

Special Forces is the epic story of a Scottish SAS soldier and a Soviet spetsnaz soldier. 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 turning 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 that 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.

By Marquesate

Her Majesty's Men series

Her Majesty's Men

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Friendly Fire

For Queen and Country

Special Forces epic

(co-authored with Vashtan)

SF Soldiers

SF Mercenaries

SF Veterans

Special Forces

Mercenaries

Part II

- Original Version -

Marquesate & Vashtan

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Visit Marquesate's website "Camouflage Men: Military Gay Erotic Fiction" at www.marquesate.org

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***To the friends I made through writing
Special Forces***

This print edition is dedicated to all the wonderful friends I made through Special Forces.

Specifically (in alphabetical order): Asher, Blf, Cyn5477, Enyo, Hotchikk, Lilbitofchaos, Landofthedragon, Mountie, Patricia, Sapphyre, Sequelguerrier, Shanghi, Squaddie, Truetoit.

Thank you, dear friends, with all my heart.

Marq

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Introduction

Special Forces - Mercenaries is the second cycle of the Special Forces epic, which consists of three cycles and about a million words. The Mercenaries cycle is so large, it is available in two parts, of which this is the second part. The first cycle is Soldiers and the third one is Veterans.

This print version is the original version of Special Forces, as it was edited by the authors of the time of first publication on Marquesate's website. The Mercenaries cycle was published between May 2007 and November 2008.

This is the only version that is authorised by Marquesate and which has both authors' endorsement at time of publication.

Marquesate
March 2010

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February/March 1992, the Persian Gulf

Dan pulled the towel from around his hips and threw himself down onto the mattresses, lit fag dangling from the corner of his mouth. His hair dripped water onto the blankets, with single drops rolling over his skin. Vadim put the shining boot down to marvel at the toned skin, and wrapped up the polishing kit.

"So," Dan inhaled, "fancy a stint to my home country before heading to France?" Exhaling with a sound of contentment. He'd just come back from a particularly gruelling shift, and the first moment of relaxation was always the best. Right *after* wolfing down the food.

"Scotland?" Vadim had learned that Dan did not really consider himself a 'Brit', and that it seemed to count for something to call him Scottish or even Scots.

"Aye, Scotland. Land of the Brave." Dan grinned, stretched his legs all the way down to his toes before flopping back into a boneless heap. "We'll be in Europe anyway, and I'd like you to see some of the most beautiful parts of Scotland, especially the Highlands. Show you my peasant roots." He laughed.

"But you are my favourite peasant, Dan. Too much culture would spoil you, and make you moody, like I am." Vadim rested his arms on his knees, studying Dan doing his best cat impression: lying there like he didn't have a care in the world. He looked like he could revert from awake to asleep within a split second. "I'd like to see it."

"Good, that means we'll have a look at Edinburgh and instead of going to every bloody museum and historical site I get to enjoy the pubs, aye? And then, of course, off to the North. I want you to see the area I come from. It's just a tiny village, though, nothing interesting." Stubbing his cigarette out in a makeshift ashtray, Dan pulled a couple of pillows close and propped himself up.

Vadim smiled, but the thought struck him that, if it was such a tiny village, they would run into friends, acquaintances, and the whole host of Dan's contacts from his youth, childhood, and whatever time he'd spent there on R&R. And his family, obviously. His face darkened at the thought and there was unrest, suddenly. "We should be subtle. About ... us. About what we are to each other."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Dan's brows furrowed, scratching his scarred abs.

"Your family. If we meet them ... they don't know you are homosexual, or do they?"

"Why would we meet my family?" Dan's brows rose even higher, completely forgetting the second part.

"Do they still live in that village? Why else are you going there?" Vadim felt he was on thin ice, somehow. Of course a visit to the home village would mean

a visit to the family. What else? And why not? It would be rude to not at least pay a visit.

"Aye, they do." Dan shrugged, "but wasn't exactly planning on staying over." Reaching for a water bottle, he took his time unscrewing the cap. "Last time I saw my brother, wife and kids, was when I visited my father shortly before he died. I was on R&R from Afghanistan." Tipping the bottle to his lips, he took an even longer time drinking. "It was right after the shit with the Muja corpses." Wiping his lips, "that's, what, how many years ago? Can you remember?"

"Five or six?" Vadim realised it was guesswork. He didn't know. He didn't want to remember, had pushed Afghanistan as far away as he could.

"Hmm ... 84? Hang on, I forgot, I actually went up again in 87, when I got out of the army. Went to see my brother to settle some finances. I think that might be about it. Makes it five years." Dan shrugged, while Vadim didn't want to think about when his father would die. He was old, even frail by now, but he might still have five, ten, or fifteen years in him. Years spent away from his ex-daughter-in-law, with his brother and other relatives. But in essence, his 'old man' as the Yanks called it, was alone. A disturbing thought. "So, just that brother and his family? Are you not on good terms?"

"Sure I am, my brother has been dealing with my finances for years. He was the one who invested my money in property and sold the houses for good profit when I needed the cash." Dan shrugged. "He's a good guy, but I'm just not close with my family. Never got to see them regularly. Was always out and about, and figured it was a damn lot easier to stay away in case I got killed. Don't want anyone to shed a tear, aye?" He produced a mock-cheerful grin.

Vadim frowned, then sat down next to Dan, to run a hand through his hair. He hadn't realized all those years that Dan had been completely alone even at home. It made his guts clench. To refuse human contact only to make sure that he wouldn't be missed. He was speechless, shocked.

"Hey," Dan poked Vadim's ribs. "What's up? Did you think I was doing the job, all on my own for all those years, with a big loving family behind me?" He laughed without humour.

"No, but I didn't think it was that bleak. I thought there was ... more for you." More? Like a loving, supportive wife that watched his back and lived a lie?

"More? What the hell would that be? I fucked bimbos, got pissed with mates. Stuffed holes left right and centre, that's all I wanted and needed. Until ..." He trailed off and mock-punched Vadim's ribs, more a gentle touch than anything. "No one at home knew what I was really doing. Okay, SAS and all that shit, and my father was bloody proud, but I was on secret missions, and you know as much as I do that it's better for everyone on the outside not to know too much. Safer. For them, for me." He shrugged and smiled. "Besides, I got you, and now you're on *my* side, I have all I need."

"I was on your side for quite a while longer," said Vadim with that rare, tender smile. "Only not official. And not quite exclusive, but I've been yours for a long time now."

Dan smiled, leaned his head against Vadim's. "But you're mine now with all the bells and whistles, aye?"

"Official, blood and guts, breath and everything else." Vadim lay back on his elbows, taking Dan's head with him, looking thoughtful. "Do you want to visit your brother, then?"

"Do you think I should?"

"Wouldn't it be rude if you didn't? He's your brother. Just, you know, catching up. I can stay at the hotel while you meet him and his family, it's no problem."

Dan laughed again, this time the humour was back. "There are no hotels as far as I remember. Just B&Bs. Guess they'd be looking funny at us if we booked a double room."

"Then we'll book singles."

"Nope." Dan shook his head, "no fucking way."

Strange, Vadim thought, that it was easier to live as a couple in a mercenary camp than in one's own hometown. Well, 'easier' as in getting beaten up, ambushed, constantly sneered at - until the point when one had actually proven that one had more balls than the rest of them. "It's no problem."

"As I said, no fucking way. I'd rather not go back." Sitting up, Dan studied Vadim. "I don't give a shit what my family knows or not. I never told them I'm gay because it didn't matter to me if they knew or not. Besides, back then I wasn't quite ..." Dan shrugged, couldn't find the right word, "anyway, five years ago I wasn't as much 'me' as I am now. So, we either fucking go as who we are, or we don't fucking go at all."

"Oh damn." Vadim shook his head. "What would you say? 'This is Vadim, my gay partner?'"

"No. More like 'this is Vadim. My partner'. Bloody unnecessary, the 'gay' part, isn't it?"

Vadim felt another wave of dread, just the thought of being exposed again, of seeing people - family - shocked, appalled and disgusted again. Why not simply let them live? Leave them their illusions? "Why hurt or disturb your family, Dan? For what? Why can't we just keep a low profile?"

"Why the *fuck* would they be hurt by who I am? And what the *fuck* does that matter to them? I am fucking *me*! If they have a fucking problem with that, they can shove it up their fucking arses." Dan had gone from mellow to extremely pissed off in a nanosecond.

Because. Everybody had a problem with it. Vadim remembered too well the hurt in his father's eyes, the 'how could we have helped you', the guilt, the shame. He didn't want to go through that again.

"It's *their* problem, not mine. If you want to get through your bloody life lying all the way, then guess what, Russkie, you can do it on your fucking own." Dan sat up, tense, dark eyes on fire.

"It's just that it's nobody else's business, Dan." Vadim stood, needed to take the brunt of the rage standing. Lying. No, just keeping a low profile. It wasn't

lying. Not technically. “Why do we have to go ... out of our way to rub it in their faces?”

“What the fucking *fuck* do you mean with rubbing it into their faces?” Dan jerked, as if wanting to get up as well, but remained sitting, fists at his side. “I just am who I am, what the motherfucking fuck’s ‘rubbing’ about that? Every stupid dripping cunt can eat the fucking face of her fucker in public, but if I simply turn up with my partner, that’s ‘rubbing it in?’” Dan did finally get up, naked or not, he was fuming with rage. “Fuck *you*, together with them, if that’s your idea of leading your life.”

Fuck you. Vadim’s words died in his throat. He knew he was being a coward and now he was ashamed of that, too. He’d either get all that disgust, or Dan’s rage. Dan was pushing him into it, but he just couldn’t do it. He’d be ashamed either way, for what he was, for what he felt. Degenerate. Coward. Broken. He couldn’t meet that bristling gaze, looked to the side instead. Standing there, feeling cold and numb. “Need shower,” he pressed out, trying to make it sound normal and reached for his shower kit. Retreating so fast that, yes, the fact that it was ‘running away’ was really damned obvious.

Dan was still raging, even when Vadim had fled. Pacing the few yards in the hut, to and fro, while smoking a fag, and then another. Finally grabbing a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, he got his feet into trainers and stormed out of the hut with the third fag between his teeth and a water bottle under his arm. Knackered from the shift, knees aching, but he had to get rid of the aggression that was eating him up from the inside. Couldn’t understand why the fuck Vadim behaved like such a coward, and what the fuck was bad about being together? If they’d survived the likes of Midge and his cronies, emerging victorious, what the hell was wrong with being who they were and being together?

He got himself into the gym, and ignoring the aches and pains of his aging body, he beasted it in a merciless regime, with more weights than he usually used, and many more repeats.

Vadim had a long, drawn-out shower, which didn’t quite relax him. He could still feel that dread in his body, a very physical reaction. Body so tensed up from it, he felt stiff and weakened. Eventually he returned, to find Dan gone. Jean hadn’t seen him, nobody seemed to have, and the Mess tent was also devoid of Dan. Left the gym. Vadim walked there and, sure enough, Dan, in the process of working his muscles so hard that he’d ache in a million places tomorrow. Vadim inhaled deeply, stepped behind the bench on which Dan was lying, and took the weight from his grip when Dan started to struggle pushing it up. Apart from another guy in the corner doing pull-ups, they were pretty much alone.

Dan was looking up, straight at Vadim. Face drenched in sweat, he said nothing.

Vadim crouched near Dan’s head, elbows on thighs, head lowered, speaking in a hushed tone. “I’m not ready for that. I ... when I see that disgust, it still ... hurts me. I can’t just shrug it off like you can. They ... called me all these things. The KGB. They said homosexual ... activity would extend my jail sentence. They insinuated ... things. Like I’d slept my way up, that I enjoyed to debase

myself by getting fucked, that I'd raped my son ... all these things. I'm not ... not ready to face that kind of thing again, Dan. I'm not strong enough. I'm not like you." He stood, turning away because the dread was worse, had transformed into weakness, leaden weakness, the feeling and taste of defeat.

Dan did nothing, lay there, silent. Too shocked to the core to move a muscle. He hadn't ... hadn't known ... couldn't even make sense of any of his thoughts. Got finally up, felt more shattered than could have been caused by his workout. Every movement worth a lifetime of dread.

He still didn't say anything when he got up and wiped his face with the edge of his soggy t-shirt. Not even when he placed his hand into the small of Vadim's back. Finally a word, just one. "Come." Leading Vadim out of the gym and back towards the hut.

Vadim followed, felt the shame of being so fucking weak, but at the same time the touch had replaced Dan's rage. He didn't know what to expect, but he was glad that Dan didn't shout at him now, was glad for the contact.

Dan closed the door behind them, and took a step closer to Vadim, until there was hardly a hand's breadth between them. He touched Vadim's face, tracing the cheekbone, along the jaw line, until his fingertips merely rested on smooth skin. "I am so fucking sorry." Quietly, while looking at Vadim. No rage now in his eyes, just a deep seated sorrow. "I didn't get it. I told you I'm no fucking brainy, just didn't realise I am such an idiot." His lips twitched, trying to turn into a smile, "forgive me?"

"Nothing to forgive, Dan. Nothing at all. I'm not ... not ashamed of what I feel, but of what ... I see in people's faces. I can't explain all that. I can't take that from them, that ... disgust. It's better they think I'm ... that I fit in." Found it still hard to breathe, pressed Dan's hand to his cheek. "Maybe one day."

"Aye," Dan nodded and swallowed, "maybe one day." Remorse unveiled in his eyes. Too open, too readable, and too damn straightforward.

"Don't. You are ... good like you are. Your confidence, your balls." Vadim tried a smile and touched his forehead to Dan's. "We don't have to visit your family. Maybe ... hire a caravan, and we won't even have to deal with any bed and breakfast owners. There are always alternatives."

"I just wanted to be ..." Dan trailed off and never finished the sentence, just shrugged, drawing in a deep breath. "Don't know if I want to go. Better to just stay far away." Shrugged again, "they say Sweden and Denmark are cool places. They marry in Denmark, you know. Blokes." Kept shrugging. "I don't ..." didn't finish that sentence either and pulled his lips into a smile instead, before taking a step back. "Got to go for a shower." Turning away. Looking for his towel and soap bag.

Seeing Dan so flustered hurt. It hurt because it was his fault, caused by being a coward. Konstantinov. The torturer was right. He'd never fully recover. Shame was one of their weapons. And now they had hurt Dan, too. "Dan, I ..." I'm scared, I'm so ashamed, I'm so fucking broken. "... want to go. I want to see Scotland. And where you're from." Even if that meant being not welcome, worse, being hated and feeling another wave of disgust and disdain. "I can face

it. I will face it. It's alright." And at the same time, he was scared, could feel himself shudder at the thought, because of the tension building up inside.

"We'll see, Okay?" Towel and soap bag under his arm, Dan tried another smile while patting Vadim's shoulder. "Plenty of time left, we just decide closer to April, alright?"

"Okay."

Taking a step to the door, "I'll see you in a bit. Just ... shower, you know. Stuff." With that he slipped through the door, closing it quietly behind him.

Vadim nodded, wincing inwardly, wondered if he should keep Dan back, but didn't want to be hysterical. Just felt that horrible thing, being helpless, having made a mistake, with no way to repair it, no way to make it vanish. He rubbed his face, restless and nervous, sat down on the bed. How was it that everything was alright when they were alone and together, like in one of those fucking caves, but somehow, once outside factors were drawn in, they screwed everything up?

Dan returned after half an hour, more than double the time he usually took. Bringing with him a pack of biscuits, one from the stash he'd been sent by the Baroness and which he hoarded in the other hut. Cigarette between his lips, towel around his hips, his smile was pretty much back to normal when he stepped through the door. "Fancy some bikkies? Was thinking of getting a brew on."

"Tea?" Vadim checked the time. "Of course, tea." Nothing in the world that tea didn't make better, he heard Dr Williams say, and the thought of the older man was somehow reassuring. "Yes. I could start it? Or at least try and find milk."

"Aye, tea. Milk and sugar."

"I remember," said Vadim, lightly, glad he could get busy and do something, even if it was just making tea.

Dan threw himself once more onto the mattress, exactly the same way as before. He grinned up at Vadim as if nothing had ever happened, and Vadim served the tea and sat with him. Between biscuits and tea, Dan did not bring up the topic again, and neither did he later. Not a word. Not now, not through the night, and not the days after. Joking and grinning, the same irreverent, easy-going man as before, with the same appetite for sex and Vadim. The same arms that wrapped around Vadim at night and the same body that spooned behind him.

Vadim, however, didn't quite forget. Wrestled with the thought, and how to bring up the topic again. And most importantly, when, and in what way. He carefully examined himself, as he always did, and expected for Dan to bring it up, but it didn't happen.

One night, after sex, Vadim murmured: "We should book flights for Britain and I should call Dr Williams. I was thinking we could meet him and then go by train up to Edinburgh. Rent a car, and you show me ... your area."

Dan had drifted off, sated to the bones, and utterly relaxed. "Hm? Britain?" Murmured, he had hardly caught half of it. "Weren't we meant to go to Kiwiland when we're done in this place?"

"It's a long flight to New Zealand ... I thought we'd stick around in Europe until Jean gets his ring on his hand."

"Mmm ... guess that's right. Got a couple months to kill before our next destination. Heard rumours it's going to be the Balkans." Dan yawned, rolled onto his back and stuck his feet out of the blanket. Stretching his calves while his eyes remained half-closed. "Didn't think you ... we should go?"

Vadim shifted, adjusted his body, rearranged his limbs until his head rested on Dan's shoulder and he could see the stubble on Dan's throat close. "I'd like to see where you come from. Where they make people like you."

Dan chuckled in the back of his throat, which vibrated through Vadim. "People like me? You mean Scottish peasants, aye?" Twisting his head until he caught the tips of the short-shorn hair, kissing Vadim's head.

"My favourite type."

"But if we go, how do you want to do it?" Dan paused for a while, the topic wasn't one he'd wanted to engage with again, but he was sated and mellow enough this time to give it another go. "Twin rooms? Mates do take twin rooms, cheaper that way. Because, I swear, on everything that is important to me, that you won't get me to take single rooms. I will *not* sleep in another room from you. Not on R&R."

"Ah. Twin. Separate beds. That could work. And we'd just move the mattresses on the floor and still sleep together. I doubt we fit both into the same bed ... not in case there's some ... vigorous movements going."

"Or we just don't have any sex but at least fall asleep, squeezed into one bed. You can chuck me out when I'm snoring." Dan smiled. "And if we do go, we will lie when we're in rural areas. Aye?"

"Aye." That should work. Be careful where it counted and less careful where it didn't mean a thing. "And regarding your family? Should we meet up at a restaurant and have a friendly chat?"

"There are no restaurants, just pubs, and I don't think you'd quite fit into a Highland pub."

"No?" Vadim raised an eyebrow. What *was* this place that it was so very peculiar?

"No. You'd be sticking out like a sore thumb." Dan yawned and shrugged, he didn't feel comfortable, but wouldn't let on. Not this time. "I call my brother and let him know I'm coming, bringing a 'mate' with me, who happens to be a fellow merc and who happens to go to the same wedding of yet another fellow merc and mate, and who happens to want to get a chance of travelling round Scotland, so I happen to take him along." Dan shrugged again, "but I warn you, I am a shit liar."

"Dan, but we are comrades. Okay, we are more than that, but if we just stick to the official version."

"The official version, Vadim, is that: We. Are. Lovers. So don't start with that one again, aye?" Dan smiled to take the sting out.

"The *other* official version, then." Oh fuck, he was starting to think in Doublethink. Doublespeak.

"Whatever." Dan stretched his legs out once more. "I don't want to discuss it, Okay? I do what you want and I take you to Scotland as a mate and nothing more, but I just don't want to talk about it." Yawning. "And besides, it is time to sleep. Aye?"

Vadim nodded. "Yes. To sleep, perchance to dream."

"Is that one of your depressing authors?"

"No, that's the Bard of Avon. Old Bill. William Shakespeare, your one true national genius."

"Shit, he's the one we had to read in school. Romeo and all that crap. A balcony and a stupid bint making great literature? I tell you, that bastard was a sadist and I'd like to punch the guy for every dreadful hour we had to spend reading that bullshit." Dan grinned.

"Really? Did it never strike you that that friend of Romeo's was quite in love with Romeo? And then Romeo falls for the girl?"

"Huh?" Dan rubbed his eyes, yawning again. "I can't remember jack shit, but if they got it on, that Romeo guy and his friend, even I would read it."

"As far as I remember, there's some evidence that they did ... Some hints in the text. I can't quote it, but when I was reading it, I thought this guy – Mercutio? – was being very jealous."

"*Hints*? Oh come on, Russkie, I don't do hints. Give me full-on porn or nothing." Grinning, Dan poked and prodded Vadim until he lay on his side and Dan could cuddle up. "But if you ever come across a good porn book," yawning, "let me know, I'll read it, even though videos are better."

"You savage. I thought your favourite was the live thing?" Vadim's hand moved to Dan's flank, stroking the hip and thigh.

"Of course it is." Nuzzling the back of Vadim's neck, Dan grinned sleepily. "But sometimes a man's got to wank. Easier on the system."

"True." Vadim's fingers tightened on Dan's leg. "I'll let you recharge, then. It's in my own best interest." Chuckling lowly and relaxing against Dan, who'd already fallen asleep. He was pretty much awake, but would just try to sleep. Thinking, going through what had happened, retracing the day, the week, and then moving forward. Planning, as far ahead as he could. It still didn't sit quite right with him that Dan didn't want to talk about Scotland, but he respected that. Family was always a tricky business.

March/April 1992

Dan had promised Vadim that he'd organise everything, but he otherwise didn't engage in conversations about the plans. He happily talked about France and the wedding, even about his worries regarding the best man speech, but

Scotland was strangely off limits. They'd go straight to the Highlands, that was all he'd told Vadim. Stopping over in Edinburgh later, flying from there to France for the wedding.

When the day came, Dan stood impatiently beside a Lannie, his bag slung over his shoulder, waiting for Vadim. "We'll miss the bloody flight!"

"Then we book another one." Vadim came closer, duffle bag slung across his back.

"And spend even more money? Bollocks! Get a shift on, Russkie."

"Relax. As long as the gate's not closed when we get there, we should be okay."

"Not my idea of a relaxing start to R&R." Dan grinned and slapped Vadim's arm before getting into the car.

Vadim gave a surprised laugh at the slap, which actually stung a bit, and he plonked down in the car. "Alright, alright." Watching Dan as he drove. "Like that would break the bank."

"I got to watch my money. Remember the farm? I want to get that done before this body breaks down." Dan flashed a grin, but the humour wasn't entirely there. More tense than usual.

"I know, but we have my money, too. And if we can't afford the work, we put it back together ourselves. And besides, even if one of us gets fucked up, there's still the other. We don't have to worry about it."

Dan shrugged, but got them to the airport in record time, left the Lannie in the car park to be picked up by one of the mercs later, and they legged it to the terminal, where the flight was being announced.

"See? It's not 'last call to Heathrow' yet," huffed Vadim. Running, however, right next to Dan. "The gate's still open."

"But not for much longer." Flashing IDs and tickets, they just about made it to the plane, where they threw themselves into the seats, catching their breath. "Right." Dan fastened his seat belt, "from Heathrow it's change-over onto a plane to Glasgow, then straight up along the West Coast. I got a hire car booked for us."

Vadim smiled. "We'll take turns driving. Do we stay somewhere overnight or when are we expected where?" Pulling the seat belt tighter and stretching his legs, getting comfortable for the flight.

"Aye, we stay in Glasgow for a couple of days. Didn't you want to have a suit made for the wedding? Besides, we'd arrive too late to drive up to my brother's." Dan turned his head and looked out of the window, staring at nothing while the plane began to move on the runway.

Vadim reached across the armrest and placed a hand on Dan's knee and Dan turned his head, looking at him through the shades, with clear surprise. Vadim took Dan's hand as the plane accelerated and finally lifted off. The land beneath them bleeding away and they were soon on the way to Europe. Scotland. Britain. The island nation that had taken him in. It felt odd, like a meeting with a stranger, even after Selection. He'd be walking around, not cloistered away in barracks, not training for any specific purpose, but actually encountering his

adopted country. Not a mother- or fatherland, but a sanctuary nonetheless. "I'm actually looking forward to this," he said, as if surprised by the thought.

"Are you?" Dan was still holding onto Vadim's hand, the gesture a novelty, at least in public. Semi-public. "I didn't think you were."

"I'm curious. And it will be good to not wear camo for a while." Vadim looked at him. "I think it's a good kind of nervous."

Dan was looking at him, even pushed the shades off his eyes. His expression entirely neutral. "Aye, but you told me you didn't want anyone to know who we are. Are you still adamant about that?"

Who we are. Not what we are. Vadim frowned at the curious way to put this. What – answer: lovers. Who – answer: Dan and Vadim. How was the orientation thing part of the Who instead of part of the What? "I don't know how they will react, that's all," said Vadim, feeling the dread again, but fighting it this time.

"I don't know either." Dan shrugged, kept looking at Vadim, but when nothing else was forthcoming, he shrugged again. "Alright, I'll lie. Shouldn't be too difficult, even though I'm a shit liar. Am not exactly on intimate terms with my brother and his family, haven't seen them for a few years, but he does keep my finances in bloody good order."

Vadim nodded. "I'm sorry I'm such a coward," he said, almost tonelessly, again the dread replaced with shame.

"It's Okay." Dan drew in a deep breath, "guess I should apologise for being pushy. I know they fucked you up, but it's hard to fully understand what it did to you."

Vadim pressed his lips together, looking around for the bustling stewards who were just getting the trolley ready behind them. Taking the moment to swallow and keep his composure, while Dan squeezed his hand.

"But I don't think you ever *were* happy with being gay, aye?" Dan asked quietly.

Vadim inhaled. "That's not ... an easy question, Dan. It's not as simple as 'yes' or 'no'. Did I ... did I wish I wasn't? Yes, I did. There were times when I cursed it. When I wanted to fit in, to not be a target. When I ... was ashamed. But that's always from outside. It's when they fuck my mind. When they tell me I'm a criminal for sleeping with men. A degenerate. My ... the masseur once told me I should never believe them when they told me I couldn't win because of my feelings. That was good advice. He said I should never believe that my feelings weaken me. When there's nobody else, just you and me, or just me, I'm not ashamed. It's part of me, I accepted it long ago. I know my life would have been different if I wasn't what I am," not who, "and it's certainly tougher, but I am not ashamed of you, or what I feel for you. It's what other people think of me, how they treat me for it, how they assume I'm a criminal for feeling the way I do. A limp-wristed faggot who slept his way up, another man's suka. That ... that is tough to bear. To see that contempt and disgust in people's faces. And I know I shouldn't care, but it bites."

Dan shook his head, opened his mouth to say something, but shut it again. Couldn't come up with anything to say, just kept looking and holding that hand. Murmuring something under his breath, while leaning his head against Vadim's shoulder. Didn't get it, couldn't understand, because he'd never felt like that. Ironic, really, that he, the gay-basher, who'd fucked himself through dozens of bimbos, to prove he was a stud and straight as hell, couldn't give a shit about anyone's comments or thoughts. But what did it matter. Arguing anymore or trying to understand each other, wouldn't get them any further. Thus he said nothing and simply stayed close. Physical contact had always worked for them throughout the years, he'd simply have to cling to that as long as Vadim let him.

Vadim pressed his hand for a long moment and rested his head against Dan's. Hoped Dan would understand. Being gay didn't actually make him a happier or unhappier person. It didn't make him better, or worse. It just was. No reason to be happy about. Something like the blood type, or eye colour. "But it's good you're happy with it, Dan. Very good."

"Happy as in 'I don't mind it. It's fine. It's the way I am.'" Dan sighed, ignored the second steward, "that's the way we use 'happy' in English. Not running around ecstatically, shouting out to the world how deliriously happy I am because I am gay."

Vadim laughed softly at the image. "Okay. Then I'm happy about it, too. Most of the time, at least, unless some bastard mocks or attacks me for it." Remembering, he thought he'd stood his ground against Dan, back in Afghanistan, before they'd stopped to try and kill each other. But then, there had been different rules between enemies.

"There will always be people talking bullshit." Dan shrugged, "at least we're not in the same shitty position those guys were in, I was beating the crap out of. Back in the bad old days." Finally acknowledging a steward when they came past for the third time, sitting up to get his drink and morsel of food. He stretched as best he could, before leaning back in the seat. "Well, at least I get to show you my country. Scotland. That should be worth something, aye?"

"Everything, not 'something'." Vadim accepted his drink and food with a nod towards the steward. Trusting Dan to make the decisions when they'd be in the country. He didn't expect any kind of trouble, but was looking forward to actually seeing the places that had produced somebody like Dan. Moscow would very much remain off limits, so Scotland would have to do.

The rest of the flight was spent uneventfully, with Dan either snoozing or gazing out of the window. He never tired to watch the endless sky and the clouds beneath, wishing himself back into the Afghan mountains, a place he'd probably never see again, even though he hadn't given up on it yet.

Landing in Heathrow, they had to navigate the moloch of an insanely busy international airport in an even more insanely busy capital city, and while they were waiting in the queue for 'EU citizens', holding their identical looking passports in hands, Dan turned to Vadim. "Have you actually been anywhere in Britain?"

“Apart from London and the ...” Vadim paused, knew he’d slipped up, but also knew that he had to mask it well now, because, despite everything, he had no idea how Dan would react to the whole London episode from years back, “the little place, what was it called? Hereford? No.”

“Ah, yes, guess they shipped you to Hereford via London, aye? Wouldn’t surprise me, everyone seems to stop over here for everything.”

“All roads lead to Rome.” One day it might slip. One day. But not today. Ideally, never. Vadim had very few secrets, but this whole ‘go off to London and commit a murder’ episode – never mind the people he’d met there, Darren and ... what was the other man’s name again? He couldn’t remember. He’d fucked him, had seen him bared and vulnerable and kind, but he didn’t remember.

Dan grinned, stepping forward to the glass booth and having his passport swiftly examined before making it through and waiting for Vadim on the other side, who was still amazed that he could cross borders this easily. “I’m afraid I think London’s a bit shit. Too expensive.” He shrugged when Vadim turned up as well.

“It seemed very big, very crowded, and ... not much else. But very free.”

“All big places are. Go to Newcastle, and shit, you can’t be freer than that. Or Glasgow, but you’ll see for yourself.” Dan chuckled, “good thing, though, we can fend for ourselves, because Glasgow is a dangerous old dump. Comes with the freedom.” They didn’t have to hurry this time and could make their way leisurely through the corridors to their destination gate, to catch their connecting flight.

“Want anything?” Dan pointed to a stall with hot drinks and sandwiches. “I could do with a cuppa, but coffee’s shit around here, as far as I remember. Never got a single decent brew in this country. Usually instant or stewed acid.”

“Tea? It’s hard to make tea entirely unpleasant.”

“This is the land of tea, I’d think even an airport will manage.”

As Dan was turning towards the stall, fishing for his wallet, Vadim touched his shoulder briefly. “And something to eat – something small, like a Snickers.”

“Snickers? Pah! You mean Marathon. Damned renaming of old favourites. But aye, I’ll get you one, might grab one for myself.” It took about ten minutes before Dan returned. Balancing a couple of paper cups and a handful of chocolate bars.

“Couldn’t make up my mind.” Dropping an assortment of Snickers, Mars, Bounty, Milky Way, Caramac, Galaxy, Curly Wurly and - worst of all - a large peanut butter energy bar - into Vadim’s lap, then holding one of the cups out to him. “There you go. We’ve got half an hour if there’s no delay. Feast yourself on the airport’s finest.” He grinned and sat down.

Vadim took the cup and glanced accusingly at the energy bar. “Peanut butter ... will haunt me to my grave, aye?” However, that was the first one he ate, while Dan kept laughing. He still liked the flavour and it worked alright with the bitter dark tea to wash the cloying sweetness down. “If you want any of these ... be my guest.”

“Thought you’d never ask.” In the next half hour, Dan worked his way through all of the chocolate bars, except for the Snickers, which he waved in front of Vadim’s face as their flight got called. “Wasn’t that the one you wanted?” Walking in front of him, like the proverbial carrot on a stick, while boarding.

Vadim laughed. “I’d tell you what I want, but then we’d get thrown off the plane for gross indecency.”

“No Mile High Club for me?”

“What is that?”

Craning his head, Dan murmured, for once keeping his voice down, “it’s the ‘club’ of all of those who’ve fucked in the loos of an air plane, high up in the sky.”

“No. None of that for us. Not this time.”

“Damn.” Dan grinned and managed to sashay his arse in front of Vadim, to the mild shock of an elderly couple who’d already sat down along the aisle. Grinning, he got into the window seat, and the whole rigmarole of boredom started up again. At least the flight was mercifully short and they had barely time for a drink.

When they arrived, it was waiting, queuing, shuffling and waiting some more, before they got to their luggage. “I tell you what.” Dan frowned darkly, as they stood around the carousel, trying to spot their kit. “I’ll never fly anything but first class again. Civilian air traffic is shit.”

Vadim laughed. “It certainly has more leg room. They must have designed those seats for people who are five foot six the most.”

“I thought it wouldn’t matter for a short hop, but bullshit. Give me a Hercules any day.” Spotting his bergan, Dan snatched it off the rotating band, closely followed by Vadim who’d spotted his and just checked whether everything was in order.

“Done? If we’re lucky we make it to the hotel in time for dinner. I’m bloody starving.”

“You are always starving, Mad Dog.”

“Aye.” Dan produced a face splitting grin while waggling his brows. “I might be forty-two, but I’m always starving. And I don’t mean food.” Overheard by a somewhat confused looking girl, he flashed a grin at her, before heading out of the baggage hall. Shoulder to shoulder with Vadim, who figured escape was the best they could do now, and walking unhindered through the green tunnel.

In the arrivals hall, Dan swivelled slowly around, until he spotted the hire car sign and right beside it the info about the airport hotels. It took quite some time, with all those people in front of them, but they finally had the keys for a car and information about the hotels surrounding the airport.

“I didn’t book anything, figured it wouldn’t be a problem.” Dan held the brochures out to Vadim. “Pick one, anyone. They are all modern and probably crap, but it’s only for one night. Ramada, Express or Holiday Inn?” Waving the Ramada brochure a bit higher than the others, and the place had three stars at least.

Vadim shook his head and confirmed the decision. “Make it Ramada. Even though it reminds me of ‘Ramadan’. What a shit name.”

“As long as we get some food I don’t care.” They found their car without trouble, a medium sized, plain and boring vehicle, nevertheless perfect for the journey, and drove the few hundred yards into the hotel parking lot. The reception area was bustling, but Dan strolled purposefully to the first available clerk, a pretty blonde girl. She had the broadest Glaswegian accent when she opened her mouth to greet them.

“Do you have a double room free?”

“Yes, of course, Sir.” She pulled out her reservations list and checked the free rooms before looking up at him. “Would you please fill in the form?” Handing the form and pen over to Dan, she acknowledged Vadim, who’d been behind him. “And what can I do for you, Sir?”

Vadim needed several moments even to understand her – more guessing than truly understanding her question, and he was very close to acting as if he didn’t speak any English, which would have forced Dan to jump to the rescue. Dan had ordered a double. Whatever he said that seemed inconspicuous was, at the same time, offensive to Dan. Vadim’s jaw muscles tightened, and he could feel his heart beat. If they got kicked out here, there were more options. He only hoped she wouldn’t get unpleasant about it. “No, I’m ... good. He is booking already.”

“Oh ...,” her eyes widened, looking from one to the other, and then she smiled. “But of course, that’s no problem.”

Wasn’t it? Vadim felt surprise, relief, and didn’t quite trust the situation yet. He expected the hammer to fall. “Good. I mean, thank you.”

Dan had filled in the form, even though there had been a moment of tension, pushing the form back to her.

She glanced at it and nodded. “I hope you will enjoy your stay here. Breakfast is between 7 and 9 AM, and we have a licensed bar as well as a very comfortable restaurant.” Leaning across, she picked up a key, still smiling brightly. “Third floor, just take the corridor to the left.” She handed the key to Dan, who took it with a nod and an all too relieved grin.

Vadim gathered up his bergan and followed Dan to the elevator, which, thankfully, opened very soon and allowed them to escape into the private space of the small cabin. Glancing at the mirror, Vadim noticed he hadn’t flushed – even though he would have expected to, the way his head was feeling.

“Well, that wasn’t all that bad.” Dan smiled.

Vadim shook his head. “No, it wasn’t. She ... took it in stride.”

“Of course, she’s a youngster. The times they are a-changing.” Dan grinned and leaned closer, to all intents and purposes about to kiss. Vadim glanced at the door, hoped it wouldn’t open yet, and kissed Dan, too, couldn’t really help it, wanted to, and just hoped the timing would be lucky.

His luck held and they didn’t hear the ‘ping’ for the third floor before they’d moved slightly apart.

“Want to have a quick shower and then head into town for food?” Dan stepped out of the lift, “or a quick shower and a meal here, and then head into town? I’m starving, but I really do want a good pint of ale, the stuff you can’t get anywhere in the world but the UK. Not that American bear’s piss.” They reached the room and Dan let them in. It was spacious enough, and while it was bland and meaningless, it would serve well for a night. The bed was certainly big enough.

“Just order the food to the room while I’m showering and it should be there when we’ve showered and changed. Saves time. I’m having something with meat or fish.” Vadim set the bergan down and closed the door behind them. “Nice enough ...” He undressed, headed to the bathroom, showered, all quick, efficient, washing the long flight off. It would be good. Different, but good.

In the meantime, Dan got the food sorted, and was already stripped naked when Vadim came out of the bathroom. “Food should be here any minute.” Stepping into the steamed-up room, “I’ll just have a shower and a shave and we’re off into town after grub. I got reception to get us a taxi in forty-five minutes.” Dan’s ablutions took even less time than Vadim’s, if it hadn’t been for the shaving. Twice a day, and it wasn’t getting any better.

His hair was still damp when he came back out into the room to the smell of steaks with roast potatoes and vegetables, and a couple of beers. Vadim was just arranging the cutlery, having dressed in what amounted to shockingly civilian clobber – dark blue designer jeans he’d got in Dubai on their last holiday, a nice dark grey jumper, flat polished shoes, with his outdoors jacket expensive enough to fit the whole composition.

“Bloody hell.” Dan threw himself onto the bed with a bounce. “You look like a GQ model, or Mr Gay 1992.”

Vadim laughed and shook his head. “Keep the flattery coming, Dan. You know I have a weak spot for that ...”

Dan smirked, reaching to pull the trolley closer. They only had one chair and he was happy to leave it to Vadim. “If you’re looking *that* good, then I better get you to dress me as well. After all, you packed most of my bag.”

Vadim glanced at the bag. “I think the suede trousers. Judging by the weather, that might be just the thing for you.”

“The what?” Dan had been lifting the lid off his plate, stopping in mid-motion. “I have *what*?”

Vadim smiled at him, the kind of satisfied smile that indicated one of his plans had come to fruition. “Oh. The dark brown suede trousers I had tailored for you on the basis of your favourite jeans.”

Dan almost dropped the lid, and if he had had any food in his mouth yet, it would have spluttered across the room. “You had *suede* trousers made for me? Can it get anymore faggoty? Fucking hell, I thought you were the one uncomfortable with being gay, hadn’t expected you to turn me into an uber-poof.” Despite the words and the righteous ‘outrage’, amusement was tugging at the corners of Dan’s mouth.

“Put them on and then we’ll decide how gay you look or don’t look,” huffed Vadim. “I think they are fairly subtle.”

“Aye, maybe, but don’t you think I’m too old for being a designer-fag?”

“Not for me. Or did you have a different audience in mind? Jean’s not here.”

“Jean would piss himself with laughter if he saw me in that.” Dan grinned, “but wait till I have my best man’s outfit sorted, if he laughs about that one, I deck him. Groom or not.” Dan finally put the lid down and picked up the cutlery. “Before I start eating, any more surprises? What am I going to wear on my feet, what on my upper body, and what on top? Eh?” Hardly able to suppress the grin.

“No, you’re free to choose based on that the trousers.” Vadim took the lid and set it down on the floor.

“You know as well as I do, that I haven’t got a fucking clue, so you better give me a hand choosing the rest, if you want the things to go together.” Dan grinned and started to eat, shovelling the food inside.

“Of course.” The food was decent enough – probably another good reason to choose the best hotel in the available range. The steak at least was more than decent. When Vadim started to eat he noticed himself how hungry he’d been, the nervousness had suppressed the appetite. “I just like the smell of leather,” he said, somewhat innocently.

“In that case,” chewing then quickly swallowing, “why do we even bother with going out? We could just have a noseful of leather and fuck.” Subtle as ever, Dan washed his mouthful down with beer, grinning. “Besides, I like the glint and coldness of steel, but did I take any blades with me? Did I hell.”

Vadim laughed, but his body liked the idea, and the laugh was more husky than he realized. “We can always improvise.” He grinned, soon finishing the steak, washed everything down with water, then dug into Dan’s bag, finding the trousers, the shoes and the top. “Just put these on, then.”

Dan finished off his beer, laughing when he saw how deftly Vadim pulled the clothes out of the bag. “I knew it! You packed the whole outfit, didn’t you?”

“I plead innocent.” Vadim’s smile was anything but.

Getting up, Dan lost the towel and shook his damp hair. “Give us the kit, then, and you tell me what you think.”

Deliberately turning his back to Vadim, Dan bent down, presenting his arse, which got him another, now huskier laugh, while stepping into the leather jeans. The suede felt warm and smooth, gliding up his legs. They fit like a glove, and when he closed the zipper and button, they felt and looked like a second skin. Swiftly stepping into socks and shoes, he threw the long-sleeved top over his head and slowly turned around his axis. “Content?”

“Ah. I knew it. You manage to pull this outfit off.” Vadim stepped close, ran his hands over Dan’s leather-clad arse. Great idea. Fantastic idea. “Works for me.”

"I would have expected something better than 'works for me'. After all, how many ex-SAS do you think you'll find, who let themselves get dressed up like a Barbie doll." He grinned, "or was that 'Action Man'?"

"If I said you're making me hard, we would piss off the taxi driver, Mad Dog Action Man." Vadim laughed at him and pulled back. "Come on. Get your shoes and let's go out. And keep that thought."

"I've *got* my shoes already. Too distracted by my arse to notice, eh?" Dan laughed and snatched the jacket. Looking at it for a moment. "And where the hell did you get that one from? I don't recognise it." Slipping into the expensive outdoor jacket. Just as short as the top, and very definitely not covering his leather-clad buttocks.

"Same place I ordered mine. You warned me about the weather in the UK, so I figured these make sense." Opening the door for Dan.

"You're lethal in our Western consumer society, you realise that?" Dan shook his head, laughing. "Buying all that stuff that no one needs."

"Bullshit. We do need this stuff."

Dan pocketed the key and they went down into the lobby, where the taxi had just pulled up outside. "Let's see if I remember where to get pissed." Dan told the driver to take them into the centre of Glasgow, getting out at the edge of Merchant City.

"Alright, Russkie, I figure we just walk along until we spot a suitable pub."

"Okay?" Vadim glanced around and stayed close to Dan without actually touching.

Dan realised all too quickly that he had absolutely no idea where he was heading, only vaguely remembering the city, and not having the faintest clue about any hostelrys. Walking on, the last thing he wanted was to lose face and look like an idiot. Stopping at the sight of a traditional pub that looked welcoming. The sign said 'Bennett's', and it was otherwise fairly unremarkable. "What about this one? Looks good to me."

"Sure. Take point, I cover your back."

"It's a pub, Vadim, or bar, or whatever you want to call it. I don't think you need to cover my back." Dan grinned, as he purposefully walked into the establishment. Heading straight towards the bar, where a friendly landlord looked up with a smile. "What have you got on your pump?" Spotting the 80 shilling before the guy could point it out to him, Dan ordered two pints straight away. "Doesn't look too bad, does it?" Quietly to Vadim with a smile.

Vadim glanced around, seeing not quite the regular scruff he remembered from the pub in Hereford. Most seemed better groomed, and most were male. There were a few women, but strangely, these were sitting in pairs. And most of all, in a country where nobody ever made eye contact, the majority of the people in the room – that was, the men – eyed them with interest. In fact, he was pretty sure there'd been a hush falling over the room the moment they'd entered. "I sometimes wonder about your luck," he said, suppressing a laugh.

"What do you mean?" Paying for the pints, Dan handed one to Vadim before turning round to face the pub. "The music's good, the patrons seem to

be alright, the landlord's a good chap, and the beer's from the hand pump. I call that good luck."

"Yes, quite. And I doubt any of the men will be going home with any of the women tonight."

"Oh ..." Dan finally clued on and grinned into the room, catching a few somewhat interested smiles in return, despite his scarred face and the look of a man more dangerous than most. Or perhaps because of. Or maybe it was Vadim who got the reaction. "Best get ourselves a table then, aye?" Dan grinned contentedly and looked around for a seat in the rather busy pub.

Vadim scanned the room. "I guess we'll have to share," he said. "Or wait till some of the guys leave." But it was early in the evening, still. He really had no idea how things would go. Only that if the girl in the hotel had the regional accent, he wouldn't understand a word that was going to be said. But Dan was right: the music was good enough and put a little spring in his step.

Dan found a table with a couple of free seats on a comfortable looking bench. The guys at that table seemed friendly enough, and willingly shifted closer together when he asked if there was space. They had just about sat down, when the first of a barrage of questions started, right after an introduction of names. He hadn't quite expected to be taken in within seconds, and grinned at Vadim with surprise. Gay or not, they were still Brits and Brits just didn't *do* outgoing.

"You two from around here?" One of the guys asked, whose name was Martin, and whose accent was far easier to understand than the thick Glaswegian.

"Not really." Dan took a sip of his beer, "we've just come from Kuwait."

Vadim sat close to Dan, part by choice, part by necessity, and looked around the table, trying to work out the rules. Meanwhile, he tried the beer. Not something he'd ever really get used to, he preferred hard stuff to get drunk, but it was drinkable. "Through London," he added.

"Aye," Dan nodded, and downed half of his pint.

"Kuwait? Are you businessmen?"

Vadim shook his head. "Soldiers."

Dan grinned into his pint glass when he heard an audible intake of breath. "Well, not anymore, technically. We were. We're mercenaries now." It all came back to him all of the sudden, the way he'd played the girls, back in the day, and he added with a gesture of his scarred hand, "Vadim was spetsnaz, Soviet special forces, and I was SAS." Smiling innocently as if he didn't notice the reaction.

"You're taking the piss!" One of the guys exclaimed, but the way he leaned forward it was more than obvious how he wanted this to be true.

"Nope." Dan placed his hand on the table and tilted his head, so the scar in his face became more prominent in the light, "or do you want us to show off more of our scars?"

"Uhm ..." said one of them.

Vadim looked between them and thought, how strange, that did draw instant reactions from pretty much the whole table. The mix of awe, incredulity, and, he'd swear, interest. The men were looking at Dan's scarred hand, and they apparently did believe. He laughed softly, not quite believing this himself. Suddenly oddly comfortable as Dan grinned at them, a broad, sharp grin that wasn't too far away from Dan's whole tiger thing. He shed his jacket, enjoying Dan's confidence and predatory glee. To him, the strangest thing was the fact there was no hiding. Just by being in this place everybody knew they were gay, and everybody else was gay or looking for gay company. Vadim looked into the faces and wondered who was seeking what. "Aye, we have the scars to prove it," he acceded, pulling the jumper down a little at the collar, to bare the old burn scar for a moment.

"And that, actually, is mine." Dan said out of the blue, earning himself some more stares. His predatory grin increasing in sharpness. "What, you don't believe me? Want to see the scar where he shot me in the shoulder?"

There was a gasp and one of the guys slowly moistened his lips, while another found his voice. "You really are taking the piss now."

"Am I?" Dan's brows rose into his hairline. "Since when were SAS and Spetsnaz friends in the last decade?" He leaned forward and pulled the neckline of his top down as far as he could, revealing a glimpse of the bullet scar and faint lines of some of the others, before he sat back.

The same effect again – more awe, and more interest. Vadim was sure that they would have free pick amongst the table if Dan kept this up. They probably already were free to choose. Likely, all they had to do was point at a guy and say 'You'. He doubted there would be more than a second's hesitation. "Let's say, the Cold War wasn't quite so cold for the two of us," he murmured, drawing a nervous laugh from the guy called Martin.

"It's a dangerous game, fucking a special forces soldier." Dan commented, lighting a fag.

"Not if he's tied up nice, eh, Dan?"

Dan's grin widened, pulling in a lungful of smoke. They'd never played this game together, had never played *any* game in fact, and the effect was like an aphrodisiac. "Aye, or a blade on his throat or a muzzle in his back, while getting fucked close to patrol." He showed his teeth in a sharp grin, while another guy, who'd introduced himself as John, was turning suspiciously red. Vadim, too, felt his guts tighten; yes, that fuck. That near-rape, that thing that could have got Dan killed, and him disgraced. Oh fuck. The memory never failed to arouse him, and he was lost for words. Their intimate history now teasing complete strangers.

"And the garrotte ensures there's no screaming," Vadim added, helpfully.

"You're not ... making this up?"

"You want me to *show* you?" Dan dropped his voice to a dangerous huskiness, and the guys were visibly torn between yes, please, and no, no, just a joke. Haha. Shocked, but completely enthralled.

"Show ... what?"

Dropping his voice even further, Dan let the smoke escape his nostrils before he leaned close to the guy who'd asked. "What it's like to meddle with special forces soldiers ..."

Met with a wide-eyed stare and a very visible gulp. "I ..."

"You what?" Dan smiled with all the innocence he could muster.

"I ..."

Dan turned to face Vadim, dropping his hand in his crotch, without the slightest attempt at hiding as he briefly stroked Vadim's cock. "Don't think he knows what he wants, hm?"

Vadim saw attention now on him, on the way Dan touched him, how very visibly Dan aroused him. He wanted to be back at the hotel now, fucking, getting fucked, as brutal as they both could manage, celebrate the very thing that aroused the civilians – their fucking deadliness, the fact they'd spilt each other's blood. His lips opened, to say something like that, let's get a taxi, but he couldn't think that clearly anymore. If Dan kept this up, they'd end up as the centrepiece of a gay orgy. He bared his teeth in a fierce grin and leaned in to bite Dan's neck, hard enough to sting, rolling the muscle between his teeth.

Dan sucked in his breath, then tilted his head, allowing a view onto the vicious bite as well as better access. All eyes around the table were fixed onto them, - attention growing all around. "Guess we are not ..." briefly closing his eyes, "in the right place for this ..." murmured, not that he had the faintest idea what the right place would be, but the way he felt right now, a comfortable pub was not it.

"You could ... " Martin again, clearing his throat, "try Club X, the only gay club in Glasgow, but ..." he never finished his sentence when another guy, who hadn't said anything but his name yet, finished it for him.

"Or you could come with us. Martin and I live quite close." Gordon's voice sounded nervous.

Vadim turned his head, Dan's flesh only then slipping out from between his teeth, which had to sting, but Vadim could feel what effect that had on Dan. Could see it in his eyes, the way he breathed, the way Dan opened his legs. Pushing them apart. Looking at Martin, who had a rather plain face, but looked fit, and at Gordon, who did have good features, a fresh, manly attractiveness that was probably owed to good diet, exercise, and a healthy dose of vanity. "Sounds more interesting than our hotel room," murmured Vadim, in Russian, by way of speaking code. "Do you want them, tiger?"

Dan kept looking at the two men, not Vadim, answering in Russian, "I want them tied up and sweating, on their knees, and begging for my cock." And fuck, he didn't have a clue where that had come from, but didn't give a damn either. "And I want you to watch me fuck them," stubbing out the fag, he drew in a breath. Turning his head to glance at Vadim, then back at the others, still in Russian, "and then I want them to suck you off while I fuck you."

Vadim stared at him, at that crude, unashamed lust. Dan's coarse Russian, very much how a soldier would use the words, went straight into his guts, a knife that aroused him, badly. It suddenly became ironclad, not just a possibility,

no longer a game. This was moving into dark territory, and part of him felt the heat rise, as he just nodded, then turned to the men. "Good," in English. "But we do play hard."

Martin's eyes had gone bug-eyed and he didn't say anything at all, while his mates stared at him. Gordon, though, nodded, albeit nervously. "We don't know either of you. You could be crazy killers."

Dan flashed a grin that was far closer to insanity than humour. "We *are* killers, just not of guys like you and Martin. We're killers because it's our job, and if you are worried, why don't you take your friends with you." Gesturing across the table, the others visibly cringed. None rose to the challenge, but every single one of them appeared tempted.

"I thought you liked mercenaries because they *aren't* safe," said Vadim. "As we're not wearing the camo, that's really the only reason, isn't it?" He leaned in. "If you want the real deal, it's without in-built security. It's risky, but so's crossing the road."

"So, what do you say? Still up for it?" Dan's dangerous grin was back, before he emptied his beer.

Martin nodded, quicker than Gordon, his cock had made the decision for them.

"Okay."

"You got booze?"

Gordon nodded, "there's an off-license on the way."

"That's it, then." Standing up, Dan took his time with the movement, until he stood to his full height. He was still wearing the jacket, but it only enhanced the breadth of his shoulders and the solid state of his body. Not a gram of fat, not anywhere, just muscles. "Hope you don't mind scars ..." he flashed another grin, before he slipped out of the bench. "Nice to meet you." To those who stayed behind in silence, and who only nodded.

Vadim gave them a nod, thought that that stunned silence was part frustration, part envy, part debating whether they should join, but he assumed Dan had just steamrolled the whole lot so badly none of them would find his balls before they were out of the room. Almost light-headed at how simple this was, meeting up, making people hard, and then going to somebody else's home. The one time that had been similar he'd acted like a bloody beginner. Darren had found him pretty much like a lost puppy, but he had been weakened by the whole shit. By falling in love. Now it was Dan and him, on the prowl. He let Gordon and Martin go first, slipped into his jacket and murmured: "That was fast ... I'm only glad we did manage some food before we went out."

"Just pissed off I didn't get my pints." Dan grinned, looked everything but pissed off, horny instead, with that glint in his dark eyes that Vadim knew too well. The edge was back, the old Dan, the man who fucked at knife point.

"What about pints later?"

"If we get back before last orders at 11, I've done something wrong." Dan grinned shark-like, before heading out after the guys.

Vadim grinned back, the situation really getting to him, but above all, Dan's recklessness, his pure balls to go through with it. Two strangers. He walked behind Dan and gripped his arse on the way out, kneading the firm muscle, which made Dan slow down, allowing some time, before they stepped into the street.

Martin and Gordon were waiting for them, hands in their pockets, jackets zipped up, braving the miserable cold and damp of Glasgow in late March. Gordon nodded at them, taking the lead. "It's just about fifteen minutes away on foot. Is that alright?"

Dan bared his teeth in another kick-arse grin. "Ask me to march twelve miles with a sixty pound bergan on my back and I might complain. This here is a doddle."

"Well, this place isn't the Afghan mountains," Vadim added, mostly to hit the same spot as Dan had.

Dan nudged Vadim when Martin's eyes went wide once more, but the guy said nothing. Seemed the soldier fetish went deep, and Dan was determined to find out what that entailed. How well would they obey an order?

They went onto their way, saying very little, with an awkward silence hanging between Martin and Gordon, while Dan just grinned and walked close to Vadim. Suited them well, the lack of attempts at conversation. Stopping over at an off-license a couple streets further down, they stocked up on booze, then went on until they entered one of the typical Glasgow streets with impressive turn-of-the-century buildings, boasting high-ceilinged tenements and granite fronts. Stopping on the steps in front of the entrance, while Martin fumbled with the keys.

"Been living together long?"

"A couple years," said Gordon. "Martin moved in when he came back from the States."

"Does that mean I'm getting to fuck another Yank? My last one was a jarhead." Dan grinned.

"Uh, no, he just worked there for a while," Gordon said, when Martin still didn't manage to get anything out.

Up the steep stairs, finally, with worn steps that betrayed age. The first floor flat had the high ceilings that the building had promised, and Gordon led them through into a large living room that had a fireplace - long since abandoned in favour of modern heating, the space now filled by a large plant with leathery, shining green leaves that stretched as far as the walls on either side.

Dan stepped inside and shed his jacket. The place was warm enough, but definitely not overly heated. Looking around, he watched Gordon switch on some low lights and Martin busying himself in another room, which seemed to be the kitchen. Gordon was holding out his hand to take Dan's and Vadim's jackets, when Dan went straight to the point.

"So, what is it you want? And do you both want the same?"

"I ..." Gordon hesitated, glanced over to the kitchen. "I don't know."

“You don’t know?” Dan raised his brows. “That smells of bullshit. You got us here, after all, and it seemed to me you knew damn well what you wanted, back in the pub.”

“It’s just ... we haven’t done this before.”

“What, getting fucked by strangers?” Dan flashed a grin.

“No, this.” Gordon moved his eyes from Dan to Vadim. “A couple. And ... guys like you. Soldiers. Mercenaries.” He shrugged. “Shit, this whole thing is a fantasy of mine, and now that you’re here, I ... don’t know.”

“And it’s too much in reality?”

Gordon shrugged his shoulders, somewhat helplessly, but not agreeing either.

Vadim sat down on the couch, watching Martin bring in a tray with pint glasses of beer and a four-pack of red McEwan’s export cans under his arm, looking up in surprise at the exchange. Surprise, or nervousness. Vadim didn’t actually want to calm the guy down – it seemed very much like it was the danger that was attracting them. The not knowing, with plenty of things going on in their heads, probably their history as well, the things they did in bed and that fascination for soldiers. Vadim leaned back, one arm on the back of the couch, thinking about what Gordon had said, then nodded.

“Gordon.” Finding that speaking somebody’s name often put them at ease while also making them listen. “Question is, do you want the same thing? I know Dan, I know what he likes. That’s all experience. We don’t have that with you, so we need to know what you like. What you want.” He looked up at Dan. “As Dan knows what I like ... as you guys know what you like. If we’re too much, I get Dan back to the hotel and no hard feelings.” He laughed. “Well, in a manner of speaking.”

Dan grinned at that, surprised when it was Martin who answered, while he was putting the tray and the cans down. The quiet one turned out to be the tie-breaker. Again. “Yeah, we do both pretty much want the same.” Standing closer to his partner, “we do a lot of role-playing, to keep the sex interesting, you know. And we switch, but, like, neither of us is really a dom. So we met someone in Club X, just once, and that guy was into dominating, so he did it for us.”

Switch, thought Vadim. Back in the world of confusing concepts, top, bottom, switch. And the thing Darren had called him. ‘Prime slave material’. “And?” he asked, curious.

Martin shrugged, “was alright, but ...”

“But?” Dan couldn’t help but grin at Martin’s American way of phrasing things, reminding him of Matt and - if he talked - Hooch. Not a bad thing being reminded of either of them.

“Not quite the ‘real’ thing?” Gordon finally found his voice again.

“That’s easy, then. Tell us about your fantasies. Tell us about the ‘real thing’.” Dan took a glass and downed almost half of his pint. Not bad for a canned beer.

Vadim left the beer on the tray for the moment, interested to hear these strangers' fantasies, but didn't want to stare. Dan's typical way to just barge ahead. There was no question really who'd be the 'dom' in this game, and, if he was honest, he really wanted to see that, wanted Dan to run this. He studied the bodies, both fit and trim for civilians. Groomed, better than the average of what he'd seen of British men so far.

Gordon actually managed to turn beetroot red and said nothing, while Martin quickly went for his pint and buried his face in the froth. Dan waited for a moment, but when nothing happened, he finished his pint, put the glass back onto the tray, and in one swift motion pulled his top over his head and threw it over the back of the sofa, then sat down beside Vadim, grinning. Met by two sets of eyes, staring at him in what seemed either shock or disbelief at the deeply scarred but perfectly honed killing machine, with its history and purpose written all over it. "Still waiting ..."

That did it, Gordon finally opened his mouth. "Okay." Muttered, still staring at the body before him. "Shit." He took his pint and sat down on one of the comfortable chairs, opposite to the sofa.

"No worries. Chances are, we've already done it," said Vadim, softly, feeling Dan's skin warm and close.

"Guess we don't get what we want if we don't tell, aye?" Laughing nervously, Gordon took a few mouthfuls of beer, while Martin perched on the armrest of his chair. "We've been talking about this, trying to do it, but when we play together, it always means that one doesn't get what he wants." Another mouthful of beer, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. "And what we want is not to have any control. We want to ..."

"... get fucked. Be made to suck." Martin continued.

"And we want to be tied up. Helpless." Gordon finished, while Dan was leaning closer, drawn to the words and the images they conjured.

"Our favourite scene is playing prisoners." Martin added after finishing his beer, and Gordon nodded. "Can you do that?"

Vadim leaned in to Dan, murmuring into his ear. "Good choice, these." He stood, liked the eagerness, the courage of these guys offering to throw themselves at the mercy of complete strangers. Mercenaries. Killers. "Dan is good at the prisoner game," he said, smiling. "Entertained me for a week or two, up in the Afghan mountains."

Dan looked at him, without saying a word, but with barely disguised surprise. Vadim slipped his jumper off, tensed his chest and abs, smiling at Dan. "Only, back then, he didn't take advantage of that Soviet he'd caught. I still think that was a bit of a waste." Smiling, part mocking, part tender.

"Well." Dan caught himself when he saw the awed look on the two guys' faces, as they stared at the perfectly chiselled body. Smooth, with hardly a scar except for the burn mark in the hollow of the throat. Dan stood up as well, placed his hand on Vadim's shoulder.

“At that time, twelve years ago, I was more into torturing the Commie bastard.” With light pressure getting Vadim to turn around and present his back.

He didn’t know which of the guys let out a shocked “shit!” nor who was the one who inhaled a hissed breath, but both of them, when he turned to look, were moistening their lips and unable to take their eyes off the scars on Vadim’s back, while Vadim felt it surreal that his old scars would have that effect. And Dan’s hand on his shoulder felt good. Strong, firm, a commitment and a trust that would never be touched by anything.

“You did that?” Martin could hardly get the words out.

“He did. Hard to explain the scars when I managed to return to my side.” Vadim glanced over his shoulder. “And I wanted him even then, the fucking bastard.” Feeling the memory heat up his blood again, the memory of torture, of offering his body to appease the enemy. Well, at least he wasn’t the only one who was horny because of these old stories. Their faces told the truth. Nice, uncomplicated truth.

Dan turned him around again, stepping half behind Vadim, only to grope his arse, grinning predatorily, and Vadim tensing, pressing slightly against him. Ready for anything, Sir.

“Helpless, you said. Do you have something to tie you guys up?”

Gordon nodded. “We ... have toys.”

“Toys?” Dan’s brows rose. Fortunately, his question wasn’t taken for the ignorance that it was, but the cue for Martin to jump up.

“I’ll go get them. They’re ... in the bedroom.” Vaguely pointing towards another door, reluctant to take his eyes off Dan and Vadim.

“Okay.” Dan nodded, not having a clue what on earth ‘toys’ meant, wondering if they were going to be presented with a set of Action Men. That thought made him grin, but he soon forgot the funny side when he was met with a look in Gordon’s eyes that was so hungry, Dan could almost taste the need on his palate. He suddenly had an image in his mind, which made him lean over Vadim’s shoulder, hands busy opening Vadim’s fly.

Vadim breathed deeply, hands motionless at his sides, being bared and presented. Fuck. And how much that aroused him.

“You want to get fucked. I assume you got condoms, lube, and get yourselves cleaned out first.” Dan’s cock hardened as much at the memory of a fist up his arse, as Vadim’s cock did, freed, in his hand.

“Aye,” said Gordon, staring at Vadim, who struggled to not speed things up by demanding anything. Anything more. Gordon left for the bathroom. Dan was stroking Vadim lightly, leisurely, when Martin returned with a large wooden box, unsecured, and set it down on the living room table, right next to the cans of beer.

Eyes on Vadim’s cock, Martin didn’t do anything for a moment, before opening the box and presenting Dan with the ‘toys’ inside, looking up with an eager expression.

Dan grinned briefly, "I will take a look. You better get into the bathroom, your partner's there."

Martin nodded, visibly swallowing, before his eyes were once again on the way Dan slowly stroked that cock, and how Vadim's smooth, pale skin seemed to glow in the low light.

"I want both of you naked when you return."

Martin nodded again, tore himself away from the display, and left for the bathroom. The sound of water running and loo flushing was heard for a long while thereafter.

"Hmmm ..." Dan smiled at Vadim when they were on their own, and he stepped in front of him, suede clad crotch pressing into Vadim's cock, which made him inhale, deeply.

"Oh fuck." Vadim reached for Dan's hips, pressing him closer for a long moment, just the feeling of leather was good.

"Best have a look at the toys, then, won't we?"

Dan let go of Vadim, about to step to the box, when he turned back. "And you better get naked yourself, aye?"

Vadim glanced over towards the bathroom, unsure what his role would be. They hadn't negotiated that. But then, they didn't need to negotiate. He looked at Dan for a long moment, who smiled at him, and trusted that Dan wouldn't go too far. Whatever went on in his head. He sat down, shed the shoes, socks, jeans, underwear, piled it up neatly, while Dan went through the toys.

"Holy shit." Dan let out under his breath. "I've never seen gear like that." Pulling out restraints, leather cuffs, harnesses, leather straps with hooks, buckles and metal fastenings, collars with heavy buckles, some strange clamps with what appeared to be weights, something else that made no sense until he turned it over a couple of times and realised they were two gags with black silicone mouth bits and holes in them for breathing. Blindfolds and metal cuffs, some smaller buckled gadgets that made no sense to him until he figured out what the metal ring was supposed to do, and a whole arrangement of dildos and butt plugs. Vadim watched him, but got the impression that whatever would happen, Gordon and Martin had, in their own ways, a few experiences more than they did.

"Holy fuck." Dan turned to Vadim, the assortment laid out on the table. "I think I missed something over the years." Holding the small metal-ringed leather straps up. "And I assume this is a cock ring, aye?"

"How should I know?" Vadim gave a short laugh. "Faced with all this stuff, I'm completely innocent." In Russian, though, to not allow their hosts – sex partners to be – an idea that neither Vadim nor truly Dan had a clue what they were doing. He picked up something that looked like it belonged on wrists: soft leather restraints that could be connected with metal rings and carabiner hooks.

"Innocent." Dan commented in Russian, switching fluently to English, "aye." He grinned. "Any idea what this is for?" Holding up the clamps.

Vadim took them from his hand, examined the pressure with a finger, noticed the blunted edges, like they were intended for something tender. He

nodded. "I know what I'd use them for. It's a pair – two." He glanced down at his chest to give Dan the idea.

Smirking, with too many teeth on show, Dan took the clamps back and carefully placed them on the table, then returned some of the things to the box, including the collars, and kept an assortment of restraints, the cock rings, and the gags on display. He was exponentially fascinated with the dildos, keeping all of them out on the table.

"Time for another beer before they return." Opening a can, Dan poured himself a pint after glancing at Vadim's glass, still untouched. Patting the seat beside him, he sat back on the sofa, enjoying his second pint as Vadim sat down next to him, touching his thigh, hip, arm, shoulder. Dan leaned closer, letting his hand run over the smooth skin of Vadim's thighs, then groin, up to the chest, with Vadim's face twitching as if he was trying to fight the lust at the touch, tried to hold back. "Will you do what I tell you tonight?" Dan murmured with growing huskiness, "or will you want to be my 'partner'?"

Vadim shook his head. "I have ... no idea." Prime slave material, he heard Darren again. How weird that it came back up and kept echoing in his mind. "What ... would turn you on more? I think I could do either."

Dan leaned closer, lips and tongue travelling along Vadim's shoulder, neck, towards his face. "Are you mine?" Question answered with question.

"I ... am." Vadim turned enough to kiss Dan. Deeply, passionately, just to show he was getting hungry for it, the touches and images keeping his lust on a simmering level. Hands running across Dan's naked chest, arms, to his powerful neck, the wild hair. "I ... will do what you tell me," he murmured into Dan's ear. "Whatever that is."

Dan smiled against Vadim's skin, no words necessary, kissing his way to Vadim's lips, deeply once more, possessively. He was still kissing him, half leaning over Vadim, when the bathroom door opened and the two guys came back out. Naked, freshly showered, and sporting hard-ons. Stopping and staring at the two men on their sofa.

Vadim turned to look at them, old soldier reflexes demanded the need to respond to a change in his environments. He looked at the guys, appraising them. Not bad. They both worked out, if less obsessively than both Dan and him. But he assumed there was more competition to the gym in Glasgow, and they didn't have the time to work out in every free minute like they had done, all their lives. He gave them a nod, acknowledging the men to put them at ease, and saw them glance at the toys that were laid on the table – probably trying to assess what Dan had in store for them. Only that Dan would most definitely surprise them. Whatever you tell me, he thought and stood, too, but Dan shook his head and smiled at him, patting the sofa once more. Not you, the smile said, *you* are special.

"You." Dan pointed to the two guys, standing up when Vadim sat down again. "You wait here. Don't move. You'll be watched." He turned and walked into the kitchen. Not hearing a sound, he smiled to himself, as he closed the door behind him. Rummaging through the kitchen drawers, he found what he

was looking for, and slipped it into the back of his trousers, feeling the familiar chill at the small of his back.

When he returned to the living room, he glanced at Vadim for a moment, who sat on the sofa, legs spreads and one pulled up, displaying the goods, as it were, then looked at the two guys. "So," slowly stepping closer, "who owns this flat, then?"

Gordon met his gaze. "I do ... Sir."

Vadim inhaled, feeling his chest expand at the word. That word meant so many things, far more than this Gordon probably knew.

Dan's eyes widened, darker than before, but nothing else could have warned the civilian. Except for Vadim, who'd have seen muscles tense, the tiger ready for the kill. Dan moved, fluid motions, a killer who had not lost his deadly skills, and the next moment Gordon was grabbed from behind, hands pulled back, the blade of the sharpest kitchen knife at his jugular.

"Well, then ..." Dan hissed, the body in his hands completely frozen in shock, "and now we play prisoner!"

Vadim was transfixed by the glint of steel against flushing skin, the way Dan handled the strong body, and the way the man responded to him, remaining hard. His lips twitched as Dan had borrowed one of his phrases, again refreshing the memory of their own prisoner 'games'.

Martin was trying to move but Dan barked at him, "Down! Get the fuck down and Do. Not. Move!"

Intimidated by the shouting, Martin scrambled to his knees, then down, flat on his stomach, as Dan kept shouting at him. Body tense, Martin moved his hands to protect his head, shuddering, no doubt with fear.

Vadim licked his lips and he set the foot down to bend forward, watching Dan easily handle two men.

"You!" Sharply barked at the man on the floor. "On your knees, to the table. Bring back what Vadim is handing you." Dan nodded to Vadim, not needing any words. They both knew how to restrain a prisoner. They'd been there, done that, and they'd do it again. Right now.

Gordon was hardly breathing, his whole body flushed, heart hammering against his chest. So strong, Dan could feel it, the man in his arms like a puppet.

"Faster!" As Martin crawled over on all fours.

Vadim carefully selected the restraints – the leather cuffs – and took a few moments to assemble and connect them, preparing them to be used. No bruises from these ones, he thought. He let them dangle in front of Martin's face, and, following an impulse, he shook his head as Martin reached for them. "With your teeth," he said, deceptively softly, but he did hold them up so Martin could gather both in his teeth and crawl back.

Vadim looked at Dan, whose face had changed into a truly frightening smile, and studied the beauty of a helpless man held in check by a blade.

"Back onto your belly." Dan's voice deceptively soft as he felt Gordon's body sweat under his hands. Slick skin and frightened heartbeat, and yet, when

he shifted the blade in his hands, dropping one hand down to Gordon's cock, he felt the hard-on. The man had never softened, and Dan grinned.

Martin dropped the restraints from his teeth and threw himself onto his belly, lying quivering, with his hands behind his head.

"You ..." softly whispered into Gordon's ear, "you will now restrain him. Nice and tight."

Gordon did not move, just breathing, frantic, shallow, as the knife at his throat twisted gently.

"Do you understand me?" Dan repeated, the blade pressing closer into the throat. "Nod if you understand me!"

And Gordon did, a miniature jerk, and only then did Dan let him go. Gordon went to his knees, took Martin's hands, opened the restraints and placed them around his lover's wrists. Tight, as requested, but making sure he was still safe.

Vadim watched him, lazily stroked himself to keep the arousal. Something touching about one lover restraining the other, so Dan could have his wicked ways. He gave a toneless laugh, part of him knowing he was everything but immune to this.

Gordon remained kneeling, head lowered, only shifting slightly to remain at Dan's feet, but Dan did not touch him, instead pushed the second set of restraints between Gordon's teeth, while Martin remained flat on his belly.

"Get over there." Softly, but when Gordon tried to get up, he sharply ordered, "on your knees!" And Gordon did, crawling over to Vadim, with the restraints in his mouth.

"Tie him up." Dan smiled, the outline of his cock in the tight leather trousers hard and obvious. "Then send him back over to his lover."

Vadim nodded, as Gordon dropped the restraints at his feet.

"Nyet," said Vadim, somewhat drawn out. "Into my hand." Stretching out a hand, forcing Gordon to go down with his teeth, pick them back up and push them in his hand, the man's eyes burning with arousal and lust at the simple game, and Vadim was tempted to pet his head. "Turn." The man scrambled around, offering his wrists.

"Higher."

Gordon bent down to offer his wrists closer to Vadim, who gingerly fastened the restraints, and ran his fingers over Gordon's tensed shoulders.

Dan had got down onto one knee, the blade of the knife whispering along Martin's spine. Rewarded with a drawn-out whimper, and a shuddering of the body that started to sweat. "On all fours." Dan murmured into Martin's ear. His voice gentle, just allowing himself to go with whatever came to his mind. "On all fours and legs spread. Arse in the air."

And Martin did, shaking, but getting himself into the position that Dan demanded, despite not having the support of his arms. His cock as hard as Gordon's had been, he knelt like a dog. Head low, face pressed against the floor, shoulders down, trying to keep them off the ground, arse high, and thighs spread.

“Pretty.” Dan smiled, the dangerous smile of a predator, “don’t you think?” To Vadim, while the blade caressed Martin’s spread arse, causing his whimpers to intensify.

Vadim nodded and spoke close to Gordon’s ear. “I think he looks very needy, your prisoner, Dan.” The Russian accent really now only there to fuck Gordon’s mind. “Now, head on over ...”

And Gordon did, without hesitation, but with difficulty to keep himself on his knees, his hands were bound in his back. Just like his lover’s, his cock was rock hard.

“Face him.” Dan ordered, softly, nudging Martin’s head up from the ground when Gordon came to a halt. Face to face, until they touched each other. Held in the stress position by nothing but the strength of their thigh muscles. The way Dan had arranged them they were perfectly presented to Vadim on the couch.

“Kiss.” Dan murmured, when they didn’t comply immediately, he delivered a hard slap onto Martin’s arse, who yelped, and Gordon reacted the same way, his arse slapped hard by Dan’s hand. “I said, kiss! And don’t dare to stop, whatever happens.”

They needed no more encouragement, desperately clinging onto the other’s lips while their bodies shook with the effort of staying in the position, no hands to support themselves.

Dan grinned, watched them for a moment, before slipping the knife back into the waistband of his trousers. Walking over to the table, he stopped in front of Vadim, who straightened again, gazing up at Dan.

“Prepare them.” Dan smiled, tenderness in his voice despite the order, as he took one of the dildos in his hand, “for this.”

Vadim stood, picked up the lube, while Dan sat to take off shoes and socks, but the skin-tight leather trousers stayed on. He was the only one partially dressed, and he didn’t know why, just that it felt right.

The two others were still kissing, just as ordered, and Vadim considered who to ‘prepare’ first. Probably Gordon. He squirted some of the cool stuff in his hand, nudged Gordon’s legs further apart with a bare foot, then brought the lubed up hand to his arse, pushed a thumb in and felt the man shudder, but welcome him. Gordon groaned as Vadim pushed more lube in with two fingers, pushing them in and out, quickly, with power, which made Gordon push back, clearly willing. The heat and tightness inviting, clean, prepared. Vadim grinned at Dan. “This one’s ripe.” He slapped Gordon’s arse, harshly, after he’d pulled out, and Dan grinned in reply, picking up a ‘toy’ of his choice. Two butt plugs, or, dildos to his mind, that would stay where they were supposed to stay.

Vadim then moved over to Martin, who tensed when he pushed in, none too tender. Pushing deep and hard with the slicked up fingers, using less lube in this case, which elicited another yelp from the younger guy. “Don’t worry, you’ll get fucked well tonight,” he said to Martin, added more lube and again pushed in and out, with strength, really just to prepare him and drive home the humiliation. “Yes?”

“Yes ... Sir,” Martin managed to get out, but he’d forgotten about the order and Dan, who was standing between Gordon’s legs.

“Did I tell you to stop kissing?” Dan demanded.

“N...no, Sir!”

“Punish him.” Dan murmured, looking at Vadim, dark eyes as intense as the day he’d cut a word into flesh. “make him feel it, and make him watch in return. Make them understand they are doing this to their lover.” Holding the second butt plug out to Vadim, who took it, still behind Martin.

“You heard him,” Vadim whispered into Martin’s ear, as he slicked up the toy that felt quite thick in his hand, thick and heavy, and positioned it at the younger guy’s arse. He’d have loved to fuck him now, to ‘punish’, yes, hard and fast, and his breath accelerated. Slowly pressing in, Martin tried to pull back, but Vadim held him down with the other hand, almost doubled him over with pure strength until Martin very nearly kissed the floor. Arse bared, helpless, open to the assault, and Vadim relished the shudder and the way the guy’s breath sounded forced as the dildo went in. Deep, against resistance and probably causing discomfort, but Vadim understood well how he would welcome that pain of being stretched and taken. And, he was right, Martin did push back eventually, with gritted teeth, until the thing was firmly lodged inside.

Gordon, too, cried out when the dildo was forced inside his body, breaching a hardly prepared muscle. Dan pulled back and pushed deeper, getting fucked mercilessly by the makeshift cock, until the thick girth was embedded as deeply in the tense body as it could. Staying there, held in place by the tight muscle itself.

Vadim looked up to Dan, eyes resting for a moment on Dan’s cock inside the tight leather. Half breathless, half expectant, lips and throat dry again. “Sir?”

Dan smiled, a sudden recognition, a moment of eyes and soul laid bare and open. Mountains. Heat. Blood. Blades. Mercy and want. Dust and desert. A lifetime of extremes.

“Sit down.” To Vadim, who sat back, also on his knees now, but still free to move his hands. Turning to the others, who were struggling to stay on their knees. “Keep him hard. Kiss, suck, lick. Don’t touch, don’t ...” suddenly a thought, “don’t look.”

Glancing at Vadim, who seemed surprised, especially as Gordon dipped down to lick his cock, which made Vadim groan, made him want to take Gordon’s head and impale him on his cock. It took all his willpower not to do that, especially as Martin went down, too, both men licking and sucking, but none quite taking him in. Vadim’s lips opened and he tried hard not to move. Closed his eyes, couldn’t bear watching them run their tongues down his length, especially when Martin went up his body, taking his nipple between his teeth, expertly sucking and chewing.

Dan went to the table and retrieved the blindfolds. “Here ...” as if he were cooing to a dog, “come here ... pretty men ...” He stood near to Vadim, who turned his head, eyes closed, reaching for Dan’s leg and pulled him closer,

unable to speak, as every word would betray he was getting desperate. Martin and Gordon looked up, and Dan knotted the blindfolds over their eyes.

"Suck him." He ordered. "Kiss him. Worship his body, but Do. Not. Make. Him. Cum." And he stepped away, watching.

Vadim almost jumped to his feet when suddenly a hot mouth opened for his cock. Slowly, so very slowly taking him in, while lips were pressed to his. He didn't care which one of them, didn't want to look at them, was just kissed, and tasted. The other guy's need obvious, hunger and tenderness merging. It was really too much – no way he could even look at Dan, or protest, as the sensations threatened to just overwhelm him. He found a straining cock, pumping whichever of the two, and felt them press close, taking turns sucking him incredibly, excruciatingly slowly. "Dan ..."

"No." Softly. "No mercy." Whispered, lightly slapping Vadim's hand away from the guys' cocks, while a blade ghosted across Vadim's throat, which made him freeze, and shudder. Just the memory of knife, and Dan, and heat, while both guys were now on his cock and balls. Vadim felt his control slip, felt he was starting to lose it, all he wanted was to come, and be fucked, ideally both. He stretched his throat and groaned as one of those cunning bastards sucked on his balls.

"Do you want to get fucked?" Dan whispered in Russian. Lips caressing Vadim's ear.

"Yes." In English. Vadim couldn't beg, but he was ready to beg, would have begged.

"Do you want to be on all fours, being watched?" Still Russian.

Would you suck me off if you could?

Vadim winced, dizzy with lust, interrogator and Dan moving into one, but he was too far gone to be scared, or nervous, or even ashamed. Dan. Safe. Whatever happened. He opened his lips, moaned as he felt teeth on his balls, and nodded, just that. Nodded again, wanted to say yes, but didn't trust his voice.

"Then don't ... move ..." Russian once more.

"No." Not that he could.

Dan didn't interfere with the two guys, still blindly sucking, kissing and licking, went to the box instead. His hand hovered over leather and steel, glancing back at Martin and Gordon, before a slow smile spread across his face. That would do it, and nicely so. He returned to the tableau, slipping a leather collar around Martin's throat first, who groaned, but did not dare to make any other sound. Dan pulled the buckle snug, closed it, then did the same to Gordon, who was tensing, but like Martin, merely let out a suppressed sound while continuing to lick Vadim's balls, with Vadim flushed and sweating, taut with lust.

Dan leaned down, fixed a carabiner hook onto each of the D rings on the collars, then looked at Vadim with a smile, who met his gaze, unsteady as the

sensations were threatening to wash him away, but unable to come from this treatment.

“Watch ...” Dan hooked his fingers into the back of the collars and pulled the men away from Vadim, who shuffled unsteady on their knees. Arranging the men to face each other, still blindfolded, he stroked their sweat damp hair briefly. “Aren’t they pretty? I wonder how much they love each other ... and I think I’m going to find out.”

Vadim cleared his throat, knew that breathing was the answer, like with any kind of pressure, or pain. Breathing was the key, and he fought hard to keep it under control, but he wanted to come, badly. “They are ... pretty.” And they were. Both men looked very nearly the same now. Short, sweaty hair, their personalities washed away by the primal response to lust, their features made anonymous by the blindfolds.

Dan smiled once more, his lips twisting into a grin after a moment, when he went back to the table and picked up a few items before returning to Gordon’s back. “They’ll be even prettier ...”

Pushing his thumb into the corner of the man’s mouth, who was forced to open it, Dan pushed the gag between Gordon’s lips and teeth. Securing the leather straps with a buckle in the back of the head. Gordon whimpered, a suppressed sound, as breath hissed through the breathing hole in the gag.

“What do you think about him, isn’t he even better now?” Dan murmured, looking at Vadim as he walked into Martin’s back, repeating the treatment. Vadim stared, his throat tight just from watching Dan apply the gags, and his easy way of keeping the men under control. Not a moment of hesitation, nor shame.

Both men gagged, Dan pulled metal items out of his pocket. “Too curious to find out what those are like ...”

Bending down, but never obscuring Vadim’s vision, Dan fitted the first of the clamps onto Martin’s nipple, who let out a tortured whimper, but his cock jerked nevertheless. Vadim couldn’t help watch their reaction, notice how they enjoyed it, how, again, discomfort and lust mixed. Dan gave these out so easily. Continuing without a word, Dan finished Martin, then went onto Gordon, who was trembling and visibly straining to try and understand what was going on, but soon enough the clamps were biting into his swollen nipples, and he breathed harshly, body covered in a sheen of sweat, and Vadim winced in sympathy.

Regarding his work, Dan stood back, glanced at the two men who were kneeling opposite each other, before he walked back to the chest. “With those as the finishing touch?” Picking up the cockrings made of leather and steel.

They were beautiful things, perfect, and Vadim nodded, fighting hard to get even a semblance of reason. “What ... what are you planning?”

“For them to watch you.” Dan’s smile didn’t seem entirely sane, as he waved Vadim over, holding the cockrings out to him. “But first ... fix them.” They might not have seen such things before, but they weren’t ex special forces for nothing.

Handing the leather and steel items over, Dan leaned down between the two men, commenting quietly, “that would look so much better without hair. Shame we haven’t got time to shave you ...” Resulting in a violent jerk by Gordon, which brought the collar closer to Dan’s hand and he took the hook in one. Martin’s whimper stopped abruptly, when he took the hook of that collar in the other, and pulled him sharply closer.

Vadim shuddered, the build-up killed him, and he’d thought a shift in the Iraqi desert was bad. This was much worse. At work, he had to focus, and time passed quickly when he was focussing, but this, while it couldn’t have been going for longer than half an hour, killed him. He reached for Martin’s cock first, pulling him close by his cock and slipping the thing over the hot flesh, pumping him once, twice, for good measure. Then over to Gordon, who turned his face blindly towards him as Vadim fixed the cock ring as well, feeling the man shiver with need when he touched him and rolled his balls in his hand.

“You’re lovers, aye? It’s time to prove it.” Hooking the carabiners together, Dan caused the helpless men’s faces to touch each other, unable to kiss, the thick leather of the heavy gags preventing any contact.

Vadim remained on his hands and knees, watched the two guys, close but powerless, and couldn’t help but want them. Them, Dan, anyone, really. He’d fuck either of them, or Dan, but that was out of the question. He’d get fucked, and he hoped it would be by Dan. But, truth be told, it didn’t matter all that much right now – anybody would do, as horny as he was.

Dan looked intensely at Vadim, the heat rising with every heartbeat. Impossibly hot, unbelievably ready. This, here, for which he didn’t have a name yet, it was driving him half insane with lust. Something inside of him, though, remained strangely detached and cool, knowing exactly what he was doing, which steps to take. Each second of control, every suppressed whimper, and each touch of sweat-slicked skin felt right.

Hands on the blindfolds, Dan leaned down, his husky voice a mere whisper. “Watch ...” and as the blindfold came off, the two guys tried to move their heads, but their collars were hooked so closely together, they could only move in tiny increment and in perfect sync.

The moment Dan stepped over to Vadim, his whole attention was on his lover, ignoring the others. Nudging Vadim until he knelt on all fours, cock hard, weeping, as hard as it could possibly be.

“Have you got any idea how fucking perfect you are?” Dan’s husky voice washed over feverish skin. Retrieving the lube, he took his time to caress Vadim’s head, face, his neck, moving so close, his leather clad crotch nuzzled into Vadim’s face, and Vadim opened his lips to trace Dan’s cock with his teeth, ready to take it, lips, arse, both.

“Show me. Fuck me. Fuck me, Sir.” The last sentence was spoken rough, gentle, with a hint of humour but no less intention.

“I will ... soldier.” Dan caressed Vadim’s face, before stepping between his legs that opened further. Cold lube on his hand, he took his time preparing Vadim, who pushed back with every motion as slow, sure, fingers opened him

and slicked him up, while the bound onlookers were making small suppressed noises, desperately trying to see everything.

The fingers were a good start, Vadim thought, but they didn't move deep enough, not enough power, not nearly enough force. He lowered his head, stared at the floor underneath without seeing anything, focussed on his arse, Dan's fingers, and what he needed, above all.

Dan opened his fly, allowing his hard cock to spring free at last, then reached to his back, pulled the knife out, almost in an afterthought. The blade whispered along Vadim's spine, who immediately understood what it was. Remembering the knife, and his body froze, especially as the cool tip lay in the hollow of the small of his back, as Dan positioned his lubed-up cock. "Ready, soldier?"

Knife, 'soldier', the knife was there, but not dangerous, more like a promise, or was it? Vadim didn't mind either way, if Dan wanted to cut him, alright, he'd take it, as long as he finally fucked him. "Yes, Sir," he breathed.

And Dan did, knowing each other so well, he knew exactly what Vadim could take, how fast, how deep, and always a bit more. Pushing further and harder to go beyond well known limits, Vadim met him with every thrust. Legs spread wide, tensing to add friction, and that pain of being stretched like that, but he was really beyond pain. Dan fit him so well, still using so much strength that Vadim could feel every thrust in his bones, groaning harshly when Dan got him just right, his body tensing in a futile attempt to achieve orgasm.

Dan groaned, feeling the eyes of the bound guys fixed onto them. Fucking Vadim, but never quite fast enough, never touching, never quite hard enough, never enough for Vadim to come, while Dan got closer and closer.

Vadim was soaked in sweat, getting so desperate he was close to try taking those thrusts just with one hand on the floor, finishing himself off, but he wouldn't have the balance, not with Dan's strength. Desperate, and getting worse, the arousal approaching anguish. "Dan ... Sir."

But Dan laughed, a short, breathless sound, and slowed down, no matter how difficult it was. His own body thrumming, sweat running down his temples, down to the small of his back. Control, not just over the others, but over himself as well.

Vadim shuddered, bit his lips not to beg. Didn't want to beg, but into that struggle he heard Dan's voice. "Come here ..." to the others, who laboured hard to shuffle closer, while Dan moved within Vadim. Tiny increments, as slow as he could without screaming in frustration, and, again, making it worse for Vadim who'd have done anything to force him, force his release. The two men reached them at last, and while Dan's cock remained buried deep inside Vadim's arse, he unsnapped the gag bits that had been kept in place, pulling them from between desperately clenched teeth. "Get him off." Two faces staring at him, jaws half-hidden by black leather, but mouths free, necks locked together. "He's clean. Suck him. Cock, balls." Pulling out, slowly so slowly, until he remained poised, merely the head still clenched by Vadim's arse. "Get him off!"

A strangled groan came from Vadim at that order, his cock twitched, but still not enough. A hair's breadth away, impossibly close and yet not enough. Martin and Gordon scrambled to obey, strangled sounds from their throats as they managed to somehow get beneath Vadim, despite bound hands and the collars pulling viciously on each other's throats as they moved. Dan knew when their mouths had reached their goal, because Vadim's whole body shuddered, and he slammed that very second back inside. That was too much, the added sensation, that exact moment brought Vadim over the edge, with one mouth on his cock and sucking, another mouth busy with his balls – it wouldn't have been enough to get him there on their own, but that thrust did it, pulled the trigger, and with a strangled half moan half cry, Vadim came, thrust towards the other's faces, the motions near powerless, pure reflex.

Dan rode into the mindless release, letting lose and casting away control. Forgetting about anything but the body beneath his hands and the tight heat clenched around his cock, convulsing. Only a few more thrusts, and he crunched his eyes shut for a moment, tensed until all muscles stood taut, and came, deep inside Vadim, the sensation breathtaking.

Pulling out, Dan fought to regain his breath, but the first words, while his hands were still on Vadim's hips, caressing, were as sharp as before. "Get back!"

Martin and Gordon fell over when they tried to obey, struggling to get back onto their knees, but unable to find their balance. The two men were a heap of limbs and desperate sounds, their cocks so thick and hard, their balls so dark in colour, they seemed close to exploding.

Dan hadn't tucked himself in yet, when he leaned close to Vadim, kissed the shivering body, thighs, buttocks, base of the spine, which relaxed under the caresses. Vadim sank down to lie there, stretched out, unable and certainly unwilling to move.

Dan returned to the others, spent cock in his open fly. He didn't say anything as he pulled them back up to kneel once more. Ignoring the others, he turned his head to smile at Vadim, who regarded him, head tilted his way, glancing over his arm that lay close to his face. Dan's voice was tender, "get washed up when you're ready. I'll follow shortly."

Once the guys knelt once more, face to face, whimpering at the way the weights pulled on tender nipples, Dan retrieved the gags. He didn't use force this time, simply murmured with a sated voice, "take them." And they did. Mouths opened willingly to allow the gags back between their teeth, Dan snapped them shut, the blindfolds following.

Vadim closed his eyes for a moment, acknowledging the order, but didn't want to move, not just yet. Breathing for a little while, he slowly managed to get his hands on the floor and pushed himself up, into a crouch. Then standing, arse sore, but feeling great, tired, sated, he managed to find the bathroom.

Dan looked down at Martin and Gordon with that odd smile, caressing each head and the short damp hair, before he followed Vadim into the bathroom.

Inside, Vadim just flushed the toilet and started the water. He filled his hands with the cool, clean liquid and washed his face, running a wet hand across

his neck, down to his pecs, then looked around. "I ..." Seeing Dan, he stopped, and smiled. "Adore you."

Dan was about to laugh at the words, but the laughter got stuck in his throat and he tilted his head, smiling. "Why?" Reaching for the tap with hot water to clean himself up.

Vadim only stepped out of the way enough to allow Dan to wash himself, lips finding Dan's hot skin, smelling the fresh sweat, and his hair. "Because ... you can make this stop." Vadim touched his temple. "You can kill all thoughts, all memories."

Dan shut the tap off, dried his cock and tucked himself back in, biding his time. Turning back to Vadim, he raised his hand and touched the temple at the same place, caressing the short hair. "All bad memories?"

Vadim leaned in to kiss Dan's wrist. "Everything. Those, too. I don't care about them anymore, and then they're gone." He placed a hand on Dan's arse and pulled him close and around enough, to kiss him. "You ..." he murmured, "would blank out the sun, Dan. Everything."

Allowing himself to be kissed, Dan held Vadim close, stroking the smooth skin, before pulling back a little, murmuring, "I think we can have a lot more fun with those two guys."

"Oh, I'm sure."

Dan winked, placing another kiss onto Vadim's lips. "And I know exactly what I want to do to them. As I asked before, how much do they love each other?"

"Yes?"

"Well, they're going to ask themselves that question tonight." Dan grinned, stepping away, but his hands remained connected with Vadim. "When we get back, I want you to remain silent when I separate them, and make sure the blindfolds stay on. Take Martin and prepare him on the couch. I bet those bound arms in his back are going to kill the guy. Civilians and all that." Dan flashed his teeth in an evil grin.

Vadim laughed. "Okay. I think I'll manage. And then? What's your plan?"

"I want him on his back, legs up and open, find something to restrain him, because you're going to fuck him with their nice selection of dildos, since they seem to be so fond of them ..."

Vadim briefly closed his eyes, grinning. "Poor bastards. And they've been really nice to us. Especially to me."

"But that's what they want." Dan smiled with another tilt of his head. "And because of that we are extremely nice to them by doing what we'll be doing. Aye?" He patted Vadim's buttock.

"Aye."

"Since Gordon seems to react that much to knife and danger, he'll get what he wants, too." Dan winked, then opened the door, placing a finger onto his lips before they stepped out of the bathroom.

The two guys were still kneeling in almost the same way as before, their bodies under extreme tension. Dan nodded to Vadim, then stepped to the

bound men and unhooked the collars, before turning away. Vadim moved in, placed his fingers between Martin's throat and his collar and pulled him with him. Martin doubtlessly thought it was Dan, and followed, insecure in his movements like he was expecting to collide with something, but Vadim just pulled him towards the couch.

Gordon's head was going wildly into all directions, trying to gauge what was happening, but Martin's presence was gone.

Wordlessly, Vadim nudged Martin onto the couch, then held him there for a moment, by his shoulders. "Don't move," Vadim said tonelessly against Martin's ear, then rifled through the box. There were leather restraints and more stuff. He saw something like ankle cuffs, but that wasn't quite what he was looking for. A moment's thought as he worked through the kind of thing he needed, and, sure enough, found it in the box. It was a leather piece, long, with two hoops that could be tightened, and Vadim slipped the hoops around Martin's legs, up over his knees, then pulled the middle part over Martin's nice, toned neck, before he took mercy and uncuffed Martin's wrists. "Don't move," he warned again, just as tonelessly, discarding the cuffs for a moment. "Lie down, on your back."

Martin lay down on the couch, struggling to orientate himself, moving very carefully, but then lay down. Vadim got between his legs, adjusted the leather straps that brought Martin's legs up, close to his chest, the weight of his legs supported by his neck. Vadim caressed the straining cock, gathered a drop of precum from the tip and rubbed it all around the crown. Martin whimpered, but Vadim walked around him and merely put the cuffs back on, in the front this time. There was nothing he could fix him to, which was a shame, and Vadim frowned, thinking if there was a way around it. There was another long leather strip, with a carabiner hook and he connected the cuffs again, pulled the arms up over Martin's head, and hooked the cuffs to the strip which he tied around the couch leg, shortening the strap to stretch Martin out and curve his back nicely.

Dan was watching, eyes fixed on the sight, and something deep, dark and full of lust once again stirred inside of him. The sight, the helplessness, and a body laid out for whatever they were going to dish out on it. He walked to the table, Gordon's head following the sound, but unable to make anything out. Dan picked up the lube and chose a dildo from the selection, by no means small and he wouldn't go near Vadim with that thing, but those guys seemed to be well into that sort of play. He stooped to pick up his knife, then handed dildo and lube to Vadim, grinning at him like a predator. "Take out his butt plug, and prepare him to get fucked with that thing." Dan whispered tonelessly in Russian, for only Vadim to hear, adding, "but don't make him come!" Then walked back to stand behind Gordon, who was getting more and more agitated and whimpered into his gag.

Vadim glanced at the size and thought that would take quite a bit of work, then nodded to Dan. He ran a finger around Martin's stretched muscle that kept the dildo inside, which caused more shuddering breaths, and shifting, but there

was very little Martin could do in that stance. The sound when Vadim freed the dildo and pulled it out – slowly, working mostly with the natural resistance of Martin’s body, was unlike any before. Like Martin expected the torture to end now, and welcomed that, and, at the same time, really wanted it back. Vadim looked over at Dan, grinned when he saw the downright unpleasant expression in Dan’s eyes, a kind of fierce satisfaction.

Vadim put the plug away, squeezed plenty of lube into his hand, rubbing it into the reddened, stretched arse, doubtlessly cool and cooling, and at the same time promising more. He reached for another dildo on the table, in size between the one Dan had given him and the one that he’d just removed, and slid it in, in one quick motion, making Martin groan and tense, resist as he was stretched further.

Gordon tried to talk into the gag, desperate sounds as his head moved towards the sofa, clearly disturbed by his partner’s groans. The cock ring ensured that his hard-on remained stayed as before, despite the obvious agitation. Dan did nothing, though, stood absolutely still, while watching the guy on the couch being used and wanting more. Oddly touched by Vadim’s choice of the smaller dildo, and wondering if he had been too reckless, but the way Martin pushed towards the intrusion, his cock and balls almost purple, and the sounds he was making had turned frantic, he knew there wasn’t a limit. Not yet, not even close.

But Vadim’s merciful stroke ended when Martin had fully accepted that size – that was when he lost the dildo, again to be left empty and needy, as Vadim moved to the bigger size, the one Dan had given him. Pressure and moving slowly, but, much like Dan sometimes did, with no mercy, no hesitation, giving Martin only the choice to take it. He winced at the size and the way it made Martin look, shameless and degraded in complete abandon, taking the huge thing.

Dan still did nothing, watching, allowing the heat to pool in his guts once more, until Gordon twitched when Martin let out a particularly desperate noise, trying to shuffle towards them. That was when Dan struck, lightening fast like before, the killer once more on the prowl and killing his prey. In one fluid motion jerking Gordon up in a choke hold, pulling the blindfold off the disorientated man, and pressing the blade against his throat. Almost breaking skin, right beneath the collar. “Keep still!” Dan hissed, and the body in his arms froze.

Vadim glanced over, a wicked grin at Gordon’s obvious panic, and he pushed the dildo in harder, smiling at Gordon with something like glee. He was fucking this guy’s partner, and they all enjoyed the sight.

“Look at him.” Dan murmured, hardly above a whisper, and yet his voice seemed loud in a room where nothing but Martin’s hissing breath was heard, as he frantically breathed through his nose. “Look closely at your lover. Look how that *thing* enters his body. Look how his arse is stretched.” Gordon’s eyes widened even more and his whole body shuddered, no matter how hard he tried to keep himself under control, with the blade an all too real threat. “We can

fuck your lover until he goes insane with need, and never allow him to come. Or we can grant him release.” Shifting the grip of the knife handle, the blade pushed harder against the throat, and yet Dan handled it with that much perfection, it never broke skin. Nevertheless Gordon didn’t dare to swallow. “I asked you before ... I ask you again. How much do you love him?” Pausing, while Martin let out choked screams behind the gag. “Do you love him enough to bleed for him? Do you love him enough to convince us to let him come?”

Vadim saw every muscle on Gordon’s body stand out at the question, the man’s eyes wide, rolling like that of cattle trapped in a thunderstorm, as he clearly thought he’d get his throat cut in exchange for Martin’s release. Dan had a way to put mortal fear into a man, part the knife, part his voice. Gordon shook so hard he’d need a steadying hand soon, as he said something against the gag, something that was pleading, and tears came to his eyes as he tried to nod and ... agreed.

“Seems you love him enough.” Dan nodded to Vadim, a strangely tender expression on his face, which was almost immediately replaced by vicious lust, as Vadim set about making Martin come. Martin, who was screaming into his gag, as if trying to stop this insanity and keep his lover from sacrificing himself, but his body had other thoughts. He was too helpless, too far gone, and too lost in pleasure and pain as Vadim drove the dildo in harder and faster now, absolutely positive that Martin could take no more, then, with the dildo deep inside, he took Martin’s cock in his hand, unwilling to suck him off. It didn’t take more than one strong, hard, slick stroke to make Martin scream mindlessly into the gag, hips moving, cock twitching and shooting his load. Across his chest, over Vadim’s hand, very nearly passing out, while Vadim carefully removed the dildo.

Gordon was crying, held up in Dan’s arms, his body both tense and shaking, cold sweat rolling down his skin, as the blade whispered once, twice, across his throat. Dan applied more pressure into the choking hold, leaning down without Gordon realising, whose eyes had rolled back into his head. He was paralysed with fear, clearly convinced he was about to die, when Dan’s hand touched him, took his cock.

Vadim, still between Martin’s legs, watched how Dan’s hand brought Gordon off with one single touch. The stimulation was so extreme, Gordon nearly passed out when he convulsed. The blade left his throat while he came, and the arms that had been merciless before, were keeping him now in a secure embrace, gently lowering the shuddering body to the ground, where Dan knelt beside him.

“Time to get you two some quality time together, hm?” He murmured, immediately starting to strip the toys off the trembling man, who hadn’t quite cottoned on that he wasn’t dead and had just had the most mind-blowing orgasm ever. Vadim did the same for Martin, removing the straps, clamps, the gag, too, and felt a strange tenderness that made him lean over the young man and wipe his face, caressing him, the jawline, the thundering pulse under the skin. Alive, blown away.

“Aye, I guess these two should go into the bedroom,” Vadim murmured.

Dan smiled, crouching down to take Gordon’s collar off, caressing the throat as he did, and smiling at the tear streaked face when Gordon finally opened his eyes. “You really did think I’d kill you.” He murmured, before giving in to the impulse and kissing the man, whose lips moved against his, as if Dan still owned him. “Silly civilians.” Whispered, before he came back up and helped Gordon to sit, taking the restraints off the wrists, before helping him to move across to his lover.

“You ...” Gordon’s voice was rough and dry, “you didn’t ...”

Dan shook his head and placed a finger onto his lip to hush the other. “It’s what you wanted.”

Gordon stared incredulously at him, but finally lowered his eyes and nodded once. They reached the couch the moment Vadim lowered Martin’s legs. It took a moment before the younger man regained some coherence, turned his head and looked at Gordon, smiling feebly. Dan didn’t think he’d ever seen anything quite so emotional, when Gordon wrapped his arms around his partner, caressing each other’s faces with their own.

Vadim moved back, as silently as if he’d had to leave the vicinity of a guard out on patrol. He went into the bathroom and poured hot water over two towels, wrung them, then rolled them up, and took two dry towels, too.

“Well.” Dan cleared his throat, but forgot to say whatever he had meant to say, instead opening a couple of the remaining beer cans. Pushing one into each of the men’s hands. “Guess you’re thirsty, aye?”

Vadim returned a few moments later and handed one damp towel each to the guys, and one dry, giving them time to clean up after they’d quenched their thirst. The living room was a mess, but Vadim supposed they’d done that before. He slipped into his jeans and sat down on the other couch – the one that didn’t have Martin and Gordon all over each other, shaken, tender, and he looked at Dan. Like they’d been when their soldiering had cut too close to the bone. For his part, he couldn’t help but smile, a tired, sated smile that betrayed there was no darkness left in him. Right now, he was a man who relished in being sated and tired, with nothing haunting him.

Dan smiled back, giving a small nod before he got up from his crouching position. Walking over to Vadim, he let the guys clean each other up. He sat on his heels between Vadim’s legs, looking up. “Guess we should be leaving, aye?” His arms went around Vadim’s waist.

Vadim regarded him from under heavy lids, cool blue eyes serene and placid. “Four is big for any bed,” he murmured. “Three works, four is plenty. And I’m tired.”

“But did you enjoy it?” Barely murmured, ignoring the whisper from the couch when he added, impossible to be overheard by the others. “Before you ask, I have no idea where all of that came from.”

Vadim flashed a quick smile. “I do, Dan. I know where that’s from.” He shook his head, still smiling. “You had it with you all the time. Maybe we haven’t changed all that much?”

Dan tensed, his eyes searching Vadim's. "Are you saying I'm back in the mountains, cutting your flesh?"

Vadim shook his head. "I'm saying it takes a lot of strength to control a man, body and soul. Get into his head. Fuck his mind. You fucked mine. You fucked three guys tonight, Dan." Vadim raised a hand and touched the side of Dan's face, who smiled, pulling him closer. "But you no longer destroy."

"I'm bloody glad I ... grew up." Dan's smile became even more tender, tilting his head to touch Vadim's forehead with his own.

Vadim switched to Russian. "But I don't doubt for an instant that Gordon would have come if you *had* cut his throat."

A low chuckle escaped his throat and Dan's smile turned into a grin. "There is that, and it reminds me of a certain Russkie." Lifting his head, he smirked with all of his teeth on show.

"Wouldn't have been the worst possible death ..." Vadim grinned back and yawned before reaching down to find his socks and shoes, forcing Dan to let go of the contact. He put them on, then stood to pick up his jumper, while Dan stretched, standing, looking for his top.

"Fuck. Call us a taxi back? I could use some shut-eye." Vadim gave another glance at the guys, who were still hugging and kissing, and would probably not stop for a long while yet. "Or maybe there were taxis in front of that pub?"

Dan was about to say something when Martin lifted his head and shifted on the couch with a wince, until he got into a sitting position. In discomfort, but smiling. So sated, he looked as if he'd drop off any second. "Wait. We'd just like to say something."

Dan slipped the jumper over his head and raised his brows, questioningly.

"Aye," Gordon nodded. "This was the most amazing thing ever. So fucking amazing, it blew our minds. Martin and I ..."

The younger guy took over, "we were wondering if you are going to come back by any chance? If we could meet again?"

Vadim grinned. "That's Dan ... an instant success." He gave another laugh, shaking his head, deeply amused. Of course Dan was irresistible. Mad Dog Dan, the reckless SAS bastard. He looked almost mockingly at Dan, who was scratching his head. "I guess we'll come through this city on the way back." If you want them. I'm game.

"Well ... " Dan fished for his fags, absolutely desperate by now, but he hadn't seen any ashtrays, and smoking hadn't been on his mind. "Aye, we could come back here. We're off to the Highlands tomorrow, for about a week or so, and then back down along the East Coast, before heading into England. That's ..." checking his watch and the dates, "two weeks, so we could be back here by the following weekend." One and a half weeks, plenty of time.

"Great!" Martin grinned from ear to ear, and Gordon nodded. "How much time do you have?"

Dan glanced at Vadim, "what do you mean?"

"You could stay the weekend." Gordon ventured, "you know ... " hesitating, "24/7."

“24/7 *what?*”

“Us.”

Dan glanced at Vadim again, this time his eyes had widened in an almost comical display of ‘not getting it’.

Martin added, when Dan didn’t reply. “Slaves. For a weekend. We like to be, like, dominated. You know ...”

“Oh.” It took Dan a while before the grin returned to his surprised face, and he looked at Vadim, switching to Russian again. “Do you want that? A game of more than a couple of hours?”

“They ask so nicely for it,” murmured Vadim. “And yes, I’d try this again.” He moved over to Dan, placing a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it. “No problem.”

“Okay.” Dan nodded. “We’ll be back.” His grin was answered by both men, and Gordon got up with some effort, walking over to a sideboard to fish for pen and paper, scribbling down their address and phone number.

“It’s a deal, aye?” Handing the paper to Dan, who pocketed the address.

“Aye, we’ll call the day before.”

Smiling, Gordon held his hand out to both of them in a touchingly formal way. “Thank you. Oh, and do you want a taxi?”

“Cheers, but I’m fucking starving, will grab a kebab on the way to town and get one there.”

“Alright.” Gordon smiled and shook Vadim’s hand, who held it with both his for a moment, while Martin waved from the sofa, quite happy to stay where he was without having to move.

“Before I forget.” Dan turned back, already on his way to the door, fag packet in hand, “where did you get those toys from?”

“Those?” Gordon grinned, holding up his hand that showed faint red rings where the restraints had dug in while he’d struggled. “It’s mail order, hang on, I get the catalogue for you.” Retrieving it from a stack of magazines near the telly, he came back and handed Dan a colourful printed mag, quite thick as well. “We got the latest issue, but this one will do, they still have everything in stock.”

“Cheers again.” Dan grinned like a shark once more, rolling the catalogue up to stash it in the inside pocket of his jacket.

Vadim gave a silent laugh. Mail order torture. The thought was bizarre. Dan had had a taste of blood, and he assumed Dan would read this cover to cover.

“Best we’re off, or we’ll be falling asleep on our feet. Not that young anymore.” Dan laughed as he waited for Vadim to get through the door. “Until the following weekend.” He turned his head, “and ... thanks.” Smiling, he closed the door behind them.

Vadim didn’t speak until they were outside in the dark, and he wanted nothing but put an arm around Dan’s waist and get manoeuvred back to the hotel. Instead, he walked close, arm every now and then touching Dan’s. “Strange. Didn’t speak more than fifty words with them, all told, but I liked them.”

“Aye,” Dan nodded, leading them back to the centre, he stopped in front of a brightly lit kebab place. “You never know, we might get ourselves a strange set of weird friends in our old age.”

“You have a talent for making friends ...” Dan truly had. But that was alright. One of them had to be good with people.

Dan laughed and looked as if he were about to kiss Vadim, before he pulled himself back and ventured into the chippie to get a large portion of doner kebab, and some for Vadim. Vadim wolfed the food down, which made him even more tired, stumbling across a taxi just a little later.

That night, once they were back in the hotel, they slept dreamless and deep. Embracing each other and staying close, as close as anyone could get.

March/April 1992, Scotland

Dan was uttering the occasional sound that hovered between a grunt and some other, unidentifiable noise, shaking his head in intervals. He'd been glued to the colourful catalogue in his hands for the last hour, since he'd chosen to be passenger for the first leg of the journey, until they hit the foot of the Highlands. Giving himself time to peruse the mail order mag the guys had handed him.

"I don't bloody believe it!" He exclaimed, while Vadim negotiated yet another tight roundabout on a narrow road through a busy village.

Vadim cast quick glances at Dan, but it was near impossible to make eye contact with him, and the images in the catalogue made no sense. Only that there was an awful lot of leather and metal involved. Vadim breathed a sigh of relief when they left the village - they were tiny affairs, but clearly dens of madness the way the Scots drove and walked and cycled with considerable speed, because they obviously knew their roads and assumed everybody else did, too. "What do you not believe?"

"The stuff you can get. It's ... hell, don't know. Here I was, thinking that I'd seen everything and knew everything, but shit, I don't have a clue about nothing."

"Such as?"

Looking up, Dan grinned at Vadim. "The kind of gags one can get, restraints, shackles, collars, and best of all, harnesses. But the complete killer are the cock and ball 'toys', and the sheer range of dildos and what they call butt plugs. Some of them are even inflatable. Holy shit, the stuff one could do with all those gadgets ..."

Vadim swallowed, remembering what they'd done with Martin and Gordon. And would do again, while Dan looked like he had a whole bag of inspiration right there on his lap. "Makes you wonder who comes up with all that stuff? I mean, are there people that design ... these things for a living?"

"Aye, and makes me wonder how I can get some of the stuff sent to me, for a private 'toys and games' without getting nicked in the process." Dan bared his teeth in a broad grin, before burying his nose once more in the catalogue.

"To the next merc camp?" Vadim couldn't help but sound alarmed.

"Where else?" Dan hardly glanced up.

"Dan, if anybody sees that stuff ..."

"Who on earth should see it?" Dan shrugged, but conceded after a moment, "well, time will tell. We aren't even sure where we'll go next." Which was a little more reassuring. At least, with Jean gone, it wouldn't be him that could discover anything by accident. Even though he strangely had started to like the man. It wasn't as clear cut anymore, especially when he thought of the way Jean had

kissed him. Part of him regretted that Jean wouldn't join them on the next mission.

Dan looked up suddenly, spotting where they were. "Right, this is Tyndrum. We'll stop over here for a cuppa and a bite, because I'm bloody starving again. After that I take over and you can do the touristy thing."

"Actually look at the landscape, you mean?" Vadim spied what passed for a café of some description, and parking space in front of it. Switching off the engine, he stretched in his seat. "I could use a coffee or something."

Dan made a grand gesture, despite the small place. "Doesn't look much, but if it hasn't changed, and judging from the crowd inside I don't think it has, it makes a mean cup of coffee and particularly good burgers, fish and chips." Closing the car door behind him as he got out, "come on, or do you want to see me starve to death?"

"Yes, you're already wasting away ..." Vadim got up, then stretched across to hide the catalogue, which Dan had left open, right where he'd sat. Shaking his head gently, but amused, and there was always that gratitude that they could actually quarrel like an old couple.

The coffee was scorching hot and like tar, but the food was great, if greasy. Vadim went for the fish, and the batter was perfect. He was really getting into the fish and chips thing, ever since he'd tried it the first time. Once they were sated, they drove on, this time with Dan in the driver's seat.

They were passing through deep forest at first, a lot of it pine, all the time on narrow twisting roads, until they got out further into the open and the Highlands began to lay out their grandeur before them. Crossing a plain that seemed uninviting with its formation of low rocks, bogs and uninhabitable area, until they hit the hills and mountains again, driving past lochs and seascapes, with the mountains behind.

Dan was becoming more and more silent the further they got, but he was also smiling, every time he took a look at the landscape.

They stopped at a convenient spot in Glencoe, right in front of the 'three sisters'. "This is it." Dan said as he got out of the car, "one of the most famous areas. Glencoe. Scottish history and all that, but don't ask me, I was always crap at history. Just look at it. Look at the freedom, the height, the green and the clouds, and the mist." Smiling as he looked up and up, into the grey Scottish sky, "isn't it beautiful?"

"Mountains," said Vadim, as if that explained everything, and he was standing close, shoulder touching Dan's. "I'll need to read about your history ..." He suddenly frowned, remembering that reading was really no longer a thing he could easily do. "At some point." He looked around, taking in the rugged and strangely soft and gentle looking landscape, which was deceptive, likely, when one didn't have a car to get through it easily. Some of those slopes were steep and probably not easy to negotiate. Not quite a match for the Hindukush, though. "It's ... yeah. It fits you."

Dan drew in a deep breath, "this is my home, and yet it isn't anymore."

Vadim's arm went up to Dan's shoulder, squeezed it and held him close. "But you did miss it?"

Dan looked to the side, surprised at the close contact, smiling. "Aye, somehow, but if I had to choose between the Afghan mountains and the Highlands, I know what I'd choose." Fishing the packet of fags out of his jacket, he lit one.

"That's slightly insane, Dan." Knowing that it would be Afghanistan. Maybe for the scope. Or the incredibly blue sky.

"Guess it's something beyond the 'home' that's getting to me and that I'll never forget." Dan shrugged but smiled, smoking slowly.

Vadim pressed his lips together for a moment, struggling with a wave of emotion. "Yes," he forced out, and looked at the three mountains. "How far is it from here?"

"Less than an hour." Not taking his eyes off the majestic scenery in front of them, Dan continued to smoke quietly, until he finally tore himself away. "Guess we better get going, aye?"

"Yeah. Would be good to get there well before dark." Vadim walked towards the car.

"Easy, we'll be there by late lunchtime." Once inside, Dan turned to Vadim, with an expression more serious than usual. "It's the last chance for a while. Will you kiss me?"

Vadim ran his fingers up Dan's cheek, grabbed his neck and kissed him, gently, heartfelt, grateful for the gift Dan gave by being 'subtle' and act as if they were just 'mates'. He wished he could face Dan's family as his lover, but the thought made him nauseous with stress - that dark, anguished feeling of shame and wanting to run away, and there was no way he could face that. He didn't want to see them being disappointed in Dan, didn't want to be blamed, just couldn't deal with anything that was more problematic than, for example, Maggie's tacit understanding and Dr William's professionalism. But which family was professional about emotions and expectations? "Thank you," Vadim said, softly. "Thanks so much."

Pulling back, Dan smiled crookedly. "For what?"

"Just for bringing me here. You know, normal life. It feels good."

"Well ... it's not quite that normal. I haven't been here for five years." Dan shrugged, the half-smile still in place. "But guess family never changes, aye?" He sat up, rolled his shoulders, before reaching for the key in the ignition.

"No, not really." Vadim didn't allow the thought much room that he'd likely never see his relatives again. Maybe that was the reason why it was so important that Dan got back in touch with his family. Projection, psychology called it. Projecting his own wishes onto Dan.

"Let's get going, then." Suddenly eager, mainly to get it done and over with. Five years, and Dan's brother had asked every single time they'd spoken on the phone or exchanged letters about his finances, when he would come for a visit again. And he never had. Not once. Now he was nervous, and a hundred other things.

“Anything I should know or keep in mind?”

“No, don’t think so.” Dan shrugged. “Told you all I know. There’s my brother, Duncan, he’s four years younger than I am. His wife, Mhairi, same age, I think, and their three sons. Can’t remember their names, just that the third one was a latecomer and a baby when I visited last. That’s it.” Glancing over his shoulder, Dan navigated the car back onto the road.

“Right. That’s easy enough to remember.” Asking all the other questions didn’t make much sense, and might even deepen Dan’s discomfort. He’d likely get a good idea of the man and his family when he was actually there.

Driving mostly in silence, the radio had stopped receiving a while ago, Dan navigated the breathtaking scenery with ease. Very few dwellings and mostly hills, mountains, rocks, bogs, and ever more green-covered mountains. The occasional forest and impressive loch, and constantly up and down along twisty roads. Dan smiled occasionally, looking around himself, remembering how much he’d loved the Highlands, and always would. The mountains were in his bones and in his blood, even though it was a different, more majestic type of mountain that occupied his soul these days.

Vadim watched the landscape move past, roll and coil and twist, and then rise and fall again, the view constantly changing. Mountains moving closer and then retreating away from the road. A beautiful country.

“We’ll be there in a few minutes.” Dan pointed ahead, where a village began to become visible, along one of the more fertile plains. “That’s where I was born.” Smiling, “literally. My mother always told me I just popped out, before she could get through to the midwife. Ever eager, aye?” He chuckled lightly, overplaying a growing nervousness, as he drove into the village. Turning right, towards a large farmhouse complex, up in the sloping hills.

“I took longer, more than eighteen hours. Thick skull, and apparently I was quite large when I was born.”

Dan shook his head, grinning, driving up a gravel path. “Doesn’t surprise me.” He shut up as they got closer to the gate, and stopped to get out and open it, while Vadim studied the farmhouses closely, trying to pinpoint every detail. Imagining what it might have been like, back in the days when Dan had been a kid. He imagined a somewhat wild kid with untamed, curly hair, the type that ran off into the wilderness if he couldn’t get his will.

Returning to the car, Dan drove slowly through the open gate, the sound of gravel beneath the tyres alerting the family, and the door opened. “Damn.” Dan murmured, and if Vadim hadn’t known better, he’d thought Dan’s hand shook, as he parked the car and turned the key in the ignition. “Best remember the story from now on.” Dan said nothing more, took a very deep breath, then turned his head towards the window and opened the car door.

Vadim undid the seatbelt, stuffed the bottles of water they’d emptied into a plastic bag, along with the wrappers of Dan’s snack and chocolate bars, and stuffed it under the seat. Then opened the car door and got outside, pressing the door shut.

The man who stepped out of the house was smiling broadly. Short dark hair, a shade lighter than Dan's, and curlier. Not as tall, but not by much, difficult to tell from the distance, and stockier in built. Laughter lines in his face; a face that was weathered and a body that gave proof to a life working outside, no matter the season. The similarity was striking, though, good looks clearly ran in the family. Vadim watched both, Dan and Duncan, hand on the car roof, breathing in the cool, clear, pure air.

"Dan!" The man called out, his face morphing into the warmest grin Vadim had seen in a long time. A face that was more conventionally 'handsome' than Dan's, without a scar, but also without the strikingness of imperfection. Holding his arms out wide, he took several steps towards Dan, whose back was tense, and his own steps betrayed reluctance, or simply nervousness, but nervous? Dan? He didn't have a choice, though, when his brother wrapped his arms around him, and drew the older and taller man into a tight embrace, while laughing. Dan had hardly a chance to notice the woman who stepped through the open door, drying her hands on her apron, smiling, her long copper hair in a braid, and a kid beside her.

Another very good-looking person, Vadim thought. The kids had to be stunners. And again, he was reminded of his own family. Katya. The children. More than two years now. He wanted to be back in touch, he missed them, especially looking at Dan's people now.

"It's so good to see you." Duncan pulled Dan into another hug, and Dan could do nothing but return it, finally finding his own smile. Unsure footing, but he was not given a choice. "It's been too long, big brother!"

Vadim walked around the car to check that the doors were locked, then stopped. Up here? On a farm in the Scottish wilderness? Crime rate was probably zero.

"Aye," Dan pulled back, smiling, "it's been long." Turning his head, he saw his sister in law. "Mhairi!" He called out to her, waving, then turned round to look at Vadim, gesturing him closer. "Duncan and Mhairi, this is Vadim."

"Your friend?" Duncan smiled and stretched his hand out to Vadim, who took it. A strong, calloused grip, straightforward and honest. Mhairi came close as well, her kid, dark red hair and big eyes, running to and fro, staring at Dan and then at Vadim, as if they were aliens.

"Aye," Dan nodded, "my friend. Fellow mercenary, but we've known each other for longer." And how he hated every word, but he was going to pull this off. For Vadim's sake.

Vadim nodded. "Nice meeting you." He glanced at Dan, gave him a smile, but could feel the tension in him. Just how Duncan would react if he knew they were gay he couldn't guess, but chances were, that kind of thing had no place on such a farm. It was always the city people who didn't care about this. The smaller the settlement, the more it was important to be normal, Vadim reckoned. And he liked these people, his gut reaction was that these were good folks. He didn't want to cause any trouble.

Mhairi laughed at her son's antics, "Donald, this is your uncle Dan, last time you saw him, you were but a wee baby." Her Scottish accent melodious but thick, different to Duncan's and even Dan's, who'd lost a lot of it over the years, anyway. Vadim had to concentrate to understand both Duncan and Mhairi, but he assumed he'd just have to listen for a while.

The kid finally stretched his hand out, and Dan shook it. "You really have grown since I last saw you." He grinned, and his family laughed, but then Donald spotted something, pointing his finger at Dan's left hand.

"Look! Look, mum!"

"Donald!" Mhairi chided her son, but then she, too, saw the scars. She smiled a little, but her smile was strange, as if she had seen something she did not want to be part of. "That is very rude, Donald, you never point at people."

"It's alright." Dan shrugged, "I know I'm not a 'pretty face' anymore." Conscious, all of a sudden, of the scar in his face, and all the other manifestations on his body. His smile faltered, and he couldn't even touch Vadim to draw support. Vadim's jaw muscles tightened at that look in Dan's face and he drew a bit closer, a familiar distance, but not intimate. Pretty enough for me, he'd said, but that was out of the question, unless he spoke Russian.

"Oh, Dan." Duncan reached out and took Dan's left hand, giving the scarred but functional mess a squeeze. "is that from the bomb that had you in hospital for so long?"

Dan nodded, "aye." Shrugged again.

"Well, then it's extra good that you are here now. Alive and healthy, as far as I can tell, and hardly looking a day older." Duncan winked, then grinned at Vadim with a conspiratory nod, to which Vadim flashed one of his rare bright smiles. Gratitude more than humour.

"Liar." It was easy to find his laughter again, and Dan thumped his brother's shoulder.

"I have been called worse."

Mhairi stopped the banter by ushering them inside. "Come on in, I have cake and coffee waiting, or would you rather like tea?" Smiling at Vadim, "and if you are not into sweets, I can make some sandwiches."

"I ... thanks. Coffee and cake would be perfect." Sweet tooth running in the family, clearly, but Vadim didn't want to draw her attention away from her brother-in-law and her kid and husband.

Duncan chuckled, "You have to excuse my wife, she believes that food is the answer to everything. Don't you, Mhairi?"

She laughed, a warm and friendly sound, "but I am right!"

Dan glanced at Vadim, then smiled, "and you can't tell, none of you lot look overfed to me."

"See?" Mhairi waited until everyone had entered the large kitchen with the substantial table in the middle. All wooden furniture, some of it old, but a top of the range kitchen arrangement along the sides. "Listen to your brother, he knows that I am right."

“You sure as hell are, if you feed me with that.” Dan pointed at the plates of cake and biscuits, grinning happily at the sweets. “I am anyone’s for a piece of cake and a good strong coffee.”

Vadim laughed and shook his head. “Not something we got in camp. Thank you kindly.” He sat down with the rest of the family, while Mhairi poured them coffee. Vadim had managed to sit near Dan, as if by accident, when his family likely had the older and better rights to him, but Vadim thought it might not be too obvious.

“So,” Duncan waited until everyone was seated and slices of cake had been distributed onto plates. “Here’s to my brother’s health, to a rare family reunion, and to the pleasure of having a friend in the house as well.” Raising his coffee cup, he winked at his wife, “or should we drink to that with a dram?”

“In the early afternoon?”

Dan grinned and nodded, trying to sway the opinion, and Mhairi conceded, getting up once more to fetch a bottle of whisky.

“After all, we don’t call it water of life for nothing, don’t we, Dan?” Duncan grinned and poured the drams.

“We call it ‘little water’ ... similar thought,” said Vadim, curious about what Dan and Duncan doubtlessly considered ‘the real thing’.

“By the way,” Mhairi commented, “Graham is in school, he’ll be here later, and Euan is in College, he stays in Fort William.”

“I have too many nephews, I can’t keep up!”

“Only three, now don’t make such a fuss.” Mhairi smiled, nodding to Vadim, who smiled back. “but no girl, how I wished for a girl, but I guess those days are over. Donald, here, was rather unexpected as well.” She smiled and ruffled the boy’s hair.

“I have a daughter,” said Vadim, remembering Anoushka. Shit. He needed to get back in touch. Before he lost them forever.

“Girls are boring!” Donald piped up, causing Dan to almost double over with laughter, but he got himself under control again, and Duncan handed the drams out to the adults.

“Once again, to family and friends.” Raising his glass.

“Family and friends!” They repeated in unison, and Duncan added, “Slainte,” before the whisky ran down appreciative tongues, with Vadim mimicking the others, finding himself enjoying the company and finding it far easier than he’d expected.

“Enjoy your meal.” Mhairi smiled when they began to tuck in.

“It’s a beautiful place you live in,” said Vadim, to be the good guest. “Dan kept talking about it, but seeing it is something else entirely.”

“Aye, we are lucky to live here, it’s a good place with good people.” Duncan smiled and Mhairi nodded, while Donald was wolfing down his cake, not interested in the adult conversation.

A conversation that went along easy lines, some banter, and a lot of pleasantries.

“So,” Duncan sat back, “indulge my curiosity, Vadim. Where do you come from?” He smiled as Mhairi cleared up the table. The family seemed to be stuck in fairly traditional gender roles.

“Moscow. I used to be Russian, but I have a British passport now.” Vadim smiled, as if there was no darkness hidden in that. He wasn’t sure how politically aware Duncan was. “I met Dan in Afghanistan, while I was still an officer in the Soviet Army. Military advisor, I oversaw part of the Afghan army at that point.” Mixed lies with truth, like sand and concrete. “Dan and I both went to the same tea house, not far from one of the market places in Kabul. Being both foreigners, we struck it off well after we got through all the mistrust and stereotypes.” He looked at Dan. “And stayed in touch ever since.”

Dan sat stiffly, his posture betraying the tension, doing anything to avoid looking at Vadim. “Aye, you could say that’s how it was.”

“You never really told us what you did in Afghanistan, Dan.” Duncan smiled, pouring more whisky into their glasses.

“Couldn’t.” Dan shrugged, “still can’t. It’s classified. Sorry, Duncan.”

“Well, for once, he learnt Pashtun,” Vadim attempted to diffuse the tension. “He’s a language talent. His Russian was much better than my English.”

“He always was.” Duncan smiled, “the only subject in school, our mother used to say, that he was good at.”

“Bastard.” Dan grouched but produced a smile. “I was also good at PT.”

“That’s alright, then.” Duncan raised his glass, “your history is a good story of friendship despite the political situation. Good thing you didn’t shoot at each other by mistake.” He chuckled, didn’t realise that his joke made Dan’s skin crawl. “Is that right?”

“Aye,” Dan nodded, “that’s right.” Couldn’t look, wouldn’t, stuck to his whisky, staring at the golden liquid as if he could find the secrets of the world in it.

“Well, Afghanistan was a much more complex place than the TV reported,” Vadim said smoothly. “It wasn’t all out slaughter all the time. Nobody wages a full-out war for ten years. A lot was just spending the time, and doing our duty.”

“Glad to have you here, now.” Duncan smiled at Vadim, “it’s good to see you here now, in my kitchen, no matter what you folks used to do. Not that I would know, because Dan never told me anything about his life.” That stung, and Dan buried his nose in the whisky glass.

“Thank you, I do feel welcome.” Vadim felt a little guilty for lying to good people. It was the truth as they could understand it. A satisfying story, with just enough truth in there to not completely mislead them, but the truth was classified.

The lie, though, killed Dan, but he emptied his glass and murmured, “to friendship. Of lions and tigers.”

Vadim swallowed. “Yes.” Dan looked miserable, but they’d started this now, and they’d have to get through with it. As much as it made Dan or Vadim cringe inside. Shit. A pleasant meeting overshadowed with whitewash. But he

hadn't been Interior Ministry for nothing. Not much of a politician, but a good operative. He'd hidden his emotions for so long - it was still second nature.

"Hm?" Duncan looked up, "what was that?"

"Nothing. Just ... nothing."

"Well in that case, shall we have a look at your rooms? Euan's is empty now anyway, and there's the guest room, so there's plenty of space upstairs." Duncan got up from his seat.

Vadim waited for Dan to get up, left him the place right behind his brother who lead them towards the rooms. Murmuring under his breath, in Russian: "I read you, tiger." The least he could do, but Dan shook his head, didn't acknowledge anything else, just walked behind his brother, up the stairs and across a spacious landing. The house was fairly old, rebuilt in the nineteenth century. If they had one thing, then it was space.

"You always have been good with numbers." Dan nudged his brother, "I'm impressed with the work you've done to the house. You must have invested a lot."

"Aye, it's worth it." Opening the door to a comfortable looking room, decorated in teenager style and obviously Euan's. "I'm a family man, Dan, always have been." Duncan smiled.

"And I'm not," Dan stood in the doorway, open coffins be damned, "and never have been."

This put a dampener onto Duncan's smile, but he squeezed Dan's shoulder. "We're all different, aye? You've always been my hero, and when I was a boy, I wanted to be like you."

Dan's smile was wistful. "I'm glad that you are not."

This tightened Vadim's guts, and he'd have killed to be able to hold Dan, or at least squeeze his shoulder. But that was family territory. He wasn't Jean, who could be all touchy-feely and still look straight.

Dan stepped inside the room and looked around, leaving his brother somewhat bewildered and in thoughts. "Looks great, very comfy, say thanks to Euan for lending me his room."

Duncan nodded, silent for a moment, before picking himself up, "along the landing is the guest room. Vadim, I hope you'll sleep well in here."

Vadim cast a long glance at Dan, masked it by looking around in the kid's room, but Dan averted the glance. "Yes, thank you." He followed Duncan, keeping up a smile he didn't quite feel. Had to focus on Duncan's kindness, to push the fact away that, yes, they'd sleep alone, despite promises and declared intentions.

Dan stayed in his room for a while longer, his window looking out over the village and the mountains close by, just about catching a glimpse of the loch in the distance. The sight made him smile and he drew in a breath, once more fortified. Looking around him, he saw evidence of a life he knew nothing about. A seventeen year old boy, named after himself, and what had he ever known about his nephew? Fuck all. Avoiding family, avoiding any close ties, but now ... perhaps he was getting old. Perhaps that's where the strange ache came

from, or perhaps having friends now, close friends, had changed his whole perspective. He shook his head and cast another look towards the loch.

"I'll be outside, smoking a fag," Dan called across the landing and made it down the stairs. There was a bench at the entrance, and he sat down, lighting his cigarette, when Donald came skipping past.

"So," the kid stemmed his hands into his hips, "you are my uncle Dan. Why have I never met you?"

"You did," inhaling deeply, "but you can't remember, you were just a baby."

"But why did you never come for a visit? I didn't even get a single Christmas present from you, and that's unfair!" The lad pouted.

"Aye ..." Dan smiled, "I guess it is." Exhaling the smoke, he was scrutinised by the kid.

"So, why are you here for a visit now?"

"Because I don't get shot at on a regular basis anymore?" Dan offered, and the kid's face turned into a comical expression: eyes open wide and mouth an 'o'.

"Is that true?"

"What, the not getting shot at or the getting shot at, at all?"

"Uhm ..." eyes narrowing, Donald seemed deep in thoughts. "The shooting?"

"Oh that, yes," Dan grinned, "that's true. Didn't your dad tell you what I did for a living?"

Nodding vehemently, Donald came closer. "You were a soldier. Special Forces, mum and dad told me about it. Was it dangerous?"

"Aye, but it's Okay now."

"Tell me more?"

"Well ..." drawing out the anticipation, Dan found himself easily captured by the kid, "guess I could." Patting the seat beside him, Donald jumped onto the bench, and Dan leaned back, smoking.

"You want to hear about the jungle, the mountains, or the desert?"

"Jungle!"

"Alright, then," Dan grinned, started to talk, and that was what he was still doing, half an hour later, when Vadim came out to search for him. But Vadim stopped in his tracks, listening to Dan telling stories that must sound like great adventures to the kid. And because it was just a kid, Vadim touched Dan's shoulder and leaned in. "Duncan was looking for you."

Glancing up, Dan followed the motion by instinct, about to reach and touch and kiss and ... caught himself at the very last second. "Okay, I'll be right in." Nodding to his nephew, "you know what, you should ask Vadim to tell you some stories. He was a soldier, too."

"Strictly speaking, we're still soldiers. It's not that big a difference between a mercenary and a soldier - only that mercs are far better paid." Vadim sat down on the bank, leaning forward to look at the kid.

“Really?” The lad’s eyes were growing bigger again, “tell me!” Settling in for more stories, his uncle already forgotten. Dan got up, shook his head with a grin and headed inside. “Duncan?”

Dan’s brother came out of the lounge, holding a couple of drams in his hand. “Care to join me in front of the fire? Mhairi’s busy cooking and I thought we could have a quick look at your finances.”

“Aye.” Dan nodded, took one of the glasses. Had feared worse, a ‘talk’, perhaps, about where he’d been and why he had never visited, and why he hadn’t been able to make it to their father’s funeral. And, and, and. So much guilt. “How does it look?”

“Not bad.” Sitting down on the sofa close to the fire, the papers were strewn across the low table. “Would have been much better if you hadn’t sold your properties, but you just wouldn’t listen to me.”

“No, and it was the best thing I’ve ever done.” Making a negligent gesture across the papers. “It was a matter of life and death and the money saved a life. That’s what matters.”

Duncan looked up from the papers, “whose?”

Damn, it had to happen one day, but they were friends, weren’t they? Vadim and him. Mates. Yeah, right.

“Guess ...”

“Hm? Who do you mean?”

Dan just smiled, and took a sip of his whisky. “Would you not want to save the life of a friend?”

“You mean ...”

“Aye, Vadim.”

Duncan’s face broke out into a warm grin. “Dan, thank goodness, you finally put my mind to rest. I’ve been worried since I had to sell everything, that you’d been conned.”

Dan laughed, even though this truly was no laughing matter, and of course they had all been conned, one way or the other. “No, it really was to buy Vadim’s freedom, or, rather, to ‘influence’ them to make the right decision.”

“Who is *them*?”

“Guess again.”

“That can’t be, you really mean the Soviet Union?”

“Aye, exactly them. The KGB.”

“And why?”

“They needed a scapegoat.” Dan shrugged, one way of putting it, “so they claimed he had committed treason, through his friendship with me.”

“And?”

“What *and*?” Dan’s brows rose.

“I believe he never did? Because you wouldn’t be friends with a traitor?”

“No ... I wouldn’t.” Dan smiled wistfully, “and you are a very clever man, little brother.”

“Aye, right.” Now it was Duncan’s turn to laugh. “But how did you even get to negotiate with those people? Didn’t think you just pick up the phone and phone the KGB.”

“Not quite.” Dan smiled once more. “I have a friend, my former employer, I told you about her. Baroness de Vilde, HM ambassador of Britain. She did all of the diplomatic stuff for me.”

“Blimey, Dan, you do move in circles I only ever hear of.”

“And that’s good so.”

“Why?”

“Because you have a good life. Don’t change it, don’t wish for anything else. If I ...” Dan shook his head before taking another sip. “No, I was never cut out for your kind of life, all I ever wanted was adventure, and that I got plenty. But what you have, that’s the real thing, you know? That’s the good stuff.”

Duncan looked at his brother, a strange expression on his face. Green-grey eyes resting in dark ones. “You think so?” Quietly.

“Aye,” Dan nodded, “it’s not for me, but I do think so.”

“Tell me about your life.” Duncan leaned forward. Paper and finances forgotten. “Tell me about yourself.” His face illuminated by the fire, casting a warm glow and spreading heat across both men. “Please, Dan, tell me.”

“What do you want to know?” Dan swallowed, the whisky suddenly burning in his stomach.

“Anything, really. Tell me about your job, whatever you are allowed to tell. Tell me about your friends, about anything at all.”

“Anything?” Dan mused, but discarded the thought. No, he couldn’t. Couldn’t tell his brother who he really was, because he had given his word. All he could do was tell him about everything outside, but not what really mattered, the one single thing. Who he loved. His friends would have to do. “Alright, I’ll tell you.”

And he did, as best he could, giving his brother some idea of his life, without lying, without distorting the truth, by simply omitting. Trying to make him understand without ever saying so, why he couldn’t have been a better brother, son, or uncle, and that he was sorry.

* * *

After he’d satisfied the kid’s immediate curiosity, Donald stormed off again, and Vadim stood, slightly wistful at the thought that he’d spent far too little time with Nikolai. Nikol’ had always been a reserved child, calm and silent, and he probably had never quite got his share of attention with his older sister far better at endearing herself.

He headed back inside and heard sounds of cutlery and crockery. Following those into the kitchen, where Mhairi was doing the dishes, while something bubbled in a pot and there was heat from the oven, too. The kitchen smelled delicious, herbs and molten or melting sugar. She turned around when he moved towards her, careful not to startle her.

"I would ... like to help," Vadim explained. "I don't want to be too much trouble, and besides, Dan's talking to his brother."

She smiled at him and moved out of the way, pointing to the dishes that were neatly stacked on the rack. "But it's really not necessary ..."

Vadim gave her a smile. "I won't break anything. I've done this before."

She laughed and handed him two kitchen towels from a drawer, both neatly folded. "Just put them in the cupboard." Vadim was reaching for the first plate when she asked: "You said you have children? I know I am nosy, but how old are they?"

Vadim looked up, and he hated the fact that he had to do the numbers. "Anya is thirteen, and Nikolai's eleven."

"Oh, that can be a difficult age," she said, smiling. "Teenagers are a wee handful for a few years."

"Yes. I mean, I guess, they ... live with my ex-wife." He saw her face express a strange kind of sympathy, like, yeah, a divorced man had to be unlucky, or broken, but truth was, he did miss Katya and the kids, maybe them even more.

"Are you still in contact?"

"That's difficult with my job," said Vadim, placing the plate into the cupboard, on top of the small pile of neatly arranged plates. So much care and work went into this kitchen.

"Did your wife marry again?" Mhairi looked almost apologetic for her curiosity.

I don't know, thought Vadim, and felt guilty again. He should keep track. He shouldn't just pretend he was alone in this world, with no connections or obligations. But part of him had always assumed that his attention wasn't necessary and probably unwelcome, too. Or maybe he was just a coward, had evaded and ignored. "If she has, she didn't tell me." He could read in her face no judgement, no criticism, but still that vague sense of compassion for somebody who didn't have a wife, no contact with his children, and probably no proper home. And she was right on all counts.

There was a sound from outside, the door opening, and she heard it too, because she tilted her head and smiled. "That will be Graham."

* * *

It was time for dinner soon once the middle son had come home, vanishing into his room after greeting Vadim, the stranger, and his uncle, just another stranger. In the typical surly teenager manner, he dragged himself upstairs and was not to be seen until it was time for the family and guests to congregate around the large table in the kitchen.

The meal was tasty and so were the drinks, while the conversation flowed easily. The way Duncan sometimes looked at Dan, with an oddly tender expression, seemed proof that their talk had been good for him.

"So," Duncan smiled warmly when the boys cleared the table and Mhairi brought the dessert in, "now that I know a bit more about that brother of

mine,” he winked and Dan grimaced, “when are you finally going to find yourself a nice wife? No man should live without a partner.”

Vadim’s jaw muscles tensed again, noticeably, and he glanced into Dan’s face, seeing that pained expression that some people might mistake for exasperation. Duncan obviously was only concerned, but they did keep prodding at the whole thing, and Vadim hoped that Dan had enough self-control to crack a stupid joke or some other way deflect that attention.

“Duncan.” Dan drew in a deep breath. “I told you and father years ago, that I was not the marrying type. Have never been, will never be, and there won’t ever be the pitter-patter of tiny feet, either. I’m not the husband type and I am even less the father type. I haven’t got a shred of a family man in me. That’s you, Duncan, and that’s good so, but I’m forty-two now, I’m not suddenly going to change.” Adding, with an attempt of a smile, “aye?”

“Aye.” Duncan smiled in return, but he was prodding at this like a kid on a loose tooth. “But what about a girlfriend, maybe?”

Vadim wanted to step in, but he knew that he really couldn’t say anything. He was a friend. Friends didn’t evade personal questions for each other. It just didn’t work like that. But it wasn’t necessary, because Mhairi called “Duncan!” from the cooker range, thankfully saving Dan, who was starting to look rather uncomfortable. Vadim gave him a small smile and decided to thank Dan for his restraint later. ‘Mad Dog’ would have just stood up to it, fuck the consequences. But Dan endured this – and Vadim knew it was really only for his sake.

Mhairi turned around, “That’s no way to treat your brother. He’s our guest and it’s entirely up to him what he does with his life.”

Duncan ducked his head with a broad grin, whispering across the table, “I’ve been told off, the Missus has spoken.”

“I heard that!” She called again, laughing, getting back to the table with a large tray of dessert glasses, filled with Cranachan. Which, Vadim found out, was some kind of sweetened cream with raspberries, with oatmeal on top, and a generous shot of something alcoholic.

“That’s delicious,” Vadim volunteered to draw the conversation back to the food.

“Uh-huh!” Dan mumbled, mouth full with the cream and fruit. Safest option was to keep eating so he wouldn’t have to talk.

The conversation from then on went along safer lines, about the kids, their schools, about the farm and the harvest, the village and who was still alive that Dan knew from his childhood and youth.

A few hours later, the kids had already gone to bed, the evening was winding up in the lounge, in front of the fire. Vadim sat with his legs stretched out, head leaning against the side of a huge chair that easily accommodated him, drowsy from the food, the warmth, and possibly the alcohol. Listening, taking in these people, and every now and then, his guts tightened at the thought of *his* family. He envied Dan these people, the re-growing closeness, the ease to be in touch and exchange.

"Where are you heading to tomorrow?" Mhairi asked, turning the whisky glass in her hand. "Are you going to visit the Isle of Skye?" She was smiling.

"Not sure, we haven't actually planned anything. Do you recommend Skye?" Dan grinned, at least he remembered that much, his sister in law came from Skye, he'd even managed to be at the wedding, a long time ago.

"Of course I do!" She laughed and waved at her husband. "Go and pick up the route book, we should help those two see the most beautiful places in the next few days." And Duncan did, coming back with a large tome.

"How many days do you have?"

"At least five ... or we could rearrange the meeting with friends in Glasgow. They invited us for the weekend," said Vadim.

"Aye," Dan nodded, dead-pan, not even a twitch gave away the sort of 'friends'. "Five days sounds good. Too much scenery and I might go berserk."

Duncan laughed, opening the book.

"Then let's have a look and find a good route for you." Mhairi put her empty glass down, leaning forward over the low table. "We probably have a few recommendations for B&Bs as well and we could phone some up tomorrow, if you like."

Dan glanced at Vadim, who nodded, and Dan agreed. "Good idea, haven't been here for so long, I could do with a tourist guide."

And so it went, the rest of the evening was spent in companionable ease, looking over maps and guides, pictures and descriptions, and getting an itinerary together that would take them across and up the Highlands, and finally back along the East coast, to spend one night in Edinburgh, before heading down to England, and visiting Dr Williams.

It was fairly late, much later than Dan's family usually went to bed, when they broke up and headed upstairs. Good-nights were said, and Dan stood in front of his door, trying not to glance over at Vadim's door.

Vadim, too, stood inside his room. He'd pulled the door shut behind him when they'd bid him good night. A friendly room, the bed easily large enough for him, and he found himself staring at it, imagining the cool linen, and no body next to him. No Dan around him. Fuck. This was difficult. Far worse than he'd expected. He pushed the bag towards the foot end of the bed and opened his door, a relatively loud sound. Hoped Dan hadn't closed his door yet. Vadim peered outside.

Dan was still in front of his door, his hand on the handle. He turned his head at the sound and smiled at Vadim, a strange smile, more tired than sad. "Good night, lion." He said in Russian. "Sleep well."

Vadim opened the door a little further, listened whether he could hear anybody else. Eyes on Dan, his lips pressed together, especially at the sound of Russian. "I'm such a fucking coward," he murmured in Russian. "Shit. And they're good people."

"It's alright, maybe later." Dan looked across the landing, smiled once more. He was hurting, but he figured he actually deserved to feel like that. Guilty, on

too many counts. "I'm having a quick shower," in English, "you need the bathroom now or later?"

Vadim followed the gaze. Yes. He had to assume somebody was still awake. Unable to speak clearly, not even in Russian because it might not be what was proper and inconspicuous. "Go ... right ahead. I'm just leaving the door open, don't like closed doors." In English, connecting one careful word with the next one. "Are we on our way tomorrow or do you want to spend another day with them?"

"We should head off or we won't have enough time to get to see the Highlands and Edinburgh." Dan took a step inside, "good night, Vadim." In English as well.

"Good night." Vadim swallowed, lowered his head, went inside. Feeling the loss of proximity, the motherfucking distance like a boot in his guts. He sometimes felt Dan was too close, especially when they slept in the heat and Dan's skin on his skin made him sweat worse, or when Dan was always, always, touching him ... that feeling was rare, but he'd lie if he didn't admit that it happened at times, but right now, Dan not being there was far, far worse. He sat on the bed, rummaged through his bag, found a fresh set of clothes that he set out on a chair for tomorrow. Waiting for Dan to get finished in the bathroom so he could brush his teeth.

Retreating into the room, Dan stared at the floor while undressing, he took the big towel that lay ready for him, and headed back to the bathroom, with the soap bag in his hand.

It took him longer than the usual ten minutes, too deep in thoughts, and too much not wanting to return to the room on his own, despite the pledges they had given each other. When he finally returned his hair was still damp, clinging to his neck, and he had the towel wrapped around his hips. He was about to shut the bathroom door when the landing light when on, and he was faced with his brother who let out a sound of shock, as he stared at Dan's body, eyes and mouth wide.

A sound that made Vadim get up from the bed, move towards the door, silently, listening to work out what it meant. Standing in the shadow of the open door, invisible from outside.

"Oh Dan ..." Duncan brought out at last, while Dan stood, frozen.

"What's wrong?" Trying to keep his voice down, but the way Duncan stared at him, Dan wanted to shake him and shout at him, to stop that horrible look in his eyes.

"You ..." raising his hand, Duncan pointed at Dan. "Your ... your body. You ..." Swallowing when he looked up, he shook his head.

"What?" Dan hissed, hard to keep quiet, "what the fuck's the problem?" Raising his arms, wide, turning once on his own axis. "Have I sprouted horns?"

Vadim felt his hackles rise. He knew the answer before Dan had cottoned on. Your body. Dan had, like in camp, not dressed after the shower. And he'd been right – there were people still awake and watching in this house. Familiarity, not surveillance. A family where people didn't have dirty secrets.

“Your scars.” Duncan whispered, unable to take his eyes off the horrible mess that Dan’s body was in - to a civilian’s eye.

“What about them?” Tension slammed into Dan. He’d never bothered about them, never cared, nor had any of his lovers, least of all Vadim. “I told you I wasn’t a pretty face anymore.” Defensive.

“I never knew ... never understood ...” His brother stammered, took a couple of steps closer. “I am sorry, Dan, but I never realised how close you must have been to death with that bomb, and ... “ making a weak gesture along Dan’s body, “all the other injuries. Your job ... I never got it. I just felt left alone with everything here, while you didn’t live up to being my hero, because you didn’t seem to care.”

“No, I didn’t, and I did.” Dan answered quietly, hardly above a whisper himself, “but I never said I could, nor that I would. I’m not a hero, I’m just a bloke, who couldn’t ... I just couldn’t let my family get too close. Couldn’t allow it, couldn’t bear the thought if the next time the bullet ...” never finished the sentence, instead shook his head, looking straight into his brother’s eyes. “I was a coward, Duncan, and I am so very sorry.”

Duncan shook his head. “But I do realise at last, that none of us would have ever understood what you were doing, and I don’t think we ever *will* understand.”

“You don’t have to, I don’t expect you to.”

“But ...” Duncan interrupted, not getting far when Dan raised his hand.

“No, you don’t.” Dan smiled, a very serious and melancholy smile. “I was a coward for never coming here, for never being a part of the family. It was easier to do my job that way, and that was bloody selfish. No family, no home, no ...” hesitated, couldn’t say the word ‘wife’.

“You are no coward.” Duncan took the last two step towards Dan, and pulled him once more into a bear hug, completely catching Dan by surprise. “You are my *brother*.”

They stood, with Dan dropping the soap bag and slowly raising his arms to hold his brother in a tight embrace, while Vadim moved to the side, silent as death, stepped into view, but still inside his room. Seeing Dan from the side, and half of his brother. Silent, watching, unable to support, and witness to an oddly intimate moment. Envious for a moment, then he shook his head and stepped out of sight again, silently moving. Feeling deeply, that whatever this visit did to Dan and him, it was important, and right, and a good thing.

* * *

The next morning, they had a late breakfast in the kitchen, after Duncan had already done a full morning’s work and the two sons were off to school. A complete Scottish fry-up, with Dan’s fabled square sausage, black pudding, potato waffles, fried bread, eggs, buttered bread, and lots of bacon, which Dan wolfed down in his usual starvation manner, complimenting Mhairi all over again on her excellent food. Vadim ate less, it was even more food than they

usually got in camp, but he tried a bit from everything and found the fare agreeable, especially late in the morning. No way he'd be able to eat this earlier, and he enquired what things were called and got a quick primer of Scottish food.

Duncan had joined them for a second breakfast, and there was the sense of greater ease around the table, with Duncan now and then looking up and smiling at his brother.

It was almost twelve when they said their good-byes, and Duncan making Dan promise that he wouldn't wait another five years before the next visit. When they finally got into the car, Dan sat in the driver's seat, looking at the key before turning round to Vadim all of a sudden. "Give me a few moments. I have ... forgotten something inside."

Vadim nodded. "Sure." Not questioning for an instant.

Dan smiled, looking at Vadim for a moment longer than usual, then headed out of the car, closing the door behind him. He stepped towards Mhairi and Duncan, who were laughing at him, expecting he'd forgot something. Vadim could see from the car how Dan went inside, and all three vanished from view.

Inside, Dan asked his sister in law if he could 'borrow' his brother for a moment. Confused, but smiling, she nodded, and Dan manoeuvred the surprised man back into the lounge, where he closed the door behind him.

"What's up?" Duncan asked with a smile.

"I got about five minutes, no more, and five minutes for telling you what I have to tell you is a bloody short time, but it doesn't work any other way."

"What?" Duncan laughed, shaking his head in confusion. "You speak in riddles."

"Aye." Dan nodded, "I always have, have all my life and have since I came here this time. All I told you, Duncan, everything was true, but it wasn't all of it. The reason why I am not married and never will? Why I haven't got a girlfriend? I'm gay, Duncan. I'm sorry, I ..."

Duncan stared at him, not uttering a sound.

Dan ploughed on, time was running out. "I want you to know, because you told me you needed to know who your brother was, and if I didn't tell you who I love, then how could you ever know who I am?" Taking a quick, deep breath. "Vadim is not just my friend, he is my lover and has been for twelve years. But Vadim, he ... I think he hates being gay. I think if he could, he'd take a pill and become 'normal'. He was so afraid, Duncan, about what you'd say, about coming here as a gay couple, and shit, I don't know how you lot react, it's difficult with families, isn't it? And ..."

Dan would have barged on, one word chasing the other, if his brother hadn't grabbed his arms.

"What?"

"I'm gay, Duncan." Dan got out, "and I'm so sorry for not being who you want me to be."

"*What?*" Duncan repeated, with increased sharpness. "You're sorry? For what?"

"You said I was your childhood hero," Dan felt and sounded deflated, "and childhood heroes aren't gay."

"That's all bullshit." Duncan shook his head, holding onto his brother. "You can't come here and drop this bomb onto me in the last few minutes before you have to leave."

"I am sorry ... but I had to. Vadim ... I can't do this to him, I promised him I wouldn't tell anyone. He wants nothing more than to be normal, to blend in, and being gay ... it's ... you don't know what happened to him and why he was imprisoned."

"The KGB? Was that it? Because of ..." his brother caught on all too quickly, "twelve years! You were in Afghanistan at the time."

"Aye." Dan nodded, didn't know what else to say. "We were."

"But Dan?" Duncan tried again while Dan slowly extricated himself out of his grip.

"I have to go. I am sorry." Couldn't repeat it often enough. "So sorry. I really am. I would have told you straight away, wanted to, but ... I love him, you see, and ... I couldn't."

"Love ..." Duncan stared at Dan, unable, it seemed, to form a coherent thought. "I've always been worried about you, that you'd be on your own, that you'd end up lonely, that ..."

"I'm not, aye?" Dan took a step to the door, trying to smile. "I'm not, and I'm ... I'm sorry." He stepped through the door, turned, and walked far too fast towards the entrance door.

"But you can't just leave!" Duncan called after him.

"I have to! I am sorry ..." And with that Dan was out of the door, almost running towards the car and pulling the door open, he into the seat, slammed the door shut, and started the ignition, like a chased man. The gravel was crunching beneath the tyres as he turned the car far too fast and drove off.

Vadim was about to say something, something like "so, you found it?" but Dan drove as if he really wanted to get away as soon as possible. Vadim frowned, regarded Dan from the side, but the pinched expression on his features and the tell-tale silence in the car after a few hundred yards told even him that something wasn't quite right. He waited for Dan to tell, but was focussing on the road with a concentration that, above all, told Vadim that not only wasn't something quite right, but Dan tried to ignore something very hard.

"You're not a great actor," murmured Vadim, gently, and touched Dan's thigh.

"What?" Dan shook his head, as if trying to make it all go away by simply ignoring it. Rock and a hard place, and he'd done what he had to do. He had broken his word to the most important person in his life in the process.

Vadim regarded him, suddenly unsure if he read Dan right, again hearing Dr Williams' advice on mistrusting anything that didn't make sense, when his emotions and his mind were at cross-purposes. But he'd have thought he could read Dan by now. Only, Dan didn't react as expected. He watched the

landscape whiz past, but kept his hand on Dan's knee, feeling Dan's leg tense when he moved the foot.

"What's wrong?"

Damn. What to answer? Nothing? Bullshit, and he hated lying, the whole reason why he'd done what he'd done. What then? Barge right ahead, no other option. "I fucked it up." Dan kept his eyes glued onto the road, driving far too fast for the tiny twisty lanes.

Vadim frowned, attention divided between the mad driving and Dan who was putting on his best Mad Dog act. "Calm down, first of all. It can't be that bad."

"Yes it is." Dan spotted a lay-by sign a few hundreds yards ahead and he slowed down all of a sudden, manoeuvring the car into the parking space. He switched the ignition off and turned to face Vadim. "I broke my word."

Vadim shifted in his seat to look at Dan. "Okay." His blood ran cold. He knew what Dan meant, all of a sudden. A falling out? The way Dan looked, very likely. Of course, Duncan, nice as he was, probably had reacted in the foreseen way to getting exposed to Dan's need to proclaim his orientation to everybody who wanted – or didn't want – to know. "Did he ... did he ask?"

"No, not at all." Dan shook his head violently. "I just ... I *had* to tell him, you understand? All that shit, all my life, me being a coward, not having contact with my family, making it easier for myself, and then he wants to know who I am, and I tell him, as much as I can, and he calls me his childhood hero and all that crap, and I ... I kept lying to him, you know? By not telling him who I really am." Shaking his head again, "I am so sorry, Vadim. So, so sorry. I did not lightly break my word, but I had to. He had to know or I'd just been giving him even more lies."

Vadim remembered the two men in a tight embrace, the way Duncan's voice had sounded at the impact of Dan's scars. Oh fuck, but he did have a right, didn't he? Didn't he deserve the truth? Even if it hurt? Courageous Dan. Again. Fucking again. Dan just had to barge right through everything. "It's okay. He's ... he's a nice enough fellow." Even if he is disgusted at what we are. It was fair enough. Live and let die. It was Dan's family, and Vadim would very likely never see them again. "If that's what you had to do, it's alright."

"I did. And I'm sorry. I really am." Looking down at his hands at the steering wheel, Dan sounded defeated. "And the worst is, I ran away from him, didn't give him any time. He told me he'd always been worried that I would end up alone, and that I couldn't just leave him. He wanted to talk to me." Adding, even quieter, "what a shit brother I have been all of his life."

Vadim reached over to touch Dan's face, tried to turn it to look at him, saw that deep, sad expression in Dan's dark eyes, and felt his own throat go tight. "We ... can just turn around. The Highlands can wait, you know. What ... whatever he says. You only have one family. One brother. I'd ... be proud to have a brother like that. Or like you. You're good people, Dan."

Dan tilted his head, forehead resting against forehead. It had been a long time since last he'd hurt like that, and this time he was the culprit. "I don't know

what ...” What to expect, what to say, what to do. “I’ve steamrolled him. How fucking selfish of me.”

Vadim smiled tenderly, ran his hand through Dan’s hair, fully focussed on the other, while the shame continued to tighten his guts. “Okay. What about this ... you calm down, he calms down, we go on towards that first bed and breakfast, and just call him. Keep it nice, ask how he feels, whatever, and if there’s stuff to talk about,” like being gay, “you meet him tomorrow or so.”

Dan nodded, felt ridiculously taken care of, and the sensation struck him as the most alien one he’d ever experienced so far. It was a good feeling, and he smiled crookedly. “Can we ... maybe not even go that far? Can we just call him from the next village?”

“Yeah. Come, move over, I drive. I think that’s fifteen miles or something. According to the last time I checked the map.”

“Thanks.” Dan looked at Vadim. “And I’m sorry, aye? I hate breaking my word. It’s just not me, and I wouldn’t have told him, believe me, if ... you know, Duncan ...” Dan shrugged helplessly, before getting out of the car to change places.

Vadim walked around the car, too, meeting Dan behind the boot, and pulled him into a tight embrace. “Nothing to be sorry about. It’s happened and we now just see what we do with it.” The nausea was still there, a different kind of fear, but he probably would never have to face Duncan again. This was between the two brothers, and even if Dan had screwed it up, at least the cards were on the table now.

Relief washed over Dan, and thankfulness. For the understanding, and for much more, for which he didn’t even have words. “Thank you.” Murmured, he lifted his head away from the embrace and smiled, “you’re not half bad, Russkie, you know that?”

Vadim gave a short laugh. “I think it sometimes takes me a while, but I end up making good decisions at some point. Pretty much when I have exhausted all other options.” They were completely alone on the road, and Vadim moved to kiss Dan, whose chuckle was silenced by the kiss, which lasted until the sound of a car coming around the closest narrow bend was pulling them apart.

“Let’s go, then?” Dan asked, nervous as hell.

“Aye.” Vadim got in the driver’s seat, waited for Dan, and followed the car that had passed them, staying right on the heels of what was clearly a native driver.

The road followed along the beautiful shores of another loch, twisting and winding through forest on one side, water on the other, and majestic slopes of the Highlands behind it all, but Dan didn’t have eyes for any of it. It didn’t take them long, lucky not to get stuck behind a lorry, before they entered the village. Soon enough they spotted a public phone right next to a café.

“Can we have a cuppa first?” Dan’s fingers were suspiciously tightly curled around the handle of the car door.

Vadim stretched his back and rolled his shoulders, just tension haunting him in the usual places. “You mean, maybe even a strawberry tart?” He locked the

door and pocketed the key. "You think they have this 'short bread'? I liked that."

"Aye, they must have. We are in Scotland, after all."

The café had a gift- and a book shop section which Vadim browsed briefly, but it was really no point buying books when he couldn't properly read, least of all a history of the general region. The café also had a gallery, and it sported not only shortbread, but several other variants, but no strawberry tarts. Dan went with chocolate and caramel shortbread instead, and an extra large mug of black coffee, which he over-filled with several spoonfuls of sugar. Vadim took the coffee as it came, black, strong, and no sugar, taking the occasional bite from a piece of shortbread with the coffee, finding the combination of sweet and bitter just right.

They'd sat down for a few minutes Dan thoughtfully working on his sweets, before he spoke again, a frown between his eyes. "What if he doesn't want to talk to me?" Stupid question, really. If he didn't, he just didn't, but for some reason it wasn't that easy this time.

"Then you call him again in a few days. He's family. And his sons ... you know, they should have an uncle."

"Oh hell." Dan sighed, "I really am not getting out of this family business anymore, am I?" Offering a crooked smile, "and that after all these years of doing my best at being a complete fuck-up."

Vadim smiled at him over the coffee. "You have a family, Dan. That's good. And your brother seems a lot less complicated than, for example, my father. It's just ... you know, nobody's fault, really. And staying away out of habit is stupid."

"Aye, I know that now." Dan sighed and shrugged, finishing off his shortbread. "But what is your father like?" Stalling, perhaps, but genuinely interested.

Vadim shook his head. "My father. Well, he's a lot like me, only smarter. Terrific chess player, he's read every single book he owns, and knows many, many more books. I have the looks from my mother. My father ... he's big into arts, ballet, modern painting. If he feels like it, he can tell you story upon story about the past, which composer knew which artist, which officer's wife followed her husband to Siberia, which young noble bled to death in the snow after a duel. He's full of stories, and when I was a kid, I found it hard to tell the difference between things that had happened two hundred years ago and what happened yesterday. He always said Russia was so much richer before Socialism happened, how the dreams got perverted ... he used to be political, but when he was young, that was very, very dangerous. He ... disagreed with my choices. He didn't want me to 'become involved' as he called it. He didn't mind the military – he did mind the ministry. He said I shouldn't turn into one of the faceless people who keep the machine running. He very much disagreed with the Soviet machine. He said I was being instrumentalised and that I was stupid for embracing that. I guess he was right on that count. It should have given him satisfaction to see me ... in prison. But it didn't. And I thought, well, 'you hated

so much what I was, can you accept me now?’ Of course, he couldn’t. As smart as he is, he never understood ... he didn’t get what I felt. Well. It’s a generational thing.”

Dan had leaned closer throughout Vadim’s talking, until his hand came to rest on one wrist. No more. “I would have thought your father was a monster if he had felt any satisfaction, seeing his son in prison. After all, you are still his son, aye?”

“Yes. And he did tell me the story. But I don’t think I can rebuild anything there. At least there’s still family to keep an eye on him. He’s not alone. But I think there’s nothing we can repair. There’s just no basis. That’s different with you and Duncan. Your brother clearly cares about you. A great deal.”

Dan smiled a little, didn’t, couldn’t comment on the ‘story’. His secret, how it got to Vadim, and a secret it should remain. Giving that wrist one squeeze. “I guess, listening to you, that I should get up now and drag my sorry arse to that phone box. Right?”

“Right. I’ll get another coffee. Take your time.”

“Okay.” Dan stood up and left the café, straight to the phone box. With the usual handful of change in his back pocket, he dialled the number that had never changed since his childhood. Feeling a fist deep in his guts, twisting and knotting his insides.

“Aye?” None other but Duncan himself had picked up the phone.

“It’s me.” Dan winced at the idiotic opener.

“Dan?”

Was there hope in that single word, or was he deluding himself, trapped in wishful thinking? Or was it anger and possibly disgust and he just couldn’t read his brother’s voice?

“Aye, it’s me.” Closing his eyes, desperately trying to think. “Listen, Duncan, I ... I’m not that far away yet, and ... oh shit.” The day he was going to be a man of clever or even just smooth words, that day the earth was probably going to open and swallow him whole. If only. He wouldn’t mind right now. “I’m sorry.”

“Aye, you’ve said that before. About ten times or so.”

“Shit.” Dan murmured, and louder, “but I am. Shouldn’t have dumped all this crap on you.”

“Well, from the little I know you, you’ve never been the most diplomatic man, but I’d always figured it was one of your more charming features.”

Dan listened up, hoping, almost praying, that he detected a smile in the voice.

Duncan continued when Dan remained silent, not trying to apologise again. “What are you actually sorry for? For being best known for your absence in our lives, or for getting yourself almost killed far too regularly and too spectacularly, without us even realising how close we were to losing you, or for turning up here, making me want to hold you and keep you so that you goddamned motherfucker won’t be able to leave before we got to know each other

properly? Or are you trying to tell me, you sad son of a bitch, that you are sorry for being gay?"

Dan stood tense as a rod, closed eyes had opened wide, and he was staring outside, not seeing the mountains nor the beauty around him. His brother had sworn. Like a trooper, even, and he'd never heard him do that before.

"So? Which one of them is it?" Duncan demanded.

"All of them?" The last time Dan had felt so small was when he'd just joined the Forces and been made to scrub the toilet floors on his hands and knees.

"If you really mean that, Dan, then you are insulting me and all of your family."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, that if you really are sorry for being gay, then you don't bloody know me."

Dan shook his head, but said nothing. No, he didn't know his brother, did he?

Duncan continued. "I told you, didn't I, that I was always worried you might end up alone. It seems you won't, and that is a good thing. It's not what I would have expected and I'm the last not to admit that it's ... strange to accept you're together with a man ..." Duncan paused, "and it's probably odd and awkward and embarrassing and goodness what, *until we get used to it*," he took a deep breath, "but Dan, I told you I hardly know you, so it's not really a shock, aye? Because how can it shock me if I never got a chance to really know you in the first place?"

Dan swallowed. "Guess ... not that much?" Managing to feel even smaller, by now reaching the stage of scrubbing the loos in the barracks with a toothbrush.

"Aye, you got it. Not." Duncan took a deep breath, and this time, Dan was certain he heard a smile in the voice. "And now, Dan, now I need you to know that I am damn glad you called, because I was about to get into the car and try and catch you on your way, and just think how awkward that would have been."

Dan smiled into the receiver, a wave of relief washing over him. "Don't thank me, you have to thank Vadim. He was the one getting me to do the right thing, and that even though he is still mortified."

"You think he wouldn't want to come back?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, *Dan*," Duncan emphasised Dan's name as if speaking to a small child, "that you're going to turn round and come back home and have a good chat with us, or just me, or whatever you feel comfortable with. You said you've known each other for twelve years. You must have been enemies, but have you been lovers for that long? And when did you realise you were gay? I remember you having girlfriends all the time. And what about the KGB thing you were talking about? And, and, and. I want to know more." There was no doubt, now, that Duncan's voice harboured a smile. "Being part of a family means sharing. Aye, Dan?"

“Aye.” Dan smiled. “I’ll talk to Vadim, but I think we might just be coming back.”

“Do that.” Duncan paused and added with a softer voice, “my brother.”

With that the line went dead and Dan looked at the receiver, before replacing it gently. Hands in his pockets, he made his way back into the café.

Vadim had been staring out the window, forcing himself not to watch Dan, didn’t want him to feel even more uncomfortable, and instead regarded the greenness, the strange landscape that always changed and still remained very typical, in a way. He’d got himself a sandwich and had eaten half of it, not really tasting anything, apart from the fact that the cheese was fairly strong and salty. “Well?” Looking up, when Dan sat down, but Dan didn’t look bad, seemed it had gone well. Dan wasn’t a great actor, by any stretch of the imagination. “What’s the plan?”

“Would you mind going back?”

“Right now?”

“Uhm ... aye?”

That meant he was supposed to come back, too. Wasn’t it? Vadim nodded, didn’t want to make this worse for Dan, but the nausea was back. He didn’t want to face Duncan on a bad day – his feeling was that Duncan wasn’t quite as bad as Dan in temperament. The man seemed sweeter, calmer, but Vadim dreaded the expression in his eyes. “You sure I should come along?”

“Aye, he emphasised that me having a partner is a good thing, but that it would take some time to get used to the fact that that partner isn’t a wee lass, but it didn’t seem to be too big an issue.” Dan smiled. “If I am going to be part of the family, then you are part of the family, too.”

“Oh shit.” Vadim rolled his eyes. “That’s what I get for encouraging you. More family.” He stood up, though, dug for the keys, and led Dan out of the café, hand on his shoulder. “Let’s go, then.” Fighting his own nervousness. He could keep a low profile. Hopefully Duncan wouldn’t ask just why they had lied when he was in the same room. Oh damn.

“Does that mean you volunteer to do the driving?” Dan cocked his head in his typical way. “Or are you trusting me not to bugger it up too badly, despite having been family-whacked?”

“No, I’m driving. I was actually trained to drive properly.”

“What, and you think I wasn’t?” Dan pulled a face, “arrogant bastard.” Grousing good naturedly, while Vadim opened the door for him.

Vadim got in himself, and just a little later they were on their way – back exactly where they’d come from. Vadim focused on the street, the car, frowning as if against the sun, but in truth because he was concentrating hard to keep the fear at bay. He liked Duncan, and that would make it worse to look into his eyes.

It didn’t take long before once again Dan got out of his seat and opened the gate for Vadim to drive through. Gravel quietly churning beneath the tyres, while Dan walked up to the door, which opened before he reached it.

Duncan stood in the doorframe, smiling, one hand in his pocket. "Heard you coming up."

"Aye, hard to sneak up on you." Dan felt a combination of awkward and a thousand other things, but Duncan laughed.

"You were SAS, I'd expect better from you."

"I'm old now. Belong to the scrap heap."

"You don't look it." Duncan was opening the door wider when Vadim got out of the car and walked towards them.

"Dodgy knees, aye?"

"Aye." Duncan's eyes seemed to smile more when Vadim came close.

Vadim glanced up, meeting the eyes. To his immense, if cautious, and so sceptical relief, he didn't see anything in them that would feed the fear. He tried a cautious smile. "Thanks for having us back," he said, muted.

Duncan stretched his hand out again, exactly the same way as he had done the day before. "I am honoured to welcome my brother's partner, and do excuse us, if we just, well, have to get used to some things."

Vadim took the hand and held it, meeting the gaze, noticing again the similarities between Dan and Duncan. "That's ... well, it took some years for ... us." The 'us' loaded with all that past, all that history, their reluctance, and the rocky road that had brought them there.

Duncan's smile was even warmer than the day before, "Aye, but I'm afraid you have to live with the 'family treatment' now, not just the 'visitor' one."

Vadim swallowed hard, thought, shit, *family*, and he hadn't realized how much he'd missed to be anybody's family. Or have family. He did have family, and he should get his own affairs sorted, too. Put his life back in order. "Seeing Dan, that can't be too bad," he murmured. "Apologies for the confusion. I guess I ... made Dan put up a smoke screen."

"It's alright." Duncan's grip was strong as he shook Vadim's hand. "As long as you two are going to tell us a bit more about your lives." Letting go of Vadim's hand, he took Dan by his shoulders. "Twelve years. War. Enemies. Bomb. KGB. Gulf. And that's only naming a very few facts that I know of." Ushering both of them back inside, they heard Mhairi calling from the kitchen.

"Coffees? I am just making some food, but you guys start chatting, I'll bring something along."

"Coffee would be great," said Vadim, following behind Dan, feeling slightly nervous and insecure still, mostly because this was now completely new territory, with that knowledge hanging between them. The whole, gruesome story. He settled down at the table, watching Dan and Duncan. Duncan, who didn't seem to have the nasty or brutal side that Dan had had as a soldier, just a perfectly nice guy, somebody who, in a way, was still innocent, but that didn't diminish him. The word 'civilian' could mean something good, and pure, and something that should be protected, Vadim reflected.

"So," Duncan leaned forward in his seat, hands folded. "How did it all begin? And don't you tell me that it is none of my business, because you're *both* family, and thus it *is* my business." He looked positively like a spitting image of

Dan when he smirked for a brief moment, showing all his teeth, before tilting his head, ready to listen.

Dan looked at Vadim, then back at his brother. "Well."

"It started when we invaded Afghanistan, we being the Soviet army," said Vadim. "Helping brothers, or taking control of a sovereign nation, depending on whom you believe. We were enemies; me and a comrade roughed Dan up a bit," the rape certainly not something he'd admit, and he looked at Dan, asking wordlessly whether that kind of whitewash was alright, and Dan smiled slightly. For anyone else the gesture would look like agreement with a memory faded and past. "Dan killed that comrade, and he managed to work out who I was. He captured me one day in the mountains, but he didn't kill me, instead ... paid me back. Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, blood for blood. I ... was fascinated, and ... attracted," Vadim felt his throat grow tight, "and I think surviving up in the mountains together did blur the lines between fellow soldier and enemy."

Duncan had moved even closer, bent over his own knees, looking from one to the other. His gaze was intense, "what are you actually saying here?"

Vadim inhaled, but couldn't form words, struggled with translating soldier concepts into something civilians could understand.

Dan moved into the breach. "Violence, Duncan. I'm afraid we didn't meet under a full moon with roses and a bottle of wine. We were set on killing each other. Just ... that it didn't work out like that."

"But what did you mean with payback? And ... why did you kill that man?"

"Why does anyone kill in a war?" Dan said quietly, looking away at first, then back at his brother. "I am not a nice man, Duncan. Not even a good one. I did what I did because I am who I am: able to do the job." He shrugged, and when he smiled it was guarded. "Don't make me try to explain, Duncan. Please don't. We were enemies in a war ..."

Duncan nodded, his eyes on Dan, and it seemed what he saw convinced him to back away, offering a smile in return. "Aye," quietly, "I guess I wouldn't understand anyway." He looked at Vadim, his first question hadn't been forgotten. "Payback?"

Vadim nodded. "We were drunk that night and itching for a fight. Dan was out alone, in civilian clothes – he was posing as a reporter, and the Soviet army doesn't like reporters. Vanya and I ambushed him and ... roughed him up. Dan killed Vanya in self-defence. In turn, when he captured me, he gave me the beating of my life." Vadim gave a dry laugh. "If he'd not needed me to find water for him, I'd have died there and then."

Duncan looked at Dan, a strange expression in his eyes, but Dan's face had gone from guarded to closed, not allowing anything to show.

"Guess I ... was asking for it." Duncan said, made a movement with his hand, as if trying to brush all of it away. "Fast forward, aye? So, how did you figure out that you were attracted to each other?"

"Oh," Dan laughed suddenly, a single dry sound, "that was easy. Vadim just shot me in the shoulder."

Duncan's expression turned almost comical.

“I think we give the saying ‘love hurts’ a completely new dimension,” said Vadim, laughing. “Shit. It ... I don’t know. Dan ended up between me and a target ... or rather, between one of our targets and us ... but I recognized him and dragged him away while the fight was going on. I was about to shoot him, because I ... wanted him and I thought he didn’t want me ... so in my messed up head I thought I should kill the bastard, but on the other hand, he did keep me alive in the mountains and didn’t hand me over to the rebels ... and he needed an alibi for surviving while the rest of the guys were dead, so I had to shoot him. Shoulder seemed like a good option – serious enough, but not crippling and likely not deadly. And I ... yeah, I said something half-insane, I guess, I don’t actually remember, but I kissed him and I told him he could meet me in the tea house near the market. When Dan had healed, he did turn up. We ... took it from there.”

“Aye,” Dan grinned, still guarded, but mellowing, “that shot probably saved my life, to be honest, but then we did the life-saving a few times after that.”

Vadim smiled, “We didn’t talk much at first, I guess, but we slowly understood each other.”

“You ...” Duncan was rubbing his forehead, as if trying to force understanding through his skull. “I’m not quite sure if I can quite follow you, but I can tell you one thing, my life is nothing compared to yours. Met a girl, fell in love, married, had kids. That’s me.” Shaking his head before looking up at Dan.

Dan moved along on the sofa until he sat thigh to thigh with Vadim, taking his hand, and feeling Vadim’s fingers half-close around his. “You’re the lucky one, Duncan, in many respects.” Glancing at Vadim, before nodding at his brother. “No, we didn’t talk much. We didn’t for several years, but we kept meeting. In the tea house, or under completely ludicrous circumstances. Like that time in the middle of a ferocious winter, in a cave.” He glanced at Vadim, then shrugged. “We had safe houses, and we were careful ... and one day, without realising it, there was a lot more than the physical stuff.” Dan looked down at their combined hands for a moment. “And, I guess, I realised at some stage I was gay.”

“When did you realise?”

Dan shrugged, “a long time ago, during a night in London. I’d been with a girl I’d picked up, and things hadn’t gone quite so well.” Dan had the decency to wince, “I was a bastard back then, and I’m afraid to say, if I had a daughter, I’d cut any guy’s balls off and stuff them down their throats, if they dared treat her the way I treated my shags.” He grinned a little and shrugged when Vadim looked strangely at him while his brother’s expression varied between shocked and amused. “Don’t worry, I *did* learn a few things about myself in the last twelve years, aye? Anyway, I remember a cheap bar, yellow street light, and how I pissed myself laughing when I realised what a fuck-up I was.”

Vadim raised an eyebrow, wondering about the exact time and moment; things he hadn’t known, hadn’t been told. “I ... was always that. I married, but

... well. She was like a sister.” Is, Vadim, is. Damn, Katya. “I was attracted from the start. Dan less so.”

“I remember ...” Duncan nodded, looking at both of them, eyes flickering to the combined hands, then back into their faces. If it was difficult for him, he didn’t allow it to show. “I remember that something was different when you came to visit us before father’s death. You were on long-term R&R, I think, because you had been wounded.”

“The Mujas?” Dan mouthed to Vadim, questioning.

Vadim nodded. “Go ahead.”

“Aye.” Dan looked at his brother. “That was in ‘84, wasn’t it? I had been wounded, that’s right, but I never told anyone what had happened. Been caught in an ambush, the Soviets flattened the village I was holed up in. I got a flesh wound in the thigh, and a bullet ricocheted off a rock and grazed my temple.” Dan lifted his hair and pointed to a faded scar that vanished into the hairline, invisible without pointing out. “Thing was, they thought I was dead, which was lucky for me, because if the Soviets had realised that I was a turkey ...” catching onto Duncan’s confused look, Dan explained, “a turkey is a Western mercenary, but then, of course, I was much worse. I was in a country, as a member of the British Forces, without being supposed to be there. All hush-hush, all top secret. Well, it still is, and it’s all I can tell you.”

Duncan nodded, listening intently.

“Unlucky for me, though, was the fact that I’d come to lie under a few Muja corpses and got chucked into a mass grave.”

Duncan sat up, alarmed, when Dan continued, nodding at him. “Aye, it was as bad as it sounds.” Glancing at Vadim, because the next part he didn’t know, no clear memories, and definitely none he wanted to remember.

“It wasn’t my unit that did the flattening, only to be clear. I came in to make sure some of the bandit leaders were, indeed, dead. Of course, I assumed Dan would be in the area, but I was surprised to actually find his kit, and later, the body.” Vadim remembered the nausea, the pain only too well. “I made sure he made it. He was pretty shaken, mentally, and I didn’t like the look of the wound.”

“I guess that’s a perfect example of understatement.” Dan grinned wryly, “I was completely out of it, but that’s all I want to remember, trust me.”

Vadim nodded, “That was a generally pretty bad year ... all told. Apart from the fact that I realized how much things were blurred and how much I cared for this particular ‘turkey’. Dan is rarely helpless, but those days, he was. I made sure the wounds were clean and he’d come round ... but I had to leave, because as free as I was - as an officer and as special forces - even I couldn’t loiter around without a mission for too long.”

“Aye, and Vadim had clued on much earlier onto what I kind of felt but didn’t know.” Tilting his head when Duncan looked at him with confusion. “I’m not clear, am I?”

“Not really.” Duncan shook his head. “You were distant when you came back, I remember you sitting here with dad, joking, but you weren’t really there.”

“No, you’re right. My mind was in Afghanistan. I guess I was with Vadim, just that I hadn’t quite realised what I felt. That came over a year later, after a particularly and incredibly shitty year.”

“That’s the one when you didn’t call nor write?”

“Aye, sorry.” Dan looked at his hand in Vadim’s and shrugged once more. “Told you, I was a crap brother, but that year I really couldn’t contact anyone. I was in the mountains, and you could hardly call that civilisation.”

Vadim nodded at that. “Yeah. We weren’t in contact for months and months, close to a year, from what I remember. I was quite busy during that time, too, but there was no way to reach Dan ... the country is too vast, and I guess he couldn’t make it to the tea house where we used to leave messages. It was a particularly bad time, we were getting close, and at the same time, further apart. It wouldn’t have been so bad if I hadn’t cared about him so much at that stage.”

Duncan smiled slightly, nodded to himself.

Dan looked up. “I guess that’s when I finally ‘got it’. Wasn’t even a heart stopping revelation, it was just *there*, and wouldn’t go away anymore. It wasn’t convenient sex, not after six years. It was love, and it is still is.”

Vadim tightened his grip and smiled softly.

“Looks like it.” Duncan smiled, leaning back in his chair.

“I don’t know when I realized,” Vadim said. “I knew I cared, from fairly early on, but it’s hard to tell understanding, friendship, comradeship, and love apart. It just blends. Apart from the ... physical side. We ended up talking after ... well, the sex, and, strangely, we’d keep each other going, even though we were still enemies at that point. When the war drew to a close, we ... well, that was tough because we knew it wouldn’t go on like this forever. That retreating would mean the end. The Brits stepped down their involvement, too.”

“Was that why you left the army after your surgery?” Duncan looked from Vadim to his brother.

“Aye,” Dan nodded, “they didn’t want to send me back to Kabul, and there was no way I could not see Vadim.”

“Wish I had known that back then. I couldn’t understand why you threw away a golden handshake and a full pension. Not after what you’d done for the country.”

Dan shrugged, his fingers tightening around Vadim’s. “Not sure if I did anything for Queen and Country. I did it because I’m an adrenaline junkie.”

“Yes, Dan never struck me as particularly political,” murmured Vadim. “Very unsatisfactory to discuss politics with him.”

“But then? After that? You worked for the embassy, I do remember how your wages hiked up.”

Dan grinned, “they still aren’t too bad.”

"No, certainly not compared to mine." Duncan laughed, "but I rather not put my life on the line, and least of all when a bomb is involved."

"Aye ... there was that." Dan said quietly.

"If it's any consolation, my wages at that point were still not great, not when exchanged into pound or dollar," Vadim murmured.

Thankful for Vadim to turn the sudden gloom away, Dan leaned into the sofa. Looking up when Mhairi came inside with a tray of coffee and mugs. "You go on, I am terribly busy in the kitchen, and I'm sure Duncan will tell me everything important later." She smiled and left the room as quickly as she had entered it, while Duncan leaned forward to pour the coffee.

"It didn't just go on from there, though? What happened with the KGB?"

Dan looked at Vadim, and Vadim started to speak.

"Yes ... by that point, we had something of a routine. I was stationed in Kabul and helped organize the withdrawal, Dan was in Kabul guarding the lady ... so we met a lot, regularly, Dan had even rented a place. Maybe we were too sure of ourselves, but somehow, they caught wind of it. I worked for the Interior Ministry, the KGB were our rivals, and it might have been some kind of rivalry thing, like making an example of me, but we were set up ... just before I left for Moscow again. They bugged our hotel room, and, well, just the fact that Dan was British, and I was meeting a Brit, and, of course, that I was gay, was enough to get me accused of treason. They grabbed me off the street, flew me to Moscow, and I faced the judge. They threw a lot of different accusations at me, treason, selling arms to Afghans, and other crimes. Some stuff stuck, and I was convicted."

Dan's face had darkened, and he didn't touch the coffee, sitting tense, while realising that they'd never talked about it. Never dared to touch the wound, that didn't feel as if it had ever closed.

Duncan put the coffee pot back onto the tray, captivated by each word. "But ..." It seemed he couldn't bring himself to ask a question. "They ..."

"Lies." Dan said quietly, but with intensity. "That was all lies. Everything. Except the one truth, that he did have sex with me, and is that treason? Is it?" He leaned forward, both hands tensing, one in Vadim's, the other on the table, clenching into a fist.

"No, not treason, but illegal," murmured Vadim. "They needed a scapegoat, and that was me ..."

Dan looked at Vadim, then back at Duncan. "And that morning Vadim was kidnapped? They set killers onto me, a whole goddamned 'army' of spetsnaz." Suddenly the good natured, easy-going guy with warm brown eyes was gone, replaced by a fierce man, whose eyes had hardened to near black, and a ferocious grin gave his brother a glimpse of the killer Dan had been, still was, and would never cease to be. "I nailed the fuckers. Knives, pistols, machine guns, and hand grenades, and the bastards were dead or dying. I made it out of the room, but I cut my leg in the damned window, left a trail of blood, and the greatest bastard of them all, the man who'd been Vadim's Colonel, caught me out when I tried to escape via the deserted kitchen."

Vadim looked at Dan. The Colonel. That felt like ice in his guts. The Colonel. The man he'd been afraid of, the man who'd intimidated him with just being there, with just a glance, with just silence, or even a word of praise. Nothing the Colonel had done that didn't seem like barbed wire, nothing that didn't cause fear or terror of some kind.

Duncan was listening in something akin to shock, not a muscle twitched in his face, as Dan carried on.

"They had set it all up, no staff in the hotel, and they'd filmed everything that had happened in our room. For evidence, you see? What damned evidence did they get, you wonder? No lies, no treason, just two guys being desperate, and wasn't that all forbidden. Hell, yes, and that's what they made stick, and that's what that Colonel took personally. How dared I 'use' one of his own men, and how I would suffer for it, how he'd take me out and got me to Moscow, where they'd torture every tiny scrap of secret out of me, until I confessed to anything they wanted me to, no matter if truth or lies, because it wasn't about truth at all, it was all about revenge." Dan paused, lips pulling away from his teeth, his whole body taut, as his eyes gleamed with a fearsome triumph, while the feeling in Vadim's guts was bad, a tension that had morphed into nausea, which made him visibly cringe. The thought of it. What could have happened to Dan. The Colonel had had a fearsome reputation. Vadim didn't doubt for a moment that the Colonel would have honoured those promises.

"And you know what? That Colonel was nothing but a homophobe, and he forgot to check the one place where he sure as hell didn't want to touch me ... I stuck a knife into his guts when he thought I was as good as dead." Lowering his voice, Dan hissed, "and before he died he asked me 'why?' and I told him because I love Vadim."

There was absolute silence in the room, it seemed as if Duncan wasn't breathing, until he swallowed hard, his face pale and his voice unsteady. "Dan ... please don't ..." But he never finished what he wanted to plead for, instead tried to reach for his mug but his hand was shaking too hard.

Every muscle in Vadim's body fought the churning nausea, but he still managed to breathe. "You ... killed him? He's dead?"

"Aye." Ignoring Duncan, Dan turned to Vadim. "The pig is dead. Bled to death on the kitchen tiles of a hotel in Kabul. Killed by a faggot." He snarled, "not the type of heroic death the bastard anticipated for himself, aye?"

Vadim felt close to throwing up, surprised himself at the violent reaction. Breathing was hard, his face was cold, lips numb, his stomach pressed up bile that sat like a fist in the back of his throat. "I need ... air," he got out, stood, and left the room. Managed to get out of the door, the bile brought the flavour of coffee up, a wretched combination.

Dan sat, completely at a loss, hardly hearing his brother's quiet words. "Dan ... what did you do? Was that necessary?"

"What?" Turning his head to look at Duncan.

"Did you have to tell us that?"

“Yes!” With sudden sharpness, Dan uttered the one word, getting up. “I had to. And there are many more things that I have to do or say, which wouldn’t meet with any decent man’s approval.”

“Well.” Duncan was clearly rattled, “perhaps you should go and look for Vadim?”

“Aye.” Dan was out of the door as fast as he’d jumped up, looking for Vadim outside.

Vadim leaned against the wall, face raised, breathing, fighting hard to breathe regularly, calmly, but the nausea was still there. That horrible pressure and a sense of dread, of fear, and he wasn’t surprised to find that he was sweating. Seeing Dan come outside, he gave a pained smile. “It’s ... alright. Just the trauma. I hope. Shit.” The Colonel dead. His sick fascination for the man, the fear, the hatred all mixed up with the knowledge he’d never be able to take revenge, or face him, never would have to face him again. “Didn’t ... didn’t know that. Dan. He’d have done that. He’d have done ... what he said and worse, you know that? I was ... scared of that man ... pretty much all the time. And you killed him. Fuck, you killed him ...”

“Scared?” Dan’s eyes widened, “but ...” and then it hit him, yes, from the few moments he’d had with that man, the anger, the hatred, the aggression and the sinister bravado, he could see how dangerous the Colonel would have been. Dangerous and insane. “I think I understand.” Taking a step closer, an arm’s length between them, and Vadim reached out, because even if he vomited across Dan’s shoes, at least Dan would be right there, close enough to touch. “I have no doubt he would have done what he ‘promised’ me he’d do, and he very nearly smashed my brain into a pulp, he had a good go at my face.” Dan grinned lopsidedly, but his eyes never caught the fake humour.

“Then, how ... how?”

“The only reason why I managed to kill the bastard was because I outwitted him. I could understand too well how he was thinking, because I had been a homophobe, just like him. A long time ago. I kept the knife right beside my cock, and that was it. Not bad for a peasant, aye?” Trying the weak humour again.

Vadim nodded, still pale, sweating, wondered why the fuck he didn’t just let it go, why he still fought to keep food and drink and everything inside. “That ... certainly makes the world a better ... place.”

Dan nodded. “You want to sit down?”

“Yeah.” Vadim sat, heavily, on the steps. Head lowered, staring at the ground in front of his feet, little stones and little bits of green, and part of Dan’s leg.

Dan stayed close, sensing eyes on them from the house, and the expectations as well as the disapproval. Feeling the growing urge to get away, just walk, up into the hills, on his own. Just to go into the mountains - but the mountains here were not Afghanistan and never would be. “You look like shit.”

Vadim laughed, a short, wretched sound. “Feel ... like it, too. Sorry. Don’t know ... what’s wrong with me. I just feel ... not good.”

“Want anything? Or just want to throw up? Usually helps me when I feel queasy.” Looking around, Dan pointed to the corner around the house. Away from prying eyes and into the bushes.

Vadim shook his head. He’d eventually probably have to do it if it didn’t get any better, but he didn’t want to admit defeat yet. “I’ll be fine. Getting better.”

“Want to take a few steps?” The mountains were starting to look like an increasingly attractive alternative, as Dan’s sense of inadequacy grew. Vadim nodded, stood, and walked beside Dan. Slowly, feeling numb and unsteady and completely focused on keeping his food inside.

Dan murmured, “I really fucked this one up, didn’t I?”

Vadim shook his head. “No. It’s our fucked-up life, Dan. The fucked-up job. My fucked-up mind.” He let his head fall back, looked at the sky, up the mountains, stood there, gazing, one arm coming up to Dan’s shoulders, and Dan held him, figuring that the mountains from the bottom weren’t all that bad, after all. As long as Vadim stood beside him.

“I guess I blew it with my brother, though. What a fucking stupid idea to tell a civvie about what I’ve done in my life.”

Vadim grinned. “He’ll get over it. With a few illusions less, I guess. But he’ll get over it. He’ll get over the fact you’re gay, too. He’s making a big effort, you know.”

“Yeah, he is, isn’t he?” Dan tilted his head until it touched Vadim’s, which made Vadim’s eyes close, and, strangely, some tension left him, like he was only anchored in three places – where he touched Dan, and the soles of his feet.

Dan fished for a fag, lighting and smoking it in silence. Quiet for a long while. “You think he wants to know the rest? You know ... the really shit part of the whole story.”

“I’d give him time to digest the whole lot.” Vadim brought his face closer, touching his lips to Dan’s, feeling better now, much better, almost ready to go back in. “Only if he asks. If he feels he can take it.”

Dan nodded, relishing the kiss. Tender, light, and he smiled. “You’re better than the mountains, you know.” Murmured against Vadim’s lips.

Vadim grinned. “That’s coming from the expert on mountains. I’m flattered ... let’s get back in. I’ll ask for a whisky, that should help. Your brother has some good stuff in the cupboard. And good looks run in the family.”

“They do?” Dan’s brows raised, but a sparkle of mirth was hidden somewhere. “If that means you fancy fucking my brother, I’ll fill you in.”

Vadim laughed. “No, I just noticed. I prefer them willing these days, you know.” Another kiss, and he moved back towards the house.

“Lucky me.” Dan murmured to himself, following Vadim.

Mhairi stood in the door frame, drying her hands on her apron. She smiled at them, and maybe, Dan thought, everything was just going to be fine.

“Come on in.” She called out to them, “you must be freezing.” Looking Vadim up and down, she shook her head. “You look terribly pale. Would you like a camomile tea?” There was warmth in her voice, and even more warmth, when she took Vadim’s arm, gently pulling him towards the kitchen.

“Well, something warming would be good.”

“You need some Scottish TLC.”

Vadim gave a laugh. “If that is the translation for whisky, I’m all for it.”

Dan watched her, nodded towards Vadim, and couldn’t help smile at her motherly behaviour.

“Dan?” Duncan’s voice was suddenly close, as he leaned in the door frame.

“Aye?” Dan turned, facing his brother. Facing him in more ways than the obvious.

“Care to continue your story?” Duncan’s smile was small, but there, and Dan wondered if his brother even knew how to smile falsely.

“Don’t think that’s a good idea without Vadim.” Glancing backwards, towards the kitchen,” Vadim’s being fed tea by Mhairi.”

Duncan nodded, beckoning Dan closer. “Granted, but come and sit with me anyway, will you?”

Nodding, Dan followed, once more back into the lounge, where fresh coffee and freshly baked shortbread was waiting.

“I’m sorry.” Dan ventured before he even sat down.

“What for this time?”

“For ...” Dan made a slow, sweeping gesture across the room, “for everything. For bringing my world into yours. For being who I am?” Realising it could only be a question, since he had no idea what Duncan was thinking.

“I don’t think I can make any judgments on that.” Duncan poured another mug of coffee, even remembering the spoonfuls of sugar. “I know nothing about your job, your life, and certainly nothing about who you love.” Adding, while stirring Dan’s coffee, “but what I’ve seen of him so far, he seems like a damn fine guy.”

“Thanks.” Burying his nose in the hot mug, Dan had no idea what to say. “It wasn’t easy.”

“No?”

“No.” Dan glanced to the door, hoping he wasn’t going to be left alone.

Less than ten heartbeats later, Vadim appeared in the door frame, followed by Duncan’s wife, who had laughed off all attempts at helping her carry the tea and the whisky, and Vadim sat down next to Dan, while she served. Seeing Dan thoughtful and somewhat subdued, Vadim gave him a bright smile, before looking at Duncan. “My stomach was acting up a bit, but seems the clear air can fix almost everything.”

“Aye,” Duncan smiled, “you’re in God’s own country, after all.”

Dan mumbled something intelligible, but Duncan and Mhairi ignored him and whatever he might have said.

“Dan hinted that things became very bad after Kabul?”

Dan sighed, sat close to Vadim and clung to his coffee, while eyeing the dram that Duncan was pouring out. Helping himself to piece after piece of shortbread.

“Yes. As I said, my own side kidnapped me from the street, bundled me into a car and brought me back to Moscow. I was charged with treason. It’s

complicated. I was working for the Interior Ministry, which has a bit of a rivalry with the KGB, as I mentioned. Foreigners are less aware of the Interior Ministry, but it's like ... all security agencies. They are rivals for money, resources, attention, and power. The KGB held me, and the Ministry was ... unwilling or unable to get me out. I was charged with treason, sabotage, a dozen things. But to prepare me for the trial, the KGB broke my mind, my will to resist. I spent a lot of time in solitary confinement, which was worse than the beatings." Vadim took a sip from his tea to arrange his thoughts, while Duncan and Mhairi sat still, on the edge of their seats, just looking at him.

"Meanwhile, Dan was, of course, worried for my life and safety ... they made him believe I'd been executed. They did ... I went through a mock execution. Dan's friends in high places, however, they bartered for my life. To cut a long story short, two years later, they released me in Finland. The Iron Curtain had come down. The Soviet Union was falling apart, and I was no longer their problem. But my mind ..." Vadim tapped his temple. "Something in there wasn't quite right. When Dan got me back, I wasn't myself. I was unable to cope with anything. My mind was frantic, but unfocussed. It was like I'd gone insane."

"Well ..." Dan murmured, looking down at his hands, smoothing the scars on his left, over and over again, until he suddenly looked up, straight at his brother. "Vadim left. Just walked away, on the night he got out. We fucked it up." Too late realising he'd used bad language, not giving a damn right now anyway. "'Worried for Vadim's life and safety' is an understatement. I went insane in my own way during those two years." He shrugged. "Maybe that was the problem, maybe we should have understood better, but when Vadim left I lost it."

Duncan looked from one to the other, but the non verbal encouragement did not yield any results. "What do you mean?" He had to ask at last.

"I mean that I had the ambassador send me to the Gulf, just at the time before all hell broke loose. I was more than happy when I got the chance to go on a suicide mission."

Dan's brother sat up even straighter. "You did?"

Dan looked at him, fair and square. "No, not if you had asked me. I am good, I knew I'd make it."

Vadim looked at Dan, reaching for his thigh, pressing it, close to the knee. "I, on the other hand, just walked. I guess part of me remembered that I should keep walking. I guess it was my feet taking over. I ended up in Sweden, and I got charged for breaking and entering. One of the cops liked to be clean in his paperwork, so he worked out who I am ... or rather, was, and got in touch with the consulate, but the Russians didn't know me. They just denied my existence. I had no papers. So this cop - Manke - he cut a deal with the people into whose property I'd broken in, and they gave me the chance to work for the compensation. That was a fairly good time, all told. My mind settled somewhat, and it occurred to me, a bit later, I should get in touch with Dan, to explain why I did what I did. But I had no phone number or address ..."

Dan looked at Vadim with undisguised intensity. He hadn't known, had never asked and just like Vadim, he was discovering truths that he'd never been privy of before.

Vadim took another sip. "Obviously, everything would have been different, if, for example, Dan had given me this address and this phone number and had been in touch with you." He glanced at Dan, from the side, who cringed, and buried his face in his mug and another piece of shortbread, while his brother frowned.

"I got in touch with his boss and we made a deal. I was going to prove I can still function, and she would take me on as a merc, too, with a British passport. So, they sent me first to the Royal Marines, and later to the SAS to get tested. They got me back up to specs. Half a year had passed between Finland and when they did put me on a Herc and flew me into the Gulf, too."

"Aye, and then I told him to fuck off and that I would kill him if he came close to me." Dan continued, his eyes straight on his brother. Taking the expected disagreement on the chin.

"Why?" Duncan looked from one to the other.

Dan said nothing at first, just looked at Vadim, finally answering quietly, "because I hurt like fuck." Turning his head towards Duncan, glancing at Mhairi as well, "and I told you, I'm not a good man."

"Two and a half years," said Vadim. "That's enough time to break any man." Vadim reached for Dan's shoulder and squeezed it. "It took a while to remember all the good things. I provoked him, to get a reaction. Dan was hitting it off well with some other guy, somebody less screwed up than I was. Am. And I thought, that's it, he found something better, somebody who won't f... screw him up so bad. I pulled some stupid stunts, up to the point that Dan requested to be transferred. But fate is a cruel master, and Dan's helicopter was shot down over the desert. Me and that ... other guy fell over ourselves to get Dan - and the Americans who'd travelled with him - out of there."

Duncan almost jumped off his seat. "What? Helicopter? Shot down?"

"Aye." Dan glanced at Vadim once more, but this time there was no help forthcoming. "Sorry, didn't tell you about it. Got shot down by insurgents, with part of the Yank crew half-dead, and had to get them out of the desert." Slipping his hand across Vadim's back, giving a squeeze. "Russkie here got us out, together with the help of a friend. A friend that ... well, let's say Vadim and that mate weren't best buddies. But anyway ... got a Yank medal out of it, and so did Vadim and the friend, and all the kids of the crew survived. So all's good, aye?"

"Aye?" His brother asked incredulously, coffee and tea forgotten. "I wonder if hearing all this is worse than not knowing what you are up to and how you'll almost get yourself killed the next time."

"Sorry." Dan murmured, felt chastised and looked the part, too. "These things are not ..." he shrugged.

“Don’t be,” Mhairi cut in, unexpectedly. “Whatever happened in the past is the past, aye? Right now you’re here and it’s lovely to have you in the family.” She made a point of nodding both at Dan and Vadim.

Vadim smiled brightly and nodded back. “He’s watching my back and I’m watching his - that’s better than being out there alone. It’s a dangerous job, Duncan, yes, but we’re trained to deal with it. We’re good at this. We’ve done this kind of thing for close to twenty years now, and, personally, I think Afghanistan was worse than the Gulf. We won’t be doing this for very much longer - a few years now, then we should retire.” Vadim glanced at Dan, smiling. “Even if Mr Indestructible here denies it, he gets older, too.”

“Nah,” Dan picked up again, jumping at the chance to protest loudly. “I got a few more years in me. Only the knees are dodgy, but they’re going to hold up. Willpower, you know.”

His brother didn’t look too convinced, and Mhairi smiled. Suspiciously, Dan thought, in the way she’d smile at one of her children.

“How much longer do you want to do the job?” Duncan asked, “Your finances are getting healthy again, I wouldn’t have thought you needed to put your life on the line for that much longer?”

“I like the job,” Dan frowned, “it’s what I’ve done all my life and what I’ve always wanted to do. It’s who and what I am. I’m a soldier, or a merc, not a civilian.”

Vadim gave a short laugh. “Five years, I reckon.” He glanced at Dan, first time he’d set the deadline, really, first time he’d spoken it. Five years. The world could blow up badly in that time, with tensions breaking up that the Cold War had kept together. “If you consider my income, too, we should be able to get cushy in those five years. That’s the positive side - what we earn, we can spend, no kids to feed or make sure they get a good education.”

Dan frowned but said nothing. Five years? He didn’t want to think about it, so he only shrugged, reaching for the last piece of shortbread. “Well, guess we won’t manage to produce kids, no matter how hard we tried.” Mumbled, not paying attention to anything but his coffee and his biscuit. Missing how Mhairi turned beetroot red and his brother didn’t seem to know what to do with himself.

Vadim shook his head. “well, my kids are taken care of,” he murmured, also to divert attention away from the uncomfortable topic of sex. “And your brother is continuing the family ...”

“Aye.” Dan looked up and nodded, completely oblivious to the discomfort he had caused. “That he does.” Smiling at Mhairi and Duncan, who caught themselves quickly.

“So, now you’re together and working in the Gulf.” Duncan picked up the thread. “Any idea where you are heading next? It can’t remain a hot spot down there forever.”

“Yes, it’s already sizzling out.” Vadim shrugged. “I guess we should get in touch with the Baroness about that? Where she thinks she needs us, I suppose.”

“Aye, I don’t really care where.” Dan put the empty mug down. “I don’t mind the heat nor the cold, unlike Vadim, here.” Grinning, he leaned back. Exhausted, the day had been more of an emotional rollercoaster than he’d bargained for. “I’m Mr Indestructible, after all.”

Duncan smiled, “Well, Mr Indestructible, are you going to stay here for another night? You’re most welcome.”

Vadim glanced at Dan, who smiled, slightly tired. While Duncan had taken everything in stride, he wasn’t quite sure he wanted to get to the moment where it would be clear Dan and he would sleep in the same bed. Under this roof. He felt uncomfortable at the thought, and he didn’t want to make this an issue. At all. “I think we have a bit of distance to cover, really. There’s the itinerary we worked out last night. Dan wants to show me Edinburgh, and we’re meeting some more friends ...” Vadim met Duncan’s gaze. “We’d love to, but I think we should better be on our way ... and rather return more often?”

“That is a deal, then.” Duncan nodded and smiled, and so did his wife. “You are always welcome here, both of you. Our home is your home, don’t you ever forget that. Whatever happens.” He nodded once more, emphasising his point.

“Thanks,” leaning forward, one hand on Vadim’s thigh, Dan smiled, “I’ll remember that now, and I promise, it won’t be five years again, but we will have to go to New Zealand first.”

“I’ll let you off.” Duncan chuckled, as Dan stood up, followed by Vadim. “But you promise you’ll be here after that, maybe you could even make it for your birthday.”

“Birthday?” Dan was taken aback, couldn’t even remember when the heck his own birthday was. “Aye ...” Vaguely.

After all that time, Vadim realized, he had no idea when Dan’s birthday was. And neither had Dan, probably. No, they’d never talked about that. Had never spent so much time together that it mattered. “That’s a good idea,” Vadim said, somewhat belatedly. “Maybe stay for a long weekend?”

“You’re most welcome to stay for as long as you like.” Duncan held his hand out to Vadim, while Mhairi pulled Dan into a hug. “We are looking forward to seeing you again, any time you can. After all, we need to get to know the two of you.”

Vadim shook the hand, and drew closer to murmur into Duncan’s ear. “Can you believe he never told me when his birthday is?”

Duncan laughed, murmuring back with a glance at Dan, “I’m not surprised ...” Stepping back, he turned to Dan to pull him into a hug, while Mhairi treated Vadim with the same physical warmth.

After more good-byes and promises to return as soon as possible, they were once more escorted to the car, with Duncan and Mhairi waving at the gate, while Dan slowly drove the vehicle off the grounds and towards the road.

“Well,” pulling in a deep breath, “that was that.”

Vadim grinned. “It wasn’t as bad as expected, all told.” He placed a hand on Dan’s knee. “So, when is your birthday?”

Glancing sideways while navigating the narrow road, Dan shrugged. "Sometime in November. And yours?"

"August 15th. That makes me Leo." Vadim grinned. "Do you really have to check your passport?"

"Hm." Dan grumped, "I don't *do* birthdays, they're pointless, but if you really want to know, it's twenty-ninth November. You know the year, you're as old as I am." Glancing to the side again, going steadily North, "actually, that makes you older than me." Dan flashed a grin.

"True. It would get quite crowded on the birthday cake." Vadim laughed. "Damn, we are getting old, aren't we? But birthdays are good excuses for a party. Look at Jean, he knows how to throw a party. Any excuse - he takes."

"Aye, but I never had a birthday party, so I wouldn't know." Flashing another grin. "And that also means that apart from a few piss-ups when I was young, I never celebrated my birthday since. Never had the time nor knew anyone who would have given a damn about my birthday, so I'm actually not going to be forty-three at all. I'm probably around twenty-two."

"... and dating a guy almost twice your age ..."

Dan burst into laughter, "Aye, but you've kept quite well, all considering."

"Thanks." Vadim grinned and reached for the map, glancing out of the window for a moment, comparing street signs at the side of the road with those on the marked route. "And if we're lucky, we'll get to the B&B before midnight."

"Should be earlier, actually. Scotland isn't all that big. Best small country in the world, you know."

"Well, I was calculating in the fact we might want to stop at some places and admire the view. Or something like that."

Dan grinned. "What did we actually book. Single rooms or twin?"

"Twin. The place doesn't appear to have singles."

"Good! At least something is working out smoothly, aye?"

Vadim grinned. "Our improvisation so far isn't too bad, though."

"Let's hope our luck holds up."

Dan's wish was being granted, the journey through the Highlands ended each night in a B&B or small hotel that didn't happen to have two single rooms. The owners invariably apologised profusely for having to let two grown men sleep in a twin room, but Dan only smiled and shrugged, reassuring them that it would be no bother, while Vadim kept his face carefully straight.

Each day they drove across majestic countryside. Crossing over to Skye, exploring hills and sweeping valleys, rugged mountains and breathtaking lochs. Until they finally reached Edinburgh, the country's capital with its stunning architecture, its posh hotels and bars.

It was in the Scotsman hotel, overlooking North bridge and parts of Princes Street gardens, that the concierge apologised for having made the mistake of booking a double-bed suite, and Dan smiled sweetly, explaining that no, it was exactly what they had booked. Making Vadim cringe inwardly, but the staff

there took it in stride, like it was the most natural thing in the world. No moment of hesitation, not even a blink.

They spent a day and two nights in the city, making it up to the castle, but this time, Dan remained a tourist, showing Vadim the breathtaking view from the battlements, instead of trying to figure out if anyone was still in the garrison, whom he knew.

Vadim didn't tire of exploring the city on its many levels, up and down narrow staircases that were squeezed in between ancient houses that didn't allow any light in, pausing in small cafes for cakes and tea or coffee, thoroughly exploring the city in the short time they had.

And for the first time in his life, even Dan enjoyed the old elegant lady, no longer feeling like an outcast, a peasant, who didn't belong.

April 1992, Scotland

On their last day in Edinburgh, Dan had to bite the bullet and go shopping, or he'd get into deep shit with a certain Frenchie. Yet buying the best man outfit for Jean's wedding turned out to be less painful than he had feared. With Vadim picking up a tailor made suit later in Glasgow, Dan sent him off to scour the Edinburgh museums, so he could enjoy the National Gallery and Museum of Scotland on his own, while he was out of Dan's hair.

Walking up the Royal Mile, Dan had passed North Bridge and was on his way back down again, towards Holyrood Palace, when he spotted a large shop to his left, with mannequins in the window and a large, glossy sign: kilt maker.

With Dan's height, there was not much in ready-made kilts to choose from, despite the size of the shop, but the choice of tartans was staggering nevertheless. Still, his sept's tartan, the MacFadyens, was not available, except for the ancient hunting version, and after a short while of deliberations with the down-to-earth shop assistant, Dan decided on a black on black tartan, which had a subtle weave and went easily with the rest of the outfit.

He managed to get the whole outfit in his size, despite long legs, narrow hips and broad shoulders, and came back out in under an hour. Prince Charlie jacket with square silver buttons, white shirt and black cravat, black waistcoat and finely woven kilt. A glossy black fur sporran, black belt and silver buckle, with silver kilt pin in the form of a sword and thistle. The stockings, classic ghillie brogues and flashes as well, with the final accessory, the shean dhu.

He heaved a great sigh of relief and lit a fag once he stepped outside, laden with bags and parcels, to relax in one of the many cafés along the Royal Mile. Waiting for five o' clock to meet Vadim at the Tron church, and to down a well-deserved pint and dram in Cockburn street's – the name of the street making Vadim laugh - Malt Shovel and then a meal, wherever it took their fancy.

Dan forbade Vadim to even peek at the manifold bags, and thus he was none the wiser regarding Dan's outfit, when they checked out late the next morning, leaving the car in the hotel car park, strolling through the beautiful city. Dan was on his best behaviour all day, following Vadim around the exclusive shops, as long as he got strong coffee in regular intervals and his favourite Scottish sweets to boot.

It was Friday afternoon, when they sat once again in the car, heading towards Glasgow, after a quick phone call to the two men who'd be awaiting them. For a weekend of ... Dan didn't quite know. Not yet.

"What are you planning?" asked Vadim, as if reading his mind.

"Damn, I don't know. What the fuck do you do with two prisoners who are hell-bent on getting off on humiliation and being used, for two days and

nights?” Half serious question, half raised eyebrow and cocky grin. “I guess permanent markings are right out.”

“Don’t know. They seemed the type who might appreciate semi-permanent markings.” Dan smirked at Vadim’s words, who kept his eyes carefully on the road, as he was thinking hard. “And will I be a master too, or the third slave? Or something in between?”

“I ...” Dan glanced to the side, then back at his hand, as it lay on the dashboard. Thinking it through for himself, up until now he had barged in and done what came to his mind. Did he have to properly plan everything now? “Not third slave. Not with those two there.” It made sense, but if pressed, he wouldn’t have been able to explain it. “Will you trust me?”

Vadim blinked and looked at him. “Yes. You know that.”

“Good.” Dan leaned back, relaxing. “In that case, I’ll just do my usual: going ahead without thinking too much. Let’s see what happens, I’m sure I’ll come up with something all of us will enjoy.” He winked at Vadim, who raised a curious brow and said nothing else, until they got off the motorway and into the city proper.

When they’d parked the car and got to the building, the door was buzzed open immediately, and they were greeted upstairs by the two men, so very definitely prepared as they knelt in the hallway, naked, their erections encased by cock rings, both wearing collars, both securely gagged, but Martin, the younger man, blindfolded as well and his arms shackled behind his back, while Gordon was holding the blindfold and the steel cuffs up towards Dan. Without a word but a look in his eyes, so hungry, it wiped out any worries that Dan might have had on the journey to Glasgow.

Vadim fell back slightly and thought to close the door while Dan cuffed and blindfolded Gordon, as matter-of-factly as if this was an ordinary occurrence. “No awkward talking this time,” Vadim murmured, in Russian, and hung up his jacket.

Dan nodded, casting a glance at Vadim, and then he hooked a finger under each of the collars, and dragged the two men into the living room. The flat was warm, heated for being naked, and the kitchen, it quickly became clear, well stocked, while drinks were already waiting on the couch table, poured for two – not four.

Like a mystic, Dan found his way by instinct from that point, orchestrating two days and nights of intricately balanced pain and pleasure, fear and lust. Creating relationships that deepened with every stroke and touch, every groan and whimper, and each hour that went past. Watching straining, immobile bodies, culminating in gagged screams and collapsing bodies. Sated, exhausted, and shuddering with exertion. Only to be tied together, on the floor, immobile once more, and left for the night. Martin and Gordon - nameless and faceless during that time - were made to watch Dan and Vadim, on their own bed, with Dan tenderly making love to Vadim, spooning, and each gentle touch the mirror of every punch and slap and all the pain he had given out before. And Vadim couldn’t help but realize how much he did enjoy being watched - even

though the emotion was real, not an act put on, his own need increasing with every thrust and every touch, but strangely safe in these guys' house. Watched, because they couldn't move, and they watched with awe, if anything, no disgust, no cold camera eyes, instead taking in, memorizing. When he'd come, he turned to press his face against Dan's chest, just breathing, then kissing Dan, and finally relaxing, all but forgetting about the two guys on the floor.

After forty-eight hours, on Sunday, despite almost no words having been spoken – nothing beyond orders, they had forged a bond, born out of need and understanding. Knowing that each man was giving the other what they needed, with Vadim the somewhat less defined factor, an entity with more facets than any of them. Sometimes, he'd watch, detached from everybody else's lust, sometimes, he'd act on Dan's orders, sometimes, he'd give orders himself. Changeable, not knowing himself what he'd do the next moment, as the chemistry between all of them shifted and changed, and he'd act on instinct, whatever he felt was suitable. It was really his understanding of how Dan thought that still made this a seamless whole. He knew what Dan wanted him to do, and how, and what Dan intended for the guys, and he always moved to help that, enhance it all.

They stayed Sunday night, but that night was different. The 'game' was over, and the four men sat and talked, after Martin and Gordon had been cared for and tucked in. To anyone else their experience had to seem like an ordeal, but to them it had been physical extremes coupled with a mental intensity they had never experienced before. No awkwardness then, as they sat and shared a last drink, having found a mode and level of communication that knew no barriers and no embarrassments. Mates, on a sexual level of deep understanding, and the genuine promise and wish to meet again.

Sunday night Dan and Vadim shared the bed with them. Tight, but everything else would have felt wrong, and the night saw them sleep. All of them, dreamless, and sated.

April 1992, England

Vadim was calm and mellow when they left Exeter airport early afternoon the next day, picking up their rental car. He let Dan drive, it was his turn, after all, and Vadim preferred it that way. Even though the phone call had been pleasant, when they'd arranged the meeting just before leaving Kuwait, it had seemed quite far away, and now it was there.

The doctor would doubtlessly be interested how he was faring, medically, and Vadim was working on the best way how to report on the things that had happened. The nausea, the panic attacks, the nightmares. Not an altogether pleasant prospect, and he considered lying or playing it down. But then, the doctor could probably not terminate his contract - at least he supposed that. He didn't actually know. Not what to expect, not what to say.

With luck on their side they had no traffic hold-ups and drove steadily on towards Lymington in Devon. Like Scotland, there was a lot of landscape variation pressed into this little patch of land, and finally, they arrived at the gates. The guards on duty were expecting them, and issued them a car pass after a quick check, as well as guest passes, to be worn at all times. Strangely enough, the few weeks spent here had made Vadim so familiar with this place that he still felt at ease.

“Any idea where the Mess is?” Dan had clipped the pass onto his shirt, and was driving slowly through the camp.

“Over there ...” Vadim pointed. “This is where they got me ready for Hereford.”

“Ah, right.” Dan nodded and moved the vehicle towards a building close to the flat-roofed medical centre. He found a parking space that wasn’t designated in any way, and turned off the ignition. “Any idea how long it will take? Since we haven’t organised accommodation, I was wondering if we could wrangle a couple of Singles rooms here.” Unspoken that there was no way they could share accom. Not here. Not now. Not in the Forces. “Maybe somewhere in the transition block.”

“Shit. No idea.” Vadim reached over and pressed Dan’s hand. “Guess we should ask the doc what he recommends?”

“Aye, but I don’t intend to stay. This is between you and the doc.”

“I don’t have secrets from you.”

Dan shook his head. “It’s not about secrets.”

They got out of the car, with Vadim stretching his legs and rolling his shoulders, while Dan put his shades back on, as if the April sky was too bright. Vadim was still tired from the weekend, and caught himself smiling as he remembered where the tiredness came from. “Ah, and there he is.” He headed towards a distinguished looking man who’d just stepped out of the building, hand stretched out.

“Mr Krasnorada!” Dr Williams smiled, taking a couple of steps towards them, until he shook hands with Vadim. “It’s good to see you, and see you so well.”

“Not nearly as good as seeing you, Sir.”

Nodding towards Dan, who had walked slower, watching, the doctor stretched his hand out to him. “You must be Mr McFadyen. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Dan couldn’t help it, the honorific just slipped out, it seemed right with this man. This Dr Williams had a natural authority about him, which made Dan take his shades back off again, and generally behave at his best. Old surroundings, memories of instilled respect, but now with long hair, sans uniform, and far too many scars.

“Do come in, please.”

“I ... if you don’t mind, I have a look around. Might meet an old mate here, who knows.” Dan shrugged, reluctant to stay just yet. He felt he needed to give space, and wasn’t sure if it wasn’t he who needed the space. The weekend had

been more than he'd bargained for. Not in a bad way, but intense, perhaps too intense.

Vadim frowned slightly and shook his head. "You're welcome to be there."

"Indeed," Dr Williams smiled, "but I believe that it would a good idea if Mr McFadyen had a look around and joined us later."

Dan nodded, glad for the understanding. "I'll be back in the afternoon, aye? I'll have a look for accom."

"Okay."

"Ah, yes, I forgot to mention this, you will find that you have been booked into transit accommodation. The Officer's Mess happened to have a comfortable family room, and I took the liberty to reserve it." Dr Williams didn't even blink, and Dan began to wonder about the man for the first time. How it was no surprise he was friends with an equally formidable person: the Baroness.

Vadim smiled. "That takes care of our biggest worry - the accommodation, not the ..." fact it would be single rooms. Vadim coughed. "Well. Thank you, Sir." He extended an arm, touched Dan's shoulder and pressed it briefly. He met Dan's eyes when he smiled, then turned to follow the doctor, smiling slightly to himself.

"Well, then, Mr Krasnorada, would you like a tea?" Dr Williams led Vadim into the only comfortable room in the surgery, the one he had visited quite a few times before.

"Yes, always." Vadim looked around, again at all the medical journals on the shelf. "How is your research going? Any progress?"

"Yes, thank you." Indicating for Vadim to sit down, the doctor went to busy himself with the kettle and the mugs. "I don't have much longer in the Forces, I will soon reach the fifty-five mark. I shall retire, but of course, this only means that I will be able to dedicate myself to my research." He glanced at Vadim, "Research, which is so sorely needed." Pouring the boiling water, he prepared the tea exactly as Vadim liked, remembering his preferences, which made Vadim smile. He was very fond of the man, he realized. Strangely, like some protective layer had been taken away and this man was actually close. Fifty-five mark. The doctor, then, was between ten and thirteen years older than he was. He looked older. But then, it always surprised Vadim on some level how old he was himself by now. Time just progressed.

"That's a worthwhile occupation. I'm not sure what I'll do with my retirement when it comes." Maybe I'll be able to read again, he thought, wistfully.

"Perhaps you might like to do all the things you haven't been able to do in the meantime." Sitting down as well, Dr Williams put the mug in front of Vadim, then took a sip. "How have you been faring?"

"Well, Kuwait's been good. I am fit for service, despite the ... ah, expected problems."

Nodding, the doctor took his glasses off and polished them. Something Vadim had seen a few times, whenever Williams was deep in thought. "Would you like to tell me about those problems?"

"Nightmares. It's mostly nightmares." Vadim frowned, thinking, choosing his words carefully. "I still scream, and then it's difficult to ... have anybody close. Which is pretty bad for Dan, but at least ... I don't attack him. I just struggle out of sleep and wake up, sweating, but I never remember what those dreams are. It's like fear, with no images. No reason, no faces, just some nameless darkness, some dread coming from deep inside, so deep that I can't reach it." He inhaled while Dr Williams took a sip of his tea, listening intently. "Under pressure, though, in a combat zone, I function. That's the reflexes. A few times, when there's a particular thing ... like somebody I feared ... and we talk about it, it feels like a kick to the stomach. Leaves me reeling and nauseous. That's pretty unpleasant, too." Like mentioning the colonel. Even in death, he was bad. Best try and forget him.

"Let's revisit what you said about the nightmares and about the functioning. Do you feel that the nightmares and other reactions are more, or less, frequent the more relaxed you are? What I mean is, are there triggers that you have been able to pinpoint? Does stress have a negative or a positive effect?"

Vadim pursed his lips. "I think it's less often when I'm calm. It's mostly when I anticipate something bad. Not battle, I can handle battle. Sometimes, I can't handle people. When there's guilt, or jealousy, or shame. That makes it more frequent, I think, at least that's a good guess." He paled. "Like ... Konstantinov said. I punish ... myself for something inside me. He was right. He got me on that count."

"This man, Konstantinov, is a psychologist, like I am."

"You know him." Vadim was almost shocked that Dr Williams was aware of the man. It didn't seem right, but made sense. He felt his teeth grind and forced himself to breathe against the tension. Nothing to be afraid of. But his mind was reeling back - he didn't want to remember Konstantinov, didn't want to dig around in that bullet hole. But then, maybe he could at some point extract the bullet. Wherever it was in the blood and guts.

"Yes." Dr Williams nodded. "In fact, I have been aware of his human rights abuse for too many years. This is why you might feel that he 'got' you in some respect, but all it is, is an understanding how the human mind works. A therapist would do the same, but to gain the opposite result." Dr Williams folded his hands around the mug, peering at Vadim over the rim of his spectacles. "The question is, do you believe you feel more guilt or shame than you used to, before the torture?"

"Yes. I've never been a ... moral man. I used to accept I was ... following orders. I killed, I committed crimes, war crimes even by Geneva Convention standards, but they never bothered me. That was war. The other side didn't pull any punches, either. The lines ... blurred, between a civilian and a dush... an insurgent. I never felt guilty for Afghanistan. After ... he was finished with me, I felt guilty for breathing ... for feeling what I feel. For being homosexual. For ...

responses like desire. Dan ... Dan just a few days ago asked me whether I'd want to be 'normal' if I had the chance. I think he's onto something there. I feel ashamed. He ... just walks around and tells everybody we're together, but it makes me scared and ashamed. I just can't do it, and even though I get used to it, I still have that response. I can't help it, and the more I fight it, the worse it gets."

Dr Williams grey eyes rested with absolute concentration on Vadim. Each word, every gesture, nothing seemed to escape his acute but compassionate scrutiny. "Even though it will not feel like it to you, but what you experience now is a typical response to the torture that has been inflicted upon you. You are not alone in this, and while that fact might not help you right now, I do want you to know that it is possible to help and lessen the response, enable you to learn to deal with the triggers, and therefore get better."

So, it was normal. Experienced before. He wasn't out of the ordinary, it was all just a reflex, like blinking, like any other response. Vadim inhaled, fought the tension as much as he could, but it remained there, his body responding as if there were blows and kicks coming in.

Dr Williams took another sip of the tea. "It is a hard path to walk down and it would take time, determination, and might affect your relationship adversely."

Adverse effects. That sounded bad. "No. I've at least sorted that thing out. I ... only have Dan. What ... what do the others do? Get divorced?"

"Some do, yes." Pausing, "I won't lie to you, Mr Krasnorada, but I also believe that your determination to get through, and the strength of your relationship, are the best possible basis anyone can have. I don't think I am making false assumptions about your relationship?"

"No. It's just ..." Vadim flashed a pained smile. "I'm so scared to lose him. That that ... stuff inside me comes out and takes over everything. That I lose control."

Dr Williams looked at Vadim, waited a moment before asking, "how dependent are you on your partner?"

"I don't think I could live without him."

"And that, Mr Krasnorada," the doctor's voice was quiet, yet there was no doubt it held warmth and compassion, "that is where the problem lies. Instead of finding strength in your partner, you need to find it in yourself. You need to find the core strength, the essence of you, on which to rely on."

Vadim shuddered, forced himself to listen, but his throat was so tight he'd be unable to drink. Or even think of tea.

"Vladimir Konstantinov is a very skilled torturer, because he is a very good psychologist, and that psychologist - against everything that is humane and ethical - has twisted and nearly destroyed that core strength. But it is still there and you will be able to find it. However, you would have to let go of your external strength, your partner, for the time of your journey. If not, you will always lean on him, instead of fighting through the pain, the nausea and the terror, to reach yourself."

Vladimir. Dr Williams *did* know the man. Even his first name. The name tensed him up again, knotted his guts as the face came back. The sound of his voice, the man's smell, the feeling of his trouser leg against his face. Vadim shuddered, closed his eyes, wanted to run away, and still knew that the doctor was right. The words almost too much to bear right now. Was he leaning on Dan? Yes, he was. He let Dan make decisions, went with them, quite gladly left them to Dan, like he'd been weakened. He had taken on a lesser role, become passive and accommodating, defined by Dan, and nothing else. Sexually, emotionally, and in all other ways, too. "I had it. For a while. During training. In battle. I can function. I can ... be strong. I can work. What ... what else do you know about Konstantinov?"

Dr Williams lifted his hand a little, a small gesture. "Let's backtrack for a moment. You might not believe this right now, but there is the chance that one day you might tear your partner apart. Aggression, turned inside for too long, suddenly turning towards the people who mean the most. I am not saying that this *will* happen. Not at all, but I am saying that it *might* happen, and that you need to be aware of this. You might, one day, hate your partner, for what you love him for right now. Loyalty, strength, you name it, it can get poisoned by the trauma." Dr Williams pulled in a slow breath and shook his head gently with a wistful smile. "I wish I didn't have to tell you all this."

Vadim was speechless. He'd be different. He wouldn't let this happen. Just because it had happened before didn't mean it had to happen in his case. No. Impossible. Wasn't that why he was holding back? Keeping safe? Questioning his responses all the time? Give his mind the power to question every response, every single emotion if it had to be.

"As for Vladimir Konstantinov, you could say the man is my personal nemesis." The doctor's small and humourless laugh was entirely appropriate in its dryness and disillusion. "He has been publishing so-called academic papers on how to break a person's mind. Of course, he would have never said this explicitly, but I have no doubts that they convey an implied how-to. I cannot even put into words how unethical this is. Inhumane, unthinkable, but sadly, I have worked with the results too often. To put it like this, for every research there is application - and this can be for good or for bad."

"That means he ... teaches his method." Vadim realized his face was cold, and he shivered. "He gloats about it. What he did to me. What he turned me into."

"You could call it that." Watching Vadim closely, Dr Williams leaned slightly forward. "You are not the only one, and the Soviet Union was not the only country." Pushing the cooling remains of the tea aside, he looked at Vadim. Straight on, and as always, no nonsense. "Neither am I the only one working on undoing as much damage as possible. You are not alone, Mr Krasnorada, not in any way, and what I said to you before you left for Selection still stands true: you may call me any time, and I will always make sure that you have my private number."

Vadim nodded, wanted to reach out, but at the same time didn't want to touch. It wouldn't be appropriate, he felt. Caught between these responses, he did nothing, merely looked into those kind eyes and wished, on some level, he could do that, could enter that therapy, but at the same time, he was fucking scared of breaking again. Because that was what it would be. Breaking him, and probably Dan, and what he shared with Dan. Even if he was weakened these days, he was functional. Dan accepted the occasional nightmares. As long as it didn't get worse than that, they'd be able to cope. "I just want to kill him," he murmured. "Replace ... that memory with the memory of his blood on my hands."

"And what good would that do? Do you think that everything that happened would suddenly be gone?"

"It's not about good. It's about settling that score and to make sure he doesn't do it again."

"A life for a life? But you are not dead ... or are you?"

"I've killed for less," said Vadim. "Or do you truly believe this man should live?"

"This is not for me to say." Dr Williams' smile was tinged with melancholy, perhaps regret, and yet the compassion was always there. "I am a doctor. I have given an oath to heal, not to destroy."

Vadim exhaled, felt tension flood out and exhaustion replace it. He lowered his head, shaking it. "Aye. We are all just doing our job. I kill, he breaks, you mend. It can be simple."

"What will you do when you retire from active duty? Which side will you be on, Mr Krasnorada?" The doctor smiled.

"When I retire ... all I want is to be able to read again. I want to go to New Zealand, and read. I want good, fresh food, and I want to learn about wine and go hunting. I want to sleep without screaming. I don't want to wear camo again, unless I'm painting a wall or moving furniture."

"And if I can be of any help to achieve this, I will be there for you."

Cleverly distracting him away from Konstantinov. Vadim knew the man guided him, but didn't feel manipulated. Saner to think about what he wanted rather than about killing Konstantinov. "Thank you. I will think about it ... if things get worse ... I'll be in touch."

"I hope so." Dr Williams smiled, then sat back. "For now, what do you say about a physical exam? I'd like to check on the scar tissue, if you don't mind. Also, while you are both here, is there anything that Mr McFadyen might need seeing to?"

"I'm in pretty good shape," said Vadim, but already lifted the jumper he wore, stripping his upper body. Remembering, too late the slight bruising he'd received from the biting and kissing on the weekend, and froze. Again that response, again the feeling of having to hide, but that was a reflex. The doctor likely had seen far worse, and indeed, there was no reaction from him. Vadim stood to present the scars on his back. "Dan's knees are giving him trouble. Maybe have a look at them."

"I will, if you can get him into the surgery."

"That's the real challenge. Dan always thinks he's just fine. But I'll mention it."

The doctor stood up with a light chuckle, checking over Vadim's scars and nodding to himself, seemingly satisfied. "You must have been doing very well with the cream. The tissue is much better than it was last time."

Vadim grinned. "Well ... I get more massages out of it. Which is nice."

Dr Williams let out a sound which sounded suspiciously close to an amused snort. "Any other trouble?"

"Just getting older. A twinge in the back here, taking more time to heal there, some aches, but nothing painful. I'm just not thirty anymore."

"Trust me, it won't get better."

Vadim slipped back into his jumper. "Thank you, doctor."

Dr Williams walked over to the sink to wash his hands. "Would you care to join me tonight in the Officer's Mess? The food is not too bad, and the wine is quite drinkable."

"Unless there's an alternative good restaurant outside camp that we could drag you to - yes. But there weren't any that caught my sight on the way in."

"No, indeed, the Mess is the most reliable place, I'm afraid. It is more or less my home - as much as anyone could call this a home - and it might be of interest to you to see the differences between a Soviet and a British Officer's Mess."

"I guess less vodka on the table." Vadim grinned. "No, my pleasure. I do miss some of the privileges, sometimes." The last word being the lie. He missed it, period. Responsibility, power, and privilege. All gone, just like the medals.

"Ah, yes, but you wouldn't have the freedom that you have now." Dr Williams put the towel away. "Living with your partner, for example. That must be worth losing some of the privileges for."

"Touché." Vadim smiled. "It's insulting that they think I'd be less of a soldier or less of an officer just because I happen to be homosexual. But the blockheads won't learn, and that means being a merc is the only thing I can do without having to hide - either from disciplinary action or getting thrown out."

"It is no different here, but as a medical doctor I know that the human nature comes in many variations." Readjusting his specs, the doctor guided Vadim towards the door. "And in that vein, if you could get your partner here to let me check those knees of his, and the scar tissue Not only would I be much obliged, but I believe that a mutual friend of ours would be very relieved as well."

Vadim grinned. "I'll see if I can find him - and I'll send him in. And if you talk to her next, please give her my best greetings."

He headed out, looked around, walked towards the car and saw Dan smoking near it, scarred hand pushed deep inside his pocket, looking strangely defiant.

"I'll live," Vadim stated. "But the doctor insists on checking on you."

“Why?” Blowing smoke away from Vadim, Dan’s eyes narrowed beneath the shades. Long hair, t-shirt without collar, shades and fag, and right in front of the Officer’s Mess.

“Because a certain lady tasked him to make sure you’re alright.”

“Oh, not *again*!” Dan rolled his eyes, but it was clear as mud that he’d comply with her wishes.

“Yeah. Checked on my scars, too. How you been?”

“Went along to the transit accom. Fuckwits. Nothing’s changed.”

“What happened?”

“What do you expect? I look like a scumbag, apparently, and I got treated like one. Oh to be a civilian, aye? At least I can tell them to stuff their fucking berets up their hoops.”

Vadim grinned, but turned serious very soon. “Fuck them. If they want to cause trouble, trouble they can have.” Glancing over to the building.

“Aye, and I told them what I thought of them, and that I’d still take three of them on at the same time.” Dan threw the cigarette onto the ground. “Can we go now?”

“First, you see the doctor, and then we’re invited to the Officer’s Mess for food. I promise we’ll leave as early tomorrow as we can get out of bed, okay?”

“What? You want me to go to the Mess? With those fuckwits? Just because the SAS doesn’t hand out ranks like smarties, they think they’re better than me.”

“You said it yourself - you can tell them just what they can do with their ranks.” Vadim stepped close, both hands on Dan’s shoulders. “Listen, if they give you any trouble, they’ll pay.”

“It’s not quite like that here.” Dan frowned, but shrugged a moment later. “You really want me to go see the doc and have dinner. Aye?”

“Aye. He’s a great man. I don’t think they’ll give us any trouble when he’s there. And he invited us to dinner, it would be rude not to go.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. You and your bloody behaviour.” Dan sighed, resigned to his fate, though. Just like he’d always been resigned to whatever Maggie got him to do. “But I want a shag tonight. On those goddamned narrow bunk beds, or maybe they are a bit wider if you’re an *officer*.” Dan almost spit the word out. “Whatever it is, I want to fuck you, right here in camp, and I want to suck you. No, you know what? I actually want you to fuck *me*. Right here. Shit, yes, right here in camp.”

Vadim swallowed, part of him glad Dan had changed his mind, because he could still feel ‘the weekend’ and its echoes. He glanced around. “That gives me something to think about during dinner.” He drew Dan into a buddy-kind of embrace, slapped him on the back, and murmured into his ear. “I did enjoy the show ... and everything else, with those two guys.”

“Aye, but don’t you remind me of that right now or the doc is going to get to see more than he bargained for.”

Vadim gave a short laugh. “I’ll remind you later, then. With better timing.”

“He wants to see me right now?”

“Yes. Should I wait here?”

Dan pointed with his thumb over his shoulder. "The Mess and the transit accom are over there. If you want to, you can throw the bags into the room, there'll be someone to show you."

"Good idea. I should still be able to remember how to prepare a bed military-style. Hasn't been that long." Vadim patted Dan's neck, another buddy-gesture, and turned to the car, getting the bags out and heading into accom. They both had day packs, one of those habits to only pack what they'd actually need and carry that in a smaller bag, whereas the bigger luggage stayed inside the car boot.

Dan was greeted by Dr Williams in the doorframe, and despite his reluctance to get checked out, the encounter was fairly pleasant, and friendly in its professionalism. He was berated for the state of his scars, told that if his partner could take better care of his own so could he, which caused Dan to grimace. His knees produced some noncommittal sounds from the doctor, with the urgent recommendation to check them out properly, including x-rays and consultations, an advice that Dan was going to studiously ignore.

They sat down for a moment, but Dr Williams never spoke about Vadim. Impossible for a doctor, sworn under the Hippocratic oath. In the end Dan left armed with a tube of cream, and the addresses of orthopaedic specialists, which he crumpled into a ball and stuffed into his pocket the moment he left the centre, making his way to the accommodation.

Vadim had been led into one of the guest rooms - which the soldier had referred to as 'family' room. It became soon obvious why: there was a double bed - which apparently was all it took to get anything branded as 'family', the possibility to have sex or cuddle up without being on top of each other. Cheap-looking historical prints that, at first glance, appeared to come straight from a 1970s interior decorator's idea of a Victorian war-hero's parlour. A small bathroom was connected to the room, a small shower that would just about accommodate one of them.

Vadim set the daypacks down, unpacked, then prepared the double bed, smiling vaguely to himself. But the smile froze when Konstantinov returned to his mind. Vladimir. If there was any way to face him again, any possibility to cut the bastard's throat, to beat him into a pulp, break his neck - there were many possible deaths, and none seemed slow and satisfying enough.

Dan knocked onto the door before entering. "That doc of yours is an ankle biter." He grouched as he looked around the room in surprise.

"Is he? Just because he's insistent that you should take care of yourself?"

"Aye, but at least he's giving me a good excuse to get you to massage my scars." Dan waggled his brows, "especially the ones down there." Pointing to his groin while flopping onto the freshly made bed.

"I always thought it was a great pick-up line: Want to oil my scars?" Vadim stood there, crossing his arms, seeing Dan stretched out on the bed. "Well, and at least it's a double. I was wondering why the soldier looked at me strange when he led me here. This is clearly for the 'gay family'."

Dan laughed, "I honestly don't think the chap even thought that far. It's a no-no, remember, not allowed. Keep schtumm." Zipping his mouth shut with his fingers, "zilch." He shrugged, "not that I have any idea what he would have thought instead, and frankly, I don't give a shit."

"Well, he didn't walk away with his back to the wall, so I suppose he didn't connect the dots."

"Shame, that." Dan sniggered, "I always wanted to fuck an Officer, but I guess ..." he pointed at Vadim, "I already have, aye? Just not a Brit."

Vadim laughed, with a hint of tension entering his body, but of the good kind. "Even a Major. These days, it's just an ex-Major, but still. Funny. I did have fantasies about getting fucked by a few of my men. I mean, about a few of them, not ... oh dear." He shook his head when Dan burst into laughter. "That's *not* what I was saying. Or thinking. But there were a few pretty attractive guys that I worked with. Shame I had to fight it. There was a Tajik once, he almost got me to the point to yield. The bastard was a fantastic wrestler."

"So, no Russian gang-bang? Damn."

"Yeah, with the officer at the bottom of the pile." Vadim shook his head. "I'd have been dead. That's not discipline as we kept it."

Still sniggering, Dan spread out on the bed as if it belonged to him alone. "And that Tajik ... tell me about his technique. Seems I can learn something from that guy, if he almost got you to give up your precious arse, back in the day."

"He was Spetsnaz, too. One of the really tough guys, worked mostly as a scout, great infiltrator, too. Hard as nails. Wrestling is some kind of national sport there - and I was stupid enough to try and compete with him. After a long, drawn-out match, he pretty much sat down on me, and I was aching in a thousand places and tired, and I guess I gave up for a few heartbeats. He saw that. I saw that he saw. And that he knew what that meant. That was when we were getting ready to cross the border into Afghanistan. Plenty of time, unrest, we were all itching to go, and one early morning - two hours or so before wake up, the guy showed up in my room. I did want him, and I'm pretty sure he saw right through me. And I kept thinking, fuck, you're Russian, he's a Tajik ... I don't think I'm racist, but just what anybody would *think* if it did come out. There was another wrestling match, and he was accidentally very close, and I was accidentally working to shake him off. We both acted as if we weren't hard, and as if we didn't come, working against each other. I was aching for days, afterwards."

"Hmmm ..." Dan was sitting up by now, eyes on Vadim, with that certain expression which read no more than three letters. "Fuck, now I'm horny."

"Aye, me too." Vadim glanced at the door, then headed over and locked it. The memory had done it. The man's fantastic, hard, agile body, who controlled him, who flipped him over on his stomach, and could easily have fucked him. All levers, all control. Face unreadable in the pre-dawn gloom, dark hair, light eyes, slightly slitted, but relatively pale.

Blinking once, Dan looked Vadim slowly up and down. "I don't think we did ever wrestle, did we? But then I'm no Tajik, whatever that means." He winked.

"It's an ethnic group, north of Afghanistan. Some of the warlords were Tajik. Some worked for us, some for the enemy, but then, they were still brothers and spoke each other's language ..."

"Oh fuck, of course, I forgot." Dan was pulling the t-shirt off over his head. Always ready.

"Not important ..." Vadim came back to the bed. "We should have enough time before dinner?"

"Depends who wins." Grinning, Dan opened his jeans, then lifted his hips off the bed to slide them down.

Vadim pulled his jumper over his head, shed the shoes, then pushed his trousers down, dumping the whole lot on one of the chairs, while Dan got his shoes off, throwing the jeans onto the floor. Vadim got onto the bed, on his knees, facing Dan. Feeling slightly awkward and exposed, but horny - he couldn't remember the man's name, just that silent fighting, not-fighting, that understanding that sex was impossible, but finding a way around it.

"Well ..." Dan murmured, "first things first ..." Coming up, his arms wrapped around Vadim's shoulders and his legs twisted to kick the balance from under Vadim. "Wrestling ..." gasped out, half strained, half laughing, "on the bed ... is crap!" Intent on throwing both of them onto the floor. Vadim responded, falling, head slightly banged against the floor as he hit the ground first, with Dan's weight on top. Good feeling, Dan's thigh against his cock, which made him want to lose, almost immediately. But he owed Dan a run for his money, so hooked his leg across Dan's, made sure he didn't put too much strain on the knee, and tried to roll over.

Fighting with concentration, Dan was lighter than Vadim, and he almost lost, already half on his back, when he managed to slip one leg between Vadim's, applying pressure with his thigh. Distraction, using every dirty trick in the book, and giving as good as he got.

Vadim groaned, hand came to Dan's arse, pulling him closer, the other going to his cock, to line him up with his own, pushing against him, any thought of combat was gone, had only been an excuse anyway. His body reacted too well, too easily to Dan, another reflex. Floor hard but even, the worst that would happen was carpet burn.

Dan was becoming breathless, exerted all his strength. Muscles hard beneath his skin, trying to flip them back over, with him on top. Vadim resisted, but loved the coiling muscles, knew he'd had an advantage, he had more technique, was heavier and stronger, but he didn't want to press for that advantage, instead went with the motion. Controlling Dan's hands and arms, legs straining against legs, working with levers and angles, but above all, they were stomach to stomach and cock to cock, which made Vadim groan again, shoulders to the ground, Dan on top. He smelled the carpet, came up with his head to bite and suck on Dan's lips.

Dan growled into the vicious kiss, hips grinding, pushing down. Straining to stay on top. Sweat between their bodies made each movement increasingly slippery, unable to get a grip, and Dan lost himself in the feeling of cock against cock. Speeding up the movements of his hips, and slamming down with all his strength and an animalistic growl.

Vadim released his arms, pressing Dan closer, every push met with a push from him. Breathlessly grinding, much like back in Afghanistan, only without giving no quarters, and more knowledge, more fucking love; he pressed up hard, Dan's harsh thrusts got him over the edge, and he held Dan, clung to him, fingers digging into his arse and back, while Dan kept thrusting down. Needing longer to get himself over, and finally cumming, while biting into Vadim's shoulder.

Crashing the next second, still holding, embracing, and rolling to the side, Dan took Vadim with him until they lay face to face, panting.

"Damn," Dan brought out, "you'll be the death of me in my old age." Burying his face into the crook of Vadim's sweaty neck.

Vadim grinned, fingers in Dan's thick hair. "You started it."

"Bollocks. It was you who had to tell me about Tajiks, wrestling, and wanting to - possibly - get fucked."

"Okay, maybe I did start it ..."

Dan groaned, stretching his legs. "Hmmm We have a couple more hours before dinner, want to go running and hit the gym, if they let us?"

"First shower. We don't have to hit the racing track while being ... well." Vadim slowly disentangled himself, then offered a hand to Dan, pulling him up. "You can shower first. Who knows, we might meet the rubber man. Smudge. The guy 'beasted' me."

"Shower? *Before* training? Where's the point in that?" Stretching properly once he stood, Dan looked down at himself and grimaced. "Okay, get it. Sticky." He grinned, "give me a couple minutes, can you dig out the sports kit in the meantime? And I wouldn't mind meeting your PTI, those guys are near indestructible."

"Yeah, he was quite annoying. Bastard." Vadim wiped himself down and dug out the sports kit, laying it out for Dan and himself, listening to the water.

Dan took hardly more than two minutes, coming back out, still partially wet and hair more or less dripping. "They made that bathroom for midgets. Still, those officer bitches should be thankful for the privacy, we used to have to walk along the hallway to the communal loos and showers." Rolling his eyes, Dan slipped shorts and t-shirt on, then sat down for the socks and running shoes.

Vadim grinned. "Well, it's a small mercy in our state." He headed into the shower, took a luxurious seven minutes, while Dan smoked a fag out of the open window, watching Vadim put the sports kit on and tie his laces.

"Let's go, then."

"You do realise that we've never done this?" Dan stood, musing, surprise on his face.

"Done what?"

“Running together.” Making a sweeping but economic gesture across the room and their kit. “This normality. Running. Something as stupid as this.” He shrugged, “wonder why we never did.”

Vadim shook his head. “No idea. But it feels damn nice, doesn’t it?” Normal life. The kind of thing other people had. Building habits, routines. No more strange, weird, extraordinary stuff, a perfectly regular life. Or as regular as it got for mercs.

“Aye, even though I’d get bored to death after a couple of months.” Dan winked and opened the door, but not before they’d both clipped their visitor passes on.

“Running is not for entertainment. It’s meant to be boring. Interesting runs happen near minefields ...”

“I didn’t mean the running.” Dan laughed. “Anyway, never asked you,” walking along the corridor towards the staircase, “what kind of runner are you?”

“What options are there?”

“Racer, sprinter, plodder and juggernaut.” Dan laughed at the latter, as they stepped outside.

“Depends on how much ground I have to cover ... somewhere between racer and juggernaut. Unless I don’t get what you mean.” They left the building and Vadim took the lead, remembering well the site of his suffering and humiliation - but now fondly remembered like any other training site he knew like the back of his hand.

Dan followed, falling into a comfortable trot beside Vadim. “I’ve never been much of a sprinter, guess I’m more of a long-distance plodder.” He grinned while feeling the movements come together, like slipping into a comfortable old shirt. He quickly found his favourite speed, with Vadim trotting in the same rhythm next to him. Impossible to say who took whose rhythm, or whether their bodies just agreed on a compromise.

“I’m a bit slow for the sprinting and too heavy for long distance stuff,” said Vadim, breathing deeply, relaxed, chest open, all limbs just moving. No racing involved, speed mostly steady, not incredibly fast, but they were still warming up.

“I remember having to race for Maggie’s life, and hell, did that feel like slow motion.” They were passing along the edge of the parade square, towards the singlies blocks of the other ranks.

“The car bomb?”

“Aye, the worst run of my life.” Picking up speed gently, now that their muscles were beginning to warm up. “Seemed for a while to be my last one as well.” They were passing along rows of buildings, all the same. The place seemed deserted. It wasn’t knocking off time yet.

“I lost it so bad when I heard about it,” murmured Vadim, lengthening his strides, too. “Somebody cracked a stupid joke about it, and I went at him like a tiger.” Vadim laughed. “Or mountain lion. Scared a bunch of green junior officers witless.”

“Did you? You never told me.” Talking easily while comfortably falling into a faster stride that accommodated both their styles, set to keep running for a long time. “Shit, we never talked about any of it. How did you find out in the first place?”

“I came in from an exercise, if I remember correctly, and one of the lieutenants told me that a turkey’d been blown up. Something to the effect of “suits him right,” and “a good start” or something, and I just exploded. I was still high on adrenaline. I eventually just walked into the embassy and demanded to know where you were. The Baroness probably didn’t believe for an instant it was because I ‘owed’ you. But it was the only thing I could do. Got my old comrade Lesha to cover for me ... wonder what he’s doing now ... he was a good friend, back from basic training ... made him believe I was clearing up my heroine addiction ... well, and you know the rest of the story. I suppose that was when I ... kind of switched sides ...”

“Holy shit.” Dan glanced to the side while they were crossing a road, running towards the guard house, which promised more open space once they’d left the compound. “There’s a hell of a lot of ‘story’ in those few words, aye? You got to tell me all the nitty gritty over some booze.”

“There isn’t really that much more to tell,” said Vadim. “But I’ll tell you the extended version at some point. It certainly was a few interesting weeks, that’s for sure.”

“I wish you’d properly switched sides back then, but fuck, we couldn’t have known.”

“I don’t have many regrets, but ... that’s one.”

Dan was starting to feel the comfortable sensation of his body working like a well-oiled machine, honed muscles and strength, while ignoring the twinge in his knees. “No point in regretting anything. If I could, I’d go back and kill a few people to avoid some serious shit, but it’s impossible.” He smiled, taking in air in deep breaths, feeling the power of his body and the exhilaration of movement.

Vadim gave a nod in silence and focussed on the flow of his breath. Expanding his chest and breathing deeply, calmly through his nose and allowing the breath to flow in and out naturally.

They continued to run, picking up pace when the second wind kicked in, both men harmonising their steps, as they went on for mile after mile, until Dan steered them towards the camp and back to the Officer’s Mess. He could feel his knees, increasingly, like he always did after running or too much marching, but the pleasant exhaustion was worth it, and the joy of doing something as ordinary as running side by side with Vadim. Ordinary, normal. Just two guys - partners.

* * *

The dining hall in the Officer’s Mess was as overly laden with Victorian silver and sculptures as he had expected, mirroring the Mess in Hereford, which Dan

dimly remembered from Christmas drinks, when the Officers had 'lowered' themselves to invite the senior NCOs to a posh piss-up in their own bar.

Dan was uncomfortable in the surroundings at first, but Dr Williams, in his calm way, reminded him enough of the Baroness to put him at ease. Being reminded of the days in the embassy when he had stood amongst the mighty and rich, while trying to blend in, never realising how much of an elegant figure he'd cut in the tailor made suits that hid the bulge of his pistol.

The meal was excellent, nothing to fault, but he remained quiet throughout the evening, while the doctor and Vadim were talking. Chatting about a whole range of topics, from art to music to historic battles, where Vadim seemed surprised the Doctor was aware of the finer points of the so-called Winter War between Finland and the Soviet Union. The Doctor in turn talking of matters such as the training of the historical Red Coats, both men perfectly at ease jumping from topic to topic. From military history to current politics, always polite and with a dash of humour. The Doctor tempered by age, and Vadim tempered by a profound disillusionment. Dan, though, was tempered by nothing, and thus he tucked into the wine until the doctor mercifully asked if he'd prefer a beer, and then supping his pints, listening with half an ear in on the conversation that often went over his head.

Dan politely stayed for a long time at the table, until he finally made his excuses and ventured to the bar, where, as a civilian guest on a normal day and not a function, he could go and buy his own drinks. He soon got into conversation with some of the guys, and found - somewhat to his surprise - that not all Officers were pompous arses, but quite a few had made it up the ranks. Immediately engaged in discussions about battle tactics, hand to hand combat, training and SAS fighting styles compared to Marines, and a thousand other things. Ending amongst laughter and pints, topped up with whiskies, all of them bought for him, while he told some of the tall tales of his past and present. Every now and then, Vadim's eyes flickered over to him, and a smile would curve Vadim's lips. It was Mad Dog who'd found his stride - yet again.

It was nearly 3 AM when the last ones were flagging and even Dan struggled to suppress a yawn, as he glanced over to the table. Vadim took the hint and stood, smiling, after making some excuse or other, about the fact that he was still used to military time keeping. He was sad the evening was over, but was relaxed and at ease after a truly great conversation with a man who knew the deep dark places of his mind and soul and yet neither shied back nor chided him, and he realized with a bit of shock that he was deeply fond of the man. Even though Dr Williams was too young to be his father, the feeling remained that it would have been good to have a father like that, and not the twisted or the powerless or the sad or the disapproving men that had taken that role in his life.

Dan, too, excused himself, walking over to the table, he shook the doctor's hand. Looking at him for a moment too long, studying the man as if asking questions he didn't dare ask, but perhaps the booze was to blame for wanting to know how he could stop the nightmares. How ... but no such thing, and he

smiled, the world mellowed by the free whisky. His hand went between Vadim's shoulder blades, a short touch, nothing but best mates, comfortable in each other's presence - unless one knew the truth.

Vadim took the Doctor's hand with both his hands and gave him one of those rare smiles, the true 'farewell' while the words were polite and friendly.

They went back to the room they shared, sleeping entwined, while no one in the Mess was none the wiser, no one asked questions, and none of the soldiers cared.

April 1992, France

They'd flown in through Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris, spent two nights in a too expensive hotel in the city so Vadim had the chance to see the Musée de L'Armée, the Panthéon with Napoleon's tomb, and the conveniently close Musée Rodin. Dan - looking very long-suffering - simply followed Vadim to wherever he wanted to go to, despite getting bored to death within ten minutes in a museum. Keeping himself entertained with studying signs and captions, making a wager with himself if he could learn the language before the wedding, or, rather, brush up and remember what he had learned once.

Just as Jean had promised on the phone, each and every eatery in Paris served great if not perfect food. That was, if one could get the waiters to understand English - something that a true Parisian waiter appeared to be above of, each one a blasé and haughty monarch in whatever place he not so much worked in but graced with his presence. By the second day, Dan's inexplicable talent for languages struck again, and he managed to order in French, truly enjoying the food and the booze. He even began to like the wine; there was something no-nonsense and perfectly unpretentious about the French house wines. Simple but good, just like him, he joked to Vadim every time.

Notre Dame was next, which Vadim felt didn't live up to its fame, but after climbing the clock tower, the view rendered Dan speechless. The landscape of Parisian roofs, so different to any other city he'd ever been in, and a lifetime away from the red dust of Kabul. Dan promised to Vadim they would return, right after New Zealand and a handful of other places they had to see.

Another surprise came as they were about to leave the Ile de la Cité, heading into what Vadim promised was 'the last church', and the beauty of Sainte-Chapelle took them by surprise; it was a strange church that was part early medieval in the sturdy bottom half and a splendour of a high medieval church sitting right on top - filled with light as the whole upper church resembled gold filigree with stained glass in between. Both were connected through a staircase so narrow that both Vadim and Dan felt somewhat claustrophobic while braving the worn-out steps. At least, Dan figured, it was more entertaining to imagine dying a horrible death, stuck between winding stones, than gazing at yet another goddamned tomb or statue.

After this last tour, they picked up their rented car, tossed the bags into the trunk and made their way out of Paris into the countryside. Stopping every now and then for a coffee in one of the villages on the way, they made their way towards Messey sur Grosne. In his description of the route, Jean had even written out which cafés and other places were interesting along the way. But for once, Vadim let the sightseeing be, keener on getting there before nightfall.

The pleasant landscape eventually opened to reveal the small village where Jean had bought his house. It didn't seem very remarkable, thought Vadim, and

downright incomprehensible how somebody like Jean, who was clearly from Moscow and therefore from a big city, could enjoy being out here in what amounted to 'just landscape'. Then again, their farm in New Zealand was even more remote, according to Dan, with at least twenty minutes drive from Palmerston North. Which, by all accounts, while being one of the top cities on the more crowded of the New Zealand islands, had a decidedly rural and backwater feel about it. Here, it was old buildings huddled together that must have looked very similar about five hundred years ago, just without the modern road.

They coursed through the village, but Jean's description of 'brick build, start of the village' was too vague. There was a big building with towers behind what looked like a moat, but that was hardly a house. It looked closer to a fortress, if friendlier.

"Hm," Vadim murmured after turning the car around on the marketplace again. "Would you mind hopping out and ask that old fellow over there where the crazy legionnaire lives? There should be only one like Jean in this place."

"Damn, seems I have to embarrass myself with my shit French again." Dan grinned, but did as asked, and was seen talking, using his hands and arms, to the elderly gent who'd been coming out of the boulangerie. Dan returned within a few minutes and plonked himself back into his seat, grinning like a fool.

"Well," scratching his non-existent beard. "There's no way we're going to miss Jean's house."

"No? Seems we have. Or are they playing their 'you're foreigners, we're taking the piss' game again?"

Dan shrugged. "If you just turn your head about 45 degrees to the left, you are sure not to miss Jean's little home."

Vadim turned and looked straight at the thing with the towers. Towers. It looked huge, and it sat right behind the mote. "The bunch of Mercedes' and cabrios might have been a clue," he muttered, exasperated. The front was lined with expensive-looking cars. He wasn't quite sure what he'd expected, but certainly not that. There were two more sturdy, practical cars, something soldiers might choose. "Little home? Fuck."

Dan laughed, "seems the bastard got us on, well and truly."

Vadim drove over, got in line in front of the cars and switched the engine off. "He's certainly not slumming it."

"But a bitch to heat." Dan grinned and winked at Vadim, leaning across to kiss him lightly, a natural gesture. "If you ask me, I'd rather have a farm in New Zealand, dilapidated or not, because the mountains are missing around here."

"Can only be a few hour's worth of driving into the Alps ..." Vadim got out of the car and headed towards the entrance. There was light outside, and by whatever magic that had warned Jean, the door opened and the ex-Legionnaire stood there, dressed in jeans and a light jumper, and a remarkably neat and flattering hair cut – in fact, Jean had never looked so well and rested.

"Hey, Frenchie," Dan called out. Grinning, as he stretched his legs, massaging his aching knee. "Got the shits yet with fear?"

“No – I have another day to plan my escape.” Jean laughed and covered the distance, pulling Dan into a tight hug that clearly crossed the line between buddy and intimate. “How are you guys?” His English, Vadim noted, was tinted with French inflection. He’d clearly not spoken a lot of English recently.

“Rather well, and if I told you what we’ve been up to across Scotland and England, you’d blush.” Dan winked, standing close to Vadim. “I can’t figure out if the most nefarious deed was visiting my family or buying my wedding outfit.” He shrugged, as if he were bored, “the two weekends spent tying up a couple of Glaswegian guys was child’s play compared to trying on clothes. And, I have you know, I remembered the ‘no camo’ rule.”

Jean’s eyes flashed at that and he laughed, again, releasing Dan, then moving to hug Vadim, who opened his arms almost in an afterthought and found that it didn’t hurt. Jean was still a sexy motherfucker, even if he pressed in less when hugging him. Vadim prolonged the embrace to murmur into Jean’s ear: “He means it with the Glaswegian guys. The way he reduced them to whimpering bitches was a sight to behold.” Feeling Jean stiffen slightly in his arms, he let him go, smiling. “And you look good.”

Jean needed a second to gather his cool again, and Vadim assumed it was because he hadn’t had a guy recently. Or Dan recently. Jean’s sexuality was still a mystery. How straight was he when he lived with his girl?

“Do I? I spent so much time working on that house to get it mostly finished before the great day ...” Jean motioned behind himself, then grinned. “I’ll have to show you. Come on in. We’ll get your stuff later. You’re staying here, of course. Your bedroom’s ready.”

“Good, because you do know that there are certain rules regarding stag nights, best men, booze and bedrooms?” Dan grinned, following Jean, but not without winking at Vadim.

Vadim grinned, especially when Jean murmured: “Let’s pretend for a few days you guys are the acceptable kind of friends, okay?”

“What do you mean? That the others are the unacceptable kind?” Dan laughed, good humouredly.

“You know what I mean,” said Jean, then led them through the hallway into a huge room that had an open fireplace and a low fire burning in it. The building seemed colder inside than outside and, far from modern, could use the heat from the fireplace even in spring. The ensemble inside was sophisticated, much more so than Vadim wanted to give him credit for. White leather couches arranged in an open square around a low, carved, wooden couch table, and people sitting there who clearly fell into two camps. There was Pascal and another sun-weathered, short haired man who had that wiry deadliness that many seasoned and still active soldiers shared. On the other side was a couple, a man and a woman, who were both attractive and impeccably groomed. Above all, Vadim wondered what these two groups had been talking about.

The one who got up first was a slender, impossibly tall dark-haired beauty. Long, wavy hair falling down beyond her shoulders, a tight soft cashmere top flattered her almost as much as the long skirt she wore. Tall and thin, and

perfectly proportioned. What the photos had never transported was the warm smile that she graced them with, and a happiness, joy and calm that Vadim had rarely seen in a person. The lady of the house, no doubt.

Even Dan was affected, plucking the inevitable shades off the top of his head to fold them and place them into a pocket. Smiling at her, as he walked straight towards her. Extending his hand, "I have seen your photos and admired your beauty, but if I may say so, you surpass any of the pictures."

She smiled, casting her eyes down for a moment, long, dark lashes and the gesture itself completely natural, even for a model. "Oh, welcome, please." She extended her hand as if leading them towards the couch she'd sat on, but Dan didn't take her hand to shake it. Instead turning it gently to bow his head and placing a kiss on it. As perfectly behaved as he would have been at the most important of the Baroness' functions. "I am Dan, honoured to be Jean's best man." Turning to the side, smiling and nodding to Vadim, "and this is my partner, Vadim." Only then letting go of her hand.

"Dan. Jean has been talking so much about you. Both of you." Placing a long-fingered hand on Dan's arm in an affectionate gesture. "Vadim." Extending a hand to Vadim as well, who decided against a kiss on the hand and instead kissed her cheeks, surprised that she was almost as tall as him. "Please, sit with us. Can I get you anything to drink?"

"That would be a life saver." Dan grinned as he sat down. "You don't by any chance happen to have some whisky?"

"But of course. Any specific brands? Jean here is trying to build up a collection – he joined a 'Whisky tasting club'."

"A Speyside single Malt would do."

"I think we have that ..." She smiled tenderly at Jean, who'd stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"Should I ..." Jean started.

"No, sweetheart, you stay and entertain the guests." She turned around and gathered a few things from the table before she left. "I'll bring some nibbles, too."

"Nibbles ..." Dan murmured to Vadim with a shit-eating grin. "I can just see Jean handing out the 'nibbles' in his tin hut in the next war zone." Turning towards her with a smile, before acknowledging the others, grinning from ear to ear at Pascal. "Long time no infection of the virus, aye?"

Pascal cast a weary glance at the groomed guy on the other couch, then pulled himself together enough to relax a little. "Hi Dan." Looking at the guy he shared a couch with, "that's Lieutenant Beauvais, just come back from the 13th demi in Djibouti. Lieutenant, that's Dan and Vadim, PMCs, friends from Kuwait. Vadim's ex-Spetsnaz, Dan's ex-SAS." The wiry man stood, and just that gesture looked rather stiff and formal, like he'd expect them to salute any moment. Vadim had to remind himself that his own Colonel was dead; but the armies of the world just built that type of man, somehow.

"Pleased to meet you." Dan was still on his best behaviour, stepping close enough to stretch his hand out to the man. "Never had the pleasure to meet anyone from the Foreign Legion while I was on the job."

"But I followed the exploits of the SAS. Less so Spetsnaz." The Lieutenant spoke clipped English, which made him sound more disciplined than seemed strictly necessary. "I'm pleased to meet you, gentlemen." Shaking Dan's hand, then Vadim's, and inviting them to sit. "It was my pleasure to drill Jean, back when he joined the Legion. Since then, I've earned my commission."

"How did he perform?" asked Vadim.

"Well enough that we offered him to stay on after basic training, to join us in the training regiment."

"That would have been suicide. Nobody likes the brownnose that gets fasttracked to corporal," said Jean. "I was tempted, though."

The Lieutenant nodded. "We had to try."

"Who doesn't." Dan muttered, then smiled his most innocent smile, when he addressed the Lieutenant. "You must have been quite impressed with Jean, to see you here at the wedding, after all those years?"

"We served together and stayed in touch ever since." Every word could hold a world of meaning, but one that no outsider was privy to. It seemed a Legion-only business, and that, again, could mean everything and nothing.

"Aye, Jean does that to people. The friendship, I mean." Dan smiled, seeing Pascal close his eyes and shake his head. Nobody else noticed, likely.

Jean just grinned. "Well, and these are Sandrine – editor of a woman's magazine, no, not that kind of magazine, something with fashion and sex tips – and Chretien, Solange's latest conquest. Or rather," when Chretien gave a rather camp and high-pitched giggle that went straight to Vadim's toenails, while Dan twitched visibly, "her latest photographer."

"Pleased to meet you." Dan got up again to shake hands with Sandrine and Chretien. "I'm afraid I'm a bit too scruffy to fit in with the fashion crowd." He grinned, fighting the laughter back, "but Vadim here is an entirely different matter." The evil grin made the scar in his face twist in strange ways.

"Oh, I think you're underestimating yourself," said Chretien in smooth English with a French accent that seemed almost comical in a man who'd subscribed so much to the camp stereotype. Holding Dan's hand for several moments too long. "But your friend does wear a beautiful suit. A little austere, but it fits his type. What do you think, Sandrine, darling?"

"I'd say Hugo Boss," she piped up.

"I wouldn't know." Dan grinned, extricating his hand. "I just wear what he tells me to."

"What?" asked Vadim, confused.

"Nono, the suit is obviously tailor-made," said Chretien. "I was thinking more the type than the suit. He could easily walk for Boss."

"Walk?" Vadim looked at Dan, who shrugged with a confused look in his eyes. "I'm not sure I understand."

"But you are a model, aren't you?" Chretien seemed a little taken aback now.

Dan burst into laughter, almost doubling over in his seat. "That's priceless," before he guffawed again.

"No. I ..." Vadim paused, only now catching onto the thought. Oh damn. They'd really thought he was ... "I mean, no, I'm not. I'm a PMC." Understanding that the civilians didn't know what that meant, he added: "Private military contractor. Politically correct term for mercenary."

"Soldiers." Dan added, ever helpful, "we're both ex-soldiers. Special Forces, you've heard of them? Every country has them." He had to wipe tears of laughter out of his eyes.

"Oh dear me," said Chretien, and a strange kind of silence settled.

Thankfully, Vadim spotted Solange coming in and headed over to take the tray from her, which elicited another of those warm smiles. "I'll get the rest," she said, when he took the tray and set it down on the table.

"It does clarify something I've said for a long time, though." Dan settled back in the couch, after taking his whisky. "Vadim is rather model material." Nodding to himself. "I've always known that, even back in Afghanistan." Stirring it with that evilly amused streak of his, because seeing Vadim flustered was a wonderful sight to behold.

Chretien looked around, frowning. "There should be more light in this place," he said, and it sounded almost as if he was giving an assistant an order. When the light wasn't magically brightened, he turned towards Solange who set down a second tray with a few bowls of 'nibbles', ranging from carrot sticks to some more unhealthy options. "Darling, where's the light switch?" Solange smiled at him and turned up the light at the wall, smoothly increasing it. "I'm sure there would be a market for him," said Chretien after regarding Vadim, who was visibly tense now. "Not in mainstream or high fashion, a bit too old for that, I hope you don't mind me saying that ... but that kind of face ..."

"Aye, but I do think that at this point in the conversation I should tell you that if you continue talking about Vadim like an - admittedly dead sexy - piece of meat, you probably won't continue with your monologue much further ..." Dan smiled sweetly while reaching for the unhealthiest option of nibbles he could find. Crisps. What else.

Chretien seemed taken aback at the bluntness, but shut up, taking Dan's words as a threat. Vadim sat down and didn't make eye contact with the photographer if he could help it. Again, there was that eerie silence, while people took their drinks and emptied the bowls.

Solange played hostess, making sure everybody had drinks and the nibbles didn't go out, while vanishing into the kitchen every now and then. Returning with a tray of savoury filled bites, there was wine and cheese later, after a procession of canapés and tiny food things, that, in succession and by their sheer amount, doubled as dinner. Conversation flared up again, with Sandrine starting a conversation that mainly involved Chretien and Solange, sometimes Jean, then Jean starting a conversation that involved the military people. Both sets of guests separated by a glass wall, like in a zoo.

“Right.” Dan finally had enough and piped up, glass in hand. He’d been enjoying the whisky and some of the wine for too long to be classified as sober anymore. Dark eyes gleaming with that wicked spark, he stretched out his long legs, making a wide gesture across the sofas. “I think it is time to play the game of ‘embarrassing confessions of the friends of the bride and groom’. Or rather, what do we know about those two lovely people here, who are the reason why we have all come to this welcoming lovely place to be damn jolly for a couple of days. What ‘secrets’ do we know which will make them really, really cringe. Things like hidden pimple cream and wads of tissue.” Dan winked, “good humouredly, of course. After all, they have been bloody fine hosts so far.” Chuckling, Dan pointed at Sandrine. “Let’s start with you. How did you meet the beautiful Solange and the strapping lad Jean?”

“Oh, Solange was the show piece in a series about ‘well-integrated foreign models’.” She rolled her eyes, “you might be aware that we had a very public discussion about integration, and we were looking for positive cases, so we gave her a five pager detailing her work, her career up to this point, how she’s dealing with her heritage and religion - all with beautiful photos, and that article set some things into motion for her career. I’m so proud of you, darling,” she said, reaching over to squeeze Solange’s hand. “I met Jean only much later, when he picked her up after one of the shootings, but he didn’t want to get involved in the article.”

“I can imagine that.” Dan grinned, “soldiers, ex or not, and glamour mags?”

“Instead she sold me to some lady from a guy’s magazine who was dead-set on doing some eerie artsy black and white shoots of the testosterone-drenched world of the French Foreign Legion, but by then, I’d long since left and presenting myself as a Legionnaire just didn’t seem right. They should talk about the guys still doing that dance.”

“True.” Dan waved his glass at the Lieutenant. “While it is fairly obvious how you met, how did you *really* meet? Jean, that is, not the soldier.” Dan smiled.

“Jean was the finest of a crop of Eastern Bloc boys,” said the Lieutenant. “These days, the Legion is full of them, and we’re sending most of them home. Not because of their fitness levels, but the state of their teeth, interestingly enough. But him we took in.” He leaned back, comfortable with a glass of red in his hand, regarding Jean, visibly delving deep into memory. “I was a young caporal, then, and I had a lot to prove. I was determined to give my lot hell.”

“And you did.” Jean said in a calm and silent voice.

“I hadn’t learned the ‘hard but fair’ tack yet. Instead, I opted for hard. And then harder. And then harder again. I pushed them to the limit and beyond. Worse. I was set on breaking them. I thought that was the way to do it. One day, all the guys were hungry, exhausted, hadn’t slept for five days. I don’t mean ‘properly for five days’, I mean ‘hadn’t slept at all’. That day I gave them an order on the parade ground, push-ups, and I knew they couldn’t take it, but I was set on making them do it anyway.” The Lieutenant gave a spartan smile, very measured, with a hint of irony that suddenly made him very attractive. “It

was Jean who balked first. Some moved to obey, but he didn't. Instead he looked me in the eye and I saw that anger in him. The others noticed, too. They got up and formed a half-circle around me. I repeated the order, but nothing happened. They just wouldn't have it anymore. And then the Eastern Bloc boy said, in his horrendous French: "You know what, I'm going to sleep now." It was like the herd had suddenly turned on the lion. These things don't happen in the Legion. The roles are clear. But in that moment, I knew I'd gone too far. True enough, he turned around and went to the barracks, and whatever I did, I couldn't stop him or the others. The next day, of course, I got another Caporal to help and we cut him down to size. He'd passed his entry test at the top, a straight 20. If he'd been one of the bad ones, he wouldn't have made me so angry. It took me a while before I forgave him – that was when the training staff decided to offer to fasttrack him. I thought, this guy can be a caporal in a few months, and I had to do it in three years. Maybe he had a point. After that, I didn't overstep again, and he obeyed. When we were posted together – he was a Caporal and I was a Sergeant, I realized he was actually a good guy. We had a lot of fun, outside the fence and on holidays. He was always shooting for trouble, and always got away with it. Testing the limits, taking risks, like losing his holidays by breaking rules all the time."

Dan smiled, had sat in silence throughout, glancing at Vadim for a moment, then back at the Lieutenant. "You know, it takes a lot of guts to admit mistakes." He raised his glass. "So, I drink to you, Lieutenant, and to the fact that you have nailed our Jean down to the 'I'. Taking risks and getting away with it. That's him." There was a lot more he could have said, and it showed to those who knew him - but he merely finished with, "to the groom, who, despite being an annoying git, knows the value of friendship. And to the bride, who must be truly remarkable, because she has harnessed all that is good in him, and none of the 'trouble.'"

The other guests raised their glasses as well, and Jean shook his head, grinning. Pleased and touched, and visibly not quite sure what to do with that. Vadim caught a glance of that strange relationship Jean had with the officer, not quite friends, not quite comrades, there was some other layer beyond that. Opponents, possibly, or an older brother younger brother relationship, but definitely respect forced from adversity. These people had all played important roles to either Solange or Jean. Of course, the photographer who furthered her career, the editor who'd likely properly started it. Pascal, Jean's very close friend and comrade, an equal, but this officer stood out somehow. Vadim was sure the man knew that, and had made a bold effort to bridge that gap and explain why he was here and why he cared about Jean who had likely dealt a major blow to his NCO ego, back in the days. What it had meant to the other NCOs - that he had failed to make the young legionnaire do his bidding - he couldn't imagine. Jean hadn't been the only one who'd been cut down to size. He thought about that while the others toasted, and he murmured a toast as well, while studying the officer.

Dan smiled, drank to finish his toast. It was different, then, the chemistry in the group had changed, with a new-found ease that didn't breed any awkward silences. Pascal's account followed: he'd met Jean during parachute training on Corsica and raised hell in the local watering holes with him. They'd been on the run from the military police once – a potentially hilarious story, but told without skill. Until the foreseeable end, being roughed up by two huge Tahitians who were Legion military police, and then time spent together 'en taule', in the hole, the Legion prison, where they'd cooked up a hundred and twenty-two different plans to escape to pass the time. Vadim leaned over and murmured into Dan's ear: "Prison with Pascal?"

"Don't get me started, or my imagination will run riot ..." Dan smirked and whispered, before laughing when the story came to an end. Quite unspectacular, but another proof of friendship, and they all raised their glasses again.

"And you?" Solange's voice was heard.

"Who?" Dan's attention had been on the drink he was pouring, suddenly confronted with her dark eyes and warm smile. "Me?"

"Yes, you." She insisted, sweetly, and he sat back.

"Well ..." Dan grinned, swirling the whisky in his glass. "I could tell you a wild story of tremendous adventures, tall tales of the high seas of the sand dunes, and unbelievably touching accounts of the bravery of two men, but ..." his grin turned into a smile after a glance at Vadim. Dan shook his head gently. "None of that would really do Jean justice." He took a sip, smiling. "I was in a very, very bad place when I met Jean. Think of ... life, death, love and loss, disaster, desolation, pain and utter heartbreak, and all that culminating in hatred ..." Glancing at Vadim again, Dan placed his hand on Vadim's thigh, casually, lightly, a touch as natural as a smile. "Jean offered friendship. That was new to me, because I had never managed to have a friend, all my life. I'd never had the chance. Jean taught me what friendship means and that it's worth it." He shrugged, smiling, "that's all, the whole wild tale boiled down to the bones. Thus I'd like to raise my glass to Jean, our friend, the man who helped save my life in the desert, and to Solange, to whom I would like to extend my friendship as well. Let us drink to friendship."

The others joined in as well, and Solange leaned over to kiss Jean, who beamed and probably looked like the happiest man on earth. And, thought Vadim, it was impossible to hold a grudge against him that moment. While Pascal studiously didn't look at Dan's hand on Vadim's thigh, the photographer was clearly noticing, and likely got images in his head at that. The Lieutenant, though, didn't bat an eyelash.

They finished their drinks, and with the atmosphere mellowed, Dan glanced at his watch. "Blimey, it's still damn early. While I am all for sitting and chatting here, I wonder if our couple would like to have some quiet time together. Perhaps the rest of us should invade a local bar? If not, I reckon we should get some music going and ask those two good people here to break out the family photo albums and the holiday videos." Dan grinned.

Jean laughed. "Well, there's a nice bar just down the road ... But before we shoo you off, I'll show the recent arrivals their room, and give them the tour of the cellar. While you enjoy yourselves outside, we'll prepare some more stuff for tomorrow, when things get a bit livelier ..." He stood, and Vadim set down his glass as well.

"Let's get your stuff out of the car." Jean headed outside, followed by Vadim and Dan. As they walked towards the car in the dark, Jean turned, flashing a grin. "Tomorrow will be hell. It's another fifty guests or so, half my people, half hers, we've rented every available room in the area and several more are staying in the house. How do you like the guys?"

Vadim shrugged. "Not sure I like that photographer."

"Don't worry about him – pretty certain he didn't mean to piss you off. Come on, you're easily forty pound and one foot more than he is, never mind the inches elsewhere."

"And how would you know?" Dan smirked, teeth and all, as they heaved the bags out of the car.

"He's been swimming in the pool downstairs. Wearing a pair of swimming trunks."

"Ay, but there are the growers and there are the stayers ..." Dan chuckled. "Oh, and that Lieutenant ... you sure he is completely straight?" Adding, because he could not *not* say it, "like you?"

Jean gave a breathless laugh. "Do you have a way to trace pheromones or what? Beauvais ..." He grinned, shaking his head. "Last thing I know, he's good to go when there's also some pussy in bed."

"Shit! You shouldn't have told me that. The guy with whom you shared the whore ... aye?"

"Yeah, that's him. It was in some dump in Africa."

"And you do know what that means?"

"You think he's just pretending? Possibly. He's a hard bastard. I respect him a lot – granted, that took me a while, the first years I thought he was a complete wanker, but after we'd dealt with our hang-ups, we became friends. I didn't ... you know, I didn't have 'a crush on him' or something."

"Actually, that's not what I meant, but thanks for volunteering the information." Dan grinned conspiratorially at Vadim, shouldering the suit bag that held his outfit. "What I meant was, short of Vadim putting me on a leash ..." flashing another toothy grin, "I'm going to go after him. That guy is so stiff, what he needs is a threesome, just without the female whore this time."

Jean leaned against the car with a groan. "Fuck." For a moment, it seemed as if it was pain or guilt, thought Vadim, but Jean's eyes showed something entirely different. Need. A deep craving for something. And he was pretty sure that craving was Dan. "Too bad I don't have cameras in his bedroom." It was only half a joke.

"No crush, then, eh ...?" Dan grinned, turned and stepped close to Jean, just for one moment. "Then again, I told you about the stag night, didn't I? The best man has the right, no, the duty, to organise the best possible night for the

groom.” Standing too close, far too close, as Dan leaned his head backwards to cast a grin and a nod at Vadim. Then back to Jean, the darkness sheltering him as he ran a hand swiftly down Jean’s front, lingering at his crotch. “I am sure we’ll find a very large bed for three men somewhere ... unless you’d like to make it four?”

Jean moved closer, elbows still on the car, breathing harder, and clearly very hard. “The beds ... are fairly big. You’ll be ... okay.” He looked at Dan, need very obvious in his eyes. “Fuck, putting that thought into my head was cruel ... I’ll need a very cold shower.”

“Or five minutes in the next bush with me on my knees and Vadim behind you.” Dan countered casually.

“The only question is, how do we set Beau... whatever’s name up to join us,” murmured Vadim close to Dan’s ear, and loud enough for Jean to hear as well. He liked Jean looking so desperate. Straight? More like forced to play straight ever since he’d returned to the village. That must have been a bit of a shock for Jean, realizing that he’d got a serious taste for men in the desert. “All, of course, without alerting Pascal the Supremely Nervous, and without giving this Chretien freak boy a chance to squeeze himself into the middle.”

“That’s simple ... fix Pascal up with a girl, tell everyone it’s a stag night only for soldiers, so the freak stays away, and find a secluded place with bed and booze and a lock. Beauvais won’t know anything until it is too late ...” Dan grinned, rubbing himself close.

Jean nodded. “O... okay. I can ... Solange’s girls will be all over him when they get here ... just drop a hint he likes blonde and he’s a soldier and they’ll ... swarm all over him. I mean, he is damned cute.”

“I always knew you’d think that. After all, a man in spandex ...” Dan smirked.

“I hate his cycling shorts, but I like the guy, yeah. Sue me.” Jean glanced up. “Will you get me off if I find a place? I have an idea. But ... be warned, he’s just as likely to rip your cock off than touch you.”

“Who, our Lieutenant?”

“Yeah.”

“Somehow, I doubt that,” said Vadim, moving to Jean’s other side, exchanging a glance with Dan. “Where do we give our Frenchie a hand?”

Dan flicked his head to the side, scanning the surroundings within a split second, before throwing the clothes bag over the hood of the car and dropping the rest of the luggage. “Right here.” Moving to the side, he pulled the unsuspecting Jean with him, closely followed by Vadim, as they stumbled through a tight gap in the tall hedges.

Jean cursed, but his protests were weak, partially because one of them – or both – kept touching him. It was just a knot of bodies, and Vadim kissed him, of all people, but at the same time, he opened his jeans, and Jean was so motherfucking glad for that when he found calloused hands on his cock. Vadim pulled his trousers down, with the underpants, he pumped Jean a few times, dry, but that powerful hand brought back all the memories, including that time when

he'd fucked Vadim. Jean moaned, the need worse when Vadim stepped behind him and Dan went to his knees into the damp grass, the heat of his breath against Jean's cock.

Jean feared for a moment Vadim would attempt to fuck him, but instead, Vadim pulled him back, his naked arse against Vadim's clothed groin, and he felt the Russian press in and grind against him. That was okay, that was safe, only that it wasn't, not safe, not psychologically safe, because feeling Vadim needing him so much and feeling his breath against his ear made things worse. Much worse, though, when the hot breath and those hands on his hips turned into the touch of Dan's lips, and then the tight heat of his throat as he took him in, paused, concentrated, breathed for a moment, and then swallowed him all the way. Eyes closed, hands gripping Jean's hips hard, leaving fingerprints in the flesh as he deep throated him, from zero to one hundred. Fast and demanding, to bring him off within minutes.

Jean felt a yelp escape and it freaked him, but he was glad when Vadim put a hand over his mouth. Powerful, controlling, holding him while Dan put everything into that fast, hard blowjob, and Jean couldn't help it, he lost control, oddly protected and steadied by Vadim - the jealous lover of the very man who was giving him that blowjob, even making sure he didn't give himself away. Jean closed his eyes, strangely, utterly secure in that lust, with Vadim shielding and holding, and he came, clutching at Dan's head, shoulders, and Vadim's hips behind him, unable to decide who he wanted to touch. Knees buckling when the pressure was taken off.

Vadim took his hand off Jean's lips and kissed his neck. "You needed that badly, hm?"

"Yeah. Fuck." Breathless, Jean relished being held and leaned against Vadim. "Do you ... what do you want?"

"Something you won't give me," Vadim murmured. "And a hand would take too long."

Dan came up, a strange look in his eyes as he tilted his head, regarding Jean for a long moment. In the end he said nothing, just leaning forward and kissing Jean, with his taste still lingering. Sharing the spent lust with the man himself, which made Jean embrace him tightly, kissing, lips, tongue, no shyness about the taste, in fact it just drove the point home how much he'd wanted and would want again.

"Serious ... what do you ... guys want?" asked Jean, right between Dan and Vadim and absolutely loving the heat and the strength.

Dan looked up and smiled. "You got to get back to your guests and your wife to be, or they'll be looking for us. I'll take care of Vadim, don't you worry ... and tomorrow ... tomorrow you'll be mine." Dan winked, leaving the meaning ambiguous.

Jean nodded, still dazed. "Okay. Thanks ... thanks for this. Believe me or not, but I missed you. Both."

"Funnily enough, I *do* believe you." Dan grinned.

"And I'm not sure."

Jean looked over his shoulder, grinning at Vadim. "I knew you wouldn't believe me, Vadya.... I need to show you your bedroom, okay?"

After they'd picked up the bags again, Jean went back into the house and up the stairs, turning to the left. Vadim assumed they were heading into one of the towers – and he was right. Up a few more stairs, Jean opened the door into a rectangular room that held a nice, big bed, and old, restored furniture. Everything smelled of wood and work, like Jean had worked on this up till today. Two walls had windows that presented a good view over the village. "There's a bathroom down through the hatch ... but I'd recommend using the stuff in the cellar for shower and sauna and all that, and it's mostly finished, too."

"This is fucking grand, you know that?" Dan looked around, impressed with everything. "And now shoo, go back to your bride. We'll take the rest of the rabble out, so that you get some peace and quiet before ..." waggling his brows, "tomorrow."

Jean grinned. "Now ... have fun guys, I wish I could join ... but you know that." He headed out of the door, and, whistling, down the stairs. Vadim closed the door and leaned against it. "What are you planning? Fucking him tomorrow night? You, and me, and that Lieutenant?"

"No." Dan shook his head, sat down on the comfortable bed and fished for a cigarette. "The last thing I'd try to do is fuck Jean. Granted, I think if we played it right, we could, even both of us, but shit, Vadim, call me a stupid sucker, but it really is the worst time. That man's desperate, and what I said earlier about friendship is something I really meant. I feel we'd be taking advantage of him, and that's not friendship. The guy's about to marry, and the last thing he needs at the altar is being completely off whack because he'd just discovered he likes to get fucked up the arse by a bloke, while his wife has had her bits chopped off to be what he thought he'd always wanted - and what she always wanted to be." Inhaling the first lungful of smoke. "Nope, that'd be shit and I won't have it." Dan's face broke into a broad grin, "the Lieutenant, though, that's another matter. He's fair game."

Vadim didn't react to the last bit. Instead, he stared. "What?"

"Hm? What do you mean?" Dan looked up, pulling on his cigarette.

"What bits chopped off?"

"Oh ... Fuck." Dan's face fell. Smoke curling out of his nose, he shook his head. "Shit, fuck and derision and thrice goddamned fucking damn. You didn't know, did you?"

"Know what?"

"Solange ...damn. Solange is a woman. No doubt, you saw her. All woman and all the right bits, just when ... well." Dan took a deep breath, "when I saw her photos for the first time I noticed her Adam's apple. One of the few shots where she wasn't wearing some jewellery or scarf around her neck. She was born a biological man, but she's a woman. And while I don't understand all this shit, I get it that it must be hell - not being who you are or something like that."

So, anyway, she's a woman, aye? No different to what you thought she was." He shook his head again, "and I'm a fucking big blabbermouth."

"A transvestite?" Vadim blinked. He'd been fooled perfectly, wouldn't have doubted for an instant. Even now, the thought that that had been a man didn't go together with what he'd seen. Voice, frame, actions, behaviour. He'd been taken aback at how tall she was. She. It. Fuck. "I guess that explains ... Jean's flexibility when it comes to cock. Fuck. Wow."

"Transvestite is something else as far as I understand it. "Solange *is* a woman. She hasn't got a cock anymore. When I met Jean, Solange was just going under the knife. She got tits and pussy and all that. No flexibility there." Dan got agitated, standing up. "Fuck, Vadim, don't behave any differently, now that you know. Because that's what she is, a girl."

"But when we met Jean, he'd been together with 'her' for a while, and that means Solange was still ... something else. Don't tell me you sleep with somebody who has the guy parts and pretend you're sleeping with a woman, because, frankly, that's bullshit. I could always tell whether somebody I'm sleeping with has male or female parts."

Dan sighed. "But that's exactly what he did because she wanted him to. Jean told me that she would cry and hurt herself, because she hated her body so much. She had a cock and she couldn't bear him touching it. I don't understand the whole thing, but he said she hated herself. So he got the money together for the surgery." Flicking the ash off his half-forgotten fag, "I don't know what Jean is, or thinks he is, and I don't care, because straight he is not, but I know one thing: Solange is a woman, okay? I guess that's all that counts."

Vadim rubbed his face. "Fuck. That's ... that's a damned decent thing to do. Of him, I mean. Enabling her to do that, and ... I don't know, pretend she's a woman when she's not ... yet, I mean. And I wouldn't have guessed."

"Yeah, I wouldn't have either, hadn't I spotted the Adam's apple." Dan shrugged and smiled. "She's a good one, I have it in me waters, you know, and so is he, no matter what." Dan got up, extinguished his fag and stepped close to Vadim to clap one arm round his shoulders. "And now we go and take the children out, aye?"

"Yes." Pulling Dan close for a deep, gentle kiss. "And regarding the Lieutenant, we can start fucking with his mind tonight. I'd enjoy a bit of build-up, before we have him tomorrow."

Dan laughed, "after you, m'dear ..." giving an exaggerated bow, he let Vadim step through the door first, his mind on things very much unlike a white wedding.

* * *

Downstairs, Jean had just made everybody laugh with a joke or a quip, and Solange was sitting on his lap where he'd most likely pulled her. Vadim still didn't manage to see the guy she had been. Nothing in the chin, nothing in the hands, nothing in the frame, and her height only made her suitable as a model.

Maybe the fact she was too perfect, too attractive – if one liked women – but he realised he was stretching it.

“Right, guys, I’ll kick you out for a little ... I already called the bar, whatever you’re having is on my tab. But I’d love to catch an early night with Solange before the well-ordered madness that is a wedding drowns us tomorrow. You guys ...” pointing at Pascal and the editor, “have the keys. Dan, here’s yours. Fridge is full, my house is your house.” He stood, and when Solange got to her feet, he swept her off them right away and winked. “See you tomorrow!” and off they went, leaving the guests alone.

“Well, guess that means we have to go into the local bar and get boozed up.” Dan grinned, ready to go. “Who’s coming with us? Military guys only, or fashion entourage as well?”

“If you don’t mind,” said the editor and smiled at them. Chretien was also interested, and not much later they were all gathered around the local wine bar, ordering the first round of alcohol. It was actually quite entertaining, even when Pascal again and again fudged all attempts to tell a joke – that alone was funny, and he took it with good humour. After a lot of drink, the fashion people left first to head back to the ‘castle’, as Vadim referred to it. While Pascal hung on for a long time, he’d flown in from South Africa or thereabouts, and was still jet-lagged. The fact that Vadim kept pouring him drinks didn’t help, and the ex-para ex-Legionnaire eventually admitted defeat and headed back out to the castle as well. That left the Lieutenant, who drank steadily, but seemed still very much together.

“How long have you been in the legion?” Dan pulled the bottle of wine close.

“Getting into my thirteenth year,” Beauvais stated. “Looking forward to become one of the anciens in Puylobier, planting grapes or binding books.” Again that wry humour. “Jean made a good change into a more civilian life, but that wouldn’t work for me. I tried, after my first five years. I was fed up and tried to do something else, but it didn’t work and I went back. Haven’t looked back since.”

“I know exactly what you mean.” Dan nodded, poured more wine into their glasses.” I left the SAS two years short of my pension age, because they wouldn’t let me return to Afghanistan after knee surgery. Went back as bodyguard and then became a merc.” He grinned, “I’m still trying to figure out what to do once that ragtag of scars and fucked-up joints gives up completely. I guess you, on the other hand, have quite a few more years. Anyway, can’t imagine there’s a life after the army,” adding while raising his glass, “except for sex, of course.”

“Sex is rare enough, I give you that. But wherever I’m stationed, there is a healthy industry of taking Legionnaire money in exchange for sex, and it’s usually cheap.”

Dan grinned, “how old are you now?”

“I’m thirty-eight.”

Dan nodded. “And Afghanistan? Now, that was an interesting war.”

"You can say that again," said Vadim, grinning. "That's how we met. Enemies by day, lovers by night." Voice low to keep it between them.

Beauvais again didn't even blink. "Guess you saved a lot of money that would have gone to the whores, then." Grinning and emptying his glass.

Dan chuckled, "not that easy, mate. We were enemies by night at first, too. Just the fact that we figured out eventually that we couldn't get rid of the other from our heads, groins, blood, kept us from pulling the blade. Or ..." he grinned, "placing it too close or too deep." Filling the glasses once more, Dan had a good mouthful from his own, noticing that Beauvais' expression had become thoughtful, speculative. "Eventually, though, we got it. Vadim earlier than I did, and he saved my life after I got injured and forgotten under a pile of festering Muja corpses."

Beauvais looked at Vadim, studying him, but Vadim just nodded and smirked. "I had some liberties as a Captain. I got away with some things that ... a normal soldier might not have. One of them was that I could operate fairly independently. Usually, nobody looked too closely at what I was doing. The paratroopers thought I acted as spetsnaz, the spetsnaz thought I acted as paratrooper, and both sides assumed the other had given me the orders, so they let me in peace to a greater extent than most other operatives."

"They are only now starting to admit that spetsnaz exist at all."

"Well, yes. There were rumours, obviously. Dan knew about us ... but yes, we were, strictly speaking, not officially there. Nor did we do the things we did."

"I guess when it comes to 'not officially being there' I definitely win." Dan grinned.

"See, the Legion is different. We're always officially there. That's part of the deal, the enemy has to know because then he's afraid. Sometimes we surprise them, on other occasions, we just let the reputation do most of the work."

"The reputation for tiny shorts?" Dan mumbled into his glass.

"Don't slag off our shorts." Beauvais grinned and had more wine. "So you pulled him out and nursed him back to health?"

"Something like that ..." Dan nodded, looking at Vadim with a grin. "He just used some ... more exotic methods."

"I guess it wasn't 'get up, pussy, it's just a flesh wound?'" Beauvais seemed genuinely interested, while the alcohol hadn't slurred his speech or thinking.

Dan laughed, glanced at Vadim again, who just looked at him without any particular facial expression, and Dan lowered his voice. "Not quite, no. I was out of it, it seems. Had a head wound, thigh wound, and had been buried long enough under the festering corpses so that I was - quite frankly - fucking mad." Dan quirked his lips into a strange grin. "He then used the well researched medical method of fist fuck and diverse other sexual techniques on me."

Beauvais - there was no other word for it - blanched. It wasn't paling, or going pale, it was a more subtle draining of colour. But Vadim also noticed that his lips opened, if only slightly.

Dan paused, dark eyes on the Frenchman, while talking to Vadim. "Did you actually fuck me that time, or didn't you? I think you kind of did the decent thing, right?" Grinning from ear to ear.

Vadim's grin matched his own. "I don't think I did. I think I'd remember that part. Not that I wouldn't have wanted. Even then, you were better than any drug I've ever tried, and then some."

"Aye, guess I was lucky." Dan clapped a hand on Vadim's shoulder, a matey gesture for anyone watching. "It's been twelve years since we met, and we've been through more shit than anyone should see in several lifetimes." Eyes resting on Beauvais, Dan added, ambiguously, and as if in an afterthought, "and you?"

"I - what?" Cautious, but wound up, the man was wide awake, but Vadim didn't think he was about to bolt.

"What have you seen, Beauvais ... what have you done." Dan smiled, face coming closer. "What have you wanted to do ..."

Beauvais held the gaze, as if hypnotised. "A lot. Not ... not enough ... and more," he said in a low whisper, voice warm, unguarded.

Dan knew, knew this very moment, and he kept his voice to a mere murmur. "Do you want to?"

Beauvais only then seemed to wake up, or almost revert back to his former self. He said nothing for an instant, then shook his head and said "yes," then shook his head again. It was strange to see him like that, Vadim wasn't entirely sure which signal was the louder one.

"Okay." Dan answered, smiling. He put the glass to his lips, finishing off the rest of the wine. "It's the stag night tomorrow, and as best man I'm supposed to be organising it." Seemingly changing the subject.

"Yes. I was wondering about that." Beauvais leaned back, but Vadim could see him think behind those eyes. He was trying to decide whether he had committed a serious gaffe, and he was only half there listening to Dan. "Jean's friend said he'd abduct the bride ... but that is after the marriage."

"Pascal? Aye, good idea. I thought, for the stag night, the military guys should get as far away from the civilians as possible, and have some good entertainment while getting pissed." Dan refilled their glasses.

"Good idea ..." Beauvais relaxed again, as if he was reasonably sure now that Dan had indeed changed the topic.

"Jean said he'd know just the place for a quiet little piss-up away from the revellers, so I guess it'll be all sorted by tomorrow night." Dan flashed a grin, "just not sure how the fuck we're going to survive the day. Any more of Chretien's ilk, and I'm going to fucking scream." He lifted his glass, "even though ... Vadim as a cover model did tickle my fancy."

Vadim laughed. "Don't get ideas. I was a poster boy once, I don't want that again. Besides, I'm 'too old for mainstream or even high fashion'."

"There's that," Dan grinned, "but I do remember you, decked out as a Christmas tree at that press stint in Kabul. Impressive, but most of the effect would have had a bigger impact on me, hadn't I hated your guts."

“I didn’t dress to impress *you* particularly ...”

“You should hear him in his obnoxious French. He’s worse in French,” said Beauvais.

“Who? Chretien? Not sure if my French’s good enough these days to pick up on it. I do speak a shitload of languages, but I’d have to be here for a couple of weeks to get used to it.” Dan grinned.

“It’s not just the language, but hearing that guy grates on me, too.” Beauvais looked around, then remembered that Jean was covering the tab, he stood. “Jean’s friend has the key. You had another key, I remember.”

“Who, me?” Dan patted his pockets, fag dangling between his lips. “Shit, yes.” He grinned and pulled them out. “Guess we should finish off for the night, aye?” Turning to Vadim, “come on, Mr Model, time for your beauty sleep.”

“Can I have the beauty blowjob first?” asked Vadim, casting a very quick glance to Beauvais, who, again, didn’t bat an eyelash. He was somewhere between staring, transfixed, and just seemed to have forgotten to breathe for two dozen or so heartbeats.

“Sure, you know how much of a cocksucker I am.” Dan grinned, lingering for a moment longer. Voice low, close enough for the Lieutenant to hear. “But only if I can have my beauty-fuck of your beautiful arse. You never know, it might smooth some of my scars.” He chuckled.

“Deal.” Vadim got up. He didn’t even have to look at the officer to tell what he was thinking. Dan’s remark struck him again. *Don’t you think they are damned envious. We got some - every day.* And he knew they were being cruel to this guy. But maybe ... maybe showing how much they enjoyed themselves hooked and baited this guy more securely. Dan wanted him - so they were, strictly speaking, on the hunt. Like he’d been with Vanya. Only that it was nothing like that. If he wasn’t completely mistaken, this piece of prey was willing to be hunted. But not quite as easy as the Glasgow boys.

They made their way back to the ‘castle’, and back into their respective rooms. True to their words, Vadim got fucked, without desperation and with a whole lot of want and lust and warmth and familiarity, until it was his turn to enjoy the way Dan drew out the blow job, playing with his lust in return. And finally, they slept. Spooned like always, with Dan lying behind Vadim, and the cool French night air gently billowing the curtains, as an owl hooted across the moat.

* * *

The next morning, a rap at the door. “Hey guys, you up for a morning jog?” Pascal’s voice. Whatever had given him the guts to approach the very heart of depravity and the place where the gay virus lurked - or maybe he’d been ordered to.

“What’s the fucking time?” Dan called out, still burrowed into the duvets.

“Seven thirty,” came the answer, and it was Beauvais’ voice, louder, easily loud enough to carry through this half of the castle.

“Jesus fucking Christ, you think I am still in the military or what?” But Dan threw the duvet off anyway, after a quick check to the side which yielded nothing, but Vadim’s whereabouts were confirmed by the sounds of water from the bathroom.

“Hardly. I let you finish your beauty sleep,” came the answer.

Fishing for a pair of briefs – for special occasions - from the suitcase, Dan stepped into them and padded over to the door. Unlocking and throwing it wide open, as he yawned and scratched his butt simultaneously. Standing in all his almost-naked glory, scars and all. “Jogging, aye? You must be fucking insane.” Grinning.

Pascal was wearing short shorts, the famous cycling shorts in fact, plus a sleek top that looked like it wouldn’t be out of place in any championship in running. Beauvais had gone for a more rustic approach, simple black track bottoms, a red T-shirt, and a black vest. “Chretien is downstairs, on the phone. For hours. I’m thinking, it might be better to have an excuse to be out of the house.”

“Oh fuck.” Exhaling with a heartfelt curse, Dan glanced towards the bathroom door. “Give us five minutes, tops. Vadim’s doing some titivating, whatever the fuck that is,” probably just shaving, “and I got to have a couple minutes for piss, dump, teeth.” He laughed when Pascal’s face fell, and shook his head. “Too much information, I know.” Shooing them off. “We’ll meet you outside and you better vanish now, or you’ll see me starkers and Pascal here ...” Dan wagged his brows, “might catch the gay virus if he saw my ‘bits’ again.”

“I wished he’d stop that,” murmured Pascal darkly, already turning away.

“Fair enough. See you at the moat.” The Lieutenant seemed amused, and they headed off.

“You’re just too much of a target!” Dan shouted after them, then closed the door and managed to light a fag, get out of the briefs, and knock on the bathroom door, all within a few seconds. “Hey, Princess!”

Vadim opened. “Yes?” Naked, and half-shaved.

“Pascal and Beauvais asked us to join them for a run.”

“A jog? Good idea. I could do worse than seeing that guy sweat.”

“Aye.” Dan grinned from ear to ear, “that’ll definitely give me some ideas for tonight.” He winked and stepped into the bathroom, enough space for them to work side by side.

“Oh, *nice* thought.”

“So, that means all stops out? Running them into the ground?” Not that he could anymore, not with that damned knee that had been getting worse recently, but he still had more stamina than any man he’d ever met.

Vadim grinned. “Save some for tonight. I’ll keep it friendly. The Legion is famous for long, pointless runs. Well, I guess we could give them a run for their money, if you really want to.”

"I do, but I'm not that fast anymore. Can still run for hours, though." As long as the knee didn't play up, but Dan ignored that thought and grinned. Shaving swiftly, he wiped his face with a wet towel. "Okay. I'm done." They headed out to slip into their sports kit, rushing down the stairs, where both Pascal and Beauvais were stretching and keeping warm.

"See that?" Dan grinned and pointed at the train-track scar down his knee. "Just so you know that you're not a big boy if you're faster than me, but you *can* try to keep going as long as I can."

"I'm not on duty, you know. Let's go." Beauvais was off, fit and fast, setting a good pace that Dan could keep up with, and, like an officer, leading from the front. Pascal followed behind, and Vadim found he enjoyed the run. A 'friendly' run that was only for waking up and burning some excess energy. Not that he or Dan needed that after last night, but he assumed that Beauvais did. He enjoyed watching the man run. Confident, wide strides, totally focussed on the run and breathing, until Dan pulled up beside him, casting a full grin at him.

"What's your favourite type of exercise?" Making conversation, which made Pascal groan, though, and shake his head, while Dan ignored the reaction in his back. Running along, effortlessly, except for the favouring of one leg.

Beauvais glanced to the side. "Jumping out of aircrafts with a bunch of green guys and evacuating a drop zone when the French defence minister is watching. That's fun. Especially in August."

Dan laughed, "and where was that? I can only offer a HALO jump into Iran, to extract an Iraqi, not quite as illustrious as a defence minister."

"Corsica, and I did nothing as fancy. I was too busy kicking their scrawny asses out of the plane. There are always one or two kids that get second thoughts."

"I think it's more of a challenge to motivate kids throwing themselves out of a bloody plane, than jumping yourself."

"How about your Iraqis? Last thing I heard SAS and Iraq don't mix."

"Wasn't SAS anymore, did it last year, to extricate a chap who had an appointment with a war crimes tribunal." Dan grinned, jumping over a puddle. "The Brits couldn't afford official involvement, and since I'm used to suicidal stupid-arsed stunts and being unofficial ... but I can tell you that, the CO hated having to ask me, he couldn't stand faggots."

Pascal groaned again, and Vadim saw him pull a face. But he kept quiet. To his credit, Vadim assumed that Pascal simply didn't want to bother an officer. Seemed some things were deeply ingrained, even though the guy was no longer his superior. Maybe he just expected Beauvais to get aggressive or even violent if the gay virus became too noticeable.

Beauvais cast Dan a sideways glance. "You have too much breath left," he stated, calmly, and suddenly went off, running fast, just covering ground as if there was something to win. Dan took after him, fuck the knee, he had to ignore whatever pain it might throw him, it was more important to take on the challenge. Upping his game as well, he cranked up the speed, until he caught up with Beauvais again, running alongside. Much faster than before.

“Tell me about the battlefields you’ve been in.”

Beauvais grinned, still breathing easily, breath flowing. “A dozen shitholes in Africa. Humanitarian stuff. Funnelling refugees one way ... guarding French expats, going mano a mano with the scum of the earth ... child soldiers ... Africa is a different place. I’d tell everybody to not get involved. It’s chaos, hostile, and there’s nothing to win. No campaign ribbons. Just shovelling shit.”

“Aye, I completely agree, even though I’ve never done the African stint.” Gradually increasing his pace, Dan was feeling the twinge in his knee now, but shit, he enjoyed himself too much, feeling his body work and the sweat start to run. “I’ve done too much Afghanistan. Got addicted to it and its mountains. Seems I either end up in mountainous dust or in desert dust.” He grinned, glancing backwards, “but Vadim hates mountains and hates desert, and probably hates any of the extreme climates.” Earning himself a couple of rolled eyes and a groan from Vadim, Dan laughed, breathlessly, as he jumped over a branch that lay low on the track. “Of course, being a couple of mercenary faggots makes it harder to cuddle up in the spare time, if you’re caught in the desert.”

Beauvais looked at him, didn’t say anything this time, and broke into a full-out run, as they went around a bend that would lead them back to the chateau. No holds barred, all stops pulled and the Lieutenant was racing with long strides, as if on a 100 meter parcour, while a mile or two in front of him.

Dan kept up, forced himself to stick to the same speed. No more breath left, now, instead focus and concentration as he raced side by side with Beauvais.

The Lieutenant seemed dead-set on winning, again pushing harder. Pressing out between gritted teeth “who touches the door,” and went in, giving one hundred or more percent, trying to get just that inch advantage over Dan, who acted against everything he knew about his body, and forced it to run as fast as he could.

Racing against the legionnaire, the two others long forgotten and left behind, he found that little bit of extra, that one ounce of insanity that would forever separate a mere man from a guy like him, and he managed to keep up, all the way, finally across the moat, and towards the building.

Both of them touched the door at the exact same time, slowing down just enough to not run smack into it, they nevertheless had enough momentum to make a racket. The Lieutenant turned to face Dan, just for a moment, then looked back at the more leisurely jogging Pascal and Vadim.

“What do you want?” Beauvais asked, softly, keeping a straight face for the others. “Do you want to fuck me?”

Dan was forcing air into his lungs, completely exhausted. He was older, his body more knackered, and fuck, he could feel it. Staring at the legionnaire, he acknowledged the straightforwardness with his own. “Yes.” Dark eyes steady, despite the state his body was in.

“Tonight?”

“Yes.” Still nothing more.

Beauvais kept his eyes on Vadim and Pascal. "Can't wait," he murmured, then turned to the door, opening it. "I'm off to the shower. Anybody care to join me?"

The look on Pascal's face was almost accusing, as if the Lieutenant had picked up the 'gay entendre' by spending too much time racing Dan.

But Dan said nothing, not that he could, too breathless, staring after the legionnaire, dumbfounded. Floored, indeed, and he was still staring like an idiot after Pascal had gone past and to his room, and Vadim had caught up with him. "Fuck. Me." Dan got out, looking as if he'd seen a ghost.

"What?" Vadim placed a hand on Dan's shoulder.

"That Lieutenant Holy shit." Still struggling for breath, Dan leaned against Vadim for a moment. "Come. Upstairs. I ..." Couldn't repeat what had been said, too dangerous. Witnesses might be awake.

Vadim leaned in to kiss Dan's temple. "Tell me when we share a shower." They both headed upstairs, Vadim locked the door and began to strip off the kit. "What happened?"

"He asked me, when we reached the door at the same time, if I wanted to fuck him. I said yes. He asked, tonight? I said yes, he ... said he couldn't wait." Realising he sounded like a parrot, and a very stupid one at that, he didn't care. Getting under the hot shower was bliss, body completely exhausted, and his knee protesting vehemently. "Fuck. Talk about the hunter and the hunted."

Vadim laughed. "Turning the tables ... not bad. Do you think he's ever been fucked? I don't think so. Or maybe he was and he really needs it. He does need *something*, and we got him where we wanted him." Murmuring, while kissing Dan's throat.

Closing his eyes and relishing the treatment, Dan grinned. "I think he's got a bellyful of guts and decided to barge ahead, knowing we'll take him up on it."

"Or that." Vadim reached for the shower gel and began to wash Dan. He just felt like it. It seemed natural, relaxed, and seeing that pleased grin was good. Dan was enjoying the situation - the hunt. And being taken care of.

During the day, guests arrived - and it was all about getting ready for the party, with the house soon filled to the brim with well-wishers and guests. Most seemed to be from the fashion side, and Jean did drop the hint that Pascal was a mercenary - which had an astonishing effect on the assembled young women. There was a lot of food, Jean did the tour of the house a few times, some guests stayed longer outside, but most of them congregated in the house and seemed to enjoy themselves.

Jean's pride and joy in the house - apart from all the other work he'd done, was hidden in the cellar. A complete 'wellness area' as he called it, with swimming pool, whirlpool, steam room, sauna, rest area, and, further back, machines for weight lifting. Everything was beautifully tiled, and Jean remarked that he'd learnt a lot about tiling - partially to keep the cost down. He claimed he could even do basic roofing now, because the steep angle of the roof made the whole restoration amazingly expensive.

Dan and Vadim had spent quite some time grooming, and Dan had to admit he was far more knackered than he should have been - were he five years younger. Eventually they had to go downstairs to face the visitors, and pretending to be part of the crowd that neither of them felt nor wanted to be part of. The place was heaving with people. Food and drink everywhere, and Dan kept looking out for Jean, until he finally caught him, as he was about to descend into the wine cellar. "Hey, Frenchie ..."

"Yes? Enjoying yourselves?"

"Well ..." Dan grinned, pointing towards the relative quiet of the wine cellar. "I'd enjoy myself more down there."

"Let's check on the wine, then." Jean headed downstairs leading the way in the dark, then switched on the light.

"So?"

"Your Lieutenant ... he told me this morning, after a race, that he was looking forward to getting fucked." Dan dropped the bomb in a carefully quiet murmur.

"Oh fuck." Jean looked shocked. "He can take the fun out of seducing, now, can he?"

"Aye, I have just about recuperated from my heart attack, and I wonder, have you arranged what we talked about for your stag do?"

"Yeah. I've been busy all day, trying to be subtle ... I have a place, don't worry."

"Do you have a few minutes? Right now?" Dan stepped closer, his hand on the light switch.

Jean nodded. "Shit, yeah. Just close the door."

"That could be too obvious." Dan murmured, flicked the light switch instead and the room was plunged into darkness. Feeling rather than seeing, his fingertips were on Jean's face and jaw, moving close until his lips touched the other's. "I missed this." Murmured, "you're a damn good kisser, Frenchie." Adding, the smile was audible in his voice, "and you'll be a damn fine husband."

Jean moved forward, embracing Dan, holding him tight and kissing. "I'm scared. I'm like a passenger. I'm not doing this. Am I? What the fuck am I doing here?" he murmured, tenderly.

"The right thing." Dan smiled, hands running slowly up and down Jean's back, until one hand rested in the back of his neck, gently pulling the head close and into another kiss. "You love her, don't you?"

"I do. She's the best thing that ever happened to me. She's fixing my stupid heart. She took all that ... that ... that anger away." Jean pressed Dan close.

"Then what you do is the right thing, and the best thing you could ever do in your life." Dan leaned close, kissing Jean's neck, murmuring, "and this ... this here ... you won't lose this."

"Just ... don't make it that long next time, okay? I sound like a whiny bitch, but I fucking missed you, Dan."

"I won't, if I can help it. Just the job, you know ..." Dan trailed off, allowing himself and Jean the luxury of a few more minutes of holding, kissing and stroking, until the noise from upstairs got louder.

"Time to get back." He whispered, smiling into the darkness. "And tomorrow I'll be right there, with the rings, and damn proud to be your best man. But tonight ..." Reaching for the light switch, the cellar was suddenly bathed in light and his grin was right there, in front of Jean's face.

"Tonight?"

"Tonight you'll have a stag night to remember." Dan snatched a few bottles of wine from the racks, stalking upstairs.

* * *

A few hours later, the guests had demolished a huge amount of wine and whisky, when Jean claimed that now his own stag party started. Leaving Solange and her friends the house, he nudged Dan and Vadim to follow him.

He led them across the lawn and through the bushes, where, secluded away and indeed pretty much invisible, a small building stood. It was in a fairly dilapidated state, and building material was gathered around it, like this was the next big project after he'd finished the main house. It looked like quite a bit of work. "It's not great, I wanted to have it finished, but the big one took longer than I'd expected."

Inside, though, it was clean, and there was a fridge in the main room that was filled with drinks, beer and wine, mostly. The centre pieces were two big airbeds, tied together, with candles lit and placed all over the floor. Nothing of that could be seen from outside. "What do you think?"

"I think that you've watched too many chick flicks." Dan grinned, "and I think that it's perfect." Looking around himself, he spotted food and nibbles, blankets and pillows. "I assume you have the two most important ingredients stashed away somewhere?"

"Yeah. They're ... over there." There was a small wooden box near the end of the 'beds'. "Unless I got you wrong and it's not condoms and lube." Jean looked at Vadim and gave a strange little smile. "Shit. I'm nervous."

"You're supposed to."

"Oh, thanks a lot, Vadim."

"Well, Vadim here is the only one who's done that marriage thing before, so guess he would know what it feels like, the night before." Dan grinned. "When is our final guest supposed to arrive?"

"I'll get him. Or do you ... shit, he doesn't know I'm involved."

"Oh fuck." Dan groaned, glancing at Vadim, who shrugged. "You think he's going to freak when he sees you? What with former superior and all that?"

"No idea. I mean ... I don't think so. But it might be weird. Should I get him and talk to him, or does either of you ... you know, spend a moment ...?"

"Spend a moment?" Dan asked.

“Explaining I’m here, too?” Jean cursed. “Oh, fuck, I’ll just get him and explain on the way. Wait here.” He headed out and soon found the Lieutenant in his perfectly civilian clothes - he had promised to abide by the ‘no uniforms and no camo’ rule, like all the others. Indicating with a motion of his head, the Lieutenant disentangled himself from a gaggle of models - or was that a murder of models? - and followed back over the lawn.

“Any problems?”

“No ... no problems.” Jean grimaced. “We just figured it’s time to spend the stag night.”

“Ah. Yes.” Beauvais followed, not even hesitating when Jean indicated the other house. But he stopped when he saw Dan and Vadim, and the ‘beds’. Glancing over his shoulder to Jean. “I am not sure I understand.”

Jean pressed his lips together for a moment. “Thierry.”

Making Beauvais straighten with just speaking his name.

“I, shit. I’m not as ... as ... straight...laced as you thought. Do you ... remember the whores that we shared?”

Beauvais rubbed his forehead. “Matter of fact, I don’t.” When Jean’s face fell, he added, “I don’t remember the *girls*.”

Dan stood, casually leaning against the door frame like a friendly observer. Smiling at Vadim when the latter picked up a bottle of wine and uncorked it.

“Assume I don’t remember them much more, either.”

Beauvais nodded, studying Jean. “So, you’re here to refresh that memory with me before you get married?”

“Yeah.” Jean seemed almost comically speechless.

“Right.” Beauvais looked at Dan, then at Vadim. “I guess this would be easier if I wasn’t so sober.”

“I’d offer you a glass of wine, or two, or three, if you gave me your word that I’m not going to end up refreshing your memory by taking over the role of ‘whore’.” Dan held a glass out to Beauvais with a shit-eating grin.

Beauvais took it and emptied it in what seemed one single gulp. “We never shared a male whore,” he murmured, then looked at the bed again.

“And I’m definitely not one.” Dan grinned, refilling Beauvais’ glass, “unless I choose to play ... games.”

“But it’s true. I can’t wait. I’m not renegeing on that.”

“Nor am I.” Dan stepped closer while looking at Beauvais, before moving towards Jean, reaching out with one hand to touch the face, briefly. “And you, groom, since this is your special night, what is it you want?” Adding, and his voice turned huskier, “anything?”

Jean grinned. “I ... Well, you.” Pausing for a moment, then looking at Vadim, checking on his reaction, but Vadim was difficult to read. He looked calm and composed, and certainly interested, but holding back.

“Me?” Dan blinked, once, following Jean’s glance, but there was nothing he could read. Looking back at Jean, he studied him for a while, and his own dark eyes found the answer in the pale ones: no, they would not tell. Not admit to

the truth. "I don't ..." he murmured, glanced again at Vadim and suddenly smiled. "But it's your stag night, aye? And it does depend on *how* you want me."

"Just ... have you. I want to fuck you." Jean smiled. "If that's okay?"

"Didn't I just say something about wanting a promise of not re-enacting the whore?" Dan heaved an exaggerated sigh. "Damn. I can't say no, at least not to the groom on his stag night. Guess you'll have me, then, but I do need some more booze." Looking at Vadim again, and this time looking intensely enough to expect a reaction.

Vadim held that gaze for several moments, but nothing went on in that face. He was just watching, appearing calm and relaxed as he moved over to offer Beauvais more wine, who took it and drank. Pouring down the wine in a way that betrayed he tried not to think, or at least finding it easier to let it all happen. Only then did Vadim look at Dan again. "Go on. He's the groom."

"And my arse is the wedding present." Dan raised a brow and quirked a grin, "guess I can think of worse things."

"Yeah, me too. Another fucking designer vase, for example," said Jean.

Dan laughed, turning back towards Jean, in the movement taking his sweater off and throwing it into a corner. "I'm willing to undress without playing strip poker, but not without booze." He grinned, toeing his shoes off, half-ruining the expensive pair that Vadim had chosen.

Jean filled a glass for him with red wine, filling it to the rim, and handed it over to Dan once he'd shed some of his clothes. Dan stood, just in his trousers, belt open, and took the wine. Emptying the glass in one go, with total disregard to the vintage or the flavour. Vadim moved to Beauvais' side, just standing close, not touching, doing absolutely nothing but watching.

"Guess I got to do all the work, hm?" Murmured, Dan moved close to Jean, hands on his shirt, fingers working with remarkable dexterity on the buttons. "Since it's your stag night ..." Grinning, his back to Vadim and Beauvais, he leaned in, lips almost touching Jean's ear, "or do you think they should get a pre-view?"

Jean grinned, pulling free of the shirt and dropping it. "Shed it," he murmured, and Dan opened his fly, wiggled his hips to let the trousers slide down. Commando as always, while Jean pulled Dan close by the waist and kissed him, not letting him go just yet. The kiss sweet and gentle, but with a hint of something else, something more.

"You're overdressed." Dan murmured, focused on Jean and nothing else. The two others forgotten. Working on Jean's belt and buttons, while tilting his head and kissing along the jaw line. Jean's trousers open, Dan skipped his hands inside and looked up, grinning, "what, going bare for the occasion?" before kissing down the throat and back up again.

Jean tensed, but in that good way, grinning back. "Less unwrapping." Slipping out of his shoes, quickly, and helping to shed the clothes, until he, too, was bared and naked. The scar on his thigh now standing out for the observers, as he reached for Dan's cock and balls, stroking and pulling, while again kissing him with an open mouth, tongue playing, too.

Pushing against Jean, Dan cupped his arse with both hands, grinding against him for a moment, as he came up from the kiss. Eyes even darker, cock against cock, hard and aroused, but without urgency. "How do you want me?"

"On all fours." Not a pause, no hesitation. Jean had clearly thought about that.

Dan looked at him, hesitating for a moment, before a corner of his mouth quirked up in a knowing grin, and he said nothing.

When Dan turned around, Jean's gaze met Vadim's, with that weird little, knowing expression. And Vadim understood perfectly. It was about sharing again. Because of his jealousy? Or did Jean just enjoy it like that? But then again, he did, too. He took a swig from the bottle in his hand, then offered it to Beauvais, who drank, deeply.

Dan got onto hands and knees, still silent, when he suddenly turned his head and looked at the Lieutenant. Moving the short distance across, still on all fours, eyes fixed on the man. "You better keep me interested, Jean." Yet looking at Beauvais while taking the bottle out of his hand, he emptied it in one go, at least three quarters of the expensive stuff. Dropped it, turned back and faced Jean, as he spread his legs further. Head high, looking at Jean, and slowly, so agonisingly slowly, lowering his chest, and opening his knees that one bit more, causing his smoothly shaved arse to lift and open wide, right in front of Beauvais.

Vadim saw the Lieutenant's eyes widen, his hands tensing, as if it was sinking in, as if he was confronted with something he hadn't anticipated. He moved back and half a step closer, near Beauvais who was transfixed. Whatever it meant to him to see Jean like that - and Dan fucking with his mind, it definitely had an impact on his body. Not touching, it was still too risky, but he wanted to touch the man. Instead, Vadim shed his shirt, too, and ran a flat hand over his crotch.

Jean had moved to retrieve the box and put a condom on before pouring lube into his hand. Warming it between his hands, he worked the lube into Dan's arse, then, remembering Beauvais watched, slowed down a notch and began to fuck Dan's arse with two fingers, grinning.

Dan lowered his upper body even more, until his face touched the mattress and his arse was as exposed as it could be. Strangely turned on by exhibiting himself, and by ... being a goddamned slut. Pushing back towards the fingers, cock hard and glistening with precum, he let out a small sound.

The sound visibly shook Beauvais, seemed to rock him in his foundations, and the knuckles on his hands turned white. Wanting. Not allowing himself yet to do anything about it. Jean cast another glance at Vadim and indicated the other side. Vadim gave a grin, then placed a hand on Beauvais' taut shoulder. "Enjoy the show," he murmured, then stepped out of his trousers, shedding everything else as well. He wasn't hurt when Beauvais didn't immediately look at him. He, too, watched when Jean moved himself to Dan's hole, and began to press in, and Dan reacted immediately when another sound forced its way out. He visibly drew a breath, expelled it, and in the movement, forced his muscles

to relax and pushed his hips upwards and out, towards the intruding cock, accepting it.

Beauvais watched, stricken, aroused, and still controlled, still debating within himself, maybe trying to talk himself out of it - or into it.

With every time that Jean pulled out, only to press even further in, when he thrust forward once more, Dan lowered his back, arched and lifted his arse, and pushed back, accepting and demanding. "Beauvais ..." His voice was husky. "You better watch ... and learn ... because I'll have you after this."

"Okay." Beauvais swallowed dryly and stepped a little closer, moving to the side, as if only now becoming aware of himself again. He clearly didn't know how to take it all in, Jean, fucking Dan, Dan, getting fucked. The breathing, the sounds, the heat. Vadim idly stroked himself, then moved towards Dan's front. "Get up," he ordered, pulling Dan up by his long hair, but slowly enough to allow Dan to rise a bit, and, hooking a thumb into his mouth, opened his jaws, with the other hand fed Dan his cock, which made Dan shudder, and his cock jerked. Visible proof of the jolt of lust that raced through him. Back arched low, arse and head raised, his eyes were wide, staring at the smooth groin in front of him. He relaxed, just allowing, taking, concentrating on breathing through his nose and keeping his balance. He'd been there before, and fuck, it drove him insane. Insane enough to want it harder, more demanding, more abusive.

Vadim took hold of Dan's head, just to take any appearance of control away, and pushed in, deep, slow, entirely too deep for most people, right into Dan's throat, which made Beauvais give a groan. The man shuddered again when Vadim pulled out, very slowly and very visibly fucking Dan's throat in long, focused strokes, with nowhere Dan could escape to. Vadim kept holding his head, while Jean fucked Dan's arse harder at the same time, easily two thrusts for each of Vadim's, and beginning to sweat from the exertion.

Dan held his own. His body - deadly in combat - a match against the others'. Taking the cocks, as he'd take any challenge. Nostrils flaring with a hissed sound when he pulled in air, eyes clenched shut, the picture of perfect concentration, when not a single instance of gagging reflex showed. Taking that cock, all the way, while he was soon covered in a sheen of sweat, yet his own cock never waned, on the contrary. Weeping, hard, almost purple with need.

"Don't ... touch him," said Vadim, and Jean looked at him, surprised, but also far gone, too far to not follow the order. Vadim sped up now, driving himself down hard into Dan's throat, balls pulled up and the orgasm was suddenly there. He came with a groan, eyes half-closed, then pulled back, just enough to allow Dan to breathe, pulling in great big gulps of air, before swallowing the last of Vadim's cum. Whole body moved by Jean's thrusts when the countering anchor was gone. Almost desperately getting more air into his lungs, eyes open now, as sweat gathered in the small of his back.

"Your turn." Vadim looked at Beauvais, who was still rooted to the spot, but now moved, opening his trousers as he took Vadim's position, freeing his cock with one hand, and mimicking Vadim. Pushing his cock between willing lips,

and once again Dan's eyes closed with the same concentration as he opened his mouth and throat, while Jean slowed, groaning.

"We've done that before, Thierry, eh?"

Beauvais grinned, but didn't manage to answer, as Dan took his breath away. The skill, the acceptance, and Vadim couldn't help but appreciate the image, even though he was done for the moment. Two legionnaires, one of them ex-, who'd done this before, albeit 'straight'. They both looked very straight indeed right now, and Dan fully enjoying himself. 'Fully' being the keyword.

Beauvais thrust, though, carefully at first, but then with more determination as the need grew worse, far worse, judging from his face that twisted with need, desire, and other ungarded emotions. And Jean, he enjoyed the view, and 'having' Dan, whose body was glistening, dark skin and pale scars, sweating with the exertion and concentration.

Vadim sat down on the mattress, studying the men, engraving this in his memory - who knew when he could use that memory again. Dan, shuddering once, twice, when Beauvais' thrusts became too desperate, hitting his throat too far, too deep, and he fought hard to keep the gagging reflex down. It made his muscles contract, his arse around Jean's cock clenched and tightened, without rhythm nor sense, just base, animalistic reactions. Jean, getting closer and more desperate, and then losing it amidst a stream of gentle, affectionate curses, almost immediately pulling free.

"Tell him to stop," said Vadim, in Russian.

Jean blinked, needed several moments to understand what had been said, then nodded, still dazed and shaking, and moved to Beauvais, placing his hands from behind on the other guy's chest, murmuring something into his ear, and then pulling him back and into a kiss. Seeing Beauvais go right for it, throwing himself into that kiss with all intensity - that was another view to remember. Vadim grinned at that, lying back on his elbows and studying Dan, whose head hung low, still on all fours and not moving. Breathing, getting himself back under control, despite his thick-veined, hard cock that gave evidence to the impossible need.

He finally raised his head, and only that. Looking at no one and nothing but the Lieutenant. "Beauvais ..." Dan's husky voice, raspy from the abuse of his throat.

Beauvais reacted immediately, and Jean let him, grinning, when Beauvais moved away. "Yes." Not a question. Knowing what he'd agreed to.

Dan pushed himself up, straightened, until he sat back on his heels. The back of one hand slowly wiping across his lips, as if catching a last drop of Vadim's cum and the Lieutenant's taste. Knees wide open, cock proudly displayed, he grinned, predatory, while crooking his finger to beckon the other man close.

Beauvais obliged, no less aroused than Dan, and got down on one knee, then both. He didn't quite know what to do, when Dan merely looked at him, with that dangerous grin on his face. Vadim could see the Lieutenant debate whether to lie down, or what else, but then he turned around and got onto

hands and knees, his back to Dan, who let out a small sound, like a huff. "You don't do things by half, eh?"

"What's the point doing it if you do it by half?"

"He kills me," murmured Jean, in Russian.

"Officer kink? You?" Vadim grinned.

Jean gave a laugh. "More the type than the rank."

Dan took the cue and glanced once at his cock, but then shook his head to no one in particular. Refusing to give into the urgent need, he listened to his mind instead. It would make it better, a thousand times, eventually. He had to take his time, even though it was one of the hardest things he'd ever done. Running his hands over Beauvais' arse, which made the man tremble, he marvelled at the shape and feel beneath his hands. Tiny buttocks, hard and wiry body, no heavy muscular arse. Nothing like Vadim, not even Jean. Lowering his head, Dan traced lips, tongue and finally teeth along the flesh, causing Beauvais to inhale sharply. Repeatedly trailing towards the cleft, but never quite getting there, which tensed Beauvais up, increasing his need. Dan lifted his head to glance at the two others, a flick of his chin towards the box with the lube and condoms, and it was Jean who took the hint, moving over to get the necessary items, and then even opening a pack of condoms for Dan.

"Has any of your whores ever eaten your arse?" Dan asked, his raspy murmur the only sound except for breathing.

"What?" Beauvais looked over his shoulder, likely nervous, even though he didn't show much of it. In fact he just seemed mildly worried, and very aroused.

That was it, that was all Dan needed to cast a grin that could have split his face. Need, arousal, want or not, this was better than getting off straight away. Lowering his head once more, his tongue pushed its way through the puckered muscle and into Beauvais' body, before the Lieutenant could catch on what was going to happen.

The reaction was violent. He bucked up, an uncontrolled motion that was just body, no mind at all, and Beauvais gave a strangled sound. Tensing all over, his cock jumped at a sensation that was both forbidden and incredibly arousing. Jean got behind Dan, condom in hand, and rolled it down over Dan's cock, careful to not touch him more than necessary, not even when he slicked it thickly with lube. "You'll have to let me know how he feels," he murmured into Dan's ear, and Dan's hips pushed involuntarily into Jean's hands.

Twisting his head, hands on the Lieutenant's arse, Dan pushed in harder, forcing his tongue deeper, he fucked the man in the most intimate way possible. His own cock never softening, never waning at all, not even when taking his time, thoroughly rimming the legionnaire, who was breathlessly panting. Beauvais held back all sounds, but getting fully into it, just from the way he responded. The lust increased and at the same time couldn't be satisfied like that. Finally Dan had to come up for air, forcing out breathlessly, "turn."

Beauvais turned, onto his back, eyes glazed. He would have done anything, followed every order, including 'push-ups!' or anything else. Whatever. He was far gone. Vadim grinned, even more so when he saw what it did to Jean. It had

to be strange for him - his former superior, yet Jean had hardly touched him, done hardly anything sexual with him, just some kissing and distracting, but nothing more. He wondered why that was, but for once Jean wasn't easy to read.

Dan's hand was searching blindly, but the lube was close, and he uncapped it one-handed, while leaning closer and over Beauvais. Parting his legs with his own as he moved between them, kneeling. "Don't want you to forget that a man is fucking you, aye?" murmured, and Beauvais' eyes widened.

"Didn't ... forget that," the Lieutenant said. "I'm aware."

"I know you are," Dan murmured, "or I wouldn't be here." Nudging the Lieutenant's legs up, as his hand went down and between, lubed fingers pushing into where his tongue had been, making Beauvais arch and lift his legs, and again Jean was helpful and lifted them higher, placing them over Dan's shoulders. The position took some more control away from the officer, even though he likely had no way to reclaim it. Beauvais looked at Jean, who grinned at him and got back onto hands and knees, and moved to kiss him again. Diversion tactics, Vadim thought.

Dan paused, poised right there, letting the officer feel his cock as he nudged just the tiniest amount, before he placed a hand on Jean's shoulder and pressed gently, guiding him away from Beauvais. Jean pulled back, but remained close, and Vadim wasn't sure whether he did that to have a better view or to reassure his comrade, who, however, looked fine.

"Look at me," Dan said, waiting until he had the Lieutenant's full attention, only then pushing forward, the angle just right, and never more than enough to breach the muscle and pause again. Breaking into a sweat once more, within seconds, the control sheer torture.

The Lieutenant stared at Dan, intently, focused on Dan's face, waiting, expecting likely for it to hurt, flat stomach moving with his faster breathing, then the breaths deepened, signalling acceptance, calm, concentration. Awareness. "Come on. Do it. You want to," said Beauvais, clearly, every syllable precise.

"So much for taking care of the virgin, aye?" Dan pressed out between almost clenched teeth, the control was getting too much, and yet he flashed a feral grin. "I'm afraid it's *my* show, and you'll get fucked through the mattress when I say it. Not before." Shuddering with the effort, whole body tense, Dan merely pushed forward a little more, before pulling back, almost fully out again, repeating the movement, rocking inside, inch by inch, and not a chance for discomfort, let alone pain. Beauvais didn't show any discomfort, the bunching of his muscles was clearly arousal, and at some point he closed his eyes, arching a bit, but his range of movements was limited indeed. A raw moan came out, that, strangely, had an almost stronger effect on Jean than Dan.

Dan's husky murmur was barely audible for anyone other than Beauvais, "this is what it should be like." Breathing hard, muscles trembling, "don't you forget that ... unless you *want* to forget it."

Beauvais opened his eyes again, face twisted, but with lust. "I ... get it." Panting softly, he flexed his legs to pull Dan closer.

"Good." That was it, and Dan pulled out, almost fully, poised, before that grin flashed across his face again and he suddenly let lose. No holds barred, body going from tense control to full-out strength, and he rammed back in, now that his size had been accommodated. Fucking Beauvais with all the wild abandon that a body like his could muster.

It clearly took Beauvais by surprise, despite his earlier encouragement, and the groan was deep and primal when Dan thrust in the first time, rocking the slighter man's frame with the whole strength that was Dan. Vadim grinned, teeth bared, as Beauvais' near-desperate, agonized, lust-filled sounds came with every thrust. The noise of flesh against flesh, and Jean watched it all with rapturous attention. Vadim moved closer, close enough to touch, but didn't. Saw Beauvais drift off, mind blanking completely from the onslaught of sensations, absolutely loving this, judging from the state of his cock that seemed like it was ready to burst.

Dan kept up, with valiant effort and never waning strength, but he'd been too far gone for too long, his own body on the edge of almost unbearable lust, and all too soon his breathing got erratic and he stiffened, face drawn into a grimace, close to pain, as he shuddered and jerked. Cumming with a groan that was torn deep from within his chest, thrusting hard as he orgasmed, deep inside Beauvais' body.

The Lieutenant stared, doubtlessly feeling the other come inside, or imagining it, when Vadim had opened another condom and pulled it over his own cock. He wouldn't come that fast this time round, but Beauvais seemed like he could take more. "I'll have him now," Vadim said, moving Dan away, who more or less collapsed into a boneless heap right beside them. Vadim grinned at the officer. "Turn. I'll have you doggy-style."

Dazed and needy, Beauvais just obeyed, swaying on his knees until Vadim pushed them open wider, and entered the slick hole that accepted him with no problem, making Beauvais groan again. He could feel the man's need, beyond the purely physical, a desperation for that exact sensation that betrayed just how much Beauvais had suppressed it.

Dan watched, barely having the energy to discard the condom. Lying close, looking into Vadim's face, then back at the Lieutenant, and he pulled himself together enough to get towards the wine bottles while never taking his eyes off. Moving back, in front of the two men fucking, so he could watch both their faces. "Where the fuck did you find him ..." Murmured, so only Jean could hear. "Priceless." No doubt a hell of a lot respect in his voice.

"He was there when I arrived," Jean murmured, watching, too engrossed to look at Dan, seeing Beauvais tense and taut all over to resist Vadim's power, and, he could swear it, moving back against him. Very nearly demanding more, meeting the thrusts like he'd been born for it. Jean shuddered, the Lieutenant's sounds the sexiest thing, never mind Vadim who fucked him without mercy, and not even beginning to get close.

Dan glanced up, stretched out as he was on the airbeds, half a bottle of wine already down his neck. "You should do something about that addiction of yours." Quietly, to Jean, before his eyes were back on the two men, drinking in each sound, each movement, and if he weren't so sore and well-used, and sated himself, he'd be aroused again.

"Addiction?" Jean nearly jumped when Beauvais' sounds got louder, Vadim had to have changed something, maybe the angle, whatever it was, Beauvais was not coherent, and likely felt absolutely nothing but lust at this point.

"Your superior." Dan tore his eyes away to look at Jean, intently.

"Ex-superior." Jean reached for the bottle. "Can't do it. I'm not there. Not up here." He tapped his temple. "Too fucking weird. You ... and Vadim, you're different. But he's part of my old life."

Dan nodded, "then kiss him. Taste his lust, because if you don't do it now, you might never get the chance." Tipping the bottle to his lips, Dan cast another glance at Jean, "fill that cup." Before the wine poured down his sore throat and his eyes were back on his lover and the Lieutenant.

Jean grinned lopsided, and moved to kiss Beauvais, who panted into the kisses, but needed both hands on the mattress to keep from toppling over, while Jean ran his hand tenderly over the other man's cheek.

Vadim then sped up, and finally wrapped a hand around Beauvais' cock, which hardly needed more than a stroke for him to come. The sound when he came was like a sob, while Vadim just rode his orgasm out, cumming when the body underneath him clenched and shuddered. Forcing himself to come, too, but stayed inside for a few more breaths, pulling Beauvais back at his shoulders, getting him to sit on his thighs while Vadim was on his haunches, and licking the sweat from the officer's neck. "This is sex," he murmured, clearly, into Beauvais' ear. "This is the proper stuff. The proper poison. You've been fooling yourself. I did that, too. Don't make that mistake. For once, you're a natural."

Dan grinned, catching a few words, he placed the half empty bottle down beside the airbeds. Crawling closer again, he lowered his head and lapped all the way up from Beauvais' spent cock, along the chest, tonguing sweat and cum, until he reached the jaw and finally was back, face to face. "And that's what you taste like when you have *real* sex." Moving into a deep kiss, tongue pushing between the Lieutenant's lips, making him taste himself.

Beauvais' hands came up and he pulled Dan closer, lacking strength to force him, but needing that touch in addition to being held and kissed. For several minutes, Beauvais did nothing but calm, and Vadim caressed him, kept the sweaty body warm by holding him like that, with Dan pressing into his front, kissing and holding him. Vadim then moved and nudged Beauvais to lie down, which he did, mindless.

Jean smiled, and was already mostly dressed. "I better get a shower and ... visit my girl," he murmured. "Sleep tight and ... thank you."

Dan looked up, "Wait." He got up, somewhat laboriously and definitely stiff. Jean paused, shirt in hand, looking at Dan.

Dan nudged Jean closer to the door and into the shadows, as he stood and embraced him, searching for a tender kiss, full of gentleness. "Sleep well." Between kisses, barely audible, "tomorrow is your big day, my friend."

"You too. Thank you." Jean smiled and hugged him tightly, then moved back and unlocked the door. "I'll probably even sleep, now." He winked and was gone, pulling the door shut behind himself.

Vadim had discarded the condom and was still holding Beauvais, who seemed ready to sleep, apart from the occasional shudder passing through him. He'd pulled up one of the blankets to their waist.

"I think we are getting old, hm?" Dan turned round, regarding the remaining two men, as he moved towards the back door, picking his way through debris and dust. "So much for an all-night *orgy*." He grinned fondly, could feel the aches and pains in his own body far too keenly, and his movements were everything but smooth, favouring one leg.

Vadim grinned, pulling the blanket back for Dan to join them. "We could try and get off on an early start tomorrow," he murmured. "But I think he has enough." Nudging Beauvais, who turned, looking at them for a moment.

"Just need a piss." Dan grinned and nodded, vanishing through the back door. A couple of minutes later, he reappeared, making his way straight back to the blankets and the other two men. "I don't think I'm the only one who's walking stiffly tomorrow." He winked at the Lieutenant, as he lowered himself down to the airbed, with a lot of groaning.

Beauvais smiled wearily. "I could have ... pulled a muscle." He reached over to invite Dan to move closer, while Vadim lay on his other side, keeping snug and warm, and relaxing already, drifting off towards sleep.

"But if you *do* want an early start ... I'm game."

"I'm an early riser. Legion time." A touch of hesitation in Beauvais's voice when he said 'Legion', and Vadim could only too clearly imagine what was going on in the man's head, but also that it didn't bother him. Yet. "Then catch your five hours, you'll need them."

"Unlike me. I need more sleep. I'm an old and weary man." Dan smirked, getting under the blankets, in front of the Lieutenant, practically sandwiching the man between Vadim and himself.

Beauvais yawned. "Sleep is such a waste of time," he stated, and shifted until he was in the most comfortable position that he could be in.

"Aye, and if you do manage to wake us early enough, you might even get to fuck one of us." Dan grinned, eyes closing.

"If you can move, that is," added Vadim, closing his eyes and letting go.

Dan chuckled, "aye, there is that, but you'll find out, soon." He was drifting off to sleep sooner than he could put his head properly onto the pillow. Booze and sex, the best sleeping aid.

April 1992, France

Dan was becoming aware of the body in his arms, when the grey of the morning was lighting up the room. Pressed against a back, he sighed, comfortable in the familiar heat. Convinced he was lying behind Vadim, holding him close and pressing his morning hard-on against the other's arse. Dan sighed once more, comfortably drifting in half-sleep half-waking, pushing his hips in tiny movements against the firm buttocks.

Waking up, the first Beauvais thought was that he was late. Which woke him up with that urgency that came with expecting a bollocking, something that was not easy to shed and, for him, had always been effective through any alcohol-induced mist. The second thing he was aware of was somebody pressed against him, with a hard-on. Which brought everything back that had happened yesterday. In fact, he was lying against a chest, broad, hairless, with sight on an armpit, hairless, male, and a hand, warm, strong, lying curled up near his cock. Looking into the blonde man's sleeping face brought back what the same man had said. *This is sex. Proper sex.* And that man's lover shared the bed, pressing up against him, moving his cock between his cheeks and the general area which felt sore. He'd been fucked by two men. First time ever. At his age. His job. Men he hardly knew. He shifted in the other's arms, felt an increasing, if sleepy, insistence. "Hey."

"Hm?" Dan snuffled, his hand slowing the exploration of the other body's hips. "Whassup?" Only then opening his eyes, yawning, and being presented with the back of a head that was anything but blond, short-shaved dark instead; a body that was anything but broad and tall, wiry and shorter instead. "Oh." Dan grinned sheepishly, "sorry. Thought you were Vadim." But he didn't stop the movements, returning to the exploration with his hands.

"Never mind." Beauvais relished the touches, the other man's strength, that sleepy, gentle, insistent, and horny exploration, like the other was measuring him up, and he remembered the tongue in his arse. And the feeling of being pounded, of a sensation that he'd never known existed, not like this. Semi-hard himself, he took Dan's hand and moved it to his cock, which readily curled around and began to stroke. "Seems you want to repeat?"

"Aye, if you're not too sore?" Dan grinned, eyes closed again, keeping his voice low, even though he didn't expect Vadim to be asleep any longer. Not with the growing movement. "While I don't let myself get fucked all that often ..." whispering into the Lieutenant's ear, the grin audible in his voice, "I'd say I know that being sore from fucking can be a good ... or a bad thing. What's it to be?"

"Go ahead." It was a good ache right now, and with that hand around his cock, it felt even better. Hardening fully under the strokes, he was ready for

another round. Beauvais knew time was limited, he couldn't do this again, so better get the most of it. Curving his back to press into the cock. Yes. Sore.

"Wait ..." Dan chuckled, "if you're too eager it'll hurt like fuck. And that's *not* the good kind of ache."

"Yes, doesn't work with just spit ... does it."

"No, but gun oil works just fine." Leaning back to look for condoms and lube, but damn, while Dan could get hold of the lube, the condoms were out of reach behind Vadim's back. "Bugger, the condoms are over there."

"Never mind. Go ahead."

Dan paused, lube warming in his hand, and fuck was he tempted. "No." Murmured, "can't. I don't know ..." Didn't continue, felt like an idiot, not that he didn't believe the officer was clean, but fuck, damn, and ..."not because of me."

"Fair enough. I fucked around in Africa."

Dan reached out and prodded Vadim, while his hand began to rub the lube between the legionnaire's tight buttocks, carefully slipping a finger into the sore arse, which made Beauvais hiss. Yes, sore. But it also made him press back.

"Vadim ... hey!" Softly, but insistent.

Vadim opened an eye and smirked. "Requiring my accompliceship?"

"You bastard." Dan grinned, "knew you'd be awake." Never letting up his movements, as his other hand dropped back to Beauvais' cock. Now two fingers entering, while stroking.

Vadim stretched some more, had already been stretched by now, but found a few more inches in his body that he could stretch. "Condom?"

"Aye, and if you want to be a proper accomplice, put it on my cock, if you please. My hands are busy ..."

"Okay." Vadim reached out, found another condom in the box - seemed Jean had been optimistic about that orgy thing - tore it open and manoeuvred behind Dan to roll it down over his cock. Beauvais was visibly enjoying what Dan did, the Legionnaire already panting, perfectly ready for another round of fucking. "Least complicated virgin I've ever encountered," Vadim murmured.

"That's because he's one of the fucking hard ones - foreign legion, aye?" Dan grinned, the huskiness in his voice growing, "I'd say they come close to SAS and spetsnaz ..." he chuckled, but was still taking his time. 'Cruelly', because the man under his hands was damned delicious in his need, and fucking him with his fingers while stroking him, feeling every tiny reaction, was a bloody fine foreplay.

Beauvais closed his eyes, hands formed fists, then he moved, pushing himself up on hands and feet, and looked at Dan. Teeth bared, daring him to finally do it, then to Vadim, same challenge in his face. Vadim laughed. "Seems here's another one that's very patient. Do you want to get fucked, soldier?" he asked, voice low.

"Yes. No games. Just do it."

"But the games are half the fun." Dan grinned back, teeth and all, accepting the challenge. He was behind the Lieutenant and between his legs, sheathed

cock lubed and poised at the obviously sore arse, hands firmly on the lean hips. "You'll like this one. It's called accepting a challenge ..." With that he pushed forward, no holding back, thrusting and plunging in deep, all in one stroke. Holding the slighter body firmly, there was nowhere for Beauvais to go.

Beauvais' legs nearly buckled, the groan was part pain and part a dark kind of lust. The sound made Vadim's guts tighten. He knew exactly what Beauvais was feeling. That need, lust spiked generously with pain, both mixed until they became something more, something greater, and Dan was the perfect partner to achieve that.

Beauvais knew he'd regret abusing his body like that, but like any good, driven soldier, he just took the consequences of a decision, even if it was pain or death. The state of his cock didn't leave any doubt just how much he 'enjoyed' getting fucked even while he was raw. The lean body tense and taut, resisting the onslaught with everything he had, and fully melting into it. Again, he closed his eyes, listening into himself, just climbing and using the lust. He spread his legs a bit more and pushed back, as if pitting his strength against Dan's.

And Dan did not disappoint. Used once again all the considerable power of his body to fuck that man, and make him feel with every fibre of his body and mind, what he was doing - and why. Breathless, heart racing, sweat shimmering on his body, Dan never let up, never slowed down, imprints of his hands deeply in Beauvais' flanks while fucking him without mercy, because mercy was not what the legionnaire wanted. It took longer this time, far longer, morning and sleep and last night's exertion, all coming together. By the time Dan finally let go with a few last erratic, and utterly vicious thrusts, he took Beauvais' cock in his hand, stroking as brutally as he had fucked him, cumming with a shout.

Beauvais came shortly after, convulsing like he was in agony, rigid, taut, exhausted, and clearly in pain, but his eyes glowing like those of a wolf who'd just killed. A primal hunger sated for the moment, and a wild beast let loose with it. He collapsed, belly down on the mattress, shuddering, hands in fists, sweaty.

The scent made Vadim smile, and he looked at that arse, wondering just how much pain the legionnaire wanted. He could deliver. He wanted to fuck him, whether he was still aroused or not, whether he could take it or not. For a long, long moment, Vadim did absolutely not care.

But that would be rape, wouldn't it?

He shook his head, needed to take his eyes off Beauvais who couldn't and wouldn't defend himself right now.

Dan collapsed on the air bed, beside the Lieutenant, and just about managed to take the condom off, tie it up and chuck it into a corner. Lying there, breathing hard, he placed a hand onto Beauvais' sweaty back. "You okay?"

"Yes."

Voice breathless, Dan glanced up at Vadim, blinking sluggishly. His smile began to grow into a grin. "And you?"

Vadim forced his eyes off Beauvais, remembered an icy night, an officer, and a shot that had blown his brains out. Remembered the ultimate vindication of thoroughly destroying a man.

And you are nothing but an animal, Vadim Petrovich. A danger to civilization and everything humanity has accomplished.

Konstantinov was right. That flaw was in him, part of him, and would never leave. Just ... feeling that way, just imagining this, taking advantage - hell, Beauvais would likely even think he'd invited it. Because, yes, he was pushy for a virgin, and he'd shared this room and this night with two total strangers, dangerous strangers at that - that was a possibility, and everything in his body said go, while his mind reeled. "I'm okay. Damn, you used him all up."

"Hey ..." Dan waved a lazy hand in a come-hither motion. "I can blow you. You know how much of a cock sucker I am." Grinning, he stretched out on his back, reaching for a couple of pillows to prop up his head. "Just don't make me get up." Holding his arm out, beckoning for Vadim to come close.

Vadim firmly pushed Beauvais out of his mind, instead moved close, over Dan, positioning his cock at Dan's lips. Moving carefully and gently, even though some impulses wanted to be brutal, and wanted to fuck, and not this. Too nice, too ... consensual. He groaned at that thought, kept his mind focused, as Dan took him in deep and allowed him to fuck his throat. It was good, great even, fuck, but there was something else that he wanted, and he couldn't have that, shouldn't do it. He was relieved when he came, as that sated feeling covered up that other need, that other impulse. He moved to place his head on Dan's shoulder, holding him, eyes closed. He didn't want to see the officer.

Dan was lying for a while, eyes closed, smoking a cigarette from a pack he'd discarded nearby. Holding Vadim and stroking his back, before he turned his head to look at the Lieutenant, who seemed to have drifted back off to sleep.

"Any idea what time it is? I'm starving, got to have a proper breakfast and wash-up before getting into the wedding clobber. Can't be stinking of sweat and sex." He grinned from ear to ear.

Vadim reached over to check the time. "Seven thirty. Maybe head back into our room and have a good, long shower before the fun and games start."

"And here I was, thinking we've already had our fun and games."

"Well, before Jean's fun and game start ..."

Beauvais turned around. "I should go first." He got to his feet, face stony enough to show he was in quite a bit of discomfort, then reached for his clothes that were on a pile. He got dressed, slipped into his shoes.

"See you later." Dan waved a hand briefly, "we'll slip out in a few minutes." Getting onto his elbow, calling after the Lieutenant, who was already at the door. "One tip, shower really hot, don't use soap on your arse and dry thoroughly. You'll be as good as new in no time." He added, "by tomorrow anyway."

Beauvais glanced over his shoulder. "Not much of a war wound, is it?" He then headed out.

Vadim exhaled deeply, glad the man was gone, mostly because he had triggered that old response. "You *are* the gay virus," he murmured and kissed Dan, who just laughed.

* * *

Breakfast had been prepared in the large downstairs kitchen. A buffet affair, brought in from the local butcher's, cheesemonger's and baker's, with plenty to eat and a multitude of foods to cater for all tastes. The bride and groom were nowhere to be seen, and so they shouldn't, as guests trickled in and out of the kitchen, filling up before the big event.

Dan and Vadim had a substantial breakfast, still unshaved and 'scruffy' from the night, before they retired to their room to get titivated and dressed. It was Dan's turn first in the bathroom, and he took much longer than his usual five minutes including shaving. He was dressing in the room, while Vadim had taken over the bathroom, grooming to perfection.

Standing in front of the large swivel mirror, Dan was fiddling with the cravat. "Have you drowned in there?" Shouting towards the bathroom, amusement in his voice.

"I'm a competent swimmer," Vadim said, opening the door which hid Dan, then pulling his shirt cuffs out from the cuffs of his suit, so the simple metal studs caught the light. Shaved, showered, dried, moisturised, and decked out in highly polished shoes and a suit that seemed both sombre and festive, and was several steps up from the ones he'd bought in Thailand, as nice as they were. For one, it was a three piece suit that played off Vadim's body better than all two piece suits he'd ever worn.

"Good, I was starting to worry." Dan pushed the door shut and came out from behind, looking at Vadim. Dark eyes widening, he exclaimed, "holy fuck." Speechless for a moment, before his face turned into a grin that kept growing until it threatened to split his face. "Shit, you work this male model stuff. You look so fucking good I'd rather stay here and get back out of my own clothes again. But I've got the rings. Damn."

"You're not half bad, either." Vadim smiled, taking Dan in, that strange combination of formal shoes with leather ties that went all the way up to the knees, black knee-high socks with weird fabric 'bunting' that peeked from under the turned-over top of the socks. The black, woollen, pleated 'skirt' with its subtle black-on-black woven tartan; a waistcoat and a very formal jacket on top it, and all with shiny square silver buttons. Never mind the black fur 'pouch' with silver and furry tassels that hung from the broad belt. Strange image. Dan managed to pull it off, though, with his narrow hips and broad shoulders - smoothly shaved, hair washed and shining, he did cut a dashing figure. "Wearing nothing under all that?"

"Of course not!" Dan protested, leaned forward and took hold of the hem of the kilt. "I'm a true Scotsman!" He lifted the fabric, revealing a bare and mostly shaved groin. Letting it drop again, he smirked broadly. "I tell you, my ancestors must all have been gay. After all, can you imagine anything more convenient than easy access - front and behind?" He twirled around, the heavy 'pouch' keeping the 'skirt' in the front down, and the ornamental silver pin kept it from flapping up, as the pleated back swung with the movement.

"Unlikely. You wouldn't be here, then." Vadim couldn't help but grin.

"I would have gone for the proper McFadyen tartan, but they didn't have it in stock, and since I am too bloody tall, this black-on-black one was the best option they had in the shop."

"There are different patterns for each family? And your family is one of them?" Vadim moved closer, running his hand over the woollen 'skirt'. Kilt.

"Aye, it's different tartans for different clans and their septs. The McFadyens have their own tartan, but as far as I know the whole thing only really got going in the 19th century or so. Queen Victoria, stuff like that. Doesn't matter. It's national pride for a Scotsman to wear a kilt and this here," smoothing the fur of the tassels with a grin, "this is the evening version. Worn with Prince Charlie jacket, waistcoat, cravat, silver belt buckle and broad belt, and, of course, the sporran. And before you ask, the bits of fabric on the top of my stockings are called flashes." He grinned even broader, eyes alight, and so very pleased with himself and his outfit. "What do you think?"

"I'll get used to it," said Vadim, grinning. "Like that shirt." Tight at the throat, a great contrast to Dan's tanned skin, the cravat only adding to that. The jacket emphasised the chest, and it did look all formal and ceremonial, vest, silver buttons and all that. "I imagine that must be warm underneath."

"Hm, that's not the enthusiastic response that I expected." Dan frowned, heaved an exaggerated sigh and shrugged. "Guess we can't all be *perfect* and *Scottish*, can we?" Reaching for the small knife in its sheath, handle decorated with a large stone on the top.

Vadim laughed and kissed him. "You'd look good in everything. And that includes the kilt and flashes and sporran. And stockings." Moving his arm around Dan, embracing him for a long moment. "I even thought your Muja garb was rather fetching."

Dan laughed out loud. "And you're a fucking weirdo if you thought that." He winked, bent down to slip the sheath into his left hand stocking, explaining, "That's a skean dubh, and it seems to be the only way I can legitimately walk around with a blade displayed on my body. If that isn't an argument for being a Scotsman, then I don't know what is." He grinned, rattling his sporran. "And here we have the most important items of the day, beside an emergency flask with whisky, and right after the bride and groom."

"And I was wondering where you had the rings." Vadim pushed his cuffs to the side to check on his watch. "Twenty minutes. Should we head downstairs?"

"I think we should. I need to show off my fucking sexy, goddamned perfect partner." Dan grinned, checked a last time that the rings really were in his

sporrán, made sure he had a crisp clean handkerchief, and plenty fags and lighter, as well. When all was set, he walked to the door, opening it for Vadim with an exaggerated bow. "After you, Monsieur in the expensive tailored suit, which cost about five times as much as my whole outfit." Grinning, "and damn worth it is."

"You'll cause the greater stir with that kilt." Vadim headed outside, now hearing the sounds from downstairs, which sounded like a lot of people talking, cheerful, excited, and so it was when they came down the stairs. He spotted Beauvais near the buffet, which was easy with his white hat and flawless uniform. He was fully kitted out like a Legionnaire, and Pascal next to him in civvies looked greatly diminished in a boring suit that was clearly on the cheaper side.

Dan grinned when he saw Beauvais, steering straight towards him. "I thought there was a no-camo rule?" Acknowledging Pascal with a matey slap on the shoulder.

"It's no camo, that's the dress uniform. I thought someone has to represent the Legion." expanding his chest.

"I give you that, the legion manages a better dress uniform than SAS does." Dan grinned, "but since I'm a mere humble civilian these days ..." Shimming his hips for a moment, which made the kilt swing out to the sides, accentuating the length of his muscular legs and the narrow width of his hips.

"So you are a full-blooded Scotsman. Nice handbag." Beauvais grinned to take out the sting, but still made Pascal give a laugh, and Dan to roll his eyes.

"Sporran, Lieutenant, it's a *sporrán*."

Beauvais looked at Vadim, with appreciation barely hidden. "Very dashing."

"Aye, and mine." Dan quipped, looking up when he thought he'd heard his name being called out. At the other end of the hall stood Jean, who looked just as brushed and polished as anybody else, but he actually wore a *tux* that somehow took five or ten years off him and transformed him into an endearingly cute young guy that was too nervous and high-strung for his own good.

"Oh dear," Dan grinned, "I guess it's time to take over my duties." Nodding to Beauvais and Jean, he reached for Vadim to touch him for a moment. A look, smile, and a murmured, "don't you go off with anyone while I'm away, Mr model ..."

"Hardly. The countdown's started ..."

Dan winked and walked off, making his way through the crowds until he stood in front of Jean.

"You look bloody magnificent." Smiling, "she'll be bowled over."

Jean took Dan's arm and pulled him along to a quieter area. "I'm scared," he murmured, and he did look pale. "What the fuck am I doing here, Dan?"

"Right, then, let's have a look at what you *are* doing here." Looking around him, Dan saw the door to the pantry, and pulled Jean into the small, windowless room. The only light coming in through the old fashioned venting lattice in the door, once he'd closed it behind them. "Let's forget about all those people out

there, aye? Just think of what you really are doing here and why you are doing it.” Dan smiled, face illuminated dimly, the lattice pattern of shadow and light making his scar twist. Standing in front of Jean in the small space, hands on his shoulders. “Do you love Solange?”

“God, yes. I still feel like I have to throw up.”

“That’s a damn good basis to start from. Not the throwing up, though.” Dan grinned. “And do you want to spend the rest of your life with her? Growing old and all that shit, through good and bad, and all that?” Leaning closer, “like Vadim and I seem to be doing, just without the tux and the white dress?”

Jean moved in and pressed close against Dan. “I just don’t want to hurt her, and I ... don’t deserve all this, and there’s you, and fuck I can’t even think clearly.”

“Me?” It slipped out, before the moment of irritation and confusion was gone again. “Right, in that order, then. You won’t hurt her if you love her and accept that things might not go the way you want them at all times, and that maybe you might grow bored or too comfortable, or whatever. Whenever this might happen, you have to remember the one great truth: that you love her. And I let you into a secret: whatever happens, if you shout at each other or don’t talk for hours, do not ever go to bed angry. Do not ever sleep in another room when you are in the same place. And do not ever be in a huff at night. No matter how long it takes, talk it out. Solve it. I know talking is shit, and awful, and hard, and whatever, but as long as you go to bed, and even if it’s at 8 AM, and you hold each other close again, falling asleep in each other’s arms, then all will be well.” Dan smiled and winked, leaning close enough to murmur into Jean’s ear, “and I shall never tell you where I got that bit of wisdom from, just that it works, but if you tell anyone that I told you all this soppy stuff, I will kill you, and it won’t be pretty.” Placing a kiss at the side of Jean’s neck, “as for deserving, the whole notion of deserve or not deserve is crap. Things happen. Too often shit ones, and sometimes good ones. This good thing happened to you, so grab it and keep it and fall asleep with it every night.”

“I’ll try. I need to make this work. All of this.”

Leaning in to place a kiss on the other side of Jean’s neck, “and as for me ... I’ll always be there, but I’m different to Solange. She is your lover and partner, I am your friend. And I’ll always be your friend.”

Jean looked into Dan’s eyes and nodded, willing himself to relax, even though it didn’t really work, but at least he made an effort.

“Right now your lover is waiting in the town hall, to become your wife.” Leaning in again, this time a light kiss onto Jean’s lips. “and thus I think we should leave now, because she’s the best and the most important thing that ever happened to you in your life. You said so yourself.”

Jean pressed Dan’s arm, briefly, nodded. “Going into battle is easier,” he murmured.

“You coward.” Dan chuckled, then slapped one of Jean’s tightly-clad buttocks. “I knew that all Frenchies were good at raising the white flag, but not

at fighting.” He winked and opened the door. “Now show them what a man with Russian blood can do. Aye, soldier?”

“Kill a lot of Nazis?” Jean grinned and headed out.

“That wouldn’t be appreciated right now.” Dan shook his head, grinning.

Chrestien had started to usher the guests towards the mayor’s office, and only Beauvais, Vadim, and Pascal were there, as well as a few stragglers.

“It’s five minutes on foot and the other half of the village will be there,” Jean murmured. “Got the rings?”

“Of course.” Dan rattled his sporran again. “Best get the entourage going, aye?” He grinned at Vadim when they approached.

“Yes.” Jean still looked nervous, but not as bad as before. They left the manor and walked down the street to the centre and the mayor’s office, where all the guests were. Several people with cameras, last minute checks and fixes of clothes, and somebody official came out, shook Jean’s hand, and the whole crowd surged forward into the office. Some people remained outside, chattering in French, while the close friends - and not a single relative - moved forward.

Inside, Solange and another very beautiful, thin woman waited. Solange’s long white dress carefully arranged, and she was surrounded by flowers, huge amounts of roses. Jean hesitated when he saw her, and she had to reach out and offer a hand to get him to move closer. When he still didn’t move straight away, too much in awe, Dan gently prodded his back.

Standing to the side of Jean, Dan leaned forward to smile at Solange. All four of them remaining with their backs to the crowd that had filed in.

Everything happened in French, but it was clear enough when the official asked for something that he meant the rings, and Dan, with his rudimentary French, got the clue and took the expensive looking box out of his sporran. Opening it, he presented the elegant gold wedding bands, handing them to the mayor. Jean’s voice shook, whereas Solange’s voice remained steady and she just radiated love which continued to dazzle Jean, and he looked ready to bolt and possibly take her with him when he ran away - again. But Dan stood by his side, as best man and as best friend, ready to keep him from running. In the end, nothing like that happened, and to the great cheer of all around, the couple finally kissed as husband and wife. When Dan glanced behind him, he was grinning like a fool as his eyes met Vadim’s, who smiled and nodded and gave a quick ‘thumbs up’.

It was time, then, to sign the register, and both witnesses, the maid of honour and the best man, were signing the documents. When the bride and groom sat at a little table to sign the papers as well, the cameras were wildly flashing away.

Vadim then moved to Dan’s side and took his hand, entwining their fingers. “Well, he’s taken care of,” Vadim murmured.

Dan smiled, squeezing those fingers in his. “Just like us, aye?”

“Well, I’ve been married. It’s a nice feeling, actually.”

Dan raised his brows. “That’s sure as fuck not what I meant.” A grin breaking through the mock consternation. “We’re two blokes, we can’t marry,

and even if we could ..." grimacing, but fortunately all eyes and attention were on the bride and groom. All ... except perhaps one pair of eyes, but Dan had his back to the spectators. "Let's just say I wasn't made for 'marriage vows'. Besides, we are as good as married. Don't you think?" Dan chuckled.

"Then how could a piece of metal hurt you?"

"What do you mean? The rings? It's just all that exclusion crap and ... and I just wasn't made for marriage. Girls marry. Women marry. I'm neither."

"The exclusivity crap is bound to work really well for Jean, hm?" Vadim cast a pointed glance towards Beauvais, who was standing rather stiffly, and listened to Pascal.

"But ..." And only then did it hit Dan, following the glance and murmuring, "oh shit. He just gave his vows that he would forsake all others, didn't he?"

"Chance of a snowball in hell," murmured Vadim. "I think he'll do whatever he pleases. And it pleases him to ..." Glancing around. "Pursue other openings."

"But if he vowed it, then ..." Dan shook his head, "whatever." Turning away, he walked towards the happy couple, smiling brightly, but before he could congratulate them, he was already prodded and shoved into position for photos. Endless photos. Couple, witnesses, and once again and all over.

Vadim was watching, then felt somebody move close to him, to his shoulder. He looked at the man from the corner of his eyes. Beauvais. He could have told just from the way he had drawn close.

"What are your plans after the marriage?" asked the Frenchman.

"No plans. We're on R&R. A week here, then we're out to New Zealand, take a look at the farm."

"You got some property there?"

"Dan has. Why, are you looking to invest?"

"I was planning to look at a few properties around this area." Beauvais murmured. "Good value for money, good, quiet area. I don't want to retire in the legion retirement home, and I have saved a good amount in the last years."

"Very little opportunity to spend, I assume." Vadim placed a hand on Beauvais' uniformed shoulder and turned to face him, moving close, to keep his voice low. "What are you *actually* asking for, Beauvais?"

"I need more time."

Beautifully ambivalent. Was that 'more time with you'? Vadim assumed it. "I'm sure Dan will be happy to oblige you with that."

"And you?"

"Me?" Vadim grinned. "Yeah, me too."

Dan was looking over the heads of the crowd, saw Vadim talk with Beauvais and noticed the hand on one uniformed shoulder. The sight made Dan grin, wondering what they were talking about. He detected a gap in the throng of well wishers the next moment, heading straight towards the couple before they were to be rushed outside to be celebrated in the village square. Wine and pastries already waiting.

“Solange,” Dan smiled, stepping towards her before anyone could whisk the beauty in white silk and pearls away. “Are you going to honour the tradition of kissing the best man?”

“Oh, please.” Solange smiled at him and moved forward, lace-gloved hand on his arm. Dan placed his calloused hands on her bare shoulders, a delicate touch, as he leaned in, kissing her gently on the lips, which seemed to surprise her a little, but she smiled into the kiss.

“He loves you very much,” Dan murmured, “and he’s worried to muck it up, but I think you might forgive him for the odd bit of muck, hm?” Smiling wistfully, “he tries, and from my point of view of a friend, he’s a good man, and I am so glad that he has found happiness with you.”

“I know I haven’t married a saint,” she said. “But a saint would be boring, don’t you agree?”

“Indeed. After all, I’m everything but, and so is Vadim.”

“And both of you are gorgeous together.”

Letting go of her shoulders, Dan took her hand, placing another kiss on its back. “I wish you all the happiness in the world, because I am sure you’ll make him very happy.” With that he stepped away, the wistful smile still on his face, watching the crowd taking over. She smiled at him, but then had to answer another well-wisher, and Jean had to shake a lot of hands, too, and they joked and looked incredibly happy together.

Dan watched for a moment, then squeezed his way through the well wishers who were heading outside. Looking out for Vadim, while searching the sporrán for his cigarettes and a quick swig from the pewter flask.

Vadim spotted him immediately and joined him. “What are our plans right after the marriage? Jean and Solange are off to the honeymoon. What about us?”

“Hm?” Dan had been somewhere else in his thoughts, lighting the cigarette. They stood on the stone steps that led down to the market place, which was teeming with people, enjoying themselves. Pulling in a deep first lungful of nicotine. “Haven’t thought that far. Travelling round?”

“Beauvais wants to spend more time with us. I guess he isn’t sore enough. We could show him how to do some stuff. Maybe he’s as enthusiastic at cocksucking as he is at getting fucked. What do you think?”

“Sure, if he wants to?” Dan was somewhat distracted, concentrating on his cigarette. “I’d be the last man on earth to say no to that offer.” Watching the smoke rise into the air, before casting another glance over the jolly crowd. “We could hire a caravan or something. Less conspicuous than three men in a bed, I guess.”

“Good idea.” Vadim looked at Dan. “What’s on your mind?”

“Ah ... nothing.” Dan waved his hand about and exhaled smoke. “Nothing a lot of booze, good food, and merry company can’t get out of my head.” He suddenly grinned, groping Vadim’s arse, right there in public. “Let’s find our apprentice and grab some wine on the way. Can’t have everybody else having a

jolly except us. Besides, my kilt hasn't had any admirers yet." With that he turned and walked down the stairs, towards a stall with pastries and wine.

Not too far away, Beauvais was doing his best to get plastered. Drinking the wine like it was water and he'd just come out of Algeria. A couple of girls attempted to strike up a conversation, but he skilfully directed their attention to Pascal, who, doubtlessly was having fun. Surrounded by girls and, thought Vadim, maybe one or two that hadn't been born as girls. But as long as Pascal didn't realize that.

"Heh." Heading towards Beauvais. "Looks like Dan is up for it."

Dan sauntered close, wine in one hand, couple of pastries in the other. Raising his brows with a grin. "Does a week's tour of the region in a caravan strike your fancy?" Downing his second glass of wine, following the Lieutenant's example in getting pissed as soon as possible.

Beauvais nodded. "I could actually show you some nice areas around here. I was born not too far away." He shrugged. "I was Belgian when I joined the Legion, of course. Just in case you were going to ask."

"I wasn't going to ask, I don't actually give a shit." Dan grinned, "but since you offered the information, doesn't anyone in the Legion ever ask for a passport?"

"They know you well when you join and if they want you, they still take you in. Anybody could have placed my accent in this general area. Doesn't matter. Some rules are just there to be broken." Beauvais again seemed more reserved now, as if reminding himself that nothing about this was about bonding or sharing information.

Dan took a third glass from a tray, emptying it half-way. "Aye, I've broken a few rules myself in my life. Actually, with a mate who's a Russian *Frenchman* and a partner who's a Russian *Brit*," grinning at Vadim, "I really wouldn't give a damn if the Legion believed you were Scottish even though you didn't speak a word of English and had donned a skirt made from towels." Dan laughed.

"Ah. Now I get what you mean." Beauvais grinned.

"Why, what did you think I meant?" Dan finished his wine.

"Wasn't sure ... It's all up for negotiations, isn't it? Life is more complicated than the rules. Talking of rules ..." He looked around, very carefully. "I'm bored. You two are the most interesting guests."

"Aye, but I'm the best man. I can hardly vanish behind the next hut for a quick fuck." Dan smirked, getting hold of his fourth glass. "Unless we're off duty before the main celebrations start." Looking at Vadim, "any idea what the plans are?"

"I assume that's more food back at the castle, more drinks ... more of the same. Ah, and dancing. Unless, of course, we'd abduct the bride."

"Aha!" Dan grinned, suddenly alert. "Now that sounds like a plan, but wasn't Pascal meant to do that?"

"Pascal?" Vadim looked across where the ex-para was holding court. "He's busy."

"Well, that's true." Dan flashed a grin. "Anyone still sober enough to drive?"

"I am," said Vadim. "no problem."

"Any ideas?" Pointing at Beauvais, before fetching glass five and glass six, pushing one of them into the Lieutenant's hand. "You know the area, anything fairly decent and yet out of the way enough that it would take a while for Jean to find his bride, or - better still - not to find her, and he has to pay a hefty ransom of food and drink?" Dan winked. A prank was a prank and even better if it came with a lot of tradition.

"There are a few hotels around ... what about a bar or a restaurant? We could wine and dine her ...? Actually, I know a place that has good wine, friendly service, and is a bit out of the way."

"Aye, but would Jean figure it out?"

"Not immediately." Beauvais laughed. "He'd have to work a bit, but no doubt the friendly locals would help him. He should be alright."

"Hmmm ..." Dan mused, "that's all very well, but not particularly interesting for the bride, or is it?"

"You think getting abducted is boring?" Beauvais looked quizzically at him.

"If I was abducted by three more-or-less middle aged straight women, then taken to a restaurant to have a mediocre meal with perhaps a glass of wine, and not a chance in hell for sex or even just innuendo, yeah, I'd be bored." Dan grinned.

"That's the problem with the villages. No outrageous nightclubs. If we were anywhere near Marseilles or another civilised area, I'd know a few nice strip bars where she could have a lapdance ... All the women I brought into places like that enjoyed a lapdance."

"A lapdance, as in: a woman dancing on your woman's lap? Pretty much scantily clad?" Dan raised a brow.

"Yes. And they do enjoy it. Trust me."

"I wouldn't enjoy one." Dan shrugged, not convinced, but grinned and finished his wine. "Well, not anymore. I used to exclusively fuck women, till I was in my early thirties." He tried to get Vadim's attention with a nudge, "what a damn fine wasted opportunity, all those years."

Vadim looked at him. "You'd have been gay in the SAS, sitting in those atrociously dull barracks, wondering about the bodies under the shower. Trust me, being gay 'all my life' wasn't fun. There's always a comrade you have a crush on, always something to prove ... it's hard work."

"I guess ..." Dan mused, the wine at lunchtime, without much food, was making him mellow. "While all I had to prove to myself was that I was a 'real man' by treating those girls like absolute shit and fucking them senseless while drunk as a skunk." Falling silent, snatching a glass from a table nearby, he downed half of it in one go. "I was a fucking little shit. Better make it up to one of them." And that was that, he didn't even wait for an answer. Turning, kilt swinging in the movement, he weaselled his way into the crowd and towards the bride and groom.

Vadim laughed. "I'll get the car. You help him get her out. Maybe tackle the groom or distract him?"

Beauvais nodded. "Deal." Heading after Dan while Vadim rushed to get the vehicle.

Dan was kind of circling, trying to find the right time and angle to strike, when he saw Beauvais. Sidling up to him, he grinned. "You do realise you stick out like a fucking thumb in your white uniform? So much for the stealth attack ..."

"I'm not sticking out to somebody who knows and trusts that uniform. How do we do it?"

"Oh for fuck's sake, cheer up, Legionnaire. I know you're an officer, but you don't have to swallow that fucking rod." Dan grinned to take the sting out. "I was just saying that you're no good for a camouflaged stealth attack in your blinding whites. Other than that, pull that rod out your arse and relax for a few days, aye? It's good to be proud of La Legion, but chill for a while."

Beauvais nodded briskly and moved away, into the background, where he remained. He was watching, however.

Dan looked after him and sighed, shaking his head. Tipsy or not, and as sensitive as a bulldozer or not, he realised that he'd obviously pissed off the Frenchman, not having a clue what it was that kept annoying the man. He might have pondered some more, had there not been an opening in the crowd. The first chords of music were heard, when a small band of locals started playing traditional songs. Dan rushed forward, legionnaire and prissiness forgotten, and managed to be the first one in front of Solange. "Fancy a little dance, my lady?" He bowed swiftly, before taking her hands in his.

"Always," Solange cheerfully agreed and followed him. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Very much so," Dan smiled, twirling her around, albeit not very elegantly. "But most importantly, are you happy?" Steering them towards the edge of the marketplace.

"Oh yes. Who would have thought it could be like this?"

"I'm not the right one to ask." Dan chuckled, twirling them around again, almost reaching the edge, when he spotted the car with Vadim inside. "I've never been married." One more step, and he lifted her up and over a small wall, while looking around for Beauvais. The Frenchman was there, climbing the wall in an instant.

"What are you doing?"

"We're making Jean work a bit for you," said Beauvais.

Dan grinned, climbing after her, pushing the kilt down to prevent flashing the entire neighbourhood. "It's the age old tradition of kidnapping the bride." Bowing deeply as he pointed to the car, "if you'd please, Madame Leclerc?"

"Oh the poor man," she said, smiling. "Dear me. What nice abductors ..."

She gathered her dress about her and got into the car.

Dan laughed as he closed the door, getting into the seat beside her, leaving Beauvais the passenger seat to navigate to the place. "He probably deserves it." Winking at her.

Vadim kicked down the gas pedal to give Jean a bit of a warning that something wasn't right - screeching tires should clue him in, and then followed Beauvais's directions. Heading onto the fast street that connected the villages in this area, while Beauvais gave directions from memory. Heading into yet another picturesque village, he ordered Vadim to park outside a similar wine bar to the one they'd got drunk in two days earlier.

Dan jumped out of the car and opened the door for Solange, holding his hand out to her. "Can't be easy to get out of this in all your finery." Dark eyes amused, he helped her out.

Solange took his hand and managed to get out of the car. "Not the most practical dress I've ever worn," she remarked, while the others got out of the car as well. "Men have it easier ..."

"That depends," Dan chuckled, offering her his arm. "Not if you have to wear certain dress uniforms, even though our legionnaire, here ..." leaning closer to her, "seems to be bearing up remarkably well."

Beauvais pointed towards the bar. "They have a lot of good, local wines here."

"Sounds like a pleasant place, then, and the groom should be able to find it. Eventually." Guiding her inside, the moment they stepped through the door, the whole place fell silent. Men, a lot of old men and not a single woman, all staring at them, faces lifted from their wine glasses and their chess, cards or board games. "Bonjour," Dan smiled brightly, scraping together the remains of his French, "we abduct woman." Correcting himself, "ah, non, bride."

The mood shifted then. Maybe it was the French, maybe it was the trio of a stunning bride, a man in a skirt, somebody in a very expensive suit all topped off with an officer of the Legion. A number of old guys invited them over to their table, and Beauvais went to order some wine. Solange wrapped one after the other of the local men around each of her fingers when she sat down and said something in French, which was doubtlessly lovely and charming.

Within half an hour, everyone in that place was merry with wine and chatter. Dan understood a few scraps here and there and managed to join in on occasion - after he'd explained with Solange's help that he wasn't wearing a skirt but was a true Scotsman, and that Vadim and he were from Britain, but not English - which pleased the guys very much. Some of the old geezers scabbled some instruments together, and soon the bar was filled with cheerful music, not dissimilar to the market place.

Time passed quickly as they were having fun, each one of the locals daring a little dance with the lovely bride, until, finally, two hours later, the door opened again and Jean appeared, looking somewhat frantic, but immediately relaxed when he found his prize. "You bastard," he said to Beauvais, who shook his head and pointed at Dan. "His idea."

Dan stood in the middle of the room, conversing with a couple of men who were showing him how to play boule, when he looked up and shrugged, grinning. "Me? I am innocent. It was his idea." Pointing to Vadim.

Vadim raised his hands. "Guilty as charged. What are you going to do about it?"

"My rescuer!" said Solange and rushed into Jean's arms. Who stared at Vadim, but could simply not resist his wife, either.

"I need her to cut up the cake ..." Jean muttered darkly.

"And I guess you'd rather cut up Vadim." Dan laughed. "I'm afraid we haven't got time for that, even though Solange suffered terribly. Didn't you?" he winked at her.

Solange nodded cheerfully, which made Jean laugh, too. "The places I looked for you," he murmured and kissed her neck. "Come. I should have fitted you with a collar, my dear."

Dan suddenly coughed and lit himself another cigarette before finishing of his umpteenth wine. "Thank you for hospitality." He called into the round with his broken French, and a cheer for the bride and groom were heard, as they all left the bar, heading back to the main festivities. By now Dan had had a lot of wine and very little food, but was bravely soldiering on.

Jean kept Solange in his car, and they drove in both vehicles back to the manor, where there was a vast amount of food and much more alcohol and everybody seemed to have a great time. The reappearance of the bride was celebrated with a cheer, and Jean looked like he couldn't wait to carry her upstairs, but instead, they cut up the cake together and more photos were made. Then it was time for the speeches, and Dan managed to keep his best man speech short and sweet, hardly stumbling over words in his inebriated stage, and making the whole crowd laugh, with Jean occasionally glaring at him when the joke was - predictably - on his side. After a lot more toasting and good wishes, the music started once more and the party went on.

Beauvais went back to drinking, something he had hardly stopped with since after the ceremony, while Dan indulged in the same, but only after stuffing himself with food. He found himself standing with a plate in one hand and a glass in another, suddenly surrounded by a bunch of girls who were giggling about his outfit, and if he really didn't wear anything underneath. Dan being Dan, he grinned at Vadim and ignored a strange and altogether unfriendly look from Beauvais, and challenged them to check for themselves ... which they did. To their great merriment and his lack of bother, especially when Vadim stepped close and placed a possessive hand on his hip, which told the gaggle of models a lot more than Dan had and made them giggle even louder.

Pascal seemed to enjoy himself with a similar ilk, the set-up with the girl had worked really well with him and he seemed very popular with the ladies - whether that was because of his attractiveness or because he was the only single, straight and friendly guy in the room was everybody's guess. The party went on for many hours. A buffet was brought, with hot and cold delicacies, and a different band played music, to the great joy of most who enjoyed to dance, which was mainly the fashion crowd. Jean and Solange opened with the first dance, and then it was a free for all, but Dan preferred to stick to food and booze, and mainly the latter.

Eventually the place became less crowded, late at night, when some people started to head home, and only the closer friends were still around. Vadim found himself sit mellow near the fireplace, staring into the fire and half-listening to the melodic French, feeling at peace, content and tired.

Dan was at the other end of the large room, laughing with a couple of girls who had taken him under his wings, while he was steadily drinking and enjoying himself, now and then glancing over to bride and groom, but never interfering with the fun and the joy, and never walking across.

Finally, it was time for Jean and Solange to retire. Under great cheer of the remaining guests, Solange threw her bouquet, and Dan had been refilling his glass, and despite all logic and care, was hit with the bouquet, catching the flowers by reflex, under great laughter and perplexed surprise on his part. Playing along, though, he laughed and joked, and waved the happy couple good night, before walking along the remains of the buffet to check out the desserts.

Vadim finally claimed one of the big couches for himself. He shed the jacket, kicked off the shoes and stretched out, his feet pointing towards the fire, arms crossed on his chest, and, having slept too little recently, closed his eyes and drifted off.

Beauvais cast a glance at Vadim resting and headed over to the buffet. He wasn't completely steady on his feet anymore.

"Seems we're the only ones left." Dan grinned, pouring himself a large measure of whisky, to round off the night.

"L...last men standing," Beauvais murmured, reaching for the bottle once Dan had put it down, then poured some into his wine glass and emptied that, too.

Dan grinned, took the bottle back, filling his own glass to the brim after he'd. "And what happens now?"

Beauvais looked at him. "Maybe lure you outside and ... cut you to size. Don't want to wake your friend."

"Huh?" Whisky untouched, Dan stared at the legionnaire. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Simple. You two together against me means I'm hopeless. You against me, that's different."

Pouring some of the whisky down his throat, Dan ignored the burn. "What the fuck's the *against* about? You think I'm some enemy?" Not quite steady on his feet, he leaned against the table.

Beauvais gave a quick glance around. "I'm outside. If you have any balls, you follow me." He turned on his heel, every inch the legionnaire who'd learned the hard way not to wreck bars off-duty.

"You fucking stupid arsehole." Dan growled, following the Lieutenant immediately. Didn't have a clue what the hell was up and why the fuck that man was behaving like an irrational bastard. "What the fuck's your fucking problem?" Pushing the door open, he stepped into the night air.

He was greeted right away with a fist. Beauvais obviously didn't believe in fair and proper duels – the moment Dan was out of the way of the other guests and things that could be broken, he gave a straight punch towards Dan's face.

"Shit!" That was the last thing that Dan had expected, and the fist hit him full on. Snapping his head back, pain exploded behind his eyes and in his nose, and he staggered backwards, not as steady on his feet with all the booze. "You fucking bastard!" Hissed, and that was it. Throwing himself towards the smaller man, Dan used a feint at the last moment, twisting his body, and his shoulder rammed into Beauvais.

Beauvais reeled back, then hit the ground which knocked the air from his lungs, but he got another two punches in, into Dan's short ribs, knowing he was at a disadvantage, but determined to sell himself as dearly as possible.

Dan groaned, but his heavier body crashed onto Beauvais's, and nothing the other could do to stop the motion. Alcohol holding the worst back, and dulling the pain. Defence and attack slowed down, and yet reflexes still functioned and Dan got to his knees the next moment, straddling the Lieutenant. Blood running from his nose onto the pristine white uniform. He shook his head, wiped the worst away with the back of his hand, before snarling, "what the *fuck* is your fucking *problem*?" Angry, hurting, damned pissed off and at a total loss at what the hell was going on.

Beauvais was seething with rage, expecting clearly to be punched and kicked, and took hold of Dan's jacket to pull him off, bucking underneath to free himself. "Get off me! Putain!"

"Putain? Fucking *what*?" Dan understood damn well. He'd never been called a whore before, and wasn't going to take it. Punching Beauvais' arm, forcing him to lose the grip on his jacket, while grinding down onto the Frenchman's hips and groin, to keep him from bucking up. "You fucking arsehole, you didn't complain when I fucked you!"

The movement and the words together did it. Beauvais exploded with rage, the smaller man going all out berserk, and displaying surprising strength and coordination despite his state. He bucked up, throwing the weight off, then hurled himself on top of Dan, whose reactions were slowed by the booze and he had simply not expected this outrage. Knees, fists, head, all weapons that Beauvais brought to bear, punching Dan's face and chest, whatever he could reach, face showing nothing but fury.

When pain exploded once more, unexpected, unbidden, Dan flew into anger himself. Pissed off beyond measure at this irrational man, and the whole goddamned situation that made no fucking sense - except for the pain. If he could only stop that French bastard to pummel him like a berserker, he might find out what the fuck was going on. Dan lifted up to get leverage, twisted, bucked upwards, got caught in the kilt. Bare arse grinding into the grass, caught under the other man's mad thrashing. But he fought, furious enough, fists hitting Beauvais's face. Faster, harder, without holding back. He grunted, breathless, satisfied when the Lieutenant let out a groan. Hitting Beauvais's jaw

hard, giving him enough time to take hold of the legs and throw his whole body weight to the side, taking the legionnaire with him, and rolling on top.

Beauvais pushed, bucked, fighting and channelling anger into every motion. Anger that was made worse because - despite the pain and the fight - he was hard, and if there was one thing he didn't want, it was Dan to notice it. This was a fight, and he hated the man, had been humiliated enough already. He wouldn't bear another humiliation. "Get the fuck off me!" he shouted in French, looking around frantically for a weapon or just a large enough stone, shielding his face with one elbow.

"Why?" Dan shouted back, grabbing the front of Beauvais's uniform, splattered with his blood, and he spit out another mouthful. "What the *fuck* is your fucking *problem*?" Lifting the slighter man's chest up from the ground, shaking him. Dan moved back onto his haunches, kneeling once more atop Beauvais, bare groin grinding down. Pushing, harder, and shit it felt damn good. The pain, adrenaline, and the whole goddamned anger, and it all came crashing back to Dan: the fights with Vadim, how they'd almost killed each other many times, the hatred and greed, the heat and lust, and he thrust once more, grinding purposefully into the man beneath, because it felt so fucking good.

Beauvais stared at him, hands had formed fists, the touch going through him with an intensity that made him nauseous, or dizzy, or was just too fucking much. "I'm done being treated like shit!" he hissed. "The whole point of getting a commission, you bastard!"

"What?" Dan stilled, groin on groin, but no movement, and he let go of the Lieutenant, dropping him back down to the ground. Breathless, voice forced. "You fucking think I treat you like shit? Are you out of your mind?" Leaning forward, giving himself a dangerous opening when both his hands came down on each side of Beauvais' head, but Dan didn't care, too shocked at those words. And whatever Beauvais might have said was swallowed when Dan exposed himself like that. Body language far easier to read than verbal clues.

"What the fuck makes you think that? Why the fuck would I do that in the fucking first place?" Dan spat out a last mouthful of blood, this time into the grass, "it's just the way I fucking am, or you think I don't bloody respect you? You think I would have touched you if I didn't?" Exasperated, but most of all, goddamned horny, and nothing could change that.

"Do you ever listen to yourself?" Beauvais knew he sounded weak, and to distract, he reached up to touch his face and looked at his hand, checking for blood.

"Why? You think I'm a fucking peasant who talks like scum? Damn right. Get over it. I didn't operate for umpteen fucking years on my own with nothing but bloody Mujas in goddamned Afghanistan for fucking nothing." Dan growled, baring his bloodied teeth.

Beauvais glanced down his body, and Dan's, which was more visibly aroused beneath the kilt. "Shit. Total mess. All of it. Fuck." Wanting, and unable to want, reluctance in his face, but at the same time, he shifted to press against Dan. The humiliation burning like acid, but the need was greater.

Dan lowered further down, face to face, hard cock pressing against trapped one, which made Beauvais go rigid, and, almost against his will, move his legs just to get more from it. "You don't want this, do you?" Damn, and it was all so obvious all of a sudden, why the hell hadn't he realised it before? "You don't fucking want to be like this. You fucking hate it, aye? And so you fucking hate *me*."

"No. Yes. Fuck!"

Down, further down, Dan could kiss if he wanted - or dared. "Tough shit, Lieutenant, I've been there, fought it, and I know that you can't win." Voice low, the calm before the storm, "you have to accept it. So, you're gay. Fucking deal with it. You made it to officer, in the foreign legion, that means you're fucking tough, so you can bloody well deal with being gay!"

Beauvais was seething with anger, but at the same time, he needed. The pain – again – just spiking the lust until he didn't know what he wanted and whether he could want this. His body just wanted release, part of him wanted to kill that man for what he'd done to him and was still doing, another part wanted to touch and kiss, but that would have given the other an unforgivable opening. All his life he'd had everything under control, and it was this bastard who took it all away and brought him face to face with himself. It felt like breaking inside.

Dan stared at him, the face, twitching muscles, the hatred and need, and the impossible fight this man tried to win and was destined to lose. He suddenly knew. Knew, as well, that it was crazy, faced with that rage, lust and doubtlessly pain. "You want to fuck me?" Low voice, "Do you, Lieutenant?"

Beauvais cursed again, caught out like that, but he nodded. "Yes. Get ... off me." Less angry now, still confused and the alcohol blurred everything, but that was what he wanted. Even if it was a trick, even if Dan only lured him away further, it was a risk he'd take.

Dan got up, knees nearly buckling, he nodded, wiping the last blood from his face. Didn't say anything, just took off into the direction of the outhouse. He noticed Beauvais picking up his kepi, before following. Despite the booze and the lust, Dan was fully aware how fucking crazy it was to give himself over into the hands of that raging madman, who didn't have a clue what to do and was most likely to finish off with his cock what his fists hadn't managed. But fuck, he was horny, and it seemed like a good idea a minute ago.

The room was untouched – Jean had been too busy during the day to stow anything away. That included the booze, candles, lube, condoms. Beauvais closed the door behind them, and stood there, becoming aware of the bruises, his throbbing jaw that hurt, and wanting somebody he didn't like – not that that had ever been a problem with women. He still moved in, hands on Dan's chest, took the jacket off him, didn't actually know how to do all this. Part of him just wanted to push up the kilt and fuck him, but it was far more complicated than that. It would have been easier in the fight, or just after, now that his thoughts returned he felt out of his depth.

Dan shrugged out of the jacket, unbuttoned the waistcoat, not bothering to take off anything else. Would take too much time, and he might regret that

insane offer otherwise. Taking a couple of steps back, he lowered down onto the airbed with a grunt. Fuck, he ached, but all that was forgotten when he lay on his back, knees bent, legs falling open, pushing the kilt out of the way. "Putain, eh?" He snorted, mocking, still half-hard.

Beauvais swallowed, then joined Dan on the bed. All he took off was the kepi when he got between Dan's legs. Remembering how Dan had done it last night, he was surprised the other had meant what he'd said. Staring at him, brow furrowed with thought and concentration, he reached for the lube, uncapped it, squirted some into his hand, and then rubbed it between Dan's cheeks. Very different. Male. Hairy, and he was about to do this.

Dan remained silent, nothing but a torch on the floor that gave light. Breathless, still, from the fight or the apprehension. Slipping his hands under his knees, Dan pushed his legs up to his chest. Watching Beauvais's face as he opened and bared himself, with the same irreverence and macho attitude, as he'd been fighting.

Beauvais opened his trousers, pushed them down, just enough, and went for a condom pack. Rolling the thing down, he lubed himself up, not thinking about what he was about to do, then, taking hold of Dan's leg with one hand, he guided himself closer and to the point. Pushing in, slowly, mostly to make sure he didn't slip in his alcohol-dazed brain, but surprising Dan with the slowness, who'd expected an angry assault.

Beauvais moved deeper, slow but inevitable. The heat. Tightness. All the good things, and Dan let out a groan, expelling a breath he had held when bracing himself. Booze made it easier, and the ache of being stretched was nothing compared to the bruises. He flashed a grin, pushing against the invading cock, concentrating on relaxing.

Beauvais got in all the way, and the surrounding strength took his breath away. The anger was gone, this man just gave back, all of it, with no anger about him. No humiliation, he just did it that easily. Nothing about 'stupid cunt' or 'asshole' or 'pull the stick from your arse'. That had grated, because ever since that sex Dan had gone on about how he considered him an asshole. "How ...?" Do you like it, he wanted to ask, because it was clear as day that Dan *did* like it.

"What?" Dan's voice was husky and he grinned again. Damn, getting fucked while being pissed after a crazy fight was a new experience, and shit, he enjoyed it. Perhaps too much. Letting go of one leg, he placed it on the Lieutenant's shoulder, and Beauvais reached up to move the other and both into the right spot. Dan's hands were now free, which reached and pulled Beauvais closer, firmly gripping his hips, and the Frenchman moved in, still trying to find the best angle. "Expected ..." Dan groaned out when he moved. Pushing upwards, cock fully hard again, "... you'd just ..." arching up with a sound that came from somewhere deep, "... thrust in ... too fucking ... angry, but damn ..." he grinned, hands increasing their firm grip, urging the legionnaire on, "this is good."

Beauvais grinned, didn't quite get his own emotions. From anger to this, instead thrust in deep, deliberate strokes – drunk enough to last a while, and he enjoyed taking it slow and intense. A man a completely different ball game. The scent, for example, but even more the strength, and Dan's bruised face that began to darken where it wasn't shaded with blood made him want to take it slow. A way to apologize, but also to fully taste the strange feelings. "Can do that, too. Like you did ... me."

Dan dropped one hand to his cock, stroking himself. Fuck, this was good, all of it, the whole insane package. "Did it because ..." suddenly pulling in a hissing breath and he arched up, shuddering, when the angle was just right, "that's what you wanted." Voice and breath getting more erratic, stroking himself with growing intensity. "You just do ... what you want. I'm fine." Another thrust that hit everything right, leaving him shuddering once more, "better than fine. Shit."

Beauvais loved how Dan clenched around him every time he did it like *that*, and kept the angle, long thrusts alternating with two short ones. He loved every moment of it, and Dan touching himself was another detail that made this too damn good. Keeping himself under control, but moving all the time, thrusting, expending more focus than he'd ever on a woman – any woman. They'd just been whores and he had needed to get off. This now opened a whole new world, and he didn't want to be done with it yet.

Dan finally sped up stroking himself when he couldn't bear the steady, excruciating climb any longer. Shirt sweat drenched, breath coming loud, erratic and fast, he got himself higher, and over the top. Arching up, all muscles clenching, cumming with an uncontrolled groan, all over himself, his hands, the kilt, his shirt.

The tightness was too much to bear, and Beauvais slammed in a few more times, cumming as well, not long after Dan, who simply collapsed when Beauvais lowered the legs and pulled out. Getting rid of the condom, first and foremost, he stowed his cock away, back into the uniform trousers. He lay down, within arm's reach of Dan, catching his breath, but even more to rest and enjoy the comedown.

Lying sprawled, breathing, Dan was doing absolutely nothing for a long time. Booze and sex, a heady mix, especially with the aggression and pain thrown in. He finally turned his head, but when he tried to look at Beauvais, he realised his right eye was starting to swell up. "I hope you're at least as bruised as I am." Dan grinned, voice reflecting how sated he was.

Beauvais again touched his jaw. "The teeth are all still there." Wiping a hand over his face and inhaling deeply, content. "Not bad for a punch up."

Dan chuckled, then groaned, deep and heartfelt. "I am getting too old for this shit. Couldn't we just have fucked without the punch-up first?"

"Maybe next time." Beauvais closed his eyes, relaxed. "Damn. You lured me into the same trap as Jean. Both of you succeed perfectly well at making me blow a fuse."

"I didn't mean to. Guess Jean didn't mean to make you blow a fuse back then, either. The consequences for him couldn't have been pretty, not in the legion."

"As I said, we had a punch-up after he defied me. That's how we deal with minor infractions."

"And who won?" Dan grinned, "since there's no point in asking if it ended like our punch-up." He felt around for a blanket to wipe the cum off himself, best he could. "Besides, why the hell did I get so much to you? Would have thought, after the sex, that you were okay with what happened."

"The way you ... the things you said afterwards. During the day. Calling me an asshole. Like that was what I'd become because of the sex. A ... a hole." Beauvais struggled through that admission, and he shook his head. "Forget it." Moving to get up.

"Shit." Dan closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head. "Touché. I talk like that, it means nothing, but damn." He sat up, searching for the fags in his sporran. "I'm sorry. Even though unintentional, I guess that was shit." Lighting a cigarette before getting up with a groan. He could feel each and every punch and kick, especially in his face.

Beauvais offered a hand, took hold of Dan's arm and steadied him. "You want some ice cubes or knives for that eye. Let's check in the kitchen. Nose looks alright, but the eye is fucked."

"Aye, but I had worse." Dan grinned, because anyone who'd seen his naked body would be damn well aware that he'd had 'worse'. Stooping to pick up waistcoat and jacket, Dan looked the Lieutenant up and down, while he was adjusting his kepi. "I have to say 'ditto' to you. Your jaw is well bruised and your uniform ... afraid there's not much white left."

"Blood of an enemy. That's honourable." Beauvais opened the door for Dan. "But yes, I'll get a bag of ice cubes for my jaw, too."

"Enemy? If you think I let myself get fucked every time you call me that, you can forget it." Jacket over his shoulder, Dan walked out into the cool night air, feeling the chill on his sweat soaked body. "Let's just hope Vadim hasn't woken. Last time I saw him, he'd fallen asleep on a sofa in front of the fire." Glancing through the dark windows of the kitchen, it seemed to be deserted, and it was quiet when they opened the door to slip inside.

"Why? You're getting into trouble?"

"No, he'd piss himself with laughter and I'd probably never live it down."

Beauvais moved carefully, until he opened the fridge which cast the kitchen into some light. Somebody had made a valiant effort to clear away the dishes and most of the food, but there were still things standing around and the fridge was filled to bursting with meats and cheeses and canapés. Beauvais took one of those trays, unwrapped it, and had a couple of bites before he looked around for a small light somewhere. Eventually finding a bag of tea lights. Dan, in the meantime, was hovering up most of the food on the tray.

"Could do with a coffee or tea." Rummaging through the freezer in the light of the fridge, Dan found a couple of bags of ice cubes, and threw both on the

table, got two dish towels and sat down, while Beauvais lit a few tea lights. "Seen a kettle around somewhere?" Wrapping a bag of ice in one of the towels, Dan pressed it against his eye with a hiss.

"Jean showed me how his espresso machine works. It does everything by itself if you know which buttons to press. Coffee?" Beauvais switched the machine on and found two cups, busying himself with making two good, strong coffees. He sat one of them down in front of Dan, who was smoking another cigarette while nursing his eye, and then Beauvais took one of the ice-filled towels and touched it to his jaw.

"Good coffee, cheers." And it was, damn good coffee, which Dan enjoyed. "You still want to come with us for a week caravanning?"

"Yes." Beauvais took a sip. "Or just a few days, I don't want to intrude." His brow dark again while he thought about it. "I was going to look at a few properties in the area during my leave."

"What do you hope to get out of it, and I don't mean the properties." Stubbing the cigarette out, Dan took another sip. "Because frankly, I'm not looking for another punch-up."

"More sex?" Beauvais seemed almost sheepish. "I try to fit in as much sex as I can before I go back. You guys have each other, and you don't need me. Whereas I ..." He exhaled. "I could just go to Paris and find sex there. It's easy enough. But I'm not sure what exactly I'm looking for."

"That's okay, then. Sex is always good." Finishing off his coffee, Dan leaned back in his chair with a faint groan. Damn, his ribs had taken a battering as well. "Consider us your guinea pigs, but no ... more ... hitting. Alright?" He flashed a grin as he readjusted the ice. "I'm aching enough as it is. You're a damn good fighter."

Beauvais grinned. "You'd have looked better if you hadn't hesitated." Taking the towel down for a moment, the area was clearly reddened and swollen. "Might want to check with a local doctor. Eye can get complicated."

Dan grinned, "I didn't hesitate, arsehole. I didn't expect you to hit me in the first place!" Realising what he'd just called Beauvais, Dan waved his hand about, "well, without the 'arsehole' bit, then. But really, I didn't have a clue what the hell you were on about." Leaning forward to peer at the legionnaire's face, "at least I got you, too."

Using the closeness, Beauvais touched his lips to Dan's, surprised by his own action, but nevertheless going through with it.

Dan, clearly taken aback, did hesitate this time, but only for a heartbeat, before he lowered the melting ice, placed a hand on Beauvais' shoulder, and kissed back. Mindful of bruises and the fact this guy had actually never kissed a man with full intention and a clear mind and not lust-addled while getting fucked. Stubble scraping against stubble, Dan pulled back a fraction to murmur, "hell, you got me again. But that's infinitely better than getting punched."

Beauvais nodded. "I'll remember your favourites ..."

"Not that difficult, actually." On the surface, but that was only for Vadim to know.

Beauvais licked his lips, fully enjoying his various discoveries if the expression in his eyes was anything to go by. "Deal then. We spend the week in the countryside, I have a look at houses, and whatever else happens ... happens."

"Deal."

He got up, clapping Dan's shoulder. "I'm off to bed. See you tomorrow."

"Have a good night, I see if I can get cleaned up without Vadim noticing." Dan waved after the Lieutenant, then remained seated for a little while longer, thinking about the day while looking out into the darkness, smoking a last flag. Finally blowing the tea lights out, he walked out, noticing the sleeping figure of Vadim in the light of the dying fire, and stole upstairs, to get cleaned up. He wrapped himself into his dressing gown, before trotting back downstairs in flip flops and with wet hair. He gently shook Vadim's shoulder. "Hey, sleepyhead, time to get into bed proper."

Vadim glanced up, looked at the last embers glowing in the fireplace, and stretched. "Damn. I love fireplaces," he murmured sleepily, gathered up his shoes and jacket and followed Dan upstairs.

"We can have a fireplace on the farm." Dan didn't turn round as they walked upstairs, carefully keeping his face out of the light.

"Ah, yes. Put it on the list. Plus the whirlpool. Damn. I must have slept, what? Two hours?"

"Something like that." Smiling to himself, Dan waited for Vadim to step inside, then closed the door. The room was very dimly lit, and he slipped out of the dressing gown immediately, yawning big and loudly, still not quite looking at Vadim, before crawling into bed. "Hurry up."

Vadim shook his head, grinning. "Sure." Shedding the clothes, he placed the pieces of the suit over a chair, fiddling for a moment with the cufflinks before they clinked down on the nightstand. Easing himself into bed, fully naked, he placed his head on Dan's shoulder, arm across his stomach. "They should be happy together," he murmured.

"I hope so, and I think they will be." Dan smiled, a little wistful, before reaching over to the lamp and switching it off. He lay silent for a moment, inhaling the scent of Vadim, and enjoying the body heat, the weight, and the closeness. Stroking the short shaved hair, before his hand rested between Vadim's shoulder blades. "Sleep well, Vadim." Murmured, "I love you."

Vadim turned his head to kiss Dan's chest. "And I love you." Moving his head up to kiss Dan on the lips, then reshuffling in bed until he'd found a comfortable position, and he drifted off to sleep.

* * *

The next morning, Vadim carefully turned out of Dan's embrace and slipped out of bed to head to the bathroom when he saw Dan's face in the early morning light. The eye was a black, sore, swollen mess, and there were other scrapes and swellings that displayed a rather shocking amount of colour. The

toilet was forgotten, as Vadim reached over to touch Dan's face. "What the fuck happened? That wasn't me?"

"Huh?" Sleep-drunk, Dan tore his eyes open at the sudden sound and touch, but ... he only opened one. The right one was swollen shut.

"What happened to your face?" Vadim pointed at his own eye to illustrate.

Dan lifted his hand, touching his swollen eye with his fingers and yelped. "Ow! Fuck!" Suddenly very wide awake. "Well I ... or rather the other way round, Beauvais had a disagreement with me." Dan grimaced.

"The bastard." Vadim reached for his clothes – jeans and jumper rather than the suit, looking like he couldn't wait to do the same to the Frenchmen. "What about? Did you do anything?"

"Hang on!" Dan pushed himself up to sit, rather sore around the ribs, but he had given as good as he'd received. "It was all a ... misunderstanding." He grimaced once more, this really wasn't easy to explain. "He thought I'd called him a hole, an arse-hole, because I'd fucked him, and so on and so forth, and the long and short of the story is, that the poor bugger went completely off the rails. Gay and all that, you know? So I kind of took the brunt, we beat the shit out of each other, and then ... I let him fuck me. Just so that he got his head around the whole thing. Kind of." Dan groaned, reaching for the packet of cigarettes on the night table. "I'd make a really shit therapist, aye?"

"You fucked." Vadim closed the button of his jeans. "Well, that's a way to take the pressure down. And you are fucking sexy when beating the shit out of someone." Vadim grinned. "Well, I liked it, back then."

Dan shrugged, comical in his helplessness. "I didn't know what else to do. The man was out of his mind with rage. Completely. He would have probably tried to bite through my throat, like a mad terrier, or something."

Vadim laughed. "You know what? I can imagine that. He has that ... determination about him."

Lighting his cigarette, Dan grinned, even though every facial expression ached. "Can you wait with a repeat performance, though? I'm too old for this shit, honestly. I need a few days to recuperate."

"And I need to head to the toilet." Vadim leaned down to kiss him. "Anything from the kitchen? Raw steak?"

"The toilet's thataway!" Dan pointed to the bathroom door, "and the kitchen's thataway." Pointing right down, "and besides, it's too late anyway. Had an icepack on last night, guess it's bearing the brunt of the ridicule now." He took a drag from his cigarette, then threw the covers off to sit on the edge of the bed, stretching and scratching his groin. "I tell you what, though, I got fucked more often in the last couple of days than in a normal couple of months. Not sure what to think about it." He grinned, burning cigarette between his teeth.

"Not to mention from several more guys than before. Are you getting used to it? I mean, enjoying it more than you were?" Remaining standing, as this was clearly important.

Dan looked up, pondering the question for a moment, until he nodded. "Aye. I don't equate it anymore with ..." hesitating, trailing off, before he grabbed the bull by the horn, naming 'it'. After all those years. For the first time. "I don't think anymore of the rape."

Vadim's face softened. "I just wish it had been different, you know. Having you is still my greatest thrill. It's good I didn't fuck you up forever."

"Aye, strange, isn't it? Tells a lot about us, the way we 'met'. And the crazy thing is, if I had met you, like, properly met you, nothing would have ever happened." Inhaling, Dan sat and mused. "I don't condone what you did, hell, no, you didn't fuck me up forever. I'm tough, and let's face it, I could have fucked you up forever by torturing you." He tilted his head, smoke slowly curling out of his nostrils. "What a fucked up love-affair of violence we are."

Vadim smiled. "You broke me up there in the mountains. You cracked something in my head, I don't know. I have never been obsessed with another person before or after. You just drilled your way in and since then, I've been yours. You got to a place that I didn't know existed ... and all that has changed me, taken the stuff away I thought was true about me. In some weird, weird way, started something that turned me into more than a good-looking bastard."

"I'm not sure if that's ... a good thing? I mean, the breaking and cracking and drilling." Dan looked quizzically at Vadim.

"Just to say that it wasn't gentle and all the more powerful."

"But I guess I get the bastard thing. I was an asshole. I needed no one, I wanted no one, and I didn't give a shit about anyone. You changed that, you made me human. Loving someone does that, I suppose."

Vadim smiled. "It does, doesn't it?" He headed over to kiss Dan, mindful of the bruises. "But I need to go piss now, if you don't mind."

"I really don't mind *that*." Dan grinned, got up to get rid of his cigarette and stretched. "And if you don't mind *me*, I'll get shaved while you piss."

After they'd shaved and showered, they got dressed, with Dan deciding that if he had to run around with the embarrassing black eye, which was pretty much swollen shut, then he should at least distract with his arse in the skin tight suede trousers that Vadim had got him. All kitted up, they headed down to the kitchen, where Solange was busy making breakfast, with Jean sitting there, watching, and having his first coffee.

"Hey! Good morning. Some of the other guests have already headed off – planes to catch, people to interview, shootings in New York City ... how are you guys? And how did you get those bruises, Dan? I'd assume that is a bit hardcore for you?"

"Holy shit." Dan shook his head, "Jean, do you ever need to breathe? Or is it the new status as husband that got you to talk like a water fall?"

"Good answer ... not." Jean laughed.

Ignoring Jean, Dan walked over to Solange, taking her hand once more with a grin and placing a small kiss onto it, murmuring, "a beautiful lady who gives me food will get anything from me."

Solange gave a gasp at his eye and took his hand firmer. "Dear me. That looks painful. Are you sure you're alright or should I call the doctor?"

"I'm fine." He smiled, "I had worse, much worse, and if I get some of that lovely smelling food, I'll be as good as new." Turning back towards Jean, Dan asked innocently, "have you seen Lieutenant Beauvais this morning?"

"He's out running." Jean grinned knowingly, over his coffee. "What happened?"

"Ah, we kind of stumbled over the same stone, or root, or something, and seem to have bruised our faces. Accidentally." Dan sat down at the table, grinning at Jean and Vadim.

Solange took the large pan and served sausages, scrambled egg, bacon, and topped everything off with a small basket of cut up baguette. "Jean has convinced me that a coffee and a croissant is not breakfast for strapping men like you."

Dan looked up at her, "I am afraid I have to declare that I love your husband for this." He grinned.

"Ah, come on, I taught her the joys of nicely fried up bacon." Jean grinned widely, and took hold of her waist, pulling her towards him, and kissing her on the neck. "Pigs are fine for food. I wouldn't know what else to do with them."

"Not a thought I would like to have before breakfast." Reaching for sausages, Dan was helping himself to a plateful. "When are you off on honeymoon?"

"I booked the flights for tomorrow. We're off to Réunion, that's near Madagascar. Tiny island that speaks French and has an active volcano." Jean released his wife so she could go on dishing up food. Jean tilted his head, listening. "Hey, Thierry." The main door shut and Beauvais came in, drenched in sweat, the scratches and swellings in his face very visible, too. Dan was grinning when he saw the nice big bruise at the jaw. At least he wasn't the only one.

"What?"

"Get showered. We might wait with breakfast for a minute or two."

"Okay. I'll hurry up."

"Wait? You must be joking, I'm starving." Lifting his head, Dan looked at the Lieutenant, full-on and one-eyed. "I give you thirty seconds or I'll start with my sausages and eggs." Grinning.

Vadim laughed at that and murmured: "Always the sausage," but settled in himself while there was more scrambled eggs and sausages for him, and freshly squeezed orange juice. "He'll have some fun chewing with that," murmured Vadim.

"That'll be a great satisfaction to me." Dan grinned, fortifying himself with strong coffee. "Because if I were honest I'd say I ache in far too many places to feel strictly fine, but I'm not honest."

"Any particular reason for the fight?" asked Jean.

Dan looked behind him and saw Solange at the fridge. "Aye, but not the best place and time to talk about it." He smiled.

“Ah, pissing contest,” said Jean, and Dan grinned, without any reply.

Just a minute later, Beauvais appeared in a dressing gown, still wet, but obviously having rushed to get a piece of the breakfast. “That vineyard,” he said to Jean. “The one you showed me on the first day ... that is all yours?”

Jean shrugged. “Mostly because I can’t find a buyer. But yeah, it belongs to the property.”

Dan started to eat, truly starving by now. “Fancy yourself as a vintner?”

“When I got this place, I thought that would be really cool, but since then I’ve realized just how much work that is. The place hasn’t been kept up for ages, I don’t think anybody did anything with it for ten years at least. Putting it back into production ... would be more time than I have. And Solange has her life, too.”

“Damn shame. It’s a nice piece of land,” said Beauvais.

“Can’t you get someone else to be the vintner, and you just hire out the land, and get someone in with ideas but no money?”

Jean grinned at Dan. “Everybody and their dog has a vineyard in these parts. I’ll see what I do with it. The house needs to get finished first, and then there is the outhouse, and then, if I still have the money and the time, I’ll have a look what to do with the land.”

“Fair enough,” Dan smiled and tucked into his breakfast in earnest. “Changing the subject, any idea where we can hire a caravan or a motorhome?”

“Sure. I can drive you there, you have a look ... You can stay here, if you want to. Have some holidays, too.”

“No, that’s fine. Beauvais wanted to take a look at property around here,” glancing at the legionnaire, “so we figured we’d take him round. Bit of a boy scout camping adventure.” Dan grinned.

“Oh. Right.” Jean grinned. “That’s probably the best idea for you guys, then. Cool. I’ll show you on the map, and you head out for your scouting adventure. Talking of which, Pascal left with one of the models ... I don’t think he’ll come back anytime soon, but he said I should give greetings and all that to you if he shouldn’t come back.” He got up to get himself more coffee. “What are your plans after that? New Zealand? And then – any more wars? I don’t have a contract yet, but I could use one, looking at how the roof is fucking expensive.”

“Aye, New Zealand. I’ve been promising Vadim to take him to the dilapidated place that I’ve bought. High time we actually did it. We got over a month before we’re heading to wherever Maggie decides to send us.” Finishing off his plate, he glanced at the legionnaire again, who was silently and meticulously finishing off the food on his plate.

Jean leaned against the fridge. “I was considering Yugoslavia, but ... don’t know. Friend of mine said he had something in Africa, but he still has to get back to me. I should be alright for a while longer, even though Thierry here thinks I should come back.”

“They’d fast track you right after the farm, you know.”

“The pay is shit, I can make more money somewhere else, and I guess I’m getting a bit too independent for the Legion. But thanks for the offer.”

Dan looked at Vadim, quirking a small smile, wondering about some things, which prompted Vadim to lean in and ask “what?” in a whisper, but Dan just shook his head.

“Anyway,” Dan leaned back, “I am sure that wherever we will all end up, we’ll be together again at some stage.”

“Well,” said Solange, pouring herself some orange juice. “I’m quite often in Paris – the house is easily large enough. You can just fly in and spend some time with Jean. Provided he is here, of course.” She placed a hand on his shoulder. “Would make me feel less guilty about having girls’ nights out.”

Dan just about managed not to choke on the rest of his coffee, and he produced a passable smile. “Sounds like a plan, doesn’t it?” Getting too close to the bone, Dan stood up, rubbing his hands, “but for now, let’s go and hire a caravan.”

Beauvais got up. “I’ll just get dressed. Five minutes.” He headed upstairs and soon re-emerged with civilian clothes. Jean explained where the place was, and just a few minutes later, they were off.

After inspecting a few caravans and motorhomes, the decision was reached to not go over the top. They didn’t choose the most expensive one, but it was spacious enough and Vadim drove the motorhome back, while Beauvais and Dan were in the car.

The day was spent with a long soak in the bath for Dan, and an afternoon kip that took longer than he’d intended, but for some reason he was bloody exhausted. After he’d taken a few painkillers, he just allowed himself to rest. Spending the evening with Jean and Solange, they were the only guests left. The evening got late, and the night turned mellow, without any of the wildness of the nights before.

The next morning saw them all depart, with Jean and Solange heading towards the airport, and the three men setting off in their motorhome.

They managed to have a look at two houses, none of which entirely convinced Beauvais, and when the evening came, they found a small restaurant, had fantastic food and large quantities of wine. Vadim had had the good sense to take the condoms and lube from the small house – he assumed Jean wouldn’t miss either for the moment – and Beauvais was enthusiastic about getting fucked, especially when one man took him and the other held him. He soon demanded more, and harder, something which they complied with readily. Afterwards, they lay in a heap on the bunk, stroking and sated, and Vadim found himself wondering about several things – the fact that violence turned him on, and Glasgow, and how that had turned Dan on, and him, too, but also about the torture and that maddening impulse to hurt Beauvais. Breaking him? It might be about that. Might be about taking his control and getting to the very bottom of the man, even if it meant to destroy everything on the way down.

Dan, unaware of darker thoughts, was sleeping sated and content, since everything was right with the world in his mind. He crawled out of the bunk the next morning, for once awake before Vadim was, and found Beauvais outside. The Frenchman had moved to the single bunk to sleep, and was now in trainers

and running outfit. Joining the legionnaire without talking much, they jogged for a good hour, returning to a lazy Vadim who lay still naked and sprawled across the bed, not knowing what hit him when two men, wet from the shower, took advantage of his - probably fake - drowsiness.

The second day was similar to the first, and the third as well. Sex at every opportunity, until on the fourth day even Dan was so exhausted, the others found him asleep in the sun, right beside the lake where they were camping. Beauvais sat down next to him, eating cold beans with a fork from an opened tin, gazing across the lake for a while, then looking up at Dan. "Did you guys quit because you're gay?"

"Hm?" Dan yawned and stretched, thankful for being able to open his eye fully again. "No, I left because I had knee surgery two years before I got out, and they wouldn't let me go back to Afghanistan. So I quit. Threw away most of my pension, got a job as chef of security in the British embassy in Kabul, and earned shitloads." Dan turned onto his side, watching Beauvais. "Vadim ... now that's a completely different matter."

"He left because of that?" Beauvais glanced into the mostly empty tin and scraped a few more beans out.

"No. The KGB kidnapped him in Kabul, imprisoned him, used a tape of our last night together as evidence, plus a thousand other made-up things, and tortured him to get a confession for crimes he's never committed." Dan trailed off, reaching for his pack of fags and a bottle of beer.

"Fuck." Beauvais looked around, but Vadim was nowhere to be seen. "Shouldn't have asked. People don't talk about their past in the Legion. Like we don't have any." He put the tin down and leaned back.

"That's sometimes better." Dan had a few mouthfuls of the lukewarm beer, and lit a cigarette.

Beauvais had grown more relaxed, and Vadim had one morning wondered aloud when he was alone with Dan, how much of his attitude had been just an unfulfilled need for sex. Quite a bit, it seemed. The legionnaire was much more at ease, and even happy.

"It's odd. One moment I think about quitting, and the other moment I think I should just keep it inside and let it out when I'm on leave. And I have only a few days left to work it out."

"It's not worth quitting because of your sexuality, if it's a job that is *you*." Dan shook his head, blowing smoke rings, deep in thought. "I got a mate, a yank, he's gay and he's a Marine. Vadim's got a mate, too, Delta. You want to have a chat with them? Could be good to hear how others are dealing with it."

Beauvais frowned, then nodded. "Can you arrange that? The Legion is more than a job. It's a way of life. But losing the respect because of what I like, that would be hard."

"I can imagine. Hasn't happened to me, but ... let's just say I understand." Dan nodded, holding a fresh bottle of beer out to Beauvais. "I'll try and give my mate a ring later on. Got a few phone numbers to check on, but haven't tried any of them since he left the Gulf." Regarding Beauvais for a moment, "you've

been lying to yourself all those years, how hard do you think will it be to lie to others?"

"I don't know. I've been thinking about it, but I don't know. Will be best to just not talk about sex and all that." Beauvais grinned, without humour. "Not that sex is on a soldier's mind at all."

"No, of course not." Dan gave a short, sharp laugh. "You'd have to bottle it up until you're on R&R and then get yourself to a place where you can have sex until you don't want it anymore. Shit solution but better than none. Besides, you're always welcome to meet up with us."

Beauvais nodded. "Alternatively ... I become a merc and there's less ... problem with it. And that means leaving everything behind. Again. Even though I'm settled in quite nicely."

"I know I'm not supposed to say this anymore, but ... you'd be a piss-poor merc, Beauvais. You've got a rod up your arse and that's perfectly fine for the Legion - in fact, I bet my own balls that you will make it far up the ranks, but as a merc? Forget it. You wouldn't fit in and the guys would hate you, and that's a shit place to be. You're an officer, aye? That's what you always wanted to be, you told me so, but as a merc you're just like everyone else, and that's down and dirty, and shoulder to shoulder. It wouldn't be for you, trust me."

"Listen to him. I had trouble fitting in as well. Officers have problems adjusting to that life." Vadim had stepped out of the caravan and moved closer, wearing just jeans and trainers. He sat down on the ground as well. "Plus, you're even more expendable than in the Legion. People respect you as a soldier, with mercs, they just stare at your paycheck and assume you're a loose gun, a troublemaker. Might be true, might not be true, but sometimes, I miss the army for all the things it did provide, and that's saying something, with the Soviet Army."

Beauvais nodded, gazing out over the lake, and Vadim placed a hand on his shoulder and pulled him closer, getting him to lean against him. They both lay back while he caressed Beauvais' chest. "Not easy," the Frenchman murmured.

"No." Dan smiled, looking at Vadim, dark eyes gazing into pale ones, and his smile turned soft and infinitely tender. "It's not easy, but it's worth it." Lying back down, he stared into the sky, eyes shielded from the sun.

* * *

In the evening they headed off into the next small town for wine and food, and to find a public phone. Dan had a list of phone numbers for Matt, and a big pocket full of change. He was in the phone box for ten minutes, trying a couple of numbers, family, camp, until he finally got through and gestured a thumbs up through the phone box. Turning his back to the other two, as he spoke with Matt. The smile unseen, the laughter, too, and so was the moment when he stopped and just listened, then laughed once more, in disbelief. Another ten minutes later, he came out of the phone box, grinning like a fool.

"Well," nodding to Beauvais, "Matt's very happy to talk to you. He's right now in his own place, on leave for three weeks, so you get him on his home number. And for Hooch ..." Dan looked at Vadim, grinning, "I can tell you where Hooch's gonna be."

"Somalia?"

"Not *quite*," Dan grinned. "What about 'at Matt's, from tomorrow, for the rest of the week?'"

"Oh." Vadim grinned, then turned to Beauvais. "We're talking Lone Cowboy here. Seems he's 'shacked up' with another serviceman."

"Two soldiers?" Beauvais grinned. "Lucky bastards, I suppose."

"Not sure I'd call it 'shacked up' in Hooch's case, but seems my little matchmaking business has taken off." Dan grinned, flapped his hands behind him, "see my angel wings? Call me cupid."

Vadim shook his head. "A week is 'shacked up'. And why not. They fit well together. So, we call them tomorrow again?"

"Aye, Matt said that Hooch asked him, should I call him, to tell you to call him." Dan fished for a cigarette, lighting it.

Vadim needed a moment to follow the sentence, then nodded. "I'd like to hear from him. See how he's getting on." Strange feeling, that. When he remembered Hooch he remembered him naked, intent, taut, dangerous.

"Seems you made an impression." Dan smiled, stashing the lighter away.

Vadim grinned. "I'd hope so."

"And now, wine and food? I am starving." Dan pointed an accusing finger at Beauvais, "you've worn me out."

Beauvais lifted his shoulders. "What about a nice little restaurant? I know a good place around here. Five minutes' drive."

"Then why did we stop here in the first place?" Dan rolled his eyes.

And so they drove to the place that the Lieutenant recommended, enjoying themselves with good food and wine. They stayed for a long time in the hospitable place, before driving back to the caravan. It was close to midnight when they arrived, and Dan stopped at the door, blocking it, and looking at the other two men, "and now? Who's up for a blow job?" Grinning from ear to ear. The generous amounts of wine had undoubtedly something to do with his mood.

Vadim looked at Beauvais. "I don't think you've had one of those, yet." Beauvais shook his head and froze when Vadim stepped behind him and began to unbuckle his belt. Once it was open, his hand traced Beauvais' cock, rubbed it through the cloth and kept very close to him - something Beauvais had learned to read as a prelude to sex.

Dan remained standing on the top step at the door of the motor home, while other two remained outside, in the darkness. "Bearing in mind ..." he took a step back down. "That I am old ..." another step, and he lowered to sit on the lowest step, "I'll just remain on the right height without having to kneel ..." Leaning forward, hands on the legionnaire's hips to pull him closer, nuzzling the cock through the fabric of Beauvais' trousers.

Beauvais's breath caught audibly, and he trembled when Vadim opened his fly and freed his cock. Placing his free hand at Dan's jaw, Vadim guided Dan towards Beauvais's cock he was holding, serving, feeding. The gesture was odd, tender, erotic, all in one and Beauvais shivered. Vadim grinned at that. "Best part's still coming."

The sound from Dan was part chuckle, part something completely unidentifiable, when he parted his lips and took in the Lieutenant's cock. Slow, but greedy. Concentrated, eyes closed, hands on Beauvais's hips, he moved him closer, until it was impossible to get any closer. Burying the cock that had hardened within a second, all the way, deep down his throat.

Beauvais cursed, but Vadim held him so he couldn't move - part of what he'd learned from the first time, when Beauvais had fucked Dan's throat. This time, Dan called the shots, and Vadim made sure Beauvais understood that. "I love when he does that," he murmured into Beauvais' ear. "First time, he tied me up and held a knife to my balls while he learnt to suck me off. Since then, it's one of his favourites. And mine."

Beauvais gave a choked sound of need.

Dan manipulated the body in front of him by moving the lean hips with his hands, pushing the body back instead of pulling away. Breathing, focused, and at the same time goddamned horny. *Cocksucker*. Loved it, wanted it, goddamned cocksucker, and would always be. Pushing back down, moving both, man and his own head, meeting deep, far deeper, with something akin to violence, and yet none of the reckless urgency. Repeating, the next time sucking in as he moved back. Strength, as he used every trick in the book to drive the Lieutenant to insanity. Vadim held him, physically held Beauvais's arms, his hands, his angle allowing him pretty much to immobilise the man, making sure that Beauvais didn't try to take control.

Beauvais groaned loudly, face twisted with need, the need always breaking through several layers of armour before he openly showed it, and now he did. Trying to move, breathless and moaning, his cock twitching every time Dan got it just right, increased the sensation.

Dan sucked and moved, pushed down, and let go again. Faster and faster, hardly a noise, barely a moment of gagging, pushing down so hard, it wasn't any longer about giving head, but about owning.

Beauvais just tensed, balls drawing up as he came. No warning, just that sound again, that groan that Vadim really liked, especially from a man who was so under control most of the time.

Dan took it, accepted it, and his whole body slackened as he forced himself to accept the erratic movements of orgasm. The cum shot straight down his throat, as he breathed through flared nostrils, concentrated. Fingers digging into the legionnaire's hips, before he finally pulled back and allowed the cock to slip out. Looking up, he grinned, saying nothing.

Slowly, Vadim released Beauvais's arms and embraced him from behind, kissing his neck. "Now, that's what I call a blowjob," he murmured into Beauvais's ear.

“And what would *you* call it?” Dan looked up at Beauvais, then cleared his throat.

“If that ... if that’s it, then that’s my first.” Beauvais grinned stupidly and relaxing somewhat against Vadim, who continued to hold and caress him.

Dan laughed, getting up from the step to light another cigarette. “Welcome to cocksuckers anon. The place for men to worship men’s appendices.” He lit his fag, leaning against the doorframe of the motor home. “And while we’re playing question and answer, did you ever suck anyone’s cock?”

Beauvais shook his head. “No. Of course not.”

“Do you want to?” asked Vadim.

Beauvais hesitated. “I ... guess I owe it to you.”

“If you need to tell yourself that to do it.” Vadim grinned. “I hated it for years and years. Still need to be in the mood for it. But when I am, I enjoy it. The power you have? The other guy’s going crazy, and it’s because of what you do ... that’s pretty good.”

“Listen to Vadim, he’s got a point. However, I wouldn’t want anyone to give me a blow job because he thinks he ought to. That’s too much like a business trade-off, just without the payment. I, for one, love sucking cock, always have, but there’s only one way to find out if you like it, aye?”

“Right now?”

Dan grinned. “Not if you don’t want to. We’re not in the legion here, you don’t have to follow orders.”

Beauvais swallowed. “Okay. But I have no idea what to do.” He knelt down nevertheless, and opened Dan’s trousers. Concentration on his features, he was thinking visibly about what he was doing, and Vadim grinned. “Would have been easier if he hadn’t come yet,” he murmured in Russian, then moved closer, running his hands over Beauvais’s face, over his lips, too, which Beauvais first seemed to take as a distraction. When Vadim gently pushed two of his fingers between Beauvais’s lips, that changed. Beauvais opened his teeth, and he got it when Vadim moved his fingers, pushing them deeper, making him suck on them. Grinning when Beauvais understood. “Easy ... you can’t take it too deep, so concentrate on the tip.”

Dan stood, leaning against the doorframe, cigarette in the corner of his lips, as he watched the scene in front of him. His cock made a visible jump, but he didn’t say anything. No pressure, no need, despite the growing obvious one.

Beauvais responded to Vadim’s fingers, closing his eyes, and Vadim took his time playing with him. His free hand adjusted himself in his trousers, and he grinned at Dan, a weird sense of irony at the scene, but at the same time teaching Beauvais the very basics of cocksucking.

Inhaling a last deep drag, Dan spit out the burnt-down fag, taking his cock in his hand. Fingers loosely curled around the hardening flesh. Not urging, just offering. “Ready to try it with the real thing?” Quietly.

Beauvais nodded, and Vadim pulled his fingers free. Vadim just touched his shoulders when Beauvais moved closer, leaning in. Shuffling on his knees to close the gap, and then, carefully, took a couple of inches of Dan’s cock

between his lips. Closing his lips around the flesh almost in an afterthought, and then, as if remembering, moved carefully, slowly, a bit in, a bit out, until he got used to the difference, took in more, and actually began to suck.

Dan kept watching, aroused but not getting anywhere. Didn't matter, though. If he needed to get off he knew how to, this was hot for different reasons. He'd had that man - that virgin - in two ways as the first. Fucked him: arse and throat, and that knowledge was enough to make him shudder. Fingers lightly carding through the short hair, merely guiding. Beauvais seemed glad for the guidance, while Vadim remained in his back, a stabilizing, securing presence, which was ironic since Vadim was far more likely to hurt a beginner than to be of any help. Beauvais kept his eyes closed and tried to get deeper, but his throat tightened immediately when the reflex was triggered, and he was careful after that.

"Just the tip. Takes a lot to have your throat fucked," murmured Vadim, which, again, provided some guidance, when Beauvais focused on the tip, sucking and licking it.

Dan's voice had turned husky, the Lieutenant's efforts were having an effect. "Aye ... not everyone's as reckless as I am." He grinned, then leaned his head back against the doorframe, fingers loosely connected with Beauvais's head. Minutes passed while Beauvais explored and tried to do what he could, but eventually, he was getting tired, pausing.

"I'll finish that," Vadim said, and Beauvais moved away.

"Right. Fuck me as you like," murmured Vadim, quickly loosened his jaw muscles, then took Dan's cock. Recklessly, deeply, forcing himself to go all the way.

Dan groaned, because he wanted it, and because it gave him all the control that simply robbed his mind. Taking Vadim's head between his hands, he pushed himself away from the doorframe and thrust forward, taking what he'd been offered, fucking Vadim's throat until the arousal found an outlet, and he came with a strangled groan.

Vadim pulled back just enough that the cock slipped from his throat and he could breathe, then remained long enough that he could clean Dan's cock. Running his tongue all over it, just gentle and showing the Frenchman that this was fun. If one knew what to do. Then, he pulled back and wiped his lips. "Good?"

"Holy shit." Dan managed to get out, knees jelly. "That was damn good. You two should act as a double feature." He looked at Vadim with that intense expression in his eyes. "And you?"

Vadim grinned. "I'm okay. I might want to get fucked later, so I'm keeping the thought. To build an appetite."

"I'm an old man." Dan smirked, "we might have to ask Beauvais to perform instead." Leaning towards the legionnaire, who'd been watching. "Well ... would you oblige?"

Beauvais looked at Vadim and grinned, if somewhat self-conscious. "I think I can do that. But you might have to tell me how he likes it." Glancing at Dan.

"I think you're a natural." Dan grinned, "from what I can tell. But I'll be there, and I'll watch, and I'll possibly blow my load watching Vadim getting fucked." Dan finally stooped and turned to go inside. "But until then, what about another bottle of plonk?"

Beauvais and Vadim exchanged a glance and both headed to follow Dan. Both thinking about it, and enjoying the idea. And later, when they were all half-drunk, exactly that happened, Beauvais fucked Vadim, just as measured and controlled as he'd fucked Dan, and Vadim was only too aware that Dan enjoyed watching him, so he was louder than usual, let go and put in more of a show - for Dan's sake. Amusingly enough, that seemed to increase the intensity.

When they finally went to sleep, Dan was holding Vadim close, unwilling to let go, even in his sleep.

* * *

The next day started fairly late, with even Beauvais lying in the cot for longer than usual. Followed by a hearty and unhealthy fry-up, done on the small barbecue, and then a trip into the next town. Dan and Beauvais were browsing a surplus shop, enjoying a good look at the French military gear, while Vadim was making his phone call to America.

Vadim leaned against the phone booth and made sure with glances at the slip of paper that he'd dialled the right number. It took a while, several long tones indicated that, almost half the world away, a phone was ringing.

"Yeah?" A young voice answered. Matt.

"Vadim here. I heard Hooch is at your place?" Then, remembering his manners, he added: "How are you?"

"Yeah." Matt laughed, his voice turning from slightly sleepy to mostly awake. "I'm alright, dude. Hooch's right here. Hang on ...". With that the phone was moved from one hand to the other during a moment of silence.

"You alright?" Hooch's drawl was heard the next moment, then a shuffle of what sounded like blankets or duvets, and a noisy exhale, like smoking.

"I'm fine ... we're in France, Jean got married, and Dan acquired himself a French soldier. An officer. The last days, we've been teaching him how to do the gay stuff." Vadim laughed softly. "In short, we're having a good time. You, too, I trust?" Strange, he thought, he missed Hooch, even though he'd only really met him once. Talking to him felt good, even though the man hardly talked at all. Well. Being listened to, then.

"Yeah. Been good." There was amusement in Hooch's voice. "Back from Angola with sunburn on my arse."

"Nice location." Vadim grinned broadly. "I meant, both. Angola, and your arse. We should catch up." Which sounded, in his own ears, very much like 'we should have sex', but he couldn't help it. Remembering Hooch was always something good.

Hooch's laughed, then took another drag from the cigarette. "Yeah, we should." A pause, another drag of the cigarette, and then a chuckle. "But right now I'm wasted. Fucking youngsters."

Vadim smiled. "I figured that much ... and Dan and I are heading for New Zealand soon, anyway."

"After that?" No pause, this time, just the quiet sound of smoke being exhaled.

"I don't know. I guess we'll hang around Europe, before heading into the next hotspot. If you are anywhere close ...?" Vadim listened with intent and nearly cursed himself. Hooch was in bed with Matt, and he was angling for sex. Yeah, that, but more, too. He simply wanted to see Hooch again. If that came with sex, he was the last person to say no to that. But if it didn't ... that was fine, too.

"How long you hangin' round? Got a few weeks. Figured some travelling." Hooch's drawl was followed by another inhale and exhale, and then the distant sound of the cigarette being stubbed out.

"A few weeks. We have to start work on the farm, and I was planning to see some stuff in Europe." Museums, locations, good food, places he'd only read about. "We could meet there."

"Yeah, got till end of May." Hooch was shifting, the bed spreads rustling. "Meeting up in Germany? Berlin?"

"Let's say mid May. After Worker's Day. Berlin is a good choice - I could refresh my memory of the place. I'll find accom." Which, these days, meant something nice.

"Done. Will be here for another week."

"Excellent." Thinking for a moment. "Ah, and this Frenchman would like to talk to you. Both of you, I guess. He's having second thoughts about remaining a career officer. We are not exactly role models of sticking around and staying in the army, but I have the feeling this guy wouldn't cope with being a civilian. Dan thinks it would be good if he could talk to somebody ... in a similar situation."

"Yeah, sure. Give him this number. He could fly across." There was no doubt Hooch was harbouring a massive grin at the latter. "Is he an opportunist?"

"Better than that. He loves getting fucked. Dan calls him a natural. He isn't half bad at the fucking, either, just a little uptight unless he's having sex. Seems he was gay all those years and just made do to, you know, keep a low profile. Denial, all the way."

"Yeah ..." Hooch seemed thoughtful. "Get him here."

"He's shopping with Dan. I'll give him the number, he'll call you soon." Vadim smiled. "Thanks for doing this."

"No thanks." A pause, then "between friends." Another pause, the sound of someone else in the room. "Tell Dan to keep the thought."

Vadim grinned. "I'll make sure he's there." Hooch wanted Dan, too, apparently. A threesome seemed the best way to make sure nobody was jealous, and Hooch had been Dan's mate first.

“Matt’s been asking. He wants Dan to come here.” There was another sound, close to the phone, and something scrabbling at the receiver.

“Probably. They can talk about it ...” Only then did it occur to Vadim that Hooch’s words had hinted at the fact that the interest was from Matt’s side. Or Hooch didn’t even think in those categories. Opportunistic, with no favourites. Or had he?

“Vadim?” Another voice, Matt’s, after obvious kaffuffle. “Tell Dan to get his ass over here. Hooch gets you, I get him. Deal?”

Vadim laughed. “I’ll let him know. And I’m not upset I’m still not your type.”

Matt laughed, “big bad Russian, yeah?” But before he could say anything else, the receiver was snatched again. “But mine.” Hooch’s economic chuckle, before the receiver was put down and the line went dead.

“See you,” murmured Vadim, and hung up. Suddenly wistful, but at the same time it was good to hear the guys had fun. Hooch was more relaxed and talkative than ever before, and the ‘mine’ had given him goosebumps. Dirty old bastard, he thought. Once somebody calls you ‘mine’, you get all weak in the knees. Fuck that. Still, he wanted Hooch, and knowing he was wanted in return, was a good feeling. Flattering. He’d be in Berlin. Dan would likely be in the US. He pushed the door open and followed Dan and Beauvais into the army surplus store.

Beauvais was explaining some piece of French kit to Dan, in his economic ways, though the man was relatively relaxed by his standards, even joking. Matey with Dan. Just like any other man that Dan had gathered among his friends, Beauvais seemed to find it easy to be matey with him, despite their rocky start. Dan was nodding, pointing to a small detail, when he looked up and smiled at Vadim. “And? Everything settled?”

“Yeah. Hooch’s coming to Europe, you’re invited to Matt’s place, and both are happy to talk to B... you.” Vadim nodded towards the Frenchman. “It’ll be a biased view, but maybe it’s some food for thought.”

Beauvais gave a nod and put the kit down where he’d found it. “I have another five days.”

“No, you got the rest of your life,” murmured Vadim.

“Listen to him.” Dan smiled and clapped Beauvais’s shoulder. Quite a daring touch, but simply the way Dan functioned. “You go see those guys and they help you figure it out. Besides, what’s that about the five days?”

“That’s when my R&R ends.” Beauvais nodded to himself, deep in thought, but Vadim could see him tense up. The same anger and discipline that he’d had when they’d met him. It was his ‘game face’, he assumed, the Beauvais that wasn’t gay, that was a professional, commissioned officer.

“Shit, we better get you onto a plane, then. Aye?” Dan’s hand was back on Beauvais’s shoulder, but this time a squeeze, fingers kneading the tensing muscle, before he let go. “What about a last night with food drink and ... entertainment, before you’re heading off? I’m sure there must be a travel agent around somewhere.”

“Saw one on the way in,” Vadim added.

Beauvais looked at Dan, then nodded, relaxing slightly. The Legionnaire didn’t buy anything, it had been just browsing for him, and not much later they were back at the phone booth, making sure Matt and Hooch knew the date, and then off to the travel agent to book the flights. Beauvais took one that would leave early the next morning, and they made a final call to ensure that either Matt or Hooch or both would pick him up.

“Right.” Dan sat on the edge of the fountain, right in the middle of the market place, smoking a cigarette. “Now what’s that about Hooch and Matt and you and I and flying across and all that?”

“Matt’s idea. I mentioned to Hooch I’d like to meet him again, then Matt snatched the receiver and said I could have him, if you come over, too.”

Dan raised his brows and looked at Beauvais with a fake painful expression. “The things I have to put up with. I am being pandered like a token.”

“Yeah. Screwing a twenty-hardly-anything jarhead is such a chore.” Vadim gave a laugh.

“It *is*! He’s too perfect, he makes me feel old and decrepit.” Seeing that he didn’t get any sympathy from either of them, Dan heaved an exaggerated sigh before pulling on his fag. “We’ll see, alright?” He grinned, remaining somewhat elusive. “For now I suggest frequenting the boulangerie over there and then the café next door, until it is time for dinner. I could do with some more of that famous French wine, what about you two?”

“Definitely. Before I head off to America.” Saying it with a touch of that typically French culinary superiority. “I’ll pay.”

Dan grinned. “Fair enough, I’m not complaining.” He stubbed out the cigarette butt, and they all headed towards the shops and the eateries. Food and drink was plentiful throughout the day and evening, and when they returned to the caravan at night, all of them more drunk than tipsy, they still managed to end up entangled in each others’ limbs, stroking, touching, thrusting and sucking, until finally – without Beauvais leaving Dan and Vadim’s bunk – they fell asleep and nothing but soft snores disturbed the night where groans and suppressed cries had been before.

April/May 1992, New Zealand

Dan was drumming his fingers onto the armrest while whistling a crooked tune under his breath, glancing left and right, back and front, anxious for takeoff.

Vadim tightened his seatbelt and leaned back. "What's up? Impatient for the ... what? Twenty-eight hours flight, two stop-overs, to start?"

"Aye, I want to get it done and over with." Dan turned to the side, grinning, "at least we have leg room. Wonder how the poor bastards in the back are faring. Probably worse than a good old Herc."

Vadim turned his head to face Dan. "Means they'll be sleeping much worse, because I'm planning to sleep once they turn down the light. Twenty-eight hours and the time lag ... doesn't get farther on this planet than that."

"No, but it'll be worth it." Finally, the fasten seatbelt sign came up, and Dan clicked the metal buckle shut. "Wonder if Beauvais is enjoying his stay." He grinned from ear to ear, settling back into the seat for take-off.

"And now I wonder what the guys do with him ... nice thought." Grinning lazily, Vadim half-closed his eyes. "Shouldn't take Hooch long to discover his talents."

"Are we something like pimps now?" Dan mock-gasped as the plane accelerated. "And what was this business about meeting up in Berlin?"

"Well. I want to catch up with Hooch. If that's okay? Do you want to join us?"

"What else should I do? Visit museums?" Dan snorted.

"No, unlikely. Even though Matt did ask whether you'd fly over to visit him. Remember?"

"Aye." Dan looked at Vadim, pressed into his seat at take-off. "But that would mean flying across while you're here." 'Here' being some vague area that covered Europe.

"I'm not sure I could join you *there*." There covering the vague area west of what Dan had called 'here'.

"What do you mean? You got a bloody medal from them."

"Hmmm. I guess." Vadim felt the powerful engines vibrate and push them right into the sky. Waiting for the ascent to slow and the plane to get back to horizontal. The physics involved were quite astonishing, if he thought about it. "Join us in Berlin, then. He said he had been to Angola. I just want to try and stay in touch. It's hard, the staying in touch part. I don't want to repeat a few mistakes I've made."

"You need some time with Hooch alone?" Dan pulled a packet of nicotine gums out of his shirt pocket, all the while looking at Vadim.

"No. That's not it." Or was it? He really didn't know what he wanted, only, to maybe not let people slip away that he cared about. It was so difficult to get them back. A simple 'Sorry I haven't called for, oh, five years' or something like

that simply didn't cut it. It was awkward and embarrassing. And Katya was a strong presence right in his mind. He needed to call her.

"It's okay." Dan smiled, "no really, it is. If you think he will become a friend, a real good friend like Jean, then that's alright. As long as you love *me*, then where's the problem? We all need friends." Tearing the wrapper open, he stuffed the chewing gum between his lips with a grimace of disgust.

"I ..." want nobody else, Vadim thought, and then he thought of the men they'd 'shared'. Matt. Jean. Beauvais. The guys in Glasgow. Dan encouraging it, setting it up, arranging it, and certainly never stopping it. "Don't know, Dan. You can come along. Or I can cancel it."

"Why?" Dark eyes intense. "You worried you'll fall in love with the Delta?"

"I don't know." Vadim frowned. "He ... cuts deeper than the others. I'd lie if I said anything else. But it's not, nowhere near to ... us." This conversation was getting into dangerous areas. Somehow.

"Well ..." Chewing the gum slowly, Dan's only outlet for a nicotine fix, "I figure that if you *did* fall in love with him, then the whole thing between us would be shit anyway. So, there's no problem, because I figure you won't, but if you did ... then I figure you didn't love me properly." He flashed a brief grin.

Vadim shuddered. He couldn't even think it. There was simply no alternative to Dan, and the thought of that breaking or fading made him sick to his stomach. "You're all I have, Dan. Every bit."

"In that case ..." Dan grinned more substantially, reaching for Vadim's hand to squeeze it almost painfully tight, "it's all sorted. You go see Hooch without funny old me around, and I go see what else is on."

Vadim took the hand and raised it to his lips. He couldn't think it, didn't want to get anywhere near that thought. Losing Dan, or even losing what he felt, just opened up the darkness and the fear. Dan was his antidote to the poison they'd drip-fed him for two years. "First, New Zealand," he murmured.

"Aye," Dan smiled, leaning his head against Vadim's shoulder, even though a stewardess was walking past. But they'd been there, done that, and he just couldn't be bothered. "Have to show you the dilapidated pile of crap that I bought for a pittance and on a whim."

"We'll get it back up to specs. Well, I guess we can pay for somebody to put it into order. I have to admit I'm useless at menial labour. Not like Jean, eh? He seemed really proud of that ... 'house' of his."

Dan grinned and nodded. 'House' indeed. "We won't even be there to fix it. Got to earn some more dosh to get it all set up. Even though ... I've been wondering, is Kiwiland really a good place to move to? We'll be out of the way from everyone and everything."

"Won't happen just yet. First, we go there on R&R, then for longer holidays, and then we can still travel. Doesn't mean we have to sit in front of the fireplace all day anyway, and - people can come visit us."

"You think they would?" Dan lifted his head to look at Vadim. "Flying across the world to visit two old fogies?"

"Why not?"

“Well, perhaps if we make it worthwhile for them.” Flashing a toothy grin, Dan closed his eyes for a moment.

“Always a possibility.” Vadim settled in when the plane moved to horizontal and people got up to stretch their legs, head to the toilets. The beautiful stewardesses appeared to serve a first round of drinks, and while they did everything they could, the travel took forever. There was only so much one could do to pass the time, and Vadim found that simply waiting had become something that his mind didn’t agree to. Reading was difficult. And sleeping - well, he should try to keep some structure to the day. Go to sleep when the lights were dimmed, and wake up when they were up. Which was nowhere like his biological clock, as they slowly, painfully slowly, flew across the vastness that was Asia. Hours and hours to cross India, and it was strange to think he was much closer to the place where it had all begun than he’d been for a long time. Somewhere, a few hours to the north, lay that vast and unforgiving country that Dan still missed.

Dan yawned, stretching on the seat that had turned into something resembling a half-way comfortable bed, yet never comfortable enough for men of their size. “Where are we?” Sleepy, muzzled, and his hair a wild mess, as he blinked to try and get his bearing.

“Just south of Kashmir,” murmured Vadim. “Give or take a few thousand miles.”

“Ah ... Kashmir.” Dan set up, rolling his shoulders. Clothes crumpled beneath the blanket. Reaching for his shirt pocket to find his packet of fags - before realising that wasn’t going to happen. Took a fresh chewing gum instead. “Part of what you crossed?”

Vadim grinned. “I was just that other side of insane when I did that. If it hadn’t been for the fear, it would have been a great adventure.”

Dan looked at him for a long time, far longer than felt comfortable, while he slowly unwrapped the next gum, but never put it into his mouth. “I would have died if you hadn’t come.” No inflexion. “I couldn’t find a ... reason. Fighting was just too hard.”

Vadim took his hand again. “It’s one regret I have. That I didn’t stay.” Throat too tight to speak. Just how much stupid pain they would have been saved, he could only imagine. Maggie could have helped. Katya - would have got the message that he had died. Lesha would have had to answer some unpleasant questions, but he was a smooth liar. Lesha. Whatever had happened to him.

“But you couldn’t.” Dan’s voice was quiet, holding onto the hand. “Your kids ...” Not the wife, no. He squeezed the hand again, murmuring, “there is no point in ifs and whats. What happened, happened, and we are here, now, alive. In a plane on our way to a godforsaken place with a view of mountains and an old and useless but bloody damned picturesque apple orchard.”

Vadim inhaled and nodded, trying to relax again and doze, but the memory stood stark in his mind. The blue sky. The dust. The vastness, the mountains,

and with them, the longing. He wished he could have reached out and told a younger self that it would all be good in the end, most likely.

Dan smiled, settled in again, blanket pulled over his head and eventually, while still holding onto Vadim's hand, he fell asleep once more. Sleeping until it was time to land for their first stop-over.

Singapore airport hit them with the full tropical force when they left the plane, and before they entered the air-conditioned airport. Vadim found a bottle of water and very nearly emptied it, feeling dehydrated and, most of all, tired. Changing to the other terminal, sometime in the morning, when Vadim's body told him it was still the middle of the night, and Dan was continuously yawning.

With a deep sigh, Vadim changed the time of his watch to local time. Better not cling to the time zone they'd left and adapt to the new one ... even though that would change again once they were back in the plane. "Two hours waiting for the connection," he murmured. "Then the flight to Auckland."

"Aye, but it's a damn sight better than last time I did this trip." Dan smiled at him, standing shoulder to shoulder in the queue. "The last time ... let's just say, Maggie sent me on R&R and it wasn't a question if I wanted to go or not. I had just smashed the entire content of my room in the embassy."

"When was that?" Vadim braced for the guilt, but tried to appear calm. He was tired and already exhausted, and he really just wanted to get there ... even though he didn't want to get onto another plane. Next time, they'd book a night in Singapore, only so they could rest in between, and catch up with the vast distance they'd travelled.

"Ah, well." Dan shrugged, glanced at Vadim, and he smiled, "had just been under a lot of strain. You were gone, imprisoned, and things didn't work out the way I had hoped. I flipped one day. No one's fault except mine, aye?" Time to show flight passes and passports once more, and they shuffled towards the plane.

Vadim nodded. "Better the room than yourself. Or somebody else." Two years. It had been a nightmare. How exactly Dan had spent the time he didn't actually know. Whether there were secrets there, lovers, maybe, or whether Dan had just, somehow, bottled it up and functioned.

They got into the plane, Dan not saying anything else, staying close, and falling asleep yet again the moment the plane was in the air. The second leg of the journey was even worse. Day, night, it all seemed messed up, legs hurt, and a bone-deep weariness settled. Vadim drank every time the stewardesses offered water, knowing he was losing fluids, his skin already felt like paper. The ocean crept past, Australia, too, hours and hours of Australia. The place couldn't possibly be so big, but it was. Earth was fucking huge, come to think of it. Then, eventually, out over the ocean again, and yet hours before New Zealand got anywhere close. The plane slowed a little at last, and other passengers began to stir. By now, Vadim wasn't even sure he had one coherent thought left in his mind, and when Dan surfaced for the third or fourth time - firmly according to the age-old squaddie maxim of grabbing some shut-eye whenever the

opportunity - he found himself smiled at and small water bottles being pushed into his hand.

Setting down on Auckland airport, picking up the baggage in the middle of the night, or noon, or whenever, customs was queuing up on tired legs, shuffling the cabin bag closer to a tall, stocky man in a uniform. Something deeply primal about his haughty features and the almond shaped, dark eyes. Vadim found himself smile wearily. Whatever type of ethnic group that was, the uniform and the savage pride in this man went well together.

Dan, though, was awake, having slept through most of the journey, and his interest was all too clear. Still, he behaved impeccably, didn't even crack a joke, just stared at the officer all too appreciatively.

"That's a native?"

"Aye," Dan grinned, once they had passed and were out of earshot. "Fucking dishy, if you ask me. Shame many of them are fat and ugly, but hell, the good ones I saw ... holy fucking cow, they were sexy." They filed into the baggage hall, claiming their suitcases soon enough.

"I'll keep an eye on them." Vadim nodded, tossing the bags in the taxi, they headed to a soulless hotel 20 minutes from the airport, where everything was typically chain motel style. The service was good, though, food 24/7, but Vadim just wanted to get out of the wet autumnal weather. Not only were they now twelve hours behind - or earlier, or whatever - but it was autumn, not spring. And it was humid enough to make him breathe in big gulps, like drinking. He managed to undress and set the alarm clock, falling into bed, while Dan stayed downstairs, wide awake since he'd slept most of the journey. He had a large dinner with all the trimming, plus the inevitable booze. The climate didn't trouble him. Afghan mountains or Auckland, it all boiled down to one thing: knowing he would walk to a room where Vadim was sleeping, crawling under the covers, spooning close, and sleeping. The alarm went off in the late morning, and they got ready for the last leg of the journey.

Taxi, Auckland airport. By day, Auckland was stretched out and ugly, somehow industrial-looking and grimy, but Vadim assumed it had to have nice areas, too. Only they weren't passing any of them. Heading for the domestic terminal - which was a tiny hall - of Auckland airport, and then getting their Air New Zealand tickets for the domestic flight to Palmerston North.

Once again a queue, until they finally sat in the last plane. "You sure you want to settle here?" asked Dan, buckling up.

"Ask me again after I've seen the place." The small plane held maybe fifty passengers, and the flight was less than an hour. Mercifully short. After take off, all the greenness that was this island became visible. Vast, vast green space, only dotted with what seemed to be cattle or sheep, the occasional house. The area they covered were mostly plains, and some coast. Then, soon, touchdown in Palmerston North, which made Vadim wonder if there was a Palmerston South, East, and West, too. They got out of the small plane, walked across the tarmac, entered a building that looked more like a garage than an airport building,

waited about five minutes, and somebody tossed their luggage on the small band in the room. Unceremoniously, uncomplicated, and somewhat primitive.

The parking lot seemed like that of a supermarket, but mostly empty. They just stepped out of the building right onto it. The air was cold and humid, and the fact that they didn't have to fly anymore made Vadim obscenely happy.

"Guess we have to get a car somewhere, aye?" Dan grinned at Vadim, luggage at his feet, deeply, oh so deeply, inhaling the nicotine.

"We do?" Vadim glanced around, trying to locate a car rental place. There had been one in the airport, or had there? The airport was nestled right into the 'city', which was all flat bungalow style houses from what he could see.

Dan grinned, "aye, we do. I learned the hard way last time, that if you don't get a car, you're fucked. Distances are too vast." Pointing towards an innocuous area, "let's head there, they should have our 4x4."

Vadim nodded, relieved, because there was an absence of taxis. Dan picked up the car and off they were again, crossing the small town - which was exactly what Vadim had seen from the airport - stretched out, large houses with large gardens, and one thing that became noticeable, too. New Zealanders had no idea how to build smooth roads. The 4x4 was overkill for the street, but even through the car's suspension, they could feel and hear that the street building had been sloppy at best. But streets were straight and had 90 degree turns. Everything seemed young and recent somehow, fresh, young, unspoilt. And green. There were lemon trees, palm trees, and an abundance of plant life that Vadim had never seen anywhere else.

Dan consulted the map he'd requested, even though it wasn't easy to get lost. Once outside the city, there were hardly any roads crossing this one, and at some point, they headed into a smaller road that headed into the hills that became steeper and more wild, and then the road hugged the mountains that were surprisingly green and surprisingly steep. To Vadim's mind, it was very obvious that the land had retained its primal shapes, even if it was farmland. There seemed to have been little impact on the land itself, apart from the street or the small bridges that they crossed when they headed into the valley. This area didn't even appear to have a name. There were farms and sheep, occasional cattle and horses. When Dan turned onto another road - or path - right there, in a small side-valley that they seemed to share with nobody, stood a two-storey building. In that, alone, it seemed peculiar- all other houses seemed to only have one storey.

A gravelled area served as the parking space, and the farm was surrounded by ancient apple trees. When Dan opened the door, Vadim saw how empty the house was, and that it hadn't been lived in for ages. The floor boards would have to be replaced, and it was fairly cold and damp. But when he touched the wall and knocked against it, the lower floor seemed made from stone, covered with a layer of wood. When he headed upstairs - the staircase needed to be replaced, too - the upper part was wood. Space. Plenty of space, and an old-fashioned oven to heat the building. There were boxes that had been delivered, standing against the wall in what Vadim assumed had been the living room.

Dan was still standing in the centre of the very large living room, with its windows towards the mountains and the old, disused apple orchard, holding his arms out wide, and slowly turning around himself once. "Well, this is it. I bought it at a whim, because I happened to pass the auction. Dirt cheap, no one seemed to want it, but I fell in love with that goddamned view and the bloody apple trees." He grinned from ear to ear. "What do you think?"

Vadim looked around. "Can you hear it?" he asked.

Dan nodded, grinning. "Oh yes, I can. It's almost deafening, isn't it?"

Vadim went to the window, opened it, and breathed deeply. The air was pure. He could see that the stones and wood surfaces had been thoroughly conquered by lichen, orange, green, white, tiny, fragile and yet hardy creatures, not quite plant, not quite anything else. Lichen meant the air was pure, he remembered. Pure like where he'd been trained in survival, deep in the tundra and taiga, far away from any human settlement that could provide assistance. He'd been stricken by the fact that, for a major road (according to the map) the street had been empty. They had encountered maybe five cars on the way - and all those had been very near Palmerston North. Absolutely nothing once they'd entered this valley.

Dan stepped up behind him, a hand on Vadim's shoulder. "You think it might be too silent for a couple of old battle horses?"

"It's just so pure," Vadim murmured.

Dan turned his head, smiling at Vadim's profile, not quite sure if he really understood what Vadim was saying or feeling, except for ..." far away from any war?" Quietly.

Vadim nodded. "No guilt, either. Did you know they are nuke-free? Famously?" He leaned back, touching Dan. "Everybody here is a stranger."

"Guilt?" Dan tilted his head, fingertips touching the hand on his face, before fishing for his cigarettes.

"No past. No human memory, no history, no old battles. Well, maybe a different matter for the natives, but, you know, for everybody else."

"So, that means we are both new and without past. And being strangers doesn't matter because everybody else is?" Dan would mull it over, needing to take his time.

Vadim nodded. "This is a place that doesn't force you to do anything."

"I don't understand, what do you mean, 'force you'?"

"All places come with rules." Vadim smiled. "Expectations. History. Culture. This place doesn't."

"But surely the people who live here have some rules, too?" Dan continued the aborted motion, finding his pack of cigarettes and the lighter.

"Aye, but it's probably just laws. Don't steal, don't ram cars ..." Vadim shrugged while Dan nodded. "That's not difficult. And - this place is empty. Reminds me a bit of that Swedish place."

"You never told me about Sweden, by the way." Dan smiled, lighting his fag.

"It was like coming up for air. It's all blurred, but it was a good place. Some good people there. Very generous."

"Perhaps we should go there? I've never been to Sweden." Dan leaned against the other side of the windowsill, blowing the smoke carefully out of Vadim's way.

"Maybe for holidays." Remembering Manke. "You'd like the village cop. I'm not sure I thanked him properly. And, he was a good-looking boy. The Swedes are probably the best-looking men I've ever seen."

Dan put on his most lecherous face, "and wouldn't it be damn convenient if they were all gay on top of that?" he laughed.

"There's likely the usual amount of them. Manke, I'd assume, was straight. Not that I was in any state to even think in that direction. He's a good guy, sometimes I wonder how he's doing."

"Why don't you find out?" Dan inhaled, thoughtfully. "I think I learned something during the last two years. Letting go of people is the biggest bloody mistake we can make. We haven't got anything more important." Dan nodded, mostly to himself.

Vadim inhaled deeply. "Yes, I know." Family. Family was important, more so than a benevolent stranger he'd met. He'd love to let go of others, but he was only too aware that Konstantinov still lurked somewhere in his mind, biding his time like cancer.

"Been to Norway and Finland on a few exercises, but never Sweden. Neither Denmark, and I heard that Iceland's supposed to be crazy. We should do a Scandinavia tour one day." Dan glanced out of the window.

"Timing is crucial ... let's go there when it's not buried in snow or full of mosquitoes."

"That would be when? Spring?" Dan glanced out at the sky, figuring it would be getting dark in a few short hours. Maximum two.

"Yes." Vadim moved away from the window and headed over to the boxes. "What's in there?"

Dan walked over as well. "Survival kit. The usual. Cooking stove, gas, air beds, extra large zip-together sleeping bags, food stocks, lots of tins, water, coffee, tea, kettle, and so on and so forth. There should be a stack of firewood and a sack of coal round the back. I got them to deliver everything, since there's nothing here, and we're not even sure if the stove still functions. They promised to send a guy round to check it out tomorrow, same with the water pipes." Dan grinned, "and I wouldn't use the loo just now. I got a camping one delivered to be safe." Pointing to a plastic box that was just visible round the corner to another room. "Luxury, aye? No more shitting into hand-dug holes for us."

Vadim grinned. "Let's set it up and watch the sunset? We could even scout into town and see if they have any restaurants?"

"Aye, when I was here there were a couple of places. A diner and a BBQ. I kept alternating between the two. Those ribs with sticky sauce were to die for." Dan grinned, starting to rip into the first box. "Not a pretty place, the town, but it's functional and all the folks were damn nice. A few pubs along the road, even though they call them bars. Weirdoes." Dan started to unpack the box, piling the equipment into neat stacks.

“Maybe we can find a Fish n Chips shop.”

“Aye, I also remember the usual assortment of Chinese and Indian, but,” Dan put on a ‘posh’ accent, “I’d like to acquaint you with the delights of the sticky BBQ ribs.”

“Try not to sound like the Baroness, please.” Vadim grinned and joined him with the boxes, tearing the carton, putting things together, and starting to build a camp. The living room had a great view, and with nobody else around, they could easily sleep downstairs. After everything was set up, they went back to the car and headed into town. Thirty minutes was all it took.

To Dan’s eternal happiness, the BBQ place was still going strong, and they spent their evening meal with a large tub of coleslaw, a huge platter of sticky ribs between them, with the sauce dripping off their fingers, and two large mugs of cider. All crowned by big slices of pecan pie, doused in hot custard, and the warmest and friendliest welcome they could have hoped for. By the end even Dan was too full to say ‘peep’, and they ventured towards the nearest bar, aware that one of them had to drive back. They were greeted with the same open friendliness, and the locals immediately took them in, particularly when they heard that they were the ones who’d bought the big old place (‘old’ meaning that it had been built in the fifties). They were ex-soldiers, currently mercs, looking to retire there when they left active service, currently seeking local expertise and skills to redo the place and bring it up to scratch. They made numerous contacts, all in the first night, with cousins and brothers and fathers available and skilled, and many out of work. The economy wasn’t going well and taxes were high, so everybody seemed keen to make a little money on the side.

Dan kept his hands to himself for once, and with a rare wisdom, made no indication that Vadim and he were more than very good mates who got along well enough to share a large house in the back of beyond, seeking some peace and quiet after a life on the line. Something which seemed sensible given the crowd and the maleness of them all. Vadim got the feeling they were relaxed, but backwater, and he, too, didn’t risk anything - and was surprised at Dan’s restraint.

They both nearly fell over with tiredness, when they finally made their way back, keeping the radio on to stay awake, as Dan drove them back through the night. While the stars were nothing like in the desert, the night was as clear and wide open as they could hope. “I like this place,” murmured Vadim.

“I am glad.” Dan’s voice was quiet, and he smiled as he glanced across. “Not sure if I won’t miss the adrenaline too much, but guess we can’t keep going forever, aye?”

“I don’t want to keep going forever. I’m tired of it. No more bloodthirst. I’ve had my fill.”

“Okay.” Dan nodded, silent for a while. Too silent. “But we have to keep going a little while longer or we won’t be able to afford renovating this place.” His excuse, his bait. Anything to keep going - and at least this was the truth.

Vadim nodded. "Never too tired to survive," he murmured, quoting some officer who'd drilled him, a military lifetime ago. "It's well worth doing that."

Dan smiled easier. "Couple more years? That should get us enough money without having to dig into what we've saved so far. Unless there's more wrong with the house than we thought." He flashed a grin, slowly turning onto the path towards the house. "According to Duncan there is always more wrong with the house than you think and it will always cost twice as much as you envisage."

"I heard Jean say something similar." Vadim stretched and yawned. "There's just no way around it, for the time being. But maybe we can keep an eye on other ways to make money. Win the lottery ... or something."

Dan laughed, "yeah, as if that ever happened. We don't even play the lottery." Switching off the engine, he leaned across to look at Vadim, hardly visible in the darkness of the night. "Sometimes, when I wake up too early, I've been wondering what we are going to do job-wise when we can't be on active service anymore."

"I have no idea. Handling weapons is right out. We could open another fishing and hunting shop over in Palmy" - he'd been amused that locals called Palmerston North 'Palmy', and was determined to use the nickname. "Seems everybody hunts and fishes around here ... and there are only, what, ten shops like that in town?"

Dan rolled his eyes. "Don't think that would give us enough money to fly round and visit mates. Or do you intend to stay on the farm and never budge again?"

"True." Vadim shrugged. "I'll think about it. We've been lucky so far, aye?"

"Aye." Dan smiled. "We've been damn lucky." For such unlucky bastards. "Ready to hit the hay?"

Vadim nodded, yawning again. "Oh yes. Sharing warmth might be necessary."

Dan held his hands up, laughing, "but only sharing warmth. If you expect me to get it up, no chance." Still grinning, he got out of the car, not bothering to lock it. "It's strange, you know." Standing and inhaling deeply, while very slowly turning around himself.

"Strange?" Vadim closed the car door. He figured locking that wouldn't strictly be necessary either, but he still did.

"Aye, strange. I never had a home. Not since I left my family's farm." Dan's face faintly illuminated by the new moon. "And here I am, at the other side of the world, with my partner, and standing in front of our *home*." He turned to face Vadim, "it's one of the best fucking feelings ever."

Vadim closed the distance and embraced him. "It will be good, Dan. I promise."

Dan smiled, holding onto Vadim for a moment. "It will. Hearth and home and all that shit, and a big bed with lots of space and comfy duvets. Sounds like bloody paradise to me."

“Yes.” Vadim kissed him, then nodded towards the front door. “What about sharing warmth and maybe some ‘cuddling’? I could use with holding you a bit longer, but not in this chill.”

“Damn good plan. Come on, then.” Dan led the way inside, and after a quick wash with cold water and a trip to the chemical loo, they got themselves inside the sleeping bags that they’d zipped together. Sharing warmth and holding close.

* * *

The next days were busy. They caught up with the men they’d met, had a few people look at the house and decide what to do with it. When they were finished with that, it seemed like it would be very slightly cheaper to repair it than to demolish it. Much of the wood needed replacing, and they could easily change the rooms and sizes, as there would be few internal walls left when they were done. Which suited them fine - that would make it easier to move furniture around, later. Piping, electricity, all that required checking, replacing, some digging up to the road, and they hired one of the cousins who was a qualified architect to take charge of it.

They opened a joint bank account, and explored some of the island. Venturing down to Wellington to sit at the harbour, have coffees and teas and enjoy the view out over the ocean.

It was on one of those days that Dan sat on the pier, drink in one hand, fag in the other, legs dangling into the ocean. “You know, I think I should go and see Maggie.”

Vadim glanced up. “Where is she ‘stationed’ at the moment?” And, in an afterthought: “What about early May?”

“Still in Dubai. She usually stays around three years and then off to another place. Which means she’s due to be posted again soon.” Dan took a drag from the cigarette, “and as for May, do you mean if I’m going to meet Matt?”

“Yes. While we’re on the way away from here, we can just as well do it all in one go. I could even join you for a day or two and we take her out for dinner or something. Catch up.”

“You mean, go from here to Dubai together, then you head off to Germany and I jump on a plane to the US?” Dan emptied his glass, thinking. “Not bad. I’d like to spend a few days with her, if she’ll have me.”

“How could she not, and I’d like to see her again, too.” Vadim checked the watch. “Let’s head towards the ferry. There’s the whole south island waiting for us ...”

“Alright, then.” Stubbing the cigarette out, Dan got up, feet wet, socks and shoes in his hand. “Best see the rest of our future home country, aye?”

“I get the feeling there’s far more to see than we can cover in a few days.” Vadim grinned. “Doesn’t mean we can’t try it.”

“True, and we’ll have a few more years after that.” With that Dan got his travel bag onto the other shoulder, marching off towards the ferry.

They explored the south island for almost a week, to return to the house, after a lot of phone calls, where they checked in with the workers. Finding everything in good hands, better than they could have done themselves, they knew there was nothing they could do there right now. Leaving the camping supplies in a shed, safe from the elements and wildlife, they headed back towards Palmy, where they boarded the plane that would take them to Auckland. Then the long flight back, with two days holdover in Singapore to take the brunt of the jetlag, which they mostly spent in the hotel and venturing out every now and then to eat in the hotel restaurant and various cafes in the centre, and to spend money in one of the many full air-conditioned malls that dotted the city. Spending a good amount in the nicest ways possible, and then back to the hotel, and via taxi to the airport for the last leg of the journey.

On the plane to Dubai, Dan was leaning over to Vadim, smiling as he placed his hand on the other's thigh for a moment. "Less anxious than last time, eh?"

"I would have been less anxious if I had been staring down a muzzle." Vadim grinned. "I was badly scared."

"I tell you a secret, when I first met her, I was rather frazzled. She's got a way of looking ... *into* you and not at you, made me want to be on my best behaviour. Hell, and did I fuck that up."

"Maybe that's why you care about her. You like people who can put you in your place, Mr cocky SAS."

"What?" Dan laughed, "you bastard, but that means that I shouldn't like you one bit. Nor Jean. Nor Matt. Nor Hooch. Nor anyone else." He stuck his tongue out at Vadim.

"My guess is, when you were young, you'd have hated all of us. Am I wrong?"

"Shit. I hate it when you pull that intellectual crap on me, Russkie." Dan made a show of a veritable pout.

"Just guessing." Leaning back, Vadim regarded Dan with half-closed eyes. "Can't help but be curious about you."

"Why?" Digging into a packet of peanuts, Dan's brows shot to his hairline. "You should know me inside and out."

"Curious about how you've changed. I want to know everything about you, every little detail, and there are many things I don't know."

"Like?" The stewardess was coming along and Dan asked for a whisky, before turning his full attention back to Vadim.

"Who was your best friend in school? Your favourite subject? First girlfriend? When was your first kiss? Your favourite piece of clothing when you were a kid? What were the things in your mind when you started ..." He grinned, then used the Russian word "wanking."

Dan laughed. "Holy shit, you really are curious aren't you? Most of these things I don't even know. Let's try ..." Dan leaned back, closing his eyes to think hard. "My best friend was Hamish Buchanan, a freckled, ginger haired git who was a bloody great guy. We roamed the Highlands, went fishing together and were generally a completely nuisance of epic proportions." Dan grinned,

and Vadim laughed. "First girlfriend? That's a trickier one. They are all the same in retrospect." Shrugging, Dan tried hard to remember the name but failed. "I can only remember how exciting it was to finally get under her skirt and then ..." shaking his head, "never mind, I fucked cunts but I never did like to touch or lick them all that much."

The stewardess arrived, but Vadim found himself listening with the same focus he'd had when sniping. Nothing should escape him there.

"My first kiss was with someone I can't remember either. Behind the neighbour's cow barn and not very" 'memorable' he wanted to say when another memory, an older one, suddenly hit him. "Shit. I'd completely forgotten about it, but that wasn't my first kiss. My *first* one was a dare, some shit I'd engineered, I think and, well, damn. The first *proper* kiss was when I was twelve and I kissed Calum. Fuck, yes, I remember now. He was the son of one of the itinerant sheep shearers and Damn." Dan downed his drink, and if his skin wasn't so tanned, the red flush would have been all too visible.

Vadim smiled, pressing Dan's hand. "Calum. I see. And I thought I was the first guy." Grinning.

"Not funny, you bastard." Dan grimaced. "I'd completely forgotten about it. I was certain I'd been straight till I was ... well, till I ... well. You know. And afterwards ... you know, too." He heaved a sigh. "Anyway my favourite piece of clothing were the walking boots I got from my dad, and for what I was thinking of when" Dan made a dismissive gesture, "I can't remember."

"Okay. But see, that kind of stuff. I want to know everything."

"But I don't." Dan looked up and at Vadim, very intense.

"You don't want to know about yourself, or you don't want to know about me?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said 'But I don't'. I don't what?"

"I don't want to know. Hell, it was hard enough to ..." Dan trailed off and sighed. "Damn. Give me a moment. Okay?" He waved to the stewardess, who soon brought him another drink and Dan sat, eyes closed, thinking.

Vadim nodded, watching. If Dan needed his time to muddle through things, he'd be the last to pressure him. But the response was interesting.

"I don't think I ever did imagine girls." Dan finally offered. "A weird mix of stuff instead. Some sort of violence." He frowned, opening his eyes to look at Vadim. "Shit, that makes me sound like a creep."

Vadim's gaze was intense. "Some form of combat? Pain? Fear? Pressure?"

"No." Dan shook his head, looking and feeling decidedly uncomfortable. "Control." Tossing the drink back in one go. "Someone tied up, helpless. Faceless, genderless." Dan shook his head again. "Shit, now what does that say about me and how fucked up I have always been?"

"I'm not a psychoanalyst. But what if ... what if it was me?" Leaning in to whisper. "What if you could do that to me?"

Dan looked at Vadim, straight on. Gaze intense and unwavering. Never a man who'd shy away. "It would break and create something in me. But not like the Glasgow guys. More. I want more." 'T', suddenly, and he didn't realise it.

Vadim nodded. "Okay. In a place where we're safe. Space. Nobody around. Somewhere ... where we're just us."

"What? You serious?"

"Yes. If the place is right ... why not?"

"Because I don't know what the fuck I'm doing? And because we have some rather hefty history?"

"I told you I'm yours. I gave you the bullet. You cut me. You ..." Vadim moved closer again and Dan shuddered, "you fucked me like a savage, more than once. You had me fucked, you tied me up, you had a knife to my balls when you sucked me. What more can you do? Anything I'd be scared of? I don't think so."

"And your nightmares? What if you could not see, could not move, could not hear, and could not breathe unless I allowed you to ..."

"You are not Konstantinov. You don't want to shatter me into the smallest pieces you can manage. And besides, you already broke me once. That was scary, yes. But it was more than that. Even then."

"But I meant to destroy you back then. Don't you realise that? Because you'd done the worst that anyone could have possibly done to me. You'd not only violated my body, it was more. I could have dealt with the body, would have simply killed you for that. Clean, a bullet, and that was that. No, I had to destroy you, because you'd broken through everything else. I wanted to strip your skin off, layer after layer, when you offered yourself. Because you ..." No, it wasn't that simple, he hadn't wanted Vadim, and he bloody well couldn't find the right words. Didn't even understand himself, and the darkness of his eyes was more intense as ever.

Vadim nodded. "I know. You would have killed me. I know that. At some point, I accepted that, I accepted death. I accepted that there was nothing I could do to stop you. That you held my life, my dignity, my sanity, everything in your hand, you knew that, I knew it, and I hated that ... that sick ... craving inside. I always wanted you. All the time. From the moment I first saw you, and to my grave. Maybe I hated the lie so much ... maybe because, somewhere, deep down, I knew how depraved I was, the fact that I had committed crimes, that I'd moved away from the man I'd wanted to be. Maybe I wanted you to annihilate me. Maybe part of the attraction was that I knew you'd destroy me. I have no idea. All I know was that up in the mountains, I did want you. Yes, I played you, I tried to pacify you with offering sex, but if you'd accepted the offer ... I would have wanted it. How's that for 'sick'?"

Dan moistened his lips, unaware. "I would have thought that a condemned man tried anything to survive."

"I ... offered because ... I needed to take your aggression away. Risky gamble. So you could ... avenge. Yourself. Like that. I'd have taken it. I'd have survived it, I know that. I knew it wasn't lust from your side. I knew it was about ...

hatred. And maybe power. Yes. Some kind of triumph, like ... like I felt, that night.” Vadim swallowed.

“Triumph or power? Or both?”

“Both. Besting somebody like you. Somebody so strong and dangerous. The more you fought, the more I needed you.”

Dan’s hand clenched around the empty plastic cup, and it took him a long time before he could talk again. “Did you use me to atone? For punishment?”

“I ... later ... saw the time in the mountain as payback. Proper payback. It certainly ... changed things. I didn’t have that ... appetite anymore, not like I’d had. I guess I learn best through pain.” Vadim lowered his head and Dan moved his own, forehead against temple, when Vadim continued. “My whole life feels like atoning for things I did. I’m trying to ... be a better man. Be worthy. Follow what I think is right, but I don’t. Too often, I simply don’t. There’s the anger, and the pride, and that fucking darkness. Then I wonder, why do I even try? And slip back. But Dr Williams told me it’s important to keep an eye on what I’m thinking and feeling, because a lot of that might end up not being very sane or healthy.”

“But the you back then and the you now are very different.” Dan’s voice remained quiet. “When it comes to the now ... I’d give my fucking right arm if I could reach into that darkness and touch you down there.”

Vadim nodded, swallowing. “Something Dr Williams said - that I can only learn to live with it. It will never go. They put something inside me and I can’t take it out. I can only try to ... live with it and try to control it, because I can’t just give up, Dan. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“No, you can’t give up.” Dan shook his head, taking hold of Vadim’s hand. “And that’s why I don’t think it would be a good idea if you let me have ... control. Fully. Because I might take from you what you’ve been using to keep it all down.”

“Or maybe it would cut that festering wound open and drain the poison.” Vadim shuddered. “What if I feel ... the need to be controlled like that? With you at least I know that that’s not a response to ... what they did to me. That that is older ... older than Konstantinov. That it’s about lust and need and not about ... destroying me.” He was surprised when he felt tears in his eyes. Shame? Or just the fucking *pressure* that found a way through the words, somehow.

Dan fingers tightened around Vadim’s hand, until they painfully squeezed bones and cartilage together. “Give me time.” He whispered, face close, heads touching. “Give me a little time until I’ve understood myself, and I’ll be what you need me to be.”

“You *are* everything I need. I’m just saying, I trust you. Whatever you want to do. I need you. And that includes ways and things that everybody else would shy away from. Because we’re not everybody, Dan. We’re us.”

“What we are is pretty fucked up.” Tension flowed out of Dan as if a valve had been opened and he smiled. Relaxing, holding Vadim’s hand in his own.

“Not from my perspective.” Vadim laughed.

"I love you, Russkie. But you know that."

Vadim smiled. "And I you."

May 1992, Dubai

When they arrived in Dubai, Dan looked his most dishevelled self with wild hair and crumpled clothes, not quite awake yet after snoozing on the plane. Once again they went through the rigmarole of customs and luggage, but at least the Baroness' driver with the air conditioned limo was waiting for them.

To Vadim, it was just a different kind of heat. After the oppressiveness of Singapore, Dubai was scorching, but bearable. "After the flight I feel like I need another week or two off," Vadim murmured, leaning back in the seat.

"No chance," Dan grinned, letting his hands run over the cool, smooth leather. "You got to go to Berlin, while I get to enjoy the luxury of the embassy a little longer." Turning to Vadim, "you remember what I told you many years ago?"

"Which of the many things?"

Dan leaned closer, grinning from ear to ear as he lowered his voice, "that you are ruled by your cock."

"It's not that, Dan. It's not about ..." sex, he thought. But of course he knew what would happen. It wasn't about playing chess, and in a way it was because Hooch looked much like Dan. Which, strangely, might have been part of Jean's attraction for Dan. Were they just both looking for a similar type, minus ten years? "Not just that."

"I know." Dan settled back. "I can see how you two can become good mates. He's not exactly a chatterbox, and well, it just fits. Friends are important, aye?"

Vadim grinned. "I get the weirdest feeling ... I feel almost protective? At the same time, I know he's a hard bastard and doesn't need anything like that, never mind I can't actually protect him, but ... I don't know."

"You think that no one can be that controlled *all* the time, aye?"

"Bingo. That's exactly it. I ... know about bottling up, I guess. All too well, really." Vadim rolled his eyes.

"You think Hooch needs *some* way of letting it all out, and you want to offer him an outlet?" Dan smiled.

"Maybe he's just a thrillseeker like you. I don't know. I only know that I worry about him, and I don't do that often. There's a select few, really."

"Hope I'm not one of them." Dan winked, "because I wouldn't want anyone to worry about me. Not even you. I'll be fine."

Vadim grinned. "Of course. But I may be concerned ... interested, at least?"

"Only as long as you are interested in the contents of my trousers." Dan grinned, glancing up as they rolled through the gates of the compound.

"Pointless, if you're naked."

“One-track mind, and fuck, am I glad about it.” Dan grinned, but then the limo stopped.

Vadim grinned and stepped out, and had to remember not to carry his own luggage. They did that. ‘They’ being the staff. Strange, after the self-reliance of the farm, or, indeed, all their lives.

Dan stepped out, and that very moment the door opened, as if on cue. The Baroness appeared, standing on the top of the stairs and smiling brightly. She didn’t seem to have changed at all; same elegance, same pearls, same bomb-proof hairdo.

And there she was, Dan’s lady friend. Vadim watched Dan and her, smiling slightly, as Dan’s face broke into a bright grin, climbing the steps. He twitched, but then shook her hand with both of his, and he leaned close. “I almost hugged you, Ma’m.” Grinning like a fool.

“Oh dear, Dan, wouldn’t that have been against the protocol. My oh my.” She laughed lightly, holding his hand for a long time, smiling at him, for once on the same height, standing a step above him.

“It’s good to see you. Very good.” Dan finally let go of her hand, “it’s been a while since I last lost a chess game.”

Vadim stepped closer. “That’s because you never play against me, Dan.”

“It’s bad enough if I lose against her ladyship, I really couldn’t stomach losing against my lover.”

The Baroness chuckled and Vadim cast an amused glance at Dan, then proceeded to shake her hand. “It’s good to see you again,” he said, heartfelt. “And of you to see us.”

“I always have time for my friends.” She smiled, holding onto Vadim’s hand as well, before letting go and making an inviting gesture. “Come on in and refresh yourselves. Dinner is in an hour, and there is no need to dress up.”

Vadim grinned at that, then straightened his face. “Thank you kindly. A shower is certainly welcome.” Glancing at Dan with a raised eyebrow. There was no need for a blowjob to get rid of the tension - but it would certainly be welcome.

Dan ignored the eyebrow, at least pretended to. They were led back into the same room they had occupied before, welcoming them with elegance and luxury, something Dan hardly noticed. “So, you heard her ladyship, we have an hour. Want a quick snooze, or what about a bath? The tub is certainly large enough.”

“Snooze later. I’d go for a bath ... just relax after the flight.” Vadim shed his shirt already and frowned. “I’m sweaty and I feel disgusting.”

“Yeah, you really are.” Dan stood suddenly in front of him, hands on Vadim’s chest. “Really ... disgusting ...”

“I can tell how ... appalled you are ...” Vadim let his head roll back as Dan took hold of him, fingers suddenly everywhere and he was in no mood to protest. Much good it would have done him anyway, and when his turn came, all the better, because his knees felt weak post-orgasm anyway. The bath afterwards was just perfect for the comedown, and they took the time to

‘cuddle’ in the bathtub, washing each other lazily and enjoying the water and the heat.

When they were drying off, Dan grinned sharply. “You think we are getting too soft?”

“On what count?” Vadim was about to shave, hot water in the washing basin, safety razor ready, and shaving foam carefully distributed in his face. Lifting his face a bit, he watched Dan in the mirror that was fogged up at the edges. “Sex-wise or personality-wise, or what-else-wise?”

“Sex-wise? Fuck, no. Personality-wise, maybe.” Rubbing his hair vigorously, Dan managed to stop the drips from the silver-streaked dark mane. “You know, getting older and losing the thirst for blood, as you always say. Meeting my family, and actually *talking* to my brother, stuff like that.” He slung the towel around his hips, “and not to forget all that ‘cuddling’.” The grin grew even sharper, if possible.

Vadim flashed a grin, then concentrated on the razor cleaning away the stubble on the left side. Swiping the blade through the water, he looked up again. “Tempered, yes. Strange, really. How you have to reduce a personality to build a soldier, removing the doubts and the fears and the ‘selfish drives’ - and how good soldiers rarely make good or deep people.” Vadim began to shave the other side. “I prefer to call this ‘reclaiming my humanity’.” A quick glance to Dan. “Because that’s what I prefer to be. Human.”

Dan leaned against the glass door of the shower, watching Vadim through the mirror, until Vadim was almost finished shaving. “I think I said that once, didn’t I?”

Vadim checked for remaining stubble with his fingertips, then splashed the soap off with water, and dried his face with a towel. “Did you? Damn. And I thought that was my nugget of wisdom.”

“No.” Dan smiled, “the wisdom is all yours. I’ve never been one for the wisdom stuff, but wanting to be human ... I remember that, that feeling of being ...” he shrugged, “of not feeling, I guess. Of forgetting that being human means a lot more than eating, shitting, sleeping and scraping through to stay alive.” Pausing, he leaned his head against the glass behind him, “it was in the cave, remember? On the plateau. We hadn’t seen each other for some crazy shit like nine or ten months.”

“You’d bled out all the war inside you. I remember.” Vadim turned, studying Dan like that, and feeling as if he should burst with tenderness. “R&R is all about being human. Meeting friends and family. Remembering who we were ... or could have been.” In my case, could have been, he thought. “That will get us to the end. I’m sure of that.”

“Never used to have R&R like that. Used to get pissed, visit mates, that was that. Never used to have friends. How things have changed.” Dan smiled, stepped close, touched Vadim’s smooth face with his stubbly one, before taking his place at the sink. “Just not sure what ‘the end’ is.”

“Death.” Vadim grinned. “We all die. But hopefully of old age, on a sun-drenched afternoon, sitting on the porch, looking at those useless apple trees or the mountains.” Vadim kissed Dan’s neck, who chuckled and shook his head.

“We can’t afford sitting on the porch all day after active service. Not just financially, we’d die of boredom!”

“There’s that. You raked up a pension, I haven’t.” Vadim shrugged. He had, but it was unlikely he could ever claim it. Not that it was much, the way things were going in Russia at present.

“My pension is small.” Dan shrugged, “I never made it to the full twenty-two years, remember?”

“Yeah. But what we make as mercs should fill that gap. In any case, I think that’s the best thing. Dying, I mean. I’d get sick of it if we were immortal.”

“I give you that, but of boredom?” Dan picked up his own can of shaving foam and lathered his face.

“I said old age, Dan.” Vadim placed a hand between Dan’s shoulder blades on his naked back, the skin warm and smooth from the bath. “No idea. What can old battle horses like us do? I don’t see us doing security shifts in a warehouse or something. Ideally, it would be something relatively easy that doesn’t involve any physical work.”

Dan began to shave, now and then his dark eyes flickered towards Vadim, looking at him through the mirror. “No physical work? Why? That’s all I know and have ever been good at.”

“Because getting older means getting weaker. Losing stamina. Coordination. Eye-sight.”

Dan’s eyes closed up, like shields going up, and he moved his gaze away from Vadim to concentrate on his own face. “Not yet.”

“No.” Vadim turned to get his clothes. “Not for several years.” He likely had faced the effect of age on his body for far longer. Knowing he wouldn’t be able to compete at sports much beyond thirty, not in his chosen disciplines. And that without constant work, and the four year interval, he’d had only one chance, could possibly have had two, if they’d let him, but they’d put their money, their expectations on younger men, more gifted than he’d ever been. The feeling of being ‘too old’ at thirty had prepared him for what he’d be facing very soon. Could already feel it encroach, the fact he didn’t regenerate as fast as he used to, seemed to feel pain more astutely, ran out of strength, and didn’t react as fast. It was a long way down from the peak he’d reached, but he had been aware for years that he was on the way down.

Dan swilled the razor, then washed his face, skin smooth now. Closing his eyes for a moment as he held onto the sink. Ignoring the constant low-level ache in his knees and the increasing intervals of ‘twinges’ in the right one. No. He didn’t belong to the scrapheap. Not yet.

“We have time to think about it later, aye?” Dan turned around, facing Vadim. Stubble and foam swirling down the plughole.

“I believe in preparation.” Vadim grinned. “Like the fact that I’ve found you some clothes that you can wear - they are out on the bed.”

Dan sighed and walked over to get dressed. Putting on whatever Vadim wanted him to wear was the easy thing - far easier than thinking about it himself - but the rest ... he didn't want to be reminded of retirement, couldn't bear the subject. It was all he'd ever done and all he'd ever known. Most importantly, all he'd ever wanted. Apart from Vadim. "How the hell am I going to dress myself when you're off to Berlin?" Dan joked half-heartedly.

"Doesn't matter, really, because I'm not there to see it." Vadim smiled. "You manage fine without me ...". Running a hand over his short hair, which was already mostly dry, as he watched Dan sit down to get dressed. "At worst, I can leave you a phone number."

"Yeah, good idea, I'll phone you in my mornings, so you can tell me what to wear that day." Dan laughed out loud, tying his shoe laces before standing up to close the belt buckle. "I have a funny feeling you'd soon want to whop my arse, especially if I happen to ..." waggling his brows, "disturb you during anything important."

Vadim grinned. "I might not answer the phone right away." Moving closer again to run a hand through Dan's damp hair. "And I guess you'll find some good ways to spend the time yourself."

"Aye, I'll stay a few days here, catching up with Maggie. Might check out a flight to the US after all, I'll leave it to my whim and to Matt's roster." Dan smiled, close his shirt but left the top button open, refusing to wear a tie. Slipped into the jacket, though. The air conditioned rooms tended to be cool, and in any way, he knew the baroness liked him to make an effort. "I just don't like sleeping on my own. Now, how fucking sad is that?"

"Not sad at all." Vadim smiled. "My feeling is, a few days apart might result in some interesting ideas when we're back in the same room. Bedroom, especially." He pointedly glanced at the bed.

"You think they do mail order to hotel rooms?"

"Pretty sure. Why wouldn't they? And what are you going to order?"

Dan's grin began to take on epic proportions as he straightened his jacket. "Remember the catalogue the guys gave me in Glasgow?"

Vadim swallowed. "I do. Now I do wonder what you are planning." He shrugged into his own jacket, then headed towards the door to open it for Dan.

"We'll see." Dan followed Vadim, the grin never waning as he walked behind him, watching the broad back and the way the muscular buttocks moved beneath the fine cloth. He drew up close when they reached the door to the dining room, squeezing Vadim's arse, "and it's all mine, too." Murmured, before he opened the door.

Vadim grinned at that, again wondering whether he should call off the meeting with Hooch, but he did think that occasional separation might be actually good - provided it wasn't for too long. No more months and months, maybe just a week here or there. That wouldn't do any harm and gave them time to pursue their interests. Even if those interests were other men. Hooch was nobody one could have a relationship with, he assumed, and the feelings in this case were more friendship than that frantic need that he'd felt with Dan.

The baroness was standing at a mahogany side board, pouring drinks from a crystal carafe. "So good to see you." She smiled, "especially with you having put so much effort into the appearance." Dan could have sworn she was winking at him, as she walked towards them with a small silver tray in her hand, carrying three glasses. "I gave most of the staff an evening off and we only have skeleton staff here, so don't expect the usual standard. I took the liberty to believe that being amongst the three of us would make for a nicer evening."

Vadim smiled and took his glass off the tray. "It should only take a skeleton staff to feed Dan strawberry tarts, I assume."

She laughed lightly, while Dan rolled his eyes, and Vadim studied her for a little, politely curious. She was holding up well, and as his mind had been pondering age, he wondered how old she was and how she'd accepted ageing. But he wouldn't ask her - that would be a major faux pas and, besides, she was a woman, and they took it worse, according to everything he knew. He remembered Katya discovering a minor line under the eye one morning. "It should be a perfect evening. Something to fly half around the world for."

Dan smiled. "Frankly, I would have flown even further."

She raised her brows in astonishment, as she took a sip.

"Aye." Dan took a sip himself, not quite sure where to go from there. "It's just that ... it's good to talk to you."

She smiled with genuine warmth, nodding to both of them. "It is, and I am pleased that you'll be able to stay a few days. I am looking forward to catching up." She paused, "there are not many I wish to catch up with."

Dan felt ridiculously pleased, his smile turning into a wide grin, and he remembered what he'd said to Vadim not long ago. That he'd never had friends, true friends, and how much life had changed.

"Would you like to come to the table?" She made an inviting gesture, "the cook prepared a selection of courses, and the *pi   de resistance* is a *fondue*."

"Fondue?"

"Yes, Dan, meat, prepared in advance, with a variety of sauces and fresh bread, to be cooked on the table." She pointed to the set-up in the centre of the round table that had been brought in instead of the normal rectangular one.

"Never had it, but I've heard about it." Vadim headed over to pull the chair for the Baroness, acting without thinking much, then hesitated whether it had been the right thing to do.

She smiled at him and sat down, thanking him, while Dan sat down as well.

"Red wine or white wine?"

"I'd go with red," murmured Vadim. "Dark meat, strong flavours." He took over the care of the wine, opening and then pouring the wine, taking the table service out of the Baroness' hands. He didn't expect Dan to know what to do, and it seemed wrong to let her do that. Left him. He had at least a vague idea about how to do all this. Far from flawless, he assumed, but it seemed worthwhile to learn about the rest.

"Thank you, that is very kind of you." The Baroness nodded towards Vadim, before pulling a trolley closer, laden with a variety of first courses.

“Would you mind helping yourselves?” She took some melon and Parma ham herself, leaving Dan to simply take some of each, as always starving already. Then it was Vadim’s time to choose, who tried just about everything, but in small portions, then discovering some favourites, like a mellow sheep’s cheese wrapped in ham, and green olives.

She took her glass and raised it, “to your health, gentlemen.”

“And to Auld Lang Syne.” Dan continued, smiling first at her, then Vadim, before the glasses clinked and they had a mouthful of the exquisite vintage, which enhanced the lingering flavour of the food.

“Now, do forgive me, but I must admit I am curious. How have you been faring?” She was looking at Vadim. “My old friend told me you were there for a visit?”

“Just a quick visit, really, but I’m faring well. I think it’s all settling in my head, eventually.” Less nightmares, even though the feeling of dread was always close under the surface. He felt more sane than he’d had for years, but he could feel the scars if he reached for them. Never mind the doctor had pointed out just how dependant he was on Dan, and that he didn’t face that problem. It wasn’t just the love - it was the fact that he had no other shot at a regular, civilian life, no other shot at a meaningful relationship. He didn’t believe that he could go through all that trouble again to hook up with anybody else. Make himself that vulnerable again. “I’ll be heading out to Berlin in a little while. An ... American friend of mine is visiting, and I’m curious how this ... re-unified Germany is like.”

“Oh, I am sure you will enjoy your time. I went there not so long ago, on business, but I had the pleasure of staying in Potsdam with a day for cultural exploits.”

“I can just imagine.” Dan murmured, grinning. “All the same to me.”

“You are incorrigible.” The Baroness chided Dan gently, but her fondness for him was always obvious. “You haven’t told me yet, are you planning to stay here before going to Berlin?”

“No, Ma’m.” Dan was still grinning from having been told off, “or rather, I’m not sure yet. I might be visiting a friend in the US for a weekend.”

She smiled, a faintly curious expression on her face. “You both seem to have developed a fondness for America.”

To his credit, Dan hardly coughed, when he replied, “I wouldn’t quite call it that.” Bussing himself with finishing the first course, then reaching for the first bowl of meat. Beef, the others were pork, chicken, turkey, and lamb.

“Ah, but they made Dan a hero, with medals and all the trimmings.”

“I heard, of course.” She smiled, dabbing her lips with the damask napkin. “After all, I had suit and medals sent out per express shipping.”

Vadim poured her some more wine, and then himself. “I guess some Americans aren’t all that bad. Even though I’m not quite sure how deeply they looked into my security files before I got a lesser medal back in the Gulf.”

She nodded, “I was wondering about that. Do you believe you might have complications entering the United States?”

“Possibly. I do wonder how long the memory of the only remaining superpower is.”

“I could investigate for you.”

Vadim hesitated, his training telling him that prodding around could make them suspicious. But he didn’t play any more games like that. “If it isn’t too much trouble,” he murmured. “It would take care of something I’ve been wondering for a while, and now that we have some American friends ...”

“Of course.” She nodded, while Dan was glancing at her, from beneath his lashes.

“And now, please do tuck into the meat, my cook did his utmost best to invent some accompanying sauces, so he reassured me.” She picked up a piece of meat and lowered it into the sizzling oil with the thin and long-handled fork.

Dan was fairly quiet throughout, mostly concentrating on the food, which was too slow for his liking, until the baroness pointed a second set of forks out to him.

They were on the second bottle of wine and well into enjoying the fondue, when she went from the pleasant chit-chat and amused banter, to a more serious question. “I assume you have not been contacted yet with your marching orders?”

Dan shook his head, while mopping up a concoction of several sauces on his plate. “No. But we’ve been busy travelling - maybe they didn’t know where to send them. Where’s the job this time?”

“Surely you have heard of the troubles in the Balkans?” She delicately speared a piece of lamb onto her skewer before submerging it into the sizzling oil.

“Aye,” Dan nodded, “was wondering about that.”

“Well, I have been tasked with the somewhat delicate duty of overseeing British interests and diplomatic endeavours in the area. However, since it is rather high profile, I shall do so from Budapest. Belgrade has been deemed too dangerous, and Bucharest not suitable.” She never noticed the moment’s hesitation in Dan.

“Another place that blows up since the Iron Curtain has come down.” Vadim ran his finger along the glass. The job would very likely not involve fighting shoulder to shoulder with the Serbs, he figured. Serbian brother nation. Long, strong, historic ties. He shouldn’t even consider those, given that he was a mercenary now.

“Indeed. We will need good men on the ground to aid in day-to-day tasks that cannot be carried out by British soldiers, neither under the flag of the UN.” She checked on her meat, then left it to cook a little longer. “I would like you to report to the camp near Belgrade next month.” Choosing a sauce, she concentrated on pouring a measure, before looking up, first at one, then the other man. “I know your professional pasts, but I nevertheless have to warn you. Gentlemen, what you will encounter might be beyond your experiences.”

“Pardon?” Dan looked up, piece of bread in one hand, sauce-dripping meat in the other. “There can’t be anything we haven’t seen yet.” Glancing at Vadim.

She tilted her head, face carefully guarded, her eyes devoid of any emotion. "Let me just say, that this is not a war of any kind you might have encountered. Unofficially, I see the threat of genocide. Brother against brother. But officially, I have not mentioned such a thing."

"Civil war." And I'll be on the wrong side, Vadim thought. The Russian part of me will fight against brothers. Considering what it had led to so far, wouldn't it have been better to keep the Iron Curtain up? What exactly had Gorbachev done when he'd delivered everything into enemy hands? He shook his head. He didn't want to think about it. Not after what they'd done to him.

"I am afraid, yes."

Dan shook his head, "can't be worse than camping with the Mujas." He hadn't expected her look, which silenced him, and he frowned. "Any wine left?" He wasn't going to worry about an assignment prematurely. If his life had taught him anything, then it was to live life as it happened.

Vadim nodded and poured him the rest of that bottle. "Russia won't be taking it lying down. The new politicians are one thing, but the Soviet Army can't have changed much. I'd rather say the same about the Interior Ministry and the secret services." He frowned. "Damn, I should have followed the news more." But again, watching the news was more often than not, painful. No day without something that reminded him, something about countries that had changed beyond recognition.

"This is not about Russia," she shook her head, "this is about an age-old grudge, a defeat five hundred years ago, and two religions, two ethnicities. A country, suddenly divided by a division that had been subtle. Bosniaks and Serbs, Croatia and Serbia, Muslims and Christians, and once again the question of who and why and wherefore." She looked straight at Vadim, "however, I deal with the present."

"As we should," Vadim murmured, acceding.

Dan had chucked down his wine, holding the glass out for more. "Any left?"

Vadim reached for the third bottle and opened it. "I think this will be one of our last ones," he murmured. "Wars, I mean. Even though Dan hates to think about it, I believe we should talk about what to do in retirement from active service."

Dan groaned, this wasn't getting any better. So much for a pleasant evening.

"I must apologise," the Baroness looked suddenly stricken. "I should not have brought up the subject of your next assignment over dinner. Please do accept my apologies?" Looking from Vadim to Dan, lingering at the latter.

"It's okay," he pulled his lips into a smile, "as long as I get some more booze and the fondue keeps bubbling away."

"But is the subject of retirement such an unwelcome one as well, Dan?" She smiled slightly, taking the opened bottle out of Vadim's hand with a gentle nod, and pouring a glass for both of the men.

"Is and is not." He shrugged. "I know it will happen, I just don't know what I'll do when it's time. Active service is all I've ever known all my life. All I ever wanted to do."

"But surely you two must have amassed an unparalleled wealth of experience throughout your active careers?"

"Hm?" Dan uttered around his mouthful of wine.

"I'm certainly not writing a 'Tell all' book," Vadim murmured. "And it's bad enough what passes as 'military biography' these days." Not that he could read much, but it was enough to get the gist of it - and the fact that most were deeply amateurish in military terms or badly written if the guy was actually writing it himself.

She smiled, "I never had anything like this in mind, but have you ever thought of making use of your combined military intelligence? I know that in certain circles your expertise would be most appreciated, and that such consultation does not come cheap."

"Mercenaries of the mind instead of the body?" Dan asked, before filling up on meat.

"You ask if you should sell your soul?" She chuckled quietly. "No, Dan."

"Not that we haven't done that already." Dan murmured.

"Pardon?" She looked at him, but he said nothing, masking the lack of answer by busily chewing.

"Consultation." Vadim mulled this through. He certainly had the background - and even better, the experience for it. Counting the fact that many of the Eastern bloc nations were blowing up, predictably, One by one, and he was an 'insider', he assumed that, indeed, even his educated guesses about these places could be valuable. "Beats tabbing and tin huts by a mile," he murmured. "Can you establish those contacts?"

She nodded, "I'd be more than happy to help my friends." Smiling, "apart from conferences and private consultations, there is military intelligence that does not officially listen to the advise of consultants, but ... let me just reassure you, gentlemen, that unofficially, there is a lot of work to be had, if one has the right contacts." With a gleam in her eyes that looked positively youthful, if not mischievous, she added, "and I have them." Raising her glass in a toast, she drank a mouthful. "To a fruitful retirement."

Dan looked at her, said nothing, but raised his glass as well, emptying it just so he could ask for another refill.

Vadim, however, grinned. He was only too aware of the fact it took the right door opener to lead a good life. Once upon a time, he'd had some contacts, but he'd never really used them - not much. Just moving people and gear around to keep the military machine going. He was sure he could play that game better now. Less to lose, for once, and more to gain. "That should fill up a few years," he murmured, and refilled glasses. "And pay for whatever needs to be done with the farm and some extra."

"Aye," Dan looked up, "at least that's a damn good reason." The only one he could think of right now, but he'd cross the bridge when he got to it, and right now he was still in active service, as long as those damned knees were playing along.

The baroness smiled, and while they were finishing off the fondue, the conversation went towards calmer waters. Helped by the booze that had pulled Dan back into a lighter mood, forgetting about what had been going on before. When they finally had dessert, he had his fill with the strawberry tarts, while a fine drop of whisky was flowing. Exchanging stories of their past that made them sometimes laugh, other times chuckle, and all the time smile.

May 1992, Berlin, Germany

Germany was cold and overcast. That seemed to be the standard for this country when he arrived, and Vadim smiled, flashing the British passport as he was scrutinised by the border police. The big black booklet made things much easier, he thought, then gathered his belongings and soon hailed a taxi. Hearing the language again threatened to transport him back into the late seventies, when the city had been very different. The German colleagues had always considered him an outsider, somebody to be wary of, and they took their paperwork incredibly seriously, that much he remembered. He'd always been seen as an 'uncle from Moscow'. Somewhat amused by the way they were so precise and without humour, and always somehow nervous and scared, as if he would report them at the slightest incidence.

He'd never undertaken anything else with them, had kept his distance instead, but he'd forced himself to speak German, even though their dialects had been colourful indeed. He remembered Kraemer, from Leipzig, a tall guy with a somewhat misshapen face who had been incomprehensible. And a few colleagues from Dresden, who hadn't been much better. His ear for dialect wasn't the best, but he'd struggled through their language, because it betrayed the German character, and he felt it was more polite than force them to speak Russian.

Driving through the city, there were construction sites everywhere. As if Berlin had erupted into cranes and piles of building material. The part of the city that he remembered looked poorer and greyer than the western part, due to the bombardment and massive destruction wrought in the war. It had been more important to house all these people - and the refugees - than to make any allowances for quaintness or beauty. German beauty was always efficiency, he'd had reflected. Berlin had been a word of inspiration, of achievement. He'd read about the race for Berlin, with Stalin threatening his generals, promising death and dishonour to those who'd get outpaced in the race for the German capital - and how much blood that haste had cost.

The Russian embassy was still in the old place, flying different colours, though, which felt strange. He paid the taxi driver to take him to the places he knew, or had heard about: the significant areas. The Wall. The Reichstag. The place where he'd once almost been tempted to blow his own cover, a seedy bar, where he'd gone to drink, not eye up any of the natives. Nothing had happened, however. Not in his position, not as a foreigner in this country. They must have

smelled who and what he was - and despite the lip service, Vadim could feel that the resentment against the Russians ran fairly deep.

Others - simple people, those that had been exposed to the war, felt differently, he thought, especially when he showed that he respected their culture and language. "Hier ist es," he said to the taxi driver, pointing at a grey house with a cafe inside. The taxi driver pulled over, he paid him in Marks, took his suitcase, and had to remind himself that he didn't have to remember to pick up any peaked cap. This city had a way to turn him back into a Soviet officer.

It had been an impulse. He headed into the cafe, noticed the shabbiness inside, the stale smoke, the same selection of bottles in front of the mirror. Cafe by day, bar by night. Nothing fancy, rather 'poofig' as the Berliners called it. Shabby. The coffee had tasted like battery acid, he remembered, but he could drink a good tea here.

Frau Klein appeared in the door, rotund and short, she looked faded and pale. Wearing a flowery dress that made her look like the local 'Putze', a cleaning lady. She looked at him as if she did not truly welcome any custom now. That, too, was so typical of this city. The grudging not quite acceptance.

"Was darf's sein?" she grunted, and Vadim couldn't help but smile. She looked at him, irritated, then clapped her hands in front of her ample bosom that looked just like another, somewhat higher layer of tummy. "Ja, der Herr Krasnorada! Ist das denn die Moeglichkeit!"

It sounded more like 'Meeglichkeijt,' and it made Vadim laugh. "Ja. Derselbe." Not quite 'the very same', but that was of no consequence. Not to this woman.

"Tee? Pfannkuchen? Ich kann rasch welche machen! Nein, ist das scheeen. Setzen Sie sich!"

Vadim sat down at the bar, and, as promised, she came back soon with a steaming hot tea for him, served just right - the Russian way, he reflected. Just a little later she appeared with a pancake with apple pieces in it, served with white sugar and mashed apple. She still made that herself, her grandmother had an apple tree that she plucked for her. Some things apparently never changed.

Vadim glanced through the window, across the street. The main reason why he knew this place was that he'd lived just across the street, second floor, where he could see the curtains and what looked like a row of potted plants and either a fat red cat or a pillow with a tabby pattern. He hadn't seen a point to always prepare his own meals during his time here, and he had been somewhat lacking in adventuring spirit on normal work days. While he'd eaten in the best places on weekends, when people tried to impress him or ingratiate themselves, and had been invited home by the German colleagues, this place had been something of a default.

He asked how she was doing and listened to her tales, of how Eastern Germany had quite unexpectedly won its freedom, how the Soviet/Russian army had pulled out - including 'the good boys', as she put it, briefly touching his hand and smiling at him, making sure he understood she counted him among the 'good boys'. Telling him about the woes that were high

unemployment numbers, rising rent, and the fact the East was treated as a second-rate place that should be patient and wait out the West's mercies and largesse. Her daughter had moved to live in the west, and had married there. It wasn't easy, but they'd pull through. Berlin. A tale of down-to-earthiness that Vadim felt deeply attracted to, somehow.

Vadim pushed the plate back when she offered to make him another pancake, shaking his head and lifting a hand. "Nein, danke," he declined the offer, but took another tea.

"Was bringt Sie her? Urlaub?" Asking whether he was here on vacation.

"Ich treffe Freund," said Vadim, then shook his head. "Einen Freund." Dropping articles again. Accusative. He was meeting a friend, which would have been 'ein Freund', but the German language had a case system, like Russian, and this had been Accusative: einen Freund.

"Oh, ein alter Kamerad?"

"Ja - aber nicht mein Kamerad. Ein Amerikaner." Vadim smiled at her astonishment that his old comrade was an American. Long, complicated story. "Das ist eine lange Geschichte," Vadim said. She, too, picked up that it must have been a strange story. Soviet officers didn't have that many American friends, and she might assume now he'd been a double agent during his time in Berlin. Which likely led to some thoughts that were not altogether wrong. He told her he was doing fine, that he'd left Russia, and that he was just refreshing memories, and it had been nice seeing her again. That he'd try to do that again, if time permitted.

Strangely refreshed after the long, friendly chat with Frau Klein, he left the place almost two hours later, got into another taxi, back to the train station, and headed out to Potsdam, which was a short way by train.

This now was an interesting city, thoroughly Prussian and militaristic in its time, built to house the Prussian army, which seemed only fitting. A taxi took him to a leafy part of the town, where he picked up the keys for the bungalow he'd rented. It stood on a patch of land, with trees shielding it from the street and everywhere else. The place had been done up and restored recently, he could smell the paint and wood chips still in the house. Catering to holiday-makers that didn't want to miss anything. Sauna. Whirlpool. Two bedrooms, space, glass, green all around. Large TV. He brought the suitcase into one of the bedrooms and unpacked, then sat in the kitchen for a while, before he made himself another tea. The fridge was stocked as ordered, and he scouted the general area when he went jogging just a little later, locating places to eat and shop on the way. Ending the day with a long soak in the bathtub.

The phone rang shortly after he'd left the tub.

Vadim padded over to the phone. "Yes?"

"What, no declarations of missing me and being unable to sleep because you haven't got your favourite 'cuddle toy'?" Dan was laughing into the phone.

Vadim yawned. "I haven't gone to bed yet." He grinned, opened the fridge and poured himself some milk. "Plus, this is a rented place. Any number of people could call. How are you?"

"It's the middle of the bloody night, Maggie has beaten me three times in a row at chess and twice at poker, I mean, at *poker*! That lady is a menace, I tell you, and I am having a large double dram of whisky to chill, but the bed is damned big."

"Her poker face is easily better than yours," Vadim grinned. "I might be able to help you with the chess when I come back, but I was never the greatest player, mind you."

"Take it your flight was alright? Did you do some exploring? Never been to Berlin, what's it like?" The sound of Dan taking a sip of the whisky was heard.

"Feels exactly like fifteen years ago." Vadim grinned, leaning against the work surface. "I like it. Didn't trigger any bad memories. I don't think I have any of this place ... well, apart from working here for five or six months. We were flushing out some spies, back then. Took a while, and I was sent to have an eye on the Germans, which might or might not have sped up matters, depending on your interpretation."

"Funny, you never told me." The smile in Dan's voice was replaced with an audible yawn.

"I have no secrets, I can tell you the whole story at some point, if you want."

"I'll hold you to that one day." Dan yawned again, "Damn, it's late." A pause, "I'm glad the place doesn't bring up bad memories." Another pause, the sound of the whisky again. "Hooch's arriving soon, aye?"

"I assume sometime tonight, or maybe early tomorrow. Depends whether he gets a train."

"I won't call, I'll wait for you to call me. Don't want to seem like a jealous lover who's checking up on you." Dan chuckled.

"Are you?"

There was a pause before Dan answered, with the faintest of sounds that could be a chuckle. "No, Vadim, I am not. You're my Russkie, and no one will change that. Sleep well, tovarish."

"But I miss you," said Vadim, softly. "I'll call you tomorrow, okay? I'm pretty much headed to bed, too. Will be weird without you."

"Aye, I miss sleeping with you. Guess I'll have to cradle the pillow." A soft laugh was heard from Dan, and then a tender, "good night, Russkie." In Russian, before the line went dead.

Vadim smiled and slowly put the receiver down, standing there, pensive for several long moments. Dan cradling the pillow. He could just see it. He shook his head, switched off the light in the kitchen and headed into the bedroom which he'd set up - fresh bedcloth, pillows, the whole deal. He assumed Hooch would sleep in this room, too. If not, there was another possibility. He took the second key out of the drawer, opened the door of the house, checked around, but there was no sound, no motion, nothing on the property. He crouched and pushed the key under the mat, then stood and closed the door again. Not a careful thing to do, but that meant Hooch could enter whenever he wanted.

Vadim was asleep fairly soon, and the neighbourhood was quiet, hardly a car driving past. It was around three in the morning when a taxi pulled up and a

man got out, shouldering a heavy duty backpack, closing the car door behind him with care. The dark haired man looked around himself, then headed towards the bungalow, the house number clearly visible in the streetlight. Knowing where to look, he was feeling under the door mat with one hand, finding the key and letting himself into the property, locking behind him. All done with smooth movements, efficiency, and hardly any sound.

Once inside, he put the backpack onto the floor in the hallway, then moved with the same silence towards the living room, which was empty and dark. Exploring further, he pushed the bedroom door open and paused for a moment, watching the figure on the bed, sprawled out and on his stomach, illuminated by the streetlight that came through the open windows. He took the few steps towards the bed and knelt down, watching the profile in the gloom.

It might have been breathing or a shift in gravity, but Vadim woke up, drifting, slowly, knowing it wasn't a nightmare, wasn't anything, and he opened his eye, half-turning as he looked at the room. There. A figure. For a moment he looked like Dan, but then he remembered it was Hooch. "Hi." Vadim turned fully, sitting up, still half sleep-dazed. "Looks like you found it. How are you?"

But Hooch put a finger onto his lips, hushing Vadim. The flash of his teeth gleamed briefly as he grinned. He shrugged out of his jacket, letting it drop to the floor. Pulling himself up, he knelt on the bed with shoes and all. Knees on each side of Vadim's thighs, his hands running from Vadim's biceps along his neck, chest, back down again, exploring without a word.

Vadim grinned - he hadn't actually expected an answer, had he? He moved, shifting his weight to lie down, stretching out and pulling Hooch closer by his clothes. Trying for a kiss, and astutely aware that he was completely naked and Hooch fully dressed, minus jacket, just with the duvet between them. A minor hindrance that Hooch was getting rid of before following the pull.

Answering the kiss, there wasn't a moment of hesitation, and Hooch's lips opened, his tongue seeking for entrance in return, which was granted. Hands between their bodies, one moving straight for Vadim's cock, the other working on opening his own fly, and Vadim groaned. Wanting the hand there, the touch, moving to help Hooch free himself, shifting his legs to accommodate him better, and pulling him further down. That taste was Hooch and just like he remembered, the desire turning to lust when Hooch ground against him.

Cock against cock, Hooch's hand helping the friction, his body using increasing strength as he moved faster, harder, hips bearing down, crushing, trapping, harshly grinding his cock against and into Vadim's. His breath came faster, and their kiss turned into a fierce battle, all the time keeping his eyes open. Vadim, however, closed his, allowing himself to be washed away by the desire, the strength. All body, no thought, pressure and movement just right, and he came, pulling the other man down and bucking against him, groaning deeply.

Hooch seemed to drink in each sound, every touch, but when Vadim moved his head to pull in air, Hooch sat up, straddling Vadim, his cock still hard, weeping, and heavy in his hand. He was watching Vadim, dark eyes intense. Just

watching, with an incredible amount of control stroking his cock slowly, despite the urgency his body betrayed.

Vadim grinned, licking his lips. "Want me to suck you?" Knowing that Hooch liked his games, that he enjoyed the control, and that he had intended for Vadim to come first. Hooch never did anything by accident.

Hooch nodded, scooting up and closer, his cock at Vadim's lips. He couldn't watch this time, but he could feel. Hands gripping the headboard, face towards the wall.

Vadim placed a hand in the small of Hooch's back, part to steady himself, part to be able to communicate, in a fashion, as he opened his lips and took him in. Nearly up to the throat, then back a bit, tongue lapping up the taste, a tang of sweat plus the need, the precum. A taste unlike Dan's, and yet so typically male. Vadim toyed with the head, cut, ran his tongue into the slit to gather more of that taste, playful himself because he had no urgency left in his body. It was just about Hooch, which was likely the reason why the Delta had brought him off first. He wanted to be taken time with. Vadim then moved the cock deeper, slowly getting past the point that was troublesome, but allowed Hooch to feel the way his throat constricted for a few altogether unpleasant moments - less unpleasant for Hooch, no doubt, and got him down the throat.

"Shit!" Hooch's involuntary exclamation was the reward for Vadim's troubles. The shudder that wrecked his body when Vadim repeated the routine, was everything but controlled. Hands tightening on the headboard, veins standing out, Hooch kept his hips still, nearly shaking with the effort, but managing to leave it all to Vadim.

Vadim took every inch, every fraction of it, not breathing, in control, and loving it, loving how Hooch responded to it. Fingers then sliding between Hooch's buttocks, finding the hole, running around it, across it, as Vadim tightened his throat, and moved back just a little, again to fight the choking reflex for Hooch's benefit, lingering there, right there, for as long as he could bear it, then moved back and took the cock again in one sweeping, fast motion, while pressing a finger through the ring of muscles at the same time.

Hooch came almost instantaneously, and despite his usual silence, a string of muttered "shit!" escaped his lips. Panting, eyes wide open, he still had his body enough under control not to slam forward.

Vadim moved back a little to be able to properly suck on him, taking as much from him as he could. Cleaning the cock and swallowing the cum, all of it, then released Hooch, who was getting himself back under control.

Vadim lay back, loosening his neck. "Get undressed," he murmured.

"Yeah, need a shower." Hooch flashed a half-grin, fingers working on his soiled shirt, which he soon pulled off and let it join the jacket on the floor.

Vadim grinned. "But this was more urgent? I'm flattered." He sat up again, yawning. "Want something to eat or drink? Towels are in the bathroom."

"Starving. Air plane food was shit." Hooch got off the bed, working on shoes, socks, then trousers. Finally naked, he bent down and picked up the bundle from the floor, to drape each piece neatly across a chair in the corner.

“Okay. I’ll sort a salad or something.” Vadim wiped his chest, then found some tight shorts in the wardrobe and slipped into them. Heading into the kitchen, he checked the fridge. “Caesar’s salad okay? Some chicken and green leaf salad, that’s pretty quick.” Source of protein and green stuff. Very healthy, too.

“Yeah, anything.” Hooch called from the hallway, before he found the right door and vanished into the bathroom. Leaving the door slightly ajar while he used the loo and had a shower.

Vadim first washed his hands, then found a pan and cut up the chicken breast, washed the salad and prepared it, while the chicken fried happily, and let it cool as he fixed the dressing, when Hooch appeared in the doorway. Short hair damp, unlit cigarette between his lips, lighter in one hand, and a towel around his hips. Watching as Vadim set two large bowls onto the table with cutlery. “What do you want to drink?”

“What do you have?”

“Water, tea, orange juice, beer, vodka.” Looking at Hooch, suddenly wanting to smell and touch him again the way he stood there. “And milk.”

Hooch grinned, “coffee?”

“Let me check.” Vadim got up and headed over to check the cupboards, while Hooch sat down at the table, unlit cigarette and lighter beside his plate. The coffee machine stood there, and Vadim found filters and ground coffee, and in little time set up the coffee, then returned to his bowl with more of the milk and two mugs when it had run through, pouring himself the milk. “How was the travel?”

“Okay.” Hooch shrugged, taking the coffee, black as it was. “Forgot how boring civilian air travel is.” He flashed a grin before taking a sip of the hot brew, with obvious pleasure.

“It’s supposed to be boring.” Vadim laughed, tucking into his food. Chicken, green salad and parmesan were a match made in heaven, he thought, then ate in silence. Watching Hooch and not really expecting him to take over the conversation. There was no duty to talk with Hooch, which was relaxing in a way, even though Vadim was always curious what Hooch thought or would have said. He wanted to know about Matt, about Hooch’s last mission, anything.

But Hooch remained silent, until he had finished his plate. Leaning back in his chair, he looked at Vadim with amusement. “Haven’t eaten that healthy for months.”

“Hope you don’t mind,” said Vadim, grinning. “What, did Matt not feed you properly? Or did you pick up burgers on the way to bed?”

“He can’t cook.” Hooch shrugged.

“Don’t make me feel all domesticated ...” Vadim drank some of his milk while Hooch showed more than his usual half-grin, and held back from clearing away the bowls because that would only prove he was domesticated. “But he’s okay? You guys having fun?”

"He's young." Didn't seem that Hooch had really thought about what he'd been doing. He shrugged, fished for the cigarette, asking without words if Vadim minded, and Vadim shook his head.

"Was good to see him after the shit in Angola. Know what I mean?"

"I think I do. It's good to have somebody so ... damn, wholesome?" Vadim shrugged. "He always seemed that way to me, really. Pure, in a way. Maybe a bit too shallow for me ... but he's a nice guy. Even better if he's good for you." Vadim cursed himself for not having kept an eye on Angola - but if they had sent Delta - official or unofficial - it must have been bad.

"Never thought about it." Hooch lit his cigarette.

Vadim cleared away the bowls and left them standing in the sink, then sat back down opposite Hooch. "Makes me wonder what my attraction is."

Hooch's eyebrows rose in a questioning expression. "To whom?"

"You."

"Don't know." Hooch pulled in smoke, exhaling slowly. "You and Dan, you understand." Drawled, eyes intent on Vadim, the same intensity he used for anything he did. "But you, you're different. You let me take my fill."

Vadim nodded, almost regretting having got Hooch this far, to actually speak about it, only that Hooch seemed fairly relaxed at the moment and far more talkative, and it was a rare moment anyway. "I have the feeling," he murmured, pausing briefly, "I can give you whatever you need ... I want to. Whatever's going on in your head. You can have it."

Hooch toyed with his lighter, all of his focus on his fingers, until he looked up, smoke curling out of his nostrils. "How far would you go?" Not elaborating any further, just looking at Vadim.

"How far do you need me to go? What do you want?"

Hooch's dark eyes never wavered, assessing Vadim, until he finally came to a decision. "When it's been really shit, I need to blow steam." Hooch stubbed the cigarette butt out on his plate. "Need to let go."

Vadim nodded, feeling the hairs on his arms stand up. It made sense, perfect sense. And Angola had been shit. "How do you do it? Normally?"

Hooch's fingers were still playing with the lighter. Round and round, without ever dropping it and without taking his eyes off Vadim. "Get myself to a big city. Go to a club. S/M. Find myself someone. The risk's shit, but I take it, or I blow." Hooch's lips quirked into a wry half-grin. "When I need it, I need it hard, but civilians don't get it."

Vadim closed his eyes for a moment, half shocked, half relieved, feeling the pressure dissipate, somehow. A lowered barrier, could feel he knew a secret and the explanation how Hooch had managed to stay together. "Makes sense," he murmured. "I always wondered how you do it." The thought of Hooch suffering at the hands of a stranger. Exposed, abused, torn apart, only to remain sane. It made so much sense. "Dan and me, we're ... somewhat adventurous. I guess you know that already, but yeah. If you want me to ... blow steam, I can do it."

Hooch smiled, some of the tension that was forever in his body flowing out of him, and he nodded. "Been a good week with Matt, but could do with more. Lost a buddy in the shithole."

Vadim stood and closed the distance to Hooch, placing a hand on his shoulder, not quite sure what to say. 'My condolences' was wrong, and anything else he could think of. "Come to bed." In truth, he wanted to hold him, stroke him, smell and touch, and that was awkward at the table. "The buddy was Delta?"

"Team member." Hooch stood up. "You got plans for tomorrow?"

"None, really. I have the whole week, more if I want to. Depends on you." Vadim stretched. "I'll have a jog and get some more food tomorrow. There's a bakery, a butcher ... all pretty close, and a supermarket."

Hooch turned to look at Vadim. "I'll be jetlagged. Wake me."

"I'll let the coffee do that." Vadim grinned and headed to bed, pulled the covers back and switched off all lights but the one on the nightstand. He lay down, watching Hooch join him, and adjusted the pillow in his neck.

Hooch turned his head to look at Vadim. "You got restraints here?"

"Would be just improvised stuff. But ... we could head into Berlin tomorrow. I'm pretty sure they should have places that offer these things." Or he could call Dan and asked for that catalogue. The thought made him grin.

"Yeah, bound to." A brief grin crossed Hooch's face at the involuntary pun.

"Indeed." And they probably even had gay bars. It would be a different side of Berlin, clearly, something that had nothing to do with his past. Vadim stretched out an arm and found the light switch, which left only the light outside to trace some lines. Vadim moved closer, his leg brushing Hooch's, and Hooch stretched. Resting his arm across Vadim's chest, legs touching, but he stayed where he was.

Vadim studied him for a while, strange to lie in bed with somebody not Dan, somebody he felt close to, no less. To make Hooch suffer. The thought intrigued him, slowly moved through his mind and gained conviction. "Sleep well," Vadim murmured, shifted and closed his eyes. No embrace, just touch, contact, but it was good.

May 1992, Berlin, Germany

Hooch was still asleep when the sun streamed through the open windows. The weather had done a turn for the better, and was now doing its best to lure Berlin's population out of their houses, but Hooch lay entangled in the duvet, on his back, one arm thrown across his face and over his eyes.

Vadim decided he'd let him deal with his jet lag, got out of the bed and first set up coffee, which started to gurgle when he had a shave. Going for a shower and then getting into his jogging kit. He peered over to the bed to check whether the American was stirring, but there was no movement.

He was about to walk back out, when Hooch drawled, "thought you promised coffee."

"I did." Vadim turned back and headed into the kitchen, pouring Hooch a mug of black coffee, to set it down on the nightstand. "I was planning to go jogging and pick up some *Broetchen* and *Aufschnitt* ... that's typical 'buns' here, but they are quite different from anything you've ever eaten."

"Thanks." Hooch had pulled himself up to sit when Vadim came back. Closing his hand around the mug and sipping the hot brew. His short dark hair was sticking up in all directions, which - in addition to the tired face and half-grin - made him look everything but fierce. Everything but a killer. If only there wasn't the hint of tension in his body, which never left him. "Been to Germany, but never out of camp." He looked at Vadim over the rim of his cup, then leaned back.

"I had the total immersion experience." Vadim grinned. "I'll be back with breakfast."

"Enjoy your run."

"Enjoy the coffee." Vadim headed out of the door, finding a route that took him through some public park and on the way back past the bakery and the butcher's. Ordering the goods in German, and exchanging minor chit-chat - yes, he was on holiday, just for a week, maybe two, yes, he liked Germany. He fell into an easy trot on the way back and unlocked the door again, finding Hooch on the floor of the living room, doing push-ups, naked. From the sheen of sweat on his body, he had been at it for a while.

He watched the muscles' movements, the breaths, enjoying the view which inspired him. He'd have loved to get back to bed right now, sweaty himself, Hooch sweaty and pumped up. Nice thought. He'd keep it.

Vadim dropped the goods off in the kitchen, had another quick shower, and came back out in faded jeans and a t-shirt, ready to set up breakfast, when Hooch met him in the hallway. "Place got a washing machine?"

"Drop the stuff in the basket in the bathroom, I'll see if I can find the instruction booklet later." Vadim's eyes trailed to Hooch's chiselled front, the tanned, broad shoulders. The fact that this man was a killing machine. It pressed

all the right buttons. "They have some nice kinds of ham here," he murmured, trying to focus on breakfast, but Hooch didn't seem to listen, instead regarding him with the customary half-grin. Even if the grin wasn't that obvious, the growing interest down below was telling, and Vadim's throat tightened, one appetite warring against the other.

"Make me keep the thought." Hooch turned, presenting his bare backside as he walked away and into the bathroom, and as before, kept the door ajar.

Anticipation is half the fun, Vadim thought. "Pretty sure I can keep you entertained." Grinning, he headed into the kitchen and prepared breakfast. Whether that would lead Hooch to rate him higher for housewife skills than Matt was anybody's guess, but the alternative, a housekeeper, would have prevented views like a naked Hooch doing push-ups. He cooked eggs, laid out various kinds of ham, and placed the buns in a little basket he'd found, all that with coffee and orange juice.

"Jesus fucking H Christ." Hooch's voice was heard from the doorframe. Leaning against it in black jeans and a grey t-shirt, feet still bare. "Marry me?" The grin in his freshly shaved face was a rare, full-blown one.

Vadim laughed. "You really aren't used to getting decent food, hm? Tuck in." He still couldn't help the grin. "First thing an athlete learns is what to eat and what not to eat. This stuff is high on salt, but a good shot at protein. Orange juice and coffee accelerate each other, as vitamin C and caffeine have a synergistic effect." He waved his hand. "I might give you the full English breakfast tomorrow, maybe. That's a sure recipe for a coronary."

Hooch laughed, a short, dry sound, as he sat down. "I know, but ain't practicable. Live on whatever shit's available." He cocked a brow, "should learn cooking. Would up my market price." Reaching for a crispy roll, he buttered it well and put a selection of meats and cheeses on top. Liking his sandwiches with an eclectic mix of simultaneous tastes.

"Depends on what market you're talking about. I'd rate you pretty highly, but then, I go for your type." He stuck to the dry-cured ham, relishing the taste and quality of the meat. "I guess we could rent a car. Should make it easier to go to Berlin, even though the trains are good and cheap. I've seen a number of shops that could fit the bill. We'll just have to browse a bit. And maybe drop in at Frau Klein's for pancakes. German-style pancakes."

"Sounds good. Give me food and I'm yours." The peeks of humour that came to the surface were rare, and despite the level of tension that never left him, Hooch was more relaxed than Vadim had ever seen him. Matt had to have a knack for touching Hooch where little else did. "Kebabs ..." biting into another bun, talking around a mouthful, "without flies feasting on the meat before." He washed it all down with coffee, on the third mug by now. "Know of any surplus stores?" Looking straight at Vadim, from one second to another the intensity in his eyes had cranked up.

Vadim paused, then smiled slowly. Surplus stores? Military kit, then. Oh, that would be interesting. "I'm sure people know. What will it be for you?" Hooch

decked out in his US camo? And what about himself? He had an idea where this was going, and he didn't mind.

"My kit's not important." Finishing off the last of his coffee, tension crept visibly up Hooch's spine, but it wasn't the bad kind. "You were an Officer. Right?"

"I was. Made it to Major, towards the end. I ran a lot of our operations in Kabul. Liaison, training the Afghans to fend for themselves, interrogation." The last word was smooth in his mouth. "I didn't interrogate, I organized it. Collated the data. Wrote reports." Vadim looked at Hooch. "Peaked cap, bulled boots, greatcoat? Or rather spetsnaz look, out in the fields?"

A slow grin crept onto Hooch's face. Twisting the mug on the table, it never span out of control. "Ever taken prisoners?"

"Yes." Vadim smiled, and wasn't it funny, really, that, in these circumstances, it aroused him. Like it aroused Hooch, who knew what it meant that he'd been a Russian officer. The bogeyman himself. If it got Hooch off, if it relaxed him, there was no harm done. It was risky, somehow. It meant remembering the other man, the one that had been destroyed. But maybe it would actually be good to do that.

"Let's go shopping." Hooch let the mug spin out of his hand and it came to a stop right at the edge of the table. He stood up, lingered at the table, half aware of domestic chores that so very little fitted into his world. Plates. Cutlery. Food. Fridge. Washing up. "Just one thing."

"Yes?"

"I can take a lot." Dark eyes intense, "and I don't do safe words."

"I'll know when you break," said Vadim, it just slipped out, even though part of him was shocked. Breaking? This had been about sex, now it was about torture. Fuck. Then why was his body so very much and unmistakably interested? Would he really find the moment when Hooch started to come apart? Keep on the safe side? Hooch wanted him to cross that line. Could he? Vadim inhaled deeply. Madness.

The intensity grew in Hooch's eyes, until they were burning with something indecipherable. He nodded. "Yeah." He severed the contact and turned away, leaving chores, kitchen and Vadim behind.

Vadim only then could breathe again. Just to sort his thoughts, he cleared away the table, placed everything in the dishwasher, found the instructions and started the machine. Every now and then pausing as images flashed across his mind, searing him with that force. With a sudden, stomach-twisting need. Hooch just cranked up the intensity. Every time. He wanted nothing more than head right back to bed, for a quick, savage fuck.

Hooch reappeared in the doorway, dressed in stylish hiking boots, designed for 'urban wear' rather than hiking, and a black leather jacket thrown over his t-shirt. "Should have helped." Offering a half-cocked grin. "I'm lousy."

"I don't feel my masculinity threatened, that's okay." It was more Vadim's sanity that was threatened, seeing Hooch in broad daylight, like that. Fuck. The grin, the ease, and the way he kept striking sparks off him, with everything he

did. He brushed past Hooch, to head over to get shoes and his own jacket, slightly more elegant, but still outdoor type clothes.

“Cab?” Hooch asked.

“Yeah. We just walk down the road and get one. There’s a taxi rank next to the bakery.” Vadim checked he had his keys, wallet, then left the bungalow, locked the door behind them. Taxi, main station, train. He had to force himself to pay attention to the outside world. Hooch had a way to distract him, and the images in his mind’s eye did nothing to help him. Neither the lazy grace with which Hooch sat opposite him on the train, one foot on the heater grill, the other leg stretched out, like he was presenting the goods. Teasing was clearly a word in his vocabulary, even though he didn’t appear to be conscious of it.

Off at the main station just a little later, they walked the streets, and Vadim had intended to show Hooch some of the sights, but wasn’t sure whether they shouldn’t just locate the goods, pay for them and head back as soon as possible. It became clearer when Hooch stopped at some of the sights they passed, asking occasional questions, showing an interest in the tour, which had no particular touristy character, but happened to pass several sights anyway.

Near the Brandenburg gate, they found somebody selling a ragtag collection of various military bits and pieces, some harkening back to the Second World War. Much of it was recent, a lot of Eastern Germany army stuff, some Russian stuff. The seller wasn’t German or Russian, but he had a friend who sold ‘complete sets’, he assured them. Getting the address scribbled on a piece of paper, Vadim suggested to go by taxi, but Hooch stopped him with that customary half-grin.

“You know where to get curry sausages?”

“Not here ... too central. Tends to be small, dingy places.” Vadim looked around, trying to figure out the best way to find one, couldn’t remember if they’d passed any of them on their little tour through the very centre. A small detour brought them finally to an “Imbiss,” where somebody, who again didn’t look German at all, served “Currywurst” and “Pommes,” and even though there was likely absolutely nothing healthy in that food, it was great stuff.

Hooch enjoyed his portion so much, he got a second one, this time with extra curry powder. He usually ate with the same intensity with which he did anything, as if the food or drink could be the last one.

They got a taxi and found the shop easily. It smelt somewhat musky, but had, indeed, the full set. Vadim spotted the Russian camo and coats right away, and made his way there, while Hooch lingered along the shelves of bits and pieces of kit. Occasionally pulling something out and studying it, until he got to the shop keeper. “You speak English?”

The shop keeper nodded. “Yes, of course. Are you American?”

Hooch raised a brow, perfectly aware that his accent would label him unmistakably. “You got handcuffs?”

The shop keeper nodded again, waving Hooch towards a shelf with various different kinds, ranging from the cheap ones that were by far the most

common, to proper police type restraints that were connected with a joint, not a chain.

Hooch picked up the police ones, weighing them and checking them over. He didn't even glance at the cheap ones. He picked up two sets, placed them onto the counter. "Will be looking for more." Vanishing once again into the maze of shelves and baskets. He finally found what he'd been looking for in a corner, next to the uniforms. Picking out several lengths of rope, made from manmade fibre. Peering through the stacks of uniforms, looking for Vadim. "Found something?"

Vadim stood in front of a tall mirror and adjusted the greatcoat about his shoulders, frowning in thought. "I lost some bulk," he murmured darkly. "This size used to fit properly." He reached for the cap and put it on, tipping it at the correct angle.

"How old were you when it fit?" Hooch's voice appeared in Vadim's back, dark eyes were watching him through the mirror with something that was clearly appreciation and ... hunger.

"Thirty. Even mid-thirties." Vadim smiled, making eye contact in the mirror. "You only keep bulk after forty if you take supplements."

"Supplements? You mean, steroid shots?" Vadim grinned. "I used to do that. I was seriously into 'body-building'," saying that with a fake Russian accent, then regarding himself critically in the mirror. "The next size down is too small, though."

"You're lucky your balls haven't shrivelled to a prune." Hooch flashed a brief grin. "Met a few of those on the prowl. Muscles, strength, and no stamina." He raised a brow, "posers."

Vadim laughed. "I just wanted bulk for wrestling, and to look as imposing as I could. And, yeah, I was bored in Afghanistan, between missions. And before we went there. Tajikistan." He glanced at a display case that held many of the old medals and Christmas tree trimmings, as he'd thought of them, likely to be had for a pittance. Including the veteran star for those that had served in Afghanistan. Another one he didn't have anymore, and would never wear again. He selected merely those that displayed the rank. Major. Not Captain. That was for Hooch's sake, the higher the better, he thought. "I take the lot," he said to the shop keeper. Not haggling. It wouldn't break the bank.

Vadim got changed again, could still smell the uniform on him as he slipped back into his clothes, then got out the wallet and paid.

Hooch paid for the cuffs with Deutschmark, pushing the items into Vadim's line of view, together with the ropes, and waited, leaning against the counter, while the shop keeper put everything into an assortment of recycled carrier bags.

Cuffs, ropes, and a Soviet uniform. If the shop keeper knew what they were planning, he didn't move a muscle in his face, industriously making money and not caring about anything else. In any case, Vadim was glad when they were outside.

"You want to shop for more?" Hooch fished for his cigarettes. He didn't smoke often, a fraction of Dan's habit.

"I think I'm set. Unless you want some 'toys'." Vadim shrugged. "Stuff like ... dildos. And, well. I forgot the lube. That means, I have some, but we might want more." He felt unreal, standing outside the shop, discussing dildos. With a former enemy. A Delta with the need to get punished. And as aroused as he was.

Hooch's eyes flashed at the same time as the flame touched his cigarette. "I'm game. Where?"

"Just follow me." Vadim headed back to the main station, where several sex shops had signs out, and it was strange to enter one and enter it with Hooch, but on the other hand, he really wanted lube and all the other stuff. Suddenly facing shelves upon shelves with porn, weird gimmicks, and a whole range of dildos and vibrators. A woman behind the counter, looking like any other shop assistant.

When Vadim turned, he saw Hooch for the first time rattled. Looking around the shop that seemed no different to any clothes shop, just that it sold a more interesting variety of goods. "Germans are weird." Hooch muttered, then caught himself the next second and steered towards a shelf with dildos. So many to choose from, he meticulously walked along to look at each of them.

Vadim kept his gaze away from the shopkeeper and stayed close to Hooch. Which, he suddenly realised, gave away what their relations with each other were. Two gay guys looking at toys together. Oh fuck. He blinked for a moment, then forced himself to breathe. "I prefer meat," he murmured into Hooch's ear, but remembered the guy in Glasgow and how spaced out he'd been. Nothing else short of an arm could have done that.

"Yeah." Hooch turned, a dildo in each hand, two different sizes. One more realistic, the other ... a challenge. "Meat doesn't come in all sizes."

"True." Vadim peered at the bigger one and shuddered briefly. Dan could fit in a fist, but he was somewhat squeamish about that thought. "Well, and it's not something you can keep in a military bergan, I guess." Vadim laughed softly, embarrassed to the bone, but also still horny.

"Shit, no. You can keep the stuff. Feel free to use it." The quirk of Hooch's lips left no question what he meant and the raising of a brow told Vadim that Hooch wasn't convinced it wouldn't get used on Vadim himself.

"Thanks." Vadim grinned. "Well, pick with whatever you're 'comfortable' with." Only realizing the pun when he'd said it.

"No clue." Hooch shrugged, "whatever hurts like fuck and doesn't cause lasting injuries."

Hurts like fuck. Vadim paused again, feeling another surge of dark lust inside, and was sure his face and eyes betrayed that. Causing him to head over to the lube, checking out several different kinds of brands, which took him forever in his state. Finally going with stuff that was compatible with just about everything and didn't leave marks, according to the bottle. Nothing fragranced or flavoured either, just the plain stuff. The condoms were a bit more of a challenge, mostly

because there were so many different kinds. Looking over at Hooch, who had found a shopping basket and had filled it with the dildos and a gag. Nothing else caught his interest. Like military kit and clothes, everything had to be functional. Perhaps even people.

"You want to use them?" Hooch gestured to the condoms.

Vadim shrugged. "I ... I should be clean." Taking a risk with Hooch, but he wanted all of the man, every scrap of feeling. The things they'd be playing with, and then the safety measure of latex. It jarred in his mind.

"I'm clean. Get myself tested every time." Leaving it between them what he meant. "Not going to infect anyone because I couldn't stop it."

Vadim nodded, stepping away from the condoms. "Okay." *Couldn't stop it.* Why did every word echo and go straight to his balls? "Right, we're done then? We probably can still catch the next train out." Looking at his watch. "Easily. Next one leaves in fifteen."

Hooch nodded and took the lube out of Vadim's hand, adding it to his basket. He stopped a few steps further down the aisle, paused for a mere second before picking up an enema kit. The sales lady was completely business-like, and spoke heavily accented English.

They were soon back in the station, catching their train with several minutes to spare. Hooch slouched in his seat, the same way as he had done on the way into the centre, the assortment of bags in the rack above them. "Food?"

"Yeah. I got some steak from the butchers. Add some sour cream and baked potatoes and we're set." Vadim grinned. "Yes, I plan ahead for food, if only the next two or three meals."

"Shit. Really got to marry you." Hooch moved his head back, chuckling, uncaring of a few glances from fellow passengers. He was anonymous, in another country, on R&R, and the military be damned if he gave a shit about anything right now.

"No need. I won't get pregnant, and I'm as thoroughly dishonoured as one can possibly be." Ouch. That stung. He hadn't meant to say that. It had been a joke about dishonoured maidens, but had turned to a big chunk of truth.

"What?" Hooch leaned forward.

"I mean, in a ... you know. Sexual way." Never mind social, military, national. Vadim briefly closed his eyes. He couldn't make this a joke again, it had rattled him too much. The complete wrong thing to say. Or think. Both. "Maybe I'll tell you the story one day. Let's say I have a British passport because Russia denies my existence." Pausing for a moment, looking at Hooch. "Let's be friends and comrades, instead?"

Hooch was close, looking at Vadim, and the understanding of something that could not be said was there, and no more questions followed. "Yeah. Easy." He settled back in his seat, looking out of the window.

"Thanks," murmured Vadim, meaning it. It didn't take long and the main station was announced, with time enough for them to gather their bags and head out. Vadim hailed a taxi back to the bungalow, opened the door and allowed Hooch to step in. "I'll fix the steaks and check whether I find the

instructions for the washing machine,” he said, dropping the bags in the bedroom.

“Want me to help?” The way Hooch stood, still in his leather jacket, a hand in the back pocket of his black jeans, he didn’t mean household chores.

Vadim swallowed. The man had a way of throwing him all the time. “Such as?” Lifting an eyebrow, gaze travelling down the body, and his own body wanted to shift the pressure of the constant arousal through much of the day. A blowjob? Or getting ready for the ‘game’, only that it wasn’t a game.

Hooch shrugged, then flashed a grin, but didn’t answer. “I’ll be exercising, alright? Too much shopping.” Turning away, back into the hallway.

Vadim exhaled again. Fuck. And he’d get to watch it, of course. He gathered up what little dirty laundry they had by now and stuffed it into the washing machine, then found the booklet on a shelf above the machine - these tidy Germans - and started it.

Hooch reappeared shortly after, wearing nothing but a pair of boxers. Positioning himself in the middle of the hallway, he used the free space - easily viewed from the kitchen - for a routine of isometric exercises, combined with push ups, triceps dips, squats and back to the push ups. Two-handed, one handed, and a variation of both, with arms in different positions.

Despite watching him transfixed for long moments, Vadim managed to return to the kitchen, where he began to make food, only interrupted by glances at Hooch’s body. That didn’t take down the arousal, but he managed to boil the potatoes, fix the salad, and the steaks were still bloody enough to writhe in pain when he stabbed them. “I assume you like them bloody?”

Hooch looked up, a fine sheen of sweat on his chest when he pulled his legs under him into a squat, balancing on his heels with his arms folded across his knees. “What, like, makes you think so?” Half-grinning.

“Let me see. These are fresh, no flies around, while I assume you boil and cook and grill everything to death wherever you are, just to make sure you don’t die of food poisoning. Raw meat, however, tastes very different, and I think the animalistic thing could appeal to you, as well as the fact that it’s a novelty when you’re used to the boiled to a pulp fare.”

Hooch’s grin grew, getting up from the position with ease and an odd grace. “I’m from the South, man, that’s all you need to know about me and bloody steaks.”

Vadim grinned, crossed his arms in front of his chest, then dropped one hand and adjusted himself, very deliberately. “Are you keeping the thought, too?”

Hooch walked closer, positioned himself in front of Vadim, arms crossed as well, mirroring his stance. “Haven’t had any other thought all day.”

“Same here.” Vadim wanted to touch him, badly, but that wasn’t what Hooch wanted. And he shouldn’t assume just because Dan liked touches and kisses and cuddles, that the same held true for this guy. The very fact they had fallen asleep and woken up apart showed the difference, even though they were very at ease with each other, with just the fact that Hooch often surprised him.

“Whatever happens ...” but the sentence didn’t make any sense. Hooch didn’t need a ‘trust me’, and wouldn’t follow a ‘talk to me’, and they weren’t in love, either. Hooch *wanted* that other man, the one he had been. Maybe Hooch, right now, only saw that in him, a person guarding something that he wanted. Violence. Pain. The potential of death. “Strange. It’s easier when they don’t want it,” Vadim murmured. “Let’s eat. The steaks should be relaxed now.”

Hooch reached out, “friends and comrades, buddy?” His eyes showed a rare warmth when he smiled.

Vadim took the hand and pressed it. “You keep ... surprising me,” he murmured. “Let’s have that food. I think we rather need it before the night’s up.” Holding Hooch’s right hand with his, then reaching to touch his groin with the palm of his other hand, pressing against the package. “Or I’ll eat you, eh?”

“No, that’ll be my job.” Hooch grinned and squeezed Vadim’s hand before letting go. He brushed past him, deliberately close, and got to the table. Still in nothing but the shorts and not giving a damn. “Looks damn fine. Should reciprocate, but haven’t got my own place and can’t cook.”

“Well, pay a nice restaurant, then.”

“Where would we fuck?” Hooch’s lips quirked. “On base?”

“Wherever. But ideally at least in some kind of safe house.”

The food was fairly soon demolished, the steaks on the raw side of ‘just right’. Good quality stuff though, like most food Vadim had had in Germany so far, minus the stuff from the fast-food place, which had still tasted really good. “What about,” Vadim ventured, seeing that it got dark outside, “you clean up and have a long shower?”

“You got liquor?”

“Vodka.” Vadim pointed at the fridge. “It’s in the freezer.”

“Thanks.” Hooch raided the freezer and found a couple of glasses, pouring both full to the brim. He emptied his own, pushing the other towards Vadim with a half-grin, then poured a second one, equally full, and took it with him into the shower after a stop-over at one of the bags, pulling the kit out. “Will be a while.”

Vadim cleared away the stuff again, then checked on the purchases. Things would have to go fairly fast to work out. He just couldn’t imagine a cold start. It had to be intense from the beginning, or he probably wouldn’t have the guts to do it ... not the way Hooch wanted.

Hooch kept the door almost shut, but not completely. The sound of the loo flushing was heard several times before the shower ran for a long while. At the same time, Vadim worked frantically, getting into the stuff as fast as he could, easily beating his own chemical warfare suit times.

He took a length of rope, knowing it would bruise, but was less dangerous than any cable, and then, knowing the layout of the bathroom, he opened the door a bit more. Moving carefully, counting on Hooch having soap in his eyes or maybe being somewhat deafened by the water running into his ears - or something. Something like him *wanting* not to notice.

He crossed the distance quickly, shoved aside the shower curtain in the same movement as he brought the rope to bear. Slipping it around Hooch's throat, who only managed to turn a fraction, fingers scrabbling for the rope. Vadim tightened it in an instant, and almost lifting Hooch out of the bathtub with sheer force, making him stumble, and using that to wrestle him to the ground. All done in deadly silence except for Hooch's struggling breaths that seemed deafening in the room, as he fought against Vadim with all his strength, no holds barred. This was no game.

Vadim managed to get on top, but it was a ride, the Delta fighting tooth and nail, and Vadim did not doubt for a moment that Hooch used everything he had - and would continue to use it. Shit. He should have brought a gun. Or a second man, he thought, with a chilling echo of that night in Kabul. And even more chilling was how fucking hard it made him. He kept the rope taut, knowing it was dangerous, but counted, counted the seconds as he restricted the big artery. Cutting off oxygen to the brain, counting because Hooch had to pass out, and at the same time, if he kept going for too long, Hooch would wake up with brain damage, or not wake up at all.

Hooch's face turned red, mouth open, desperate sounds, movements growing uncoordinated. Flailing, still fighting, body bucking up, but in the height of that movement he suddenly crashed, eyes rolling back, hands falling off Vadim, as his head slumped to the side. Passed out cold.

"Sweet dreams," Vadim murmured, releasing the makeshift garrotte immediately. Checking on the bruise, which, he assumed, Hooch would be able to explain somehow. Horsing around, maybe. Didn't matter. He gathered up the body, lifted it with some effort, and put it into a fireman's lift. Heading out towards the bedroom, he dropped Hooch on the bed, took his hands and locked them in the handcuffs behind his back, then placed him down onto the floor to tie his legs with a length of rope. Enough to walk, not enough to run or kick. He checked his vitals again, not doubting that Hooch would come round in a little. Then touching the body - stroking and caressing the muscles, the damp skin, the cock he wanted, part of him wanted to be repaid in kind. Stroking the cock, he wanted to suck it, but that wouldn't be part of the role. Sucking a prisoner? Wouldn't happen.

Hooch drew in a painful sounding breath, and jerked awake the next moment. Eyes opening wide, disoriented for a split second, before he got his bearings and Vadim could see how his mind worked, how he mentally checked himself. Muscles twitching, testing the cuffs, and dark eyes flickering into every corner, checking his position and that of the enemy. The tiniest indication of tension, before he threw himself onto his back, knees together, coming up the same instance, flying towards Vadim's face.

Vadim managed to begin a turn, the kick hit him in the shoulder, painful as Hooch's whole body was behind it, and it sent him a good yard away. The fun had just begun, and he managed to get to his feet and out of range, at least for a moment. His shoulder hurt bad, and he moved around the man, regarding him, expecting another assault. Too bad he didn't have a gun, or even Vanya with

him. Only to threaten. And to control. Staring down at Hooch. American. Prisoner. Prisoner did it. Naked. His. He reached behind himself and took the knife he'd found in the kitchen for that purpose, and showed it to Hooch. "Are you done with the thrashing?"

Hooch said nothing, glaring up at Vadim, rage in his dark eyes. Rage and so much goddamned hunger, this really was only the beginning. No word, no movement, the near-perfect deceit, until he suddenly tensed again, hands fists in his back, pushing himself up and backwards, aiming to kick Vadim's face. Vadim dodged this again, faster this time, and the moment Hooch's body touched the ground again, he kicked him. The boot making a dull, thudding noise as it hit flesh. First into Hooch's back, the next kick into his side, and while Hooch didn't scream, he had to use all his control to keep silent. Breathing noisily, frantically irregular, his body tried to curl into itself, to protect the vital organs.

Vadim knew well what that felt like. He'd been pissing a lot of blood from all the hits and kicks into the kidneys. He reached down, grabbing Hooch by the throat, forcing him up and then backhanded him several times, hard, making his head fly left and right, snarling at him.

The moment Vadim stopped, Hooch spit a mouthful of blood at him. The rage had intensified. Fuelled by pain and anger that fed the hunger, while hunger and greed fuelled the rage in return. He was on his knees, fighting the pain, but fighting the man had only been paused. Not stopped.

"Are you. Done yet?" Vadim shouted at him, eyes blazing, he did feel the anger, got into the scene. The bungalow just bled away and everything blurred.

"No!" Hooch forced out. Spitting blood again.

It was just him and Hooch, right here, right now. The intensity again breathtaking. "You can have it the easy way or the hard way." Adding: "Scum."

"Make. Me!" Hooch snarled. Teeth stained red.

Vadim bared his teeth, again hitting Hooch, but now punching him straight in the face, then releasing him. Hooch hit the floor, where he lay dazed for a moment, taken out by the blinding pain behind his eyes. "There is no reason for you to resist ... we already know everything. We even got your team members to confirm it. All you have to do is tell us the story of your infiltration, and you will live."

"Fuck you." Hooch shook. Snorting to stop the blood run down the back of his throat. Staining the floor instead. "No chance." The stare of defiance was burning bright in his dark eyes. "I'm fucking *Delta*!"

"Ah. And your team members aren't?" Vadim raised an eyebrow, mocking him. "You are here in breach of international laws. You have entered our territory. The border police might have shot you in error, you know ...?"

"Liar." Hooch turned his head, wiping blood onto his shoulder, trying to breathe properly, but his nose hurt like fuck and was swelling up.

"That may well be or not be." Vadim smiled, maliciously. "Nobody will ask questions where you are, because you're not officially here. You are at my mercy."

Something flickered in Hooch's eyes, and then his lips pulled into a mocking grin. "Am on my own."

"Deltas operate in small teams. You Americans are herd animals. Nothing more. And you are not the leader of the pack." Picking up the knife again. "What's your name?"

"Fuck you."

"How eloquent." Vadim placed the knife against Hooch's throat, staring into his eyes, then, with the other hand, removed the cap. "But I may well fuck you. And then call the guards to fuck you, too." Smiling again. "What now, bitch? Any more niceties?"

Hooch's breath quickened, in pace with his heartbeat that was hammering against his chest. He knelt still, very still with that blade against his throat, but his cock was hardening. Despite everything or probably because of it. "Won't tell you." Lips hardly moving.

Vadim's eyes trailed down to the cock and he wanted Hooch so much in that very same moment. Needed to stay in control. Looking into Hooch's eyes, the man wouldn't suck him. No way. He'd bite. Likely accepting the consequences just to prove a point. But getting sucked by this dangerous, defiant bastard was a price, even though he had no idea how to claim it. He lowered the knife, letting the blade whisper down to the chest, then, gently, almost, cut into the skin, and Hooch twitched and gave an involuntary hiss. Deep enough for it to bleed, watching the red form a drop, and lingering, not falling, not running, just beading. Vadim's lips were open, breath going a little faster. "What is your name?"

Hooch didn't answer. Had no answer, and he growled, anger rising like a burning tide, spitting at Vadim.

Vadim used the open hand again to hit Hooch, several times. Left, right, six, eight times, until Hooch's head hung low, without resistance. Too dazed to focus.

"Don't forget it's you who's in *my* power. Not vice versa. You were caught. Out cold. Fabulous soldiering, right there." Stepping back again, Vadim was warm from the fight and the hitting and he slipped out of the greatcoat, tossing it across the bed. Arms crossed as he stood close to Hooch, but not too close. "You will break, Delta. Even if I have to kill you, you will break."

Hooch forced his head back up, the bleeding had stopped despite the recent hits. "No." His voice betrayed the pain, but then it strengthened, hardened, when the rage came back and his fists clenched in his back. "Can't."

"You can't? I'll help you." Vadim felt coldness trickle down his back.

I'll help you. Just let go.

Konstantinov.

He stepped too close, confused by the sudden memory, Konstantinov had been there, just like he was, now, but Konstantinov hadn't been hard. No lust in it. Just power. But what strong, heady stuff that power was.

Hooch took the chance, jumped up from his knees, onto his heels, and propelled his whole body weight towards Vadim.

Vadim snapped out of the thought immediately, cursed himself as he lost balance and fell, crashing down, managing while falling to kick and make sure that Hooch didn't get on top when the kick hit the neck. Quickly getting back onto his feet, while Hooch remained on his side for a moment, coughing. Vadim's heart pounded, moving back to prevent a follow-on attack. "Bastard. We've played enough."

He took the rope again, slid it over Hooch's head before he could try and defend himself. There was very little Hooch could do, and with that angle, Vadim wrestled him to the ground, knee in his back, forcing him down with strength that was part anger, part shock, part lust. He used the rope to tie the legs and the arms together, connecting the cuffs and the rope between Hooch's legs, then, hog-tied, Hooch couldn't move, he was held down, and all he could do was try desperately to contain the sounds of distress.

"You are not cooperating. You had your chance."

Vadim took the ball gag and placed the knife at Hooch's bloodied lips. "Open, or I cut off your lips." Forcing it through the teeth, then tying it in the back. "What now? Any brave or clever ideas? Bitch?"

Frantically breathing, nostrils flaring with every shallow breath, Hooch glared at Vadim. His eyes, though, showed more than defiance or anger. There was pain, even hatred, and undeniable lust. Greed. Greed for more. Greed to let go. To be made to let go. 'Make me'.

Vadim stared at him, saw the challenge, and wanted it. At the same time it was like Konstantinov was with him in the room, studying his technique. Fuck, he thought. He could almost sense the bastard, could almost hear his voice. Smell him. But it made him only angry, right now. He took the rope around Hooch's neck and connected that to his legs, pulling the head far back into his neck, via the handcuffs. Forcing Hooch into a painful position with all weight on his hips - and his cock pressed into the ground.

He sat down after he'd checked the knots, and looked at Hooch, every now and then checking his watch. Allowing the tissue to swell, allowing Hooch to feel the pain as the adrenaline burnt out, body turning into a rigid, sweaty sculpture. And Hooch fought, fought so hard to retain control of his body. If he let up, he'd choke. His neck muscles stood out like steel ropes, his whole body trembling with the effort.

Vadim was watching him, unfazed, with no feeling, at least he hoped so, then put on the cap that shadowed his eyes. He opened the gag and pulled it from between Hooch's teeth, carefully not to be bitten.

"What now, American scum? I can leave you like this for a few days. The cramps should be very enjoyable for somebody who so obviously enjoys discomfort. As a friend once said," baring his teeth fiercely, "it's a challenge to make a masochist break, but I'm up for the task."

"Can't ..." each word forced out between clenched teeth, but then Hooch's muscles gave in for a second and his head snapped forward, rope cutting into

the larynx and he jerked himself back, the sound of distress purely animalistic. "Can't ... touch me."

"I don't have to touch you. Yet. When I'm done with you ..." Vadim paused, changing his tactics. "Tell me, would you like to suck my cock? This makes you hard, point proven: you're a masochist, and a degenerate at that. A homosexualist."

Hooch's breath came hissing, laboured. His face a mess of drying blood and darkening bruises, but the glare still had the same intensity. "Just sex." Hardly able to stop a sound of pain escaping. Almost a whimper. Almost.

"Is it?" Vadim met the gaze, measure for measure. If Hooch truly believed that, he didn't see himself as gay. Despite plenty of evidence to the contrary. Maybe the type that thought that they weren't gay as long as they didn't 'take it'. But Hooch did. He said he couldn't stop it, when he fell in with the S/M crowd. Unless 'taking it' was nothing but part of the punishment. Would he stay hard when he got fucked? Would he come? And would he accept it, deep down, truly accept that he was having sex with a man, and one that 'topped' him. Hooch made it sound like sex didn't matter. Here, he was wrong. Repeat sex could form a habit, a habit could become an addiction, even a relationship, or a mind-saving, mind-destroying nexus like with Dan. It could be the seed of a new person, the core, the deep, deep core that couldn't be touched otherwise, unless one was very skilled at removing layers and skin and scars. And Hooch's hunger, to 'watch', that intensity, that just proved him wrong. "You should think carefully about what you choose when you have free choice," Vadim murmured lowly. "How many women can fuck you up the arse? And isn't that what you want? You couldn't help it? Bullshit! You got yourself in a position where you knew what would happen. You're Delta. Risk assessment should be developed better in you than your average stupid grunt." Vadim leaned forward. "You feed on it. You need it."

Hooch growled, a sound that was everything but human. "Just ... sex ... asshole!" Hardly comprehensible words, the strain made it near impossible to speak.

"If you repeat it often enough it may yet come true." Vadim took the blindfold that he'd found. Stupid little thing was given out in long-haul flight packs, and he'd kept it, just in case the light woke him, but he could never bring himself to wear it. Hated his eyes to be covered these days, and assumed it was a soldierly reflex. Now, he needed to blur Hooch's sense of time. And nothing did that like taking his sight. He knelt down and slipped it over Hooch's eyes, made sure it sat in the right place, then sat back on the chair, leaning against it. Attentively watching, studying what he could see from the face, the lips, the tension in the body. He needed to make sure that Hooch didn't choke.

The strain in Hooch's body grew in increments. Turning from rock hard muscles to cramped steely ropes beneath the skin. Sweating with the effort to remain in the stress position without choking himself. Between the devil and the deep blue sea - with his head far back in his neck the pain got so bad in the battered muscles and joints, Hooch let out small sounds between the sharp

hissing breaths. Biting his lips to stay quiet, but he couldn't stop those sounds of distress completely. It got worse, much worse, after half an hour. So bad, his body was wrecked with waves of pain, visibly shuddering through him. Muscles trembling, he was fighting to keep his head at least far enough back to be able to get in a little air. Rope digging deeply into his throat, his lips were open, letting out rattling breaths when another shudder ran through him. The tremor growing to uncontrollable proportions when he kept hanging on. Kept fighting. Longer, ever longer. Not giving in. Impossible to. Could not, would not. But he didn't know for how long he fought, forgot where he was, forgot why and how and if he was watched or not. No sounds except for his own, and those became just as uncontrollable as the wrecking convulsions.

Vadim could have watched for an hour or two. The mental struggle was likely as fierce as the physical one, but somebody fighting so hard won his respect. Hooch had that, of course, it was just a theoretical thought. Not that he'd got too deep into the role. Not like the Major was actually rearing his head. Exactly when the other man, the one he'd been, had died, he couldn't remember. Maybe there was no moment, maybe it was just a long, long process of coming up for air.

He shifted his weight, knelt down beside Hooch. "This will stop when you beg me to fuck you," he said, softly. "Simple."

Hooch didn't answer. Just a sound that wanted to break through. A desperate sound, when he forced his head to make tiny movements ... shaking 'no'.

Vadim placed a hand on Hooch's cheek, the other was a fist just in case the man would bite, and he rested his hand there, against the sweaty, stubbly chin. There was this odd tenderness again, and part of him wanted to free him and take him to bed, but that was not what Hooch had requested.

Hooch fought the touch - and lost the fight before it even started. The sound that finally came out, from his very core, and the desperate whimper was small, almost negligent.

Yet it was the most weakness Vadim had ever witnessed, and just seeing him like that, not struggling right now, soundly beaten and knowing it, tightened Vadim's chest. He took the knife and severed the piece of rope that kept Hooch's head up, which fell to the ground, forehead hitting hard. Allowing him that much relief, then tied the legs closer together, at the knees, too, but severed the rope that kept arms and legs together, taking most of the strain off. Vadim lifted him and placed Hooch on the bed, face down, who finally got himself sufficiently back together again to try and fight - but his overstrained muscles simply wouldn't obey and the pain of changing the position was unbearable.

Vadim untied the legs to open them and tie them to the bed frame, spread, then, carefully, ready to fight back if Hooch started trouble, but the movements were uncoordinated and despite the effort, Hooch's legs would not obey him. The muscles useless with tremors and cramps after cramps. Vadim unchained the wrists and raised them above Hooch's head, tying them to the bed frame, which should make escaping impossible, whenever Hooch regained control of

his body again. But right now the man was just breathing against the pain, while struggling to suppress the sounds that wanted to come out. Again, forever struggling. The need for control.

Vadim watched him for a bit, wanting to wipe the sweat off, but he knew that he had to wait for the pain to subside. Eventually the signs became obvious, when Hooch pulled in a few deeper breaths and the tremors in arms and legs subsided. “The more muscles you have, the worse the cramps,” Vadim observed. “At least that’s what I heard.” He ran his fingers through his hair, having taken the cap off. Seeing the naked, defenceless man on the bed raised two emotions. One was wanting to protect him – the other was to fuck him so hard that he screamed. Vadim swallowed, shuddering himself now. He kept his eyes on Hooch, allowed the thought to not only creep up, but fully manifest, until it was the dominant, only thought in his mind. Fuck this man. Screaming. Bleeding. Fighting. Hating. This is what I am, Vadim thought. I’ve been this, and I am that same thing, still. And I’ll ever be this. I’ll always be capable of rape. He studied the thought, examined it, repelled like he had received a bullet and he was examining the wound. Splintered bone, pieces of metal. Blood and puss. Clinical. This wasn’t a game, not like with Dan. This was the real thing, even though he knew it wasn’t real, it still was. He fed it from the genuine, pure source of darkness.

He headed over to where he’d dropped the purchases. The dildo. And the lube. If he fucked Hooch now, he would rape him. Hooch might not be able to tell the difference, or he might, but it wouldn’t be good – too much poison. He didn’t even want to force himself in and so much as remember he’d very nearly killed Dan after he’d been finished with him. How many had killed themselves after this? Deserved or innocent. Feeding that hunger was ... not wrong. It would destroy something. He shuddered with the effort, he wanted Hooch, wanted to have him, and he could feel Hooch expected it on some level. That was why Hooch had got himself into this position. He lubed the dildo up, it was the smaller one, then pulled Hooch’s arse cheeks apart, whose breath quickened, muscular buttocks tightening, to dribble in more lube. The silicone cock was cool and firm and smooth, hard enough to just push through, and Vadim positioned it, his own guts tight, cock impossibly hard as he began to push in.

Hooch’s head flew up, craned far back into his neck, despite or because of the over-strained neck, and he let out a sound, hissed through clenched teeth, which was all too terrifyingly close to “yes!”

It made Vadim shudder. If this had been rape, Hooch would have wanted it. Fuck. He pushed the dildo deeper, felt the body’s resistance, knew what it would feel like if that had been his flesh. Gripped the thing harder and began to fuck Hooch in long, powerful strokes, deeply and with a lot of force, finding the angle that he liked, and kept going. Alternating between deep and shallow strokes, with far more patience than he would have had, normally. He could do this all night, and maybe he would. To fight that other desire.

Hooch had no leverage, couldn't rub his cock against anything; no freedom to thrust into the mattress. Once again fighting, this time for release, his body dripping with sweat. Thrashing within the bonds, back muscles bunching, rolling, shoulders standing out starkly on the shimmering, glistening, sweat-drenched skin. Growling, head thrashing from side to side, trying to push back towards the dildo, needing just that much more. More pain, more speed, more of everything, and most of all more of being used. The words that became audible, amidst the desperate breathing, thrusting, tearing and fighting, were again and again, a growled, breathless: "Make me. Make me."

Vadim slid a hand under Hooch's body and took hold of his cock, thick and pulsing. He knew Hooch was close, maybe couldn't come – just like he couldn't himself from getting fucked alone. "No demands," he murmured. "Beg me, you piece of scum." Holding the cock tightly, not allowing Hooch to push into his hand, as he kept thrusting in with the dildo, deep, fast, brutal, a speed and strength that would have brought him over the edge within a few minutes.

Sounds intensifying; heat and pressure growing, more, unbearable. The hand, just that touch, and the pain. The glorious, hated, needed and spearing pain. Mind-blowing, and Hooch threw his head back, whole body arching, tightening, rock hard sculpture of muscle and sweat, when he came with almost a scream. Suppressed, still, somewhere, despite the uncontrollable shudders and the gruelling breaths.

Vadim wanted to lick the sweat off him, but didn't. Instead, he released Hooch's cock, wiped his hand on the duvet, and regarded the shuddering mass of man. He wanted, wanted badly. He pulled the shirt off, plus undershirt, baring his chest and back, got rid of the shoes, the trousers. Skin on skin. He wanted that, even above fucking him, wanted to feel the body. He slid between Hooch's legs, used some more of that lube to slick up his cock, and pushed inside, right away. Right after Hooch's orgasm, but slowly, easing himself in, and Hooch tensed, but except for a low groan and his hands clenching, there was no reaction. Vadim wanted, desired, needed, but right now, it wasn't about that. He lay down on top of Hooch, stretched out, while entering him fully, allowing the other man to feel most of his weight, his lips near the man's ear. "What am I, Hooch? Tell me."

Words, weight, body heat. Threatening. Reassuring. Neither. Just ... wanted. Hooch tried to speak, face half pressed into the mattress, but it was hard to move his head, even harder still to clear his throat, moisten his lips and find enough spittle to try and answer a question he couldn't understand. "M..." tried again, "man." The first thing that came to his mind, and he clenched his buttocks, just to feel the living flesh inside him.

Vadim groaned at that, but he couldn't move. It would hurt badly. "Yes," he said, breathlessly. "I'm ... that. I'm a man. And ..." swallowed, forcing himself so hard to stay right there without moving. "A comrade." Soldier. It always came back to that. "I won't fuck you, not ... not right now." Vadim's hand ran over Hooch's arm, caressing the muscle, the shoulder, the armpit, stroking and

exploring, anything to keep his mind from the tantalizing heat and tightness. The smell of pain, misery, and need.

“Do it.” Hooch shuddered, no demand, just a fact. “Need it.” Need to feel. Need pain. Need ... His fists clenched, not releasing this time, and he couldn’t help moving towards the caress.

Vadim wanted to. He wanted to, and Hooch demanded it, and what would be wrong just doing it. What? He shuddered again. “Relax,” he said, very close to Hooch’s ear. “Accept it. Enjoy it. Feel it. Feel me. Feel ... what I do.” How else could he say it. He wanted Hooch to be *aware*.

“Can’t see ...” Hooch’s face turned into a grimace, and he shook his head, as much as he could.

Vadim removed the blindfold and dropped it at the side, discarded, and Hooch clenched again, trying to feel more of the burn, the sensation of being filled.

“I need you to understand,” Vadim murmured. “I know you want the pain. I can give you pain.” I want to give you pain, said a small voice in him. I can. I can destroy you if you want me to. I can do it even if you don’t want me to. “I need to ... break through that wall ...” Vadim kissed his neck, suddenly, shifting even though he didn’t want to, far from a thrust, just a slight movement. “I need to get inside of you.”

Hooch groaned and shuddered, tried to intensify the movement, but failed. Too securely bound. Turning his head until the swollen eye was pressed into the mattress and he caught a glimpse of Vadim. “What do you want?” Every word tickled, his throat as dry as the Sahara. “There’s nothing to find.”

“Bullshit. Who are you, Hooch? And why does nobody know your real name, the one you’ve been born with? Because you’re hiding.”

“No!” No, why? And did it matter? Hooch’s fingers scrabbled at the rope, but he couldn’t find leverage.

Vadim shifted to allow Hooch a view of his face, making eye contact. “You’re doing this to feel, but all you feel is pain. One day, that will backfire. Somebody could kill you, direct or indirect.” He shifted again, redistributing his weight. “Do you feel alive now?”

“No.” The answer came too fast, too true, and the darkness in the one visible eye intensified. Hooch shuddered, a deep resistance beginning to yield. Losing, unless he had already lost, as if that cock inside of him, and that body that crushed his own, forced all the layers and lies away, everything he’d never known, never thought about. Draining the puss from a wound he’d never known existed.

Vadim closed his eyes, knowing that it was the truth and that he’d touched the darkness at the other man’s core. Feeling the shift in the other’s body, the yielding, on such a primal level that there was really no thought to describe it. That quality of touch changed, he was now truly, deeply, inside, and that place looked as desolate as his own space. “I know,” he murmured. Inhaling deeply, then, very carefully moving, lifting some of his weight off Hooch, but staying inside. Waiting, shielding, and feeling that deep, impossible connection. He

wanted him on his knees, now, which was impossible to achieve without leaving him. Fuck. Ropes were impractical for this, but he hadn't wanted to risk getting a double kick in the face. He wasn't thirty anymore.

He left Hooch to loosen the ropes that kept his legs taut, then returned, not yet pushing inside again. "Lift up," he murmured, prodding Hooch to get up on his knees, and began to stroke the powerful body, kneading and touching, chest, thighs, to the balls, rolling them in one hand. All with time, leisure, tenderness, but still firmly. "You ... are breathtaking, Hooch. First American I ever respected." He gave a small laugh and rubbed his cock against the powerful arse.

Hooch eyes were closed, lips open, making small, involuntarily movements towards the hands. As if he were only reacting. A body, nothing else, allowing the mind to listen. "Just surviving." Murmured, he shivered as if from cold, while the sweat on his body cooled.

"Might be a good day to start living," Vadim kept his voice low, just between the two of them. Realising he was starting a massage, he decided that was a good idea, actually, and Hooch's body responded on its own when cramped muscles were stroked. Vadim took some more of the tension out, banning his own for the moment. This stuff was too important. The need didn't matter, not like it once had. "Took me a lot to learn that."

"Fighting is easier." Hooch brought out, barely more than a whisper, his fingers clenching and unclenching around the bit of rope they could grasp.

"I guess it is. It's a habit." Vadim reached over, worked his way down from the neck and shoulders, down the back, the hips, the thighs, calves, to the feet. Firmly stroking, he'd need oil for a proper massage, it might be worth getting up and getting some. But he couldn't be bothered, he wanted to touch instead, stay close, listen to Hooch breathe. Gradually relaxing himself, focused on the other's body, some arousal was still there and it would take very little to make it flare up again.

With every touch, every minute longer, every connection of hands on skin and flesh, something happened in Hooch. First a faint tremble in his legs - unexpected and overwhelming in its simplicity. His head relaxed, neck muscles, abused and tortured, losing their tightness, and his knees spread further. Sliding towards the hands, opening wider, and opening for more than a cock. The whole man, inviting. Hooch's body accepting and understanding long before Hooch understood. And Vadim kept thinking, that was how he wanted him, like this. He didn't want to break the man. He wanted the acceptance and the lust from him, too.

"Why are you doing this?" Hooch murmured, speech was becoming easier, despite the parched throat. "I thought ... "

"You thought I'd fuck you even though it would be just pain."

"Yeah."

"Not much you could have done. Could have fucked you with a knife. Nobody knows where you are. Nobody would hear you scream."

“Nobody ever does.” Barely breathed out, Hooch wasn’t sure anymore if he was talking, or thinking, or if the sounds came from somewhere else in the room.

“True.” Self-sufficiency that had led to the worst loneliness imaginable. That was Hooch in a nutshell, thought Vadim. Keeping up the movements, he suddenly realized what he’d do next. He wiped the lube from Hooch’s arse and moved his face in, gently biting the powerful muscled cheeks. Then less gently biting them, enjoying the vibrating power, and then moved closer and deeper, which made Hooch jerk, but not away, instead towards. Kissing the hole, somewhat reddened and looser, Vadim moved his tongue in, and the same time taking hold of Hooch’s arse, folding his hands over the small of his back, and blocking movement backwards with his shoulders. All Hooch could do was allow those sounds - any sounds - that wanted to come out, and he let out another whimper, defeated, elated, before it changed into a low groan. Such a soft sound from such a tough man.

The lube was neutral in taste, vaguely oily and artificial, but no bad taste, and Hooch was thoroughly clean. The opening reacting with reflexes as Vadim licked and brushed, taking his time with this. Hooch tried to move towards the tongue, but his hips stayed in Vadim’s grip, and his breathing increased, louder, faster, intermingled with more of those small sounds. This was too much, too good. His cock reacted eventually, despite having come only a short while ago. So much, so overwhelming, he had forgotten that he was supposed to fight. It had been drained out of him, the wound now clean, but open.

Vadim smiled and pulled away, noticed the signs, and lazily ran a hand over Hooch’s cock. “Free choice,” he murmured, just loud enough. “I keep doing this until you come. Second, I’ll untie you and we see what happens. Three. I’ll fuck you. Four. You suck me off. Five: any of the above in whatever combination you want.”

The body beneath his hands shuddered, spine lowering down further, as if all the muscles had lost their strength and could not hold the body up. “Second.” Hooch’s voice was quiet. Looking up, one-eyed, “untie me.”

“Okay.” Vadim reached over, fiddled with the knots, but the second one had pulled so tight that he had to cut it, less of a bother, anyway. Removing the ropes, one by one, and dropping the pieces on the floor.

Yet when Hooch tried to move, his muscles didn’t comply, he had no control. Losing balance and falling onto his side. He groaned, but there was no anger, instead laboriously turning half-way onto his back, looking at Vadim. The true extent of the disfiguration of his face became visible, and Vadim’s eyes widened at the ... colours, and swelling, but Hooch was unaware. “Want to suck you.” Hooch reached out, leaving a faint trail of smeared blood from a torn wrist, unaware of that as well. Touching Vadim’s shoulder. His arm so heavy, muscles exhausted, it rested with its full weight. Had lost control over his body and - at last - control over his mind. The needed, dreaded, constant control. Not a shred of tension left in his body, and least of all in his eyes. “Then fuck me.”

Vadim was no longer sure whether Hooch was in any state to do either of those, looking at the face, the wrists. Fuck. Had anybody else ever fucked him up that bad? Had he really used so much force? I'm okay, he thought. I don't need ... I'm not sure I want ... shocked at the extent of force he must have used to make Hooch look like that. "You're not okay, comrade. You ... could just rest."

"Need it." Nothing else mattered. No pleading, no anger, just one simple fact.

Vadim wasn't completely convinced, but he nodded, didn't want to push him away, not in that fragile state right now. He began to realize that he had no idea what he'd done to the Delta. Or whether whatever he'd done could be reversed and again yield Hooch as he knew him. "Okay." He stretched out, hand trailing Hooch's shoulder, neck, wasn't even quite sure whether kissing him was okay, but he moved up and towards him, placing his lips on Hooch's swollen, bloodied ones.

The response was slow, but no less intense. A different kiss, without the watchfulness, without intent. A manifestation of sensations, taste and feeling, as tongues touched, lips moved slowly. Hooch kissed Vadim like only Dan ever had before. With utmost focus and completeness. And that went right through Vadim, the unexpected intimacy, the feeling in this, far more than he'd ever got from Hooch. Soundly beaten and destroyed, but at the same time, in that moment, Vadim couldn't feel guilty for it, despite all the evidence of how much the Delta had been fucked up. Vadim smiled gently, running his hand through Hooch's hair. "Okay. I think I know how." He moved and turned, kissing his way down, then shifted and turned on the bed until he was facing Hooch's half-hard cock, keeping some support against Hooch's legs.

Moving a fraction forward, Hooch's lips touched Vadim's cock, just staying there for a moment. Eyes open, looking, not watching, not in the way he used to, but looking closely and just breathing. Inhaling the scent. Musk, male, some lube still, and his tongue snaked out and licked along the length with deliberation. Not the clinical detachment, the undeniable skill, but imprinting himself with touch and taste, and really, truly, wanting to lick and suck that cock. His eyes closed and he rested his hand on Vadim's hip, merely lying there, while he moved his head, using only his tongue and lips to lick and suck, getting the most taste, the most sensation possible.

Vadim had hardly touched Hooch's cock, too ... yeah, needy suddenly, too much caught up in the feeling of this very different way to do it. This wasn't the devil may care Delta, wasn't the man that seemed to fuck or suck mostly for sports and as part of a trade. When he could think just remotely clearly again – hard with the need coming back full force, with every second making it better, he forced himself to take Hooch's cock, which was fully hard. Interesting. Hooch really got into it, so much that Vadim found it difficult to even get the basics done, no tricks, just sucking and licking unless something Hooch did made him breathless and forced a groan from him.

Hooch slowly licked up the length, letting his head fall to the side. “Fuck me.” Voice husky.

Vadim rolled over onto his back for a moment, gathering his thoughts, his mind, everything. He turned again, pushing Hooch over onto his back, whose limbs moved languidly, like nearly frozen water. Heavy, but pliable. Vadim got onto his knees, while Hooch’s legs fell open, and reached for the lube, then pushing lubed up fingers into Hooch, who was still nice and relaxed, counteracting the soreness of the merciless dildo fuck. Vadim pushed up Hooch’s legs, because the Delta likely didn’t have any strength left for this, placed them onto his shoulders, and they were, indeed, dead weights. Such ‘weakness’ for a man of Hooch’s strength.

Fuck me. That wasn’t quite the expression, Vadim thought, as he eased himself in, feeling all that, everything he’d imagined. The heat and the tightness, but above all, that acceptance that sometimes came with defeat, apparently, or with something else that he had with Dan. Hooch rolled his head to the side, good eye looking at Vadim, before it, too, closed, and he parted his lips, letting out a long, deep sigh. His hands on the sheets, fingers slowly curling then uncurling again.

Moving in and closer, Vadim kept most of his weight away from Hooch as he pushed deeper, bending to get to his lips, his face, his throat, while he began to ease out, and back in, thrusts slow and controlled.

Hooch’s lips were moving, lifting his arms, heavy as lead weights. His hands on Vadim’s shoulders, touching, connecting.

Vadim’s breath came hard, but he didn’t want to inflict more pain, and yet, he needed Hooch, too, needed to come, after a whole day of wanting, and what felt like hours of prelude and sex and ‘fun’. “You okay?” he asked, voice somewhat strangled by need. If he had to stop, he would. The alternative, not stopping, didn’t bear thinking about.

Lips parted, Hooch opened his eyes at the question, looking at Vadim. Truly looking, not using the faintest amount of control. All gone, all given up, and he smiled. A rare smile, none that Vadim had ever seen. A smile that belonged to the man, not the Delta. His hands moved slowly, with effort, head lifting, which was even harder. Fingers moving travelling Vadim’s face, touching. “Yeah ...” Whispered. Resting his head back, Hooch closed his eyes once more.

Vadim turned his head to kiss a hand, then moved again, sweat running from him as the control took so much strength to maintain. He didn’t just want to pound into Hooch, he wanted to ... what? ‘Make love’ or something like that. Yes. Fuck. He cared about the man, there was all this tenderness, all the stuff stored up inside him, and he didn’t want to lose himself just yet. Instead moving, thrusting, sliding, shifting the angle to find the best way to do this, while keeping his own need in check, holding force back, and everything else, eyes half closed.

Hooch’s arm slid off Vadim’s shoulder at one stage, and he just lay there, as if crucified. Eyes closed, head back, laboured breaths coming from parted lips, riding out the sensations. Higher and higher, towards a plateau he stayed on,

impossible to crash over the edge. That was the crux, he was passive. Like never before in his entire life, not even in any of the dangerous hardcore scenes he'd got himself into. This, now, was the absolute final abandonment, and it was shaking him to the core. Ripping him wide open and hurting - and that ache was good. Not empty. Not just surviving. *Time to start living.*

Vadim shifted again, wrapped a hand around Hooch's cock, and timed the motion with his thrusts that got deeper and harder, sweat trickling from his back now. Still nowhere near the savage madness, still lucid and emotional, no anger, no hatred, no disregard. Just that, giving Hooch what he could, and what he needed, while taking what he needed in return. Exchange and gift and all that, but above all, it was a relief when he finally allowed himself to come, groaning and grateful when he could lift that pressure, the restraint, thrusting hard a few more times, but already gone, tired, drained, and cleansed.

Hooch hardly noticed the change, body still clinging to those last hard thrusts and the hand that couldn't quite take him over the edge. Opening his eyes, so close, too close, and his whole body shook with need. There was only one thought left, only one thing to do. "Please!" And he begged. At last.

Vadim understood, and while he was out of breath, that didn't matter. He shifted again, sucking down Hooch's cock in one swift, determined motion, fucking his throat and deliberately constricting his throat with the recklessness he did it.

Hooch cried out, the sound reverberated through the room, when he came at once again. Falling back onto the bed after a rigid, painful contraction. He reached for Vadim, eyes closed, hands almost scrabbling. Mindless, still in the throes of the aftermath.

Vadim pulled back, not much, just enough to swallow a few times, stretching out right next to Hooch, whose hands were all over his chest, face, pulling him close with what strength he had left. Vadim placed a hand flat between Hooch's shoulder blades, pushing him closer and kissing his neck, leisurely. He was dead tired and shuddered from the comedown. What a night. What a day. "I'm here."

Hooch held onto him, with as much strength as he had left, breath loud in the room, while his body still shook with something that was larger and far beyond the mere physical experience.

Vadim lay back, not moving anywhere. The room was pleasantly calm, quiet, warm around them, no need to pull up any blankets. He just breathed the man's scent, felt that power that seemed to have no focus, no direction, but was still there. "It's all good. I hold the watch."

Just like before, Hooch calmed, the words touching him deeply. Taking the watch. Taking care. Not having to guard his back, and the ingrained response of a soldier calmed the man, until he lay quietly, muscles slowly relaxing, eyes closed, breathing in Vadim's embrace.

Vadim kept stroking him, not closing his eyes - it was about watch, and sleeping on watch wasn't allowed. He just needed to rest and relax a bit, too, recharging before he could make himself get up. Because he would have to. The sheer exertion demanded attention - the way the muscles had shaken and

tensed, Hooch would be physically fucked if he didn't get a hot bath and likely a massage. "I'll run the bath," he murmured after long minutes. "Don't move. Relax."

"Yeah." Hooch breathed out, and his eyes remained closed. Not feeling the need to check up on movement.

Vadim slid out of the embrace, stroking Hooch's shoulder as if he had to reassure him, then padded over to the bath, running hot water until he found the right temperature. Added some bath additive – warming, relaxing, said the pack – and spread the bathrobe over the heater so it would warm up for later.

Then he returned to the bedroom, sat down next to Hooch, who was still lying on his side, exactly where he had been left, gently stroking the shoulder and back, which made Hooch draw in a deeper breath. He had been drowsing, now rolling onto his back. Once again the full extent of a damage that Hooch didn't seem to be aware of, became obvious in the dimmed light. He quirked a smile, calmly looking at Vadim - with one eye swollen.

Vadim shook his head. "Sorry about the face," he murmured. "I should have had more sense than that."

"It's alright." Hooch's voice was tired, relaxed, very much unlike the energetic, highly controlled man. "Was what I wanted."

"Okay." Vadim yawned, stretching his neck, then gave a wry smile. "Guess I am a kinky bastard after all."

"That makes me?"

"Two of a kind." Vadim yawned again. "Right. I'll get you into the bathtub now." Offering his hand as he got up to support Hooch. He'd have carried him, but he assumed that wasn't welcome, and besides, the doors were fairly narrow in this place. Hooch accepted the help, and he groaned when he got onto his feet. Walking stiffly, he made it into the bathroom on his own.

Vadim got Hooch into the bath, a somewhat tricky task with a man who had to grit his teeth to get his limbs to comply. Submerging into the hot water, Hooch couldn't help the sharp hiss when his torn wrists hit the water, burning like fire, but he continued to lower down until there was hardly more than his neck and head above the water.

Vadim sat on the rim of the tub, taking a sponge to soap him and rub Hooch's skin to get the circulation going and to work some of the exhaustion out of his body.

Hooch was leaning forward, grateful for the treatment, when he moved once more back, head resting against the edge of the tub, as relaxed as he could be. "So." He stated, looking straight into Vadim's face. "I'm gay and a masochist. That what you taught me?"

Vadim laughed, surprised. "Not sure what I 'taught' you, but maybe I made you aware of what you're doing when you're doing this." Vadim took one of Hooch's arms out of the water and checked the abrasions around the wrists. Thankfully, they didn't circle the wrist completely. It would be easier to explain that kind of mark. "I just found it striking that you call yourself an 'opportunist' rather than 'gay'. Or, as Dan puts it, 'faggot'. So you were just taking advantage

of an abundance of men that all suffer from too little sex. At the same time, you suck like a pro, and you visited Matt when you could have had women. Probably all women, with that grin of yours.”

“Yeah, point taken.” And there it was, that grin, and it still worked, despite the messed-up face. “Used to do women. Figured sex is just what we do. Means nothing. You tell me it does?”

“We can do for years what we are not.” Vadim looked at him. “I was married, a father, a good Soviet citizen. Was that me? On some level, yes, on many levels, fuck, no.” He shook his head. “I did things I’m not. Many things. I’m still accountable, but it’s not me. I didn’t do things I was. I held back, I had regrets, many wasted opportunities. It’s not that easy. You ... I wanted more from you than ...” He grinned, borrowing a phrase from Jean, “getting off with you.”

“What *do* you want?”

“Friends and comrades. If I can have that. I’m very short of friends and comrades.”

“Yeah,” Hooch smiled lopsided, “deal. Got the comrades, short on friends myself. Not sure what Matt is.”

Vadim grinned, relieved somehow, that the offer was just accepted. He was, he thought, indeed fairly lonely in that regard. “Who knows what he is. He’s certainly very pretty. Brave, too.”

“Brave?”

“I tried to intimidate him once. He was a piece of work.” Vadim shook his head. “They make them with guts, if little sense, these Marines.”

“You got to tell me that story some time.” Hooch shook his head a little. “Got any vodka left? Hurt like fuck in some places.” The half-grin was back.

“Yeah.” Vadim got up and walked out, on the way to the kitchen picked up his tight shorts and put them on, and then got two shot glasses and the bottle of vodka. Pouring them on the rim of the bathtub. “I’ll feed you some pills, too. Supplements. Should help you recover. That is, after the massage.”

Hoch chucked the vodka down. “You treat all your masochists like that?” He grinned, holding the glass out again.

“All ...” Vadim poured another shot. “Some way to determine how many people I treat like this, hm?” He grinned. “Dan ... he doesn’t go that far. It’s always more of a game. He wouldn’t have gone that far.”

“That’s the difference?” Hooch downed the second shot. Determined to dull some of his senses in the most comfortable way. “I don’t play.” He held his glass out again, and Vadim filled it once more.

“Possible. For me it’s probably different. There are days, well, nights, usually, when I need one thing, and other nights when I crave something else. No idea how that links into the job. Sometimes I enjoy it ... serious, like this. Many times I’m happy with ‘vanilla’, or whatever they call it. Depends. I don’t know whether my job has anything to do with it. But one thing I do remember ...” Vadim paused, thinking. “When I was getting tired, exhausted, mentally

more than physically, I didn't have the strength. Then I just took it, allowed it to happen. Made me feel alive again."

"I like the pain." Hooch was watching Vadim intently, "the humiliation." Emptying the vodka. "Only sometimes. Most times I just want sex. No stress." The vodka was starting to do some work, and he held his glass out once more.

Vadim poured the bottle, which was the last shot, too. "I'll get more of this. But it won't be cold." He considered. "Me. I'm what some people call a 'switch', I like both ends of it ... Depends on many factors. But I like the pain, too. Dan got me drunk on pain a few times ... when we met. I like force. Struggle. Strength. I like to fight for it. Mentally – like getting into your mind – or physically, like wrestling or something like that."

"Drunk on pain ..." Hooch mused, finishing the last of the vodka, condensation running down his fingertips. "Couldn't say it better." Wiping his lips with a slow, lazy hand. "That where your scars are from?"

"Yeah. Dan tortured me. That's the ones on the back. The one ... between the legs, that was some weird kind of pact. But I was horny as fuck when he did it."

"Fuck. Torture. And you love him?"

"I sometimes think that was his way of touching a captive Soviet officer without feeling gay." Vadim gave a laugh. "And talking about 'excessive' pain ... It just means that you need more pain to get the same results. You're a hard bastard, Hooch. And that's a compliment."

Hooch snorted, closing his eyes for a moment as he craned his head back, across the rim of the bathtub, baring the rope burns and strangulation marks. "You think I do my job because I like this shit?"

"I don't think so. Many do it who are perfectly 'vanilla'. It's not the job. It's just ... I think, that we see things and do things that normal people don't. We get wounded, we get captured, see comrades die ... I think it deafens some of us to things that would satisfy civilians. There's sometimes a lot of rage ..." Vadim thought of Beauvais and his brow darkened. "Shame. Guilt. We do things that nobody else would, and we are still bound by their rules. We're fine to kill, but we better not be gay or have sex outside ... what's expected. I think it's the pressure. Some turn to drink, others kill themselves, and then there's the whole thing about guarding your emotions and maybe trying to stay human, then that, really, is the most difficult of all. How can I torture a man and be a loving father? How can I desire an enemy and still do my duty? How can I live with this. Most people never think about it or push it away, but others are aware of what they are doing. They still do it. They have to put that pressure somewhere. If pain makes you feel alive, it also means you're not invincible. Even though you, as Delta, are trained to believe in yourself – and you have a great deal of guts, and there's the regimental pride stuff, too. In the end, though, you are a man. You're human. You have the same needs as if you hadn't joined up and were now working as ..." pondering. "What would you be as a civilian? No idea. Can't see you in anything but the camo. But you have the same needs as the next civilian. You're just dealing with a lot more and hold yourself to very

different standards. It's relaxing to be a mercenary, in a way. I don't have a country, there are no standards. All I have to do is get the job done and obey orders. That's fine. Nobody can touch me for being gay. Nobody."

Hooch looked at Vadim for a moment, then moved his hand out of the water, reached for the back of Vadim's neck, and pulled him down with surprising, returning strength. Kissing him for a long while. Intense and utterly honest, and Vadim drank the kiss in, feeling again that sense of understanding, of connection. Hooch only spoke when he released Vadim's neck. "I understand now." Quietly, with no less intensity in his eyes.

"That's as far as I've worked it out, at least," murmured Vadim, now too aware of the fact his whole theory was put together from pieces here and there, and might not hold up for everybody. "But don't ... ever ... let them tell you because you're gay that you can't do your job." Don't believe them when they tell you, you can't win. The trainer. Fuck. "You can do whatever anybody else can do. Don't allow them to fuck you up because of what you want in bed, whether that's ... men or pain or both."

"I know." Hooch let his hand slowly drop off Vadim's shoulder, resting on the edge of the bath tub. "My job is what I am. No one can touch me there." He gave the typical half-cocked grin.

"Good. I don't want you to get fucked up over it." Which was probably the wrong grammatical structure, Vadim thought, but shrugged.

"Fucked up? More than I already am?" Hooch drawled. "No chance." He let out a chuckle, a side of himself, this dry humour that only a few had ever seen.

"Let me clean your face." Taking a fresh wash-cloth and carefully using warm water to wipe away the dried blood, Vadim offered a hand for Hooch to get up. Towelling him dry while the water gurgled away, then wrapped him in the bathrobe that was nicely warm now. He ushered Hooch back to the bedroom, but sat him down on a chair. "New sheets," he explained and got rid of the sheets, blankets, putting on new and fresh ones, then covered the area with two big towels. "Lie down." He headed into the kitchen and returned with vodka and an assortment of pills. "Some painkillers and magnesium, in case you're cramping." Placing them on the nightstand.

"Never got the four star treatment before." Hooch let himself relax back into the pillows. Reaching for the vodka bottle, Vadim had thoughtfully brought a glass of water. Hooch popped one pill after the other, before moving from water to vodka.

"You might end up liking it, hm?" Vadim found some massage oil, and uncapped it. "Let me take care of the muscles. I promise, I won't touch you anywhere untoward." Grinning a grin that said that that was normally the progression of things.

Hooch laughed, turning over onto his front. "Haven't got another shot in me."

"You should always keep one bullet for yourself ..." Vadim grinned and peeled away the bathrobe. Hooch's skin was warm and dry now, and he worked his way up from the toes, slowly and thoroughly, like he'd learnt by having been

worked on by several very good masseurs. He had picked up good tricks along the way, especially if it came to tightness, cramps, and over-exertion. Working on Hooch for a long time, eventually hearing Hooch's breath change, as he fell asleep. He still continued, relaxing every muscle he could reach, up to his fingertips, then wrapped Hooch into the blanket and dimmed the light. He gathered up the uniform, the cut rope, and cleared it all away. The soiled blankets, too, and placed the remaining vodka into the freezer. Finally taking off the shorts, he slipped under the blanket with Hooch, close, touching, smelling the good clean smell, and closed his eyes. Shopping again, tomorrow. There were other things he wanted to try. Maybe just spend some of that hard-earned cash, have apple pancakes, tea, stroll around. A relaxed day, especially now that Hooch seemed far more open than Vadim would have thought possible.

* * *

The next morning, Hooch was still deeply asleep, taking up most of the bed. Sprawled out, lying on his back. He'd disentangled himself from the duvets, most of his body uncovered, and in the merciless light of the morning sunshine, the bruises, contusions, abrasions, swelling and marks were all too visible. Yet he slept on, undisturbed.

Vadim, however, had a too good look at all the injuries. What to do. If they wanted to go out, there should be some kind of excuse. Not a beating, that might only attract attention. He'd been told to 'hide in plain sight' – something Jean had perfected, he thought wryly. No, didn't work. An explanation. He thought about it while fixing the English breakfast he'd promised yesterday, taking his time, then, when the coffee began to gurgle, he touched Hooch's shoulder. "Good morning. You had a car accident."

"What?" Hooch jerked up, from asleep to awake in a second, without a moment of drowsiness in between. He winced before he had himself under control and relaxed back down. "I had what?" Yawning, he stretched, masking the wince this time.

"Car accident. We'll tape the worst marks off. We might even get you a neck support. Whiplash." Vadim grinned. "Polite society and all that. You look like ... somebody gave you a very sound beating."

"Somebody *did* give me a very sound beating." Hooch cocked his customary grin, gently fingering his swollen eye, and testing his nose which was tender but not broken.

Vadim headed into the kitchen and brought a plate of the breakfast and a strong, black coffee. Once Hooch had taken these off him, he grabbed his own and sat down on the bed.

"What does my neck look like?" There was undisguised amusement in Hooch's voice. None of the tension nor control had returned. Yet.

"Like you'd been strangled – there's rope burn, let alone strangulation marks. Damn. The brace would at least cover that."

"Sounds good, then." Hooch nodded and relished the first sips of coffee, sitting up in bed with the plate balancing on his knees. "Got to buy a suit."

"Suit?" Vadim smiled when he realized how surprised he sounded.

"Need one. Family stuff coming up. Don't want to go in uniform."

"Never mind me. Dan would rather gnaw off his own leg than wear a suit. I've seen a few good shops for that."

Hooch decimated the breakfast with ravishing hunger. "You know anything about suits?"

"Yes, I got some made." Vadim nodded towards the wardrobe. "Brought exactly one, just in case I wanted to go to the theatre, or the opera, like I sometimes did, when I was ... working here." Vadim grinned. "I have this thing for suits and guys in suits."

"Got a thing for a guy in suit who's been in a car crash?" Hooch shoved one of the last forkfuls into his mouth, looking thoroughly amused while chewing.

"If that guy in a suit who'd been in a car crash would appreciate a blowjob ... I'm pretty sure I could come up with one."

"Give a blowjob or get a blowjob?" Hooch finished off the food, turned to Vadim, mug in hand. "I got the remainder of the week. You up to use me for a while?"

"Either. I'm fine with both. I give them, I receive them, and ..." throat suddenly dry. "I'd 'use' you for a week. Yes. Fuck, yeah, of course."

Hooch's eyes had too much intensity. "I want to know who I am."

Vadim felt his breath catch again. "Okay." He reached out to touch Hooch's shoulder. "Better me than somebody else," he murmured after a long pause.

"Yeah?" Hooch quirked a miniature grin. Agreement despite the question.

"Yeah." It was. Hooch didn't want any safety measures built in, no compromise, and that had to lead to disaster with a civilian. And it did touch and use the darkness inside. But it wasn't about trust. It was clear-cut need and recklessness, and Hooch would do it, safe or not. "I'll head over to the pharmacy and get some stuff." Vadim stood again, grabbed some clothes from the wardrobe and got dressed. Jogging would be later. "Enjoy the breakfast." Bending over to get into the jeans.

"It's finished." Hooch commented laconically. "I'll do some stretches." When he threw the blankets away and got up, a livid bruise in the area of his kidneys was visible, but there was no indication he was bothered by it.

Vadim winced somewhat, and other areas of Hooch's body didn't look better. Fuck. If Hooch had done that for fun, it would be interesting to see what he looked like after a mission. He vanished into the bathroom to throw some water into his face, then put on a shirt. Thinking of fun ... "Hey, what was the Legionnaire like? Beauvais?" Standing in the doorway to the bedroom.

Hooch was slowly stretching against the wall, working his muscles in an efficient and careful way. Unlike the recklessness he'd shown the night before. "Angry." Hooch called out, turning to face Vadim, working the kinks out of his arms. "Very angry."

“About? The job?” Vadim leaned against the wall, watching the play of muscles. He wouldn’t mind fucking Hooch against a wall. Would happen. Not right now, but definitely later.

“About everything.” Hooch shrugged, used the bed as leverage for calf stretches. “Most of all about having missed out. The guy’s a loose cannon. He’ll get himself fucked by anything that moves.” Hooch let himself fall forward and onto the edge of the bed, using it for push-ups, suppressing a wince.

“That’s your impression of him? Dan gave him the whole ‘gay tour’ – pretty much hand-trained him to become a ‘faggot’.”

“We got it into his skull that he’s closer to the Legion than to his cock. He’s not out for a lover. He’ll be alright picking up casual sex.” Hooch looked up, stalled, shoulders tense, body rigid, letting the tension work through his muscles. “If that guy doesn’t make Colonel I fuck a cheerleader squad.”

“Colonel. Fuck.” Vadim laughed, thinking of his own Colonel for a moment. It took a man who didn’t have a life to be a Colonel. And the thought of a gay Legion Colonel was somehow amusing. “Dan found him, checked him out, picked him up, seduced him ... I think virgins are too much trouble, but I guess Dan likes them.”

“Dan likes a challenge.” Hooch remarked dryly, with humour in his dark eyes. “Or he wouldn’t love you.”

Vadim raised an eyebrow. “Ouch.”

“You didn’t meet in a gay bar in Kabul.”

“Touché.” Vadim grinned. “We spent weeks trying to kill each other.”

“Just weeks?” Hooch raised his brows, walking over to where Vadim had dropped his bathrobe, picking it up. “The whole story makes no sense.” Hooch walked towards the bathroom, all the while looking at Vadim.

Vadim followed, deciding the conversation was too interesting to leave behind. “I ambushed him with a comrade.” Vadim pursed his lips, carefully watching Hooch for signs of anger or disgust. “I was ... thirty one, semi-drunk, and thought I was the hardest, cleverest guy on earth. And that whatever I wanted, I could just take.”

“What are you telling me?” As if Hooch didn’t know, but it was paramount to get it right.

“Just listen.” Vadim watched Hooch intently. “He paid me back. He found out who I was, and paid me back. He took me prisoner after a mission in the south, up in the mountains ... he tortured the truth out of me, that I was spetsnaz ... we were supposed to be secret back then. He needed me to find water, so he didn’t execute me. I tried to flee, but I was in no state to outrun him, so he dragged me out of my hiding hole, and he ... beat me within an inch of my life. That’s where the scars are from. I think ... I think I remember that I offered him to do what I’d done, to make it even.” Vadim’s face twitched. Telling the old story still wasn’t completely painless, not without guilt.

“Fuck.” Hooch sat down on the edge of the bathtub, running a hand through his hair.

He should stop now, Vadim knew that, but he'd seen into the abyss that was Hooch, and wasn't it just fair for Hooch to do the same? "He went into a rage. I'm not sure what I said that made him stop, I was too far gone. I ... gave up. I surrendered. I'd been bested. Fucked up. Made so fucking scared like I'd only been as a child, a few times. Aye, and I told him of my family. That was it. He kept me alive because of my family, and because he thought he'd be just as bad as I was ... if he'd killed me after the torture. He then made a 180 degree turn and saved my life. And somehow ... somehow, I don't know, I started to connect to him. And he, I guess, somehow, to me. He knew I wanted him, and I knew he wanted me, but there was that rage ... that insult, the mistake I'd made. Next meeting, I took him prisoner, it was a raid. I kissed him as I shot him, I didn't want to take his life, either. We met, after he'd healed. I offered sex. No strings attached, no emotion, just that, plain old sex. Blowjobs, hand jobs, some point he fucked me, he was so full of rage, but, yeah, I liked it rough. Few men at that point had ever done that to me ... never like that, it was always ... more emotional than that. It was a civilian thing, before I joined. Dan showed me my limits. He broke me and since then, I just couldn't get rid of him. Not that I wanted to, but ..." Vadim shook his head, chewed on his lip. "Ah, fuck."

"That's not love." The words came out of Hooch, without thinking. The truth did not meet the expectation, not after what he'd witnessed.

Vadim shook his head. "It wasn't. Of course not. How could it have been?" He swallowed, feeling the darkness churn inside. "But we met. Months apart, but we always managed to meet. Understanding. We saw each other's point of view. He was training the dushmans, the bandits, I was ... doing my best to drive every resistance fighter out of the country. Pakistan is still fucked up due to that ... I got him through the war, he got me through the war. There were gifts, and ... good, calm nights when all we did was lie there and share heat, or drink tea, or ... well, not talk very much, but sometimes we did even that. We killed each other's comrades. There were emotions, but it took years. When Dan was blown up, I almost deserted – I went away with the leave of a friendly officer, in a way, he had no idea what I was really up to – found him in Kashmiri hospital, more dead than alive. We decided we wanted to try it, together, you know? Stay together. But I had my family, and I had to go home to fix things, while he was working to get diplomatic help for me. Didn't succeed. Somewhere, I'm sure, somewhere the MI5 or MI6 connected me to a suspect killing in Britain. And as a suspected assassin, they wouldn't extend their hand to me. Who could have blamed them? All the wrangling must have attracted somebody's attention, and the KGB took me, fucked me up and put me on trial for treason and for being gay."

"Jesus fucking H Christ." Hooch breathed out, glued to each and every of Vadim's words. He was physically shaken, and that, for a tough guy like him, was a first.

"Dan paid for my freedom. He and his friends cut a deal with the KGB. The Soviet Union was crumbling, there was no point to keep me around for longer."

I might have got out under an amnesty. In any case, somebody up in the KGB decided to take a quarter million pounds in exchange for what was left of me. And it wasn't much." Vadim's brow was dark. "It took me three months to remember what I was. Nine before I was halfway physically capable again. We met again in Kuwait. It was a rocky start, but since then, I had my priorities straight. I'm a mercenary because I can't allow any country, any nation, to fuck me over again. If I have to get fucked, I do it for money. Yes, part of me hates it, but my time's running out. I have a few more years to make enough money so I don't have to work anymore."

Hooch looked at him, with that one open eye. "Do you love him? Or do you ... depend?"

"Both. I am not sure I can survive alone." Vadim shook his head. "Dan helps keep me together. The stuff the KGB did to my mind? It's still there."

"How come he doesn't hate you?"

Vadim shrugged. "I think he tried. It didn't work. Too much history. Too much pain."

"No, at the beginning." Hooch shook his head. "A masochist, like me?"

"Yeah. In a way, I'm a masochist like you. But that's not all. There is ... more. I enjoy the power, too. I do both."

"I meant Dan. You raped him. That's what you told me, right?"

Vadim swallowed. "That's what I told you. Dan is not a masochist. He's just playing when we play hard. It's a game to him. I told you, I couldn't go as far with him. It's ... again, too much history."

"I'd fucking kill anyone who did that to me. No second thought." Hooch murmured, looking at his hand for a moment, the abrasions, the goddamned obvious signs of something so sick and so good at the same time.

Vadim nodded slowly. "I should have been put down like a rabid dog." Glancing to the side, not sure what to say. "I deserved it. I ... was a complete bastard. Whatever happened afterwards, I deserved it. All of it." Including the beating, the breaking, the scorn, the humiliation. "I deserved it." Murmured. Konstantinov was right. But the crime wasn't being gay. The crime had been committed at the end of 1980.

"Deserved what?" Hooch looked up. "You telling me you deserved the fucked-up shit from the KGB?"

"It wouldn't have happened if I hadn't met Dan. If I hadn't done that ... crime, that night. I don't believe in cosmic justice, but I deserved what happened afterwards. On some level, I did."

"That's a load of bullshit. If you believe that, you believe it is Dan's fault they got you."

"No, I don't believe that." Yes, the guilt, the crime, the punishment, it was all still there, in his mind, and Konstantinov might have done it for the wrong reasons, but he'd been justified. On some level, he'd done the right thing. "Well ... that's the long, very gruesome story. My dark secrets. The reason for everything."

“Shit.” Hooch said quietly, shaking his head. “How many know how it started?”

“Nobody. They get the cleaned up version. That’s to protect me, I guess. Who’d look at me with the same eyes again if they knew?” Vadim raised his eyes and met Hooch’s gaze, which met his own, unwavering.

“I won’t tell anyone.” Hooch paused for a moment. No flicker in his eyes, nor a twitch in his face, regarding Vadim the same way as before, as if he’d never been told anything.

“Thank you. And the last dirty secret is ... that the MI5 or MI6 suspected the right guy. I keep thinking of butterfly wings that start a storm somewhere. Whatever I do, it had consequences. I kill a dissident in a foreign country, and the foreign country gets a whiff of it and lets me rot in prison for two years. It all makes sense.” Vadim ran both hands over his face. “And why did I tell you ... maybe because you made yourself very vulnerable. Maybe I wanted to give you an idea what risk you’re running.”

Hooch said nothing, but his face twitched. Cold War. He was silent for a while, still looking at Vadim, when he finally cleared his throat. “Shopping?”

“Shopping.” Vadim inhaled, deeply, thought he should have gone to the pharmacy and not spilled the beans like this. “I’m heading out, you get ready. Should be back in a little.” Leaving Hooch some time to think about it, and in turn clearing his own mind.

The shopping in the pharmacy took longer than expected, not because of the neck brace or the bandages, but all the other things he got there. Painkillers, bath salt, massage oil. He figured they’d need much more of that. Definitely the massage oil.

Hooch in the meantime, got himself dressed, shaved, brushed and generally spruced up. Still looking as if he’d been in a meat grinder, though. He even managed to do a household chore, by unloading the washing machine and hanging things up wherever he could find a space. All the time thinking.

Returning with the bags, Vadim unpacked his loot onto the kitchen table, with Hooch looking on. “This should get you through hardly noticed.”

Hooch huffed a dry laugh. He took the neck brace, fiddling with it.

Vadim pointed at the bandages. “I brought salve, too. Should help with the healing. And I’ll massage you again, to keep the muscles happy.” Vadim grinned, glad Hooch didn’t seem too affected. He’d hoped for that. Somebody seeing him as the thing he was and still staying around. Dan did that, too. Everybody else just knew part of the story. “I’ll bandage you and suit up, and then we head back into the city.”

Nodding, Hooch grinned. “No massage, or I’ll never get a fucking suit.” He was wearing a shirt, fairly casual but simultaneously smart. He knew what to go for, once out of the camo. Holding out his arms. “Do your worst.”

“I’d love to,” Vadim murmured, grinning. He bandaged the wrists, neatly and professionally, after he’d applied the salve which cooled and soothed the irritated skin, then applied more salve on the marks around Hooch’s neck. “You even have a sense of taste,” he murmured. “That’s an attractive trait.”

Hooch raised his brows. "In food? Men? Job? Kinks?"

"All of them." Vadim fitted the brace. "There. Perfectly respectable victim."

"Better than perfectly consenting victim." Hooch snorted. "I want to look for more stuff that brings pain and less damage."

"Are your nipples sensitive?" Vadim grinned broadly. If Hooch could play like that, so could he.

"That's for you to find out." Hooch deadpanned, getting into his leather jacket. His movements were still stiff, but he wasn't letting it stop him from anything. "I rarely scream, though." He stood at the door, holding it open for Vadim. Unable to look down, the neck brace pushing his chin up and holding it rigid, he had to turn his whole upper body to check for the other.

Vadim pursed his lips, liking the way Hooch was forced to stay completely straight. "I'll find out, don't you worry." He locked the door, and off they were to Berlin.

May 1992, Berlin, Germany

Hooch kept slipping a finger beneath the neck brace, either to ease the fit or to scratch underneath, until he muttered something to himself and controlled his response, sitting quietly in his seat and staring straight ahead - since he had no chance of looking anywhere else.

"You okay with that?" asked Vadim, glancing at him. He'd been looking out over the countryside that was rushing past, and slipped deep into thought. About them. About what he'd told Hooch. And why. And how he expected Hooch to react to it. Most of all, why. What had he felt he could, maybe should tell him.

"Better than the alternative." Hooch quirked a half-grin, his swollen eye opened a slit and the white was blood-shot.

Vadim smiled. "Yeah." He wanted to say more, but there was somebody on the seat across the aisle, and he didn't want to embarrass Hooch. Or himself. "Just a few more minutes."

Hooch nodded, the movement awkward. "How are they going to fit my neck size?"

"You don't know your size? Well ... then, maybe, very carefully?"

Hooch leaned forward, lowered his voice, "have a sales assistant measure my strangled neck?"

"Well, they should be able to do that without hurting your whiplashed back more ..." Vadim heard the announcement for the Berlin station, and got up, offering a hand to Hooch, who looked up with surprise, but took the hand and allowed himself to be pulled up.

Vadim remained standing there, touching Hooch's body for a long moment, almost the full length of it, then stepped to the side, allowing Hooch to get to the door, then moved out.

Outside, they got a taxi, and the taxi driver, after a short conversation, took them to the main shopping area of the city, which had plenty of shops to buy a decent suit in. Vadim glanced around. "Dan hates shopping ... it's odd to think that after five minutes, you won't start to fidget around and tell me you're bored." Giving Hooch a bright smile.

The smile was answered with a long, measured look, and with the ghost of a smile. "But I'm not Dan." Hooch let the words hang in the air, and turned towards a department store that looked rather posh.

"No, you're not." Vadim walked beside him until he noticed Hooch was heading into the store. "I think that way," he murmured, taking Hooch's arm and guiding him along the street. It would probably pay to see a specialist, and he spotted one that seemed nice and friendly inside, as well as calm, and, judging by the price tags, pretty much what they were looking for. "That's odd, but nice." Vadim grinned at the deliberate double meaning. Odd, but nice to

spend time with Hooch instead of Dan. He was walking a touch too close to Hooch for it to be neutral distance.

"You know the shop?" Hooch shifted slightly to the side, a fraction away from Vadim, as they steered towards the shop.

"No. But looks alright." Vadim opened the door, and noticed that some guy in a nice suit in the back looked up, made eye contact and drew closer. Offering help without being pushy.

Hooch walked up to the man, looking him once over before visibly relaxing. "You speak English?" He even gave a small smile. "I need a suit, or two."

The shop assistant was young, early to mid-twenties, short, dirty blond hair, and he had a good smile, Vadim thought, when he answered. "Yes, Sir, of course. Do you have a particular ... style?"

"Smart." Hooch shrugged, "smart and dark, one for special occasions."

"Of course, Sir." The shop assistant glanced down Hooch, assessing him quickly and politely, Vadim thought, then ushered him towards the back. "It really depends on the material," he explained, chatting about brands and gauging which price range was the one Hooch felt comfortable with, who nodded a few times, before he made clear that he really didn't mind the price tag, as long as the suit was as smart as possible and would make him look good in a sea of boring suits, back home. This cheered the shop assistant on to further efforts – he was likely paid a bonus.

Vadim pulled a chair closer and sat down, watching the interplay, while the young guy chose a few suits. Narrowing it down to about five, he placed them strategically around Hooch, who looked at each of them, taking his time to feel the fabric. Finally pointing at a black one and a charcoal one. He turned around fully to face Vadim, "what do you think?"

Vadim waved his hand. "I'd say, put them on. And get some shirts with it."

"Yeah." Hooch turned back to the assistant, pointing at his neck. "Can't remember European sizes, need a couple of ties, too." He added, when the sales assistant frowned at the bulky neck brace, "was in a car accident." Raising his brows, or one brow, rather. The other not very movable in the beat-up face.

"I'm sorry to hear, Sir." The shop assistant reached for a tape measure he wore in his pocket. "If you will allow, I'll see if I can measure it?" Stepping closer, smooth motions, very professional, and sliding the tape measure around Hooch's neck, who managed to stand still, despite the sudden urge to hit the guy. The young man gently checked that the tape measure had slipped under the brace, straightened it, then leaned back a bit and fiddled with the tape measure, checking and fiddling, standing close. He either was very professional or fully unaware.

"You got it yet?" Hooch's voice was quiet as not to disturb that goddamned tape measure, "or want me to bend over?" A sudden devil-may-care attitude came over him.

The shop assistant flushed, and the way he removed the tape measure again didn't seem quite as professional now. "That ... erm, is all. Are you looking for a loose or a somewhat tighter fit?"

Vadim couldn't help it, he had to laugh, the words just invited being read entirely wrong. "I'd say, tight," he ventured.

"Definitely tight."

The shop assistant seemed a bit flustered still, but pointed Hooch towards a shelf with shirts. "I would recommend these. It depends what kind of sleeve you want, Sir, and of course the colour."

"Has to go with the dark suits." Pointing once again to the black and the charcoal ones. "Make me look like James Bond."

The shop assistant looked at Hooch, eyes wide, rabbit and snake and all that, then needed a full three seconds before he remembered what he was supposed to be doing, and quickly moved to the shelf, selecting a number of shirts, checking their sizes and makes. "You may ... want to try these on," he said, wrestling with professionalism, which, Vadim thought, was incredibly endearing. Hooch could have that guy, he was perfectly ready to do whatever Hooch might ask of him.

"Yeah," Hooch indicated a nod. He took the black suit and the stack of shirts, vanishing in the changing room. A while later, he re-emerged. The collar of the shirt was open, allowing the brace room. The suit was okay, but merely okay, it didn't move along the lines of his body as it should. "Not tight enough."

The shop assistant fought to keep an even face, not looking at Hooch's eyes directly, trying very hard to focus. "We ... there's a different brand. Please. I'll go and find a different cut."

Vadim smiled when the young guy rushed off, and got up. He leaned in to murmur into Hooch's ear. "An artist at work. This guy an opportunity, Hooch?"

Hooch raised a brow. "Could be. Too knocked up, though." He turned fully so he could face Vadim. Standing too close for mere buddies. "I have a deal to offer you. He's not part of it."

"Okay. Whatever it is, I take it."

Hooch let out a faint snort, turning all the way back round again when the eager sales assistant appeared with another suit.

"I'll try that one." Hooch conceded and vanished once more in the changing room, from where he called out a while later, "can someone help?"

The shop assistant looked at Vadim, not sure what to do, and Vadim joined Hooch in the changing room.

"Buttons." Hooch commented dryly. "Defeated by fucking buttons."

"Defeated in the nicest way possible," murmured Vadim, closing the shirt buttons for him, enjoying the warm skin under his fingers. "Much better. You shouldn't gain any weight, and this will be really nice."

"No chance to gain anything on my next mission, except for parasites and sunburn."

"And there's that." Closing the last one, then reaching for the jacket, Vadim helped Hooch into it, stepping behind him to look into the mirror.

Hooch turned around and looked at himself. "Better." He announced, then stepped out of the changing room to where the sales assistant was waiting. "What you think?" The suit was sharply cut, the material exquisite, and it moved along the hard lines of Hooch's body in all the right ways.

"It was clearly made for you, Sir." The young man's hands were closed, almost fists, betraying the tension. But if he was seeking control, he had already lost, as he was up against Hooch. "Will it be anything else, Sir?"

"Yeah," Hooch quirked the brow of his good eye, "I want a black one for special occasions." Stepping closer to the shop assistant. "Really special. You get me?"

Again three seconds before the shop assistant managed to do so much as blink at Hooch. Vadim assumed that his nerves were extremely slow-firing, three seconds was excessive, but he was a civilian, after all. "Of course, Sir." Heading off to bring a black suit of the same make, and laying it out for Hooch. Eyes on the suit, not on the man.

"Thanks, buddy." Hooch returned to the changing room, on his own for a while, before he called out for help once more. "Getting stuck here ..." When rescue came, he was standing in little more than a pair of briefs, trousers caught around his ankles, and unable to see what he was doing when he bent over, his head held up too high. Vadim bit down hard on the grin, but he dressed Hooch, trousers, shirt, then jacket, smoothing the cloth over Hooch's frame. "I did mention what suits make me want to do ... didn't I?"

"And I did mention the deal, didn't I?" Hooch turned to face Vadim.

"Yes."

"What you think?"

"Makes me want to get some of those, too." Vadim grinned.

"That'll do for a wedding?" Hooch cocked the good brow.

"Absolutely. Who's getting married?" It slipped out, but on the other hand, they'd entered a stage where asking personal questions wasn't as bad. Not that Hooch couldn't still brush him off.

"Not me." Hooch suddenly flashed a grin that almost split his face. Entirely uncharacteristic and unexpected.

"Family?"

"Sister. I'm sick of wearing uniform." Hooch took a step back, turning slowly, then walking out of the changing room to allow the sales assistant to get an eyeful, too, who flattered him, stating it was a good fit, certainly a good look, *Sir*, and whether he could do anything else for him.

"My buddy wants a suit, too." Turning around, Hooch glanced at Vadim, before he retreated back into the changing room to take the suit off and to look over a range of shoes the assistant had brought.

"Certainly."

Vadim got the tour of the shop again, looking at brands and the shop assistant seemed to find some of his confidence back when Vadim indicated that, yes, price wasn't what he was going for, and that they could speak German, something which seemed to surprise the young man. Vadim quickly decided

which make he wanted and knew the size of his neck, of course. It didn't take long until he'd found a very dark blue suit that he liked, and a grey pinstripe that seemed serious, but fitted him very nicely. He spent more time on finding the shirts, and the ties, adding a little pile of cufflink boxes to that.

Hooch had gone outside to smoke a cigarette, then came back and sat down on one of the chairs, occasionally glancing up and otherwise flicking through a couple of magazines, which clearly did not catch his interest. He didn't look bored, though, instead blessed with infinite patience, as he sat as comfortably as he could, good eye half-closed. Dozing lightly while waiting for Vadim, who got his attention when he held a pair of cufflinks under his nose. Black obsidian, simple but polished to a gleam.

"You telling me I should buy those?"

"No, I'm asking whether you'd wear them if I got them for you."

"Yeah, and longer lasting than roses." Hooch let out a dry huff of laughter. "Thanks."

Vadim chuckled. "I don't *do* roses," he said, mimicking Hooch's way of saying that, then indicated for the shop assistant to start wrapping and bagging and running the totals for both piles.

Hooch stood at the counter, not even blinking when it came to paying the considerable sum, using a credit card that was gladly accepted by the sales assistant, who looked equally disappointed and glad to see them leave. A notion that Hooch ignored, like most things that were not of direct interest to him. Waiting for Vadim to pay his pile and get hold of his own assortment of bags, Hooch turned fully towards the assistant. "Where's the nearest public phone?"

"Just down the street. Turn left," the shop assistant said, opening the door for them.

Vadim nodded his thanks and they were back on the street. "I was wrong. You also got a healthy sadistic streak."

Hooch had to turn round fully to glance at Vadim, once again the good brow quirked up. "Do I?" He made a passable go at an utterly innocent and surprised look.

Vadim laughed. "Yeah. Never mind. Takes one to find one." He briefly placed his hand on Hooch's shoulder, to direct him to the phone he'd spotted, but also to touch him. "Over there."

Hooch made a movement as if he were about to glance at the hand, but it was aborted, because it would have been impossible anyway. "Give me a moment." With that he was off to the public phone. Inside, he was looking through the phone book, then fished for change and made a call. All in all it took no longer than ten minutes before he came back out.

"We need to be back in town at seven for dinner."

"Good idea." Vadim checked the time, slightly amused at Hooch's quick and efficient way to deal with anything. No-nonsense, and at the same time very considerate. "That's plenty of time. We could look in the bags in the train station, and have a look what we can find in the toy shop."

Hooch indicated a stiff nod. "Figure we need a more specialised shop." Heading off into the direction of the train station. He was walking through Berlin as if he knew the place, even though he was only there for the second time. Orientation skills honed to perfection, particularly in an urban environment.

Vadim followed, not surprised when Hooch had the train station located just a bit later. Once they'd locked in the bags, he looked at Hooch. "Any idea where to find the specialist? I guess you could sweet-talk the shop assistant in that other shop to give you the details of the competition."

"What makes you think I could sweet-talk her?" An amused gleam became visible in Hooch's eye, "appealing to her sympathy for the poor invalid who had a 'car accident' in between buying more sex toys?" The amusement became more evident.

"Okay. Let's do another shop." Vadim really didn't want to be seen as the one who'd fucked Hooch up like that. "Don't want any accusing looks."

Hooch shrugged and grinned, heading towards a set of dingy looking side streets, having a knack for picking up the atmosphere of places. He was right, because it became obvious after a moment that they'd landed in the red light district.

"Just don't like advertising what I do in the bedroom," Vadim murmured, glancing around.

"Understandable." Walking along the road and the windows that advertised the 'wares', Hooch had an uncanny ability to be left alone by doormen who tried to drag punters in, while at the same time avoiding to be hassled. Strangely blending in without appearing invisible, a presence that was oddly forbidding, and with him Vadim, in association. They made it to the end of the street, and found in a corner what they had been looking for. A shop whose window displayed every bit of kinky gear imaginable.

"Different generation, clearly." Vadim took a deep breath and entered the shop. The first thing he noticed was a smell of leather, silicone and plastics. While his eyes adjusted to the gloom inside, he could make out that at least half the shop was about clothes, but crammed in every space imaginable was a lot of 'gear': gags, dildos, lots of steel and leather. "Okay," he murmured.

"What about that: you choose, I pay."

Vadim stepped closer to some of the stuff and looked at it, figuring out what to do with it. Some was labelled, some had photos and left nothing to the imagination. Other stuff he could guess – other pieces were completely alien. He found things he wanted to try, though. Nipple clamps. He wanted to find out whether Hooch's were as sensitive as his. A more solid-looking blindfold next, larger than the flimsy thing they had. What else? There were more ropes, but Vadim thought of the state of Hooch's wrists and went for wrist and ankle cuffs, again fairly solid-feeling, heavy, and padded. Remembering the guys from Glasgow, he added cockrings, curious what they'd feel like and what Hooch would think of them. And there were chains that could connect the cuffs and

various other pieces, placing them onto the counter, and feeling strange about it.

Hooch didn't look at the pile of toys, deliberately so, leaned closer to the sales person instead. "I'll pay. Just pack the things up. Got a couple more things to add." The shop assistant nodded, started to tally up the count, that was quite hefty - supply and demand. Hooch went back along the rows and picked up a whip with a flat end. Sturdy and flexible, then lingering no more than a second over an implement of leather, steel and chains, with weights attached. The picture left nothing to the imagination how this should be used, with the weights hanging from the parachute and pulling down the scrotum. He remembered vaguely that something like that had been used on him, but the memory of the encounter had become a blur of pain and need. He was curious, but not this time. There'd be opportunities for another encounter, he figured. Placing the whip onto the counter beside the packed bag, he turned fully to glance at Vadim with a half-cocked smile. "All?"

Vadim looked at the whip. "From my end." Okay. He'd try that out. Hooch clearly meant to be at the receiving end. "It's your body."

"No, not when I'm prisoner." Hooch turned back to the sales assistant and paid for his purchases, in cash this time, with a stash he kept in the back of his wallet. Clearly, he had a fairly good idea of what should and what shouldn't show up on his credit card bill. Besides, the shop wasn't the type that accepted plastic. "Get kebab at the station?" He'd spotted the place even though it had been out of the way.

"Yeah. I'll pay the food." The bill was fairly awe-inspiring, Vadim thought, especially after he'd seen the clothes he could get for a similar amount. Heading out, he again just followed Hooch. "What's the offer - or deal you're offering?"

"I'll tell you over dinner." Hooch grinned the customary half-grin, then headed off towards the kebab place, where they got doners with garlic sauce and chillies, before taking the bags out of storage and making their way once more back to Potsdam and the bungalow. Hooch - all the way - being in a rare mood, which could almost be described as sunny, except that Vadim knew it had to be anticipation.

When they got back to the bungalow, Hooch spread the clothes purchases out on the bed. "I'd go for the elegant one. You'll like where we'll eat."

"I'll have a good shave first." Checking the time. "Shower, then a coffee and getting dressed. And we should be fine for seven." Elegant. That was fine with him. He relished the thought, in fact, of this 'Yank' who knew about the good life, and seemed far more cultured than he'd have given any American credit for. He began to strip. "You planning to keep the anticipation?"

"Yeah." Pulling the brace off, Hooch rolled his neck and shoulders, rubbing at the back to ease some of the tension. "I'll get myself ready." 'Ready' meant more than a simple shave.

"Bathroom is all yours. I'll just make a quick call." He headed back into the kitchen, while Hooch was in the bathroom, as usual leaving the door slightly ajar.

Vadim dialled Dan's number, which rang a couple of times, before a member of the embassy staff picked up. Since this was the private number, it became soon clear who he was and that Mr McFadyen was in with Her Ladyship, but would be called to the phone immediately, and it should not take longer than a few minutes, and to please wait.

As promised, not much later, Dan's voice was heard, with unmistakable amusement in it. "I take it you are entertained well?"

"Hi Dan, good to hear your voice, too," Vadim murmured. "No, I'm not bored. Too busy spending money in Berlin. You'd be bored to tears."

"Somehow I don't quite believe that." Dan's smile was audible, and then a shuffle and the sound of a cigarette being lit. He took his time before saying anything else. "How is Hooch?"

"Starts to relax. Latest mission was hard on him, I guess. Takes him something to come down." Vadim kept an eye on the corridor for Hooch, then began to start a coffee. "Are you okay? Enjoying your holidays?"

"Aye, not doing much else than gym, pool, sunning, drinking fine booze and eating good food. And excellent company of course." Dan paused, "would you tell me I'm a bimbo if I told you I miss you?"

"No. I miss you, too." And he did. Would be good to be reunited, Vadim thought. "Why don't you head out to the States, meet Matt? And join me here in a week? I could show you Berlin. This place is nice, good place to unwind. Not quite Dubai, but you'll like it."

"You really do want to parcel me off to Matt, aye?" Dan chuckled, a low rumbling sound. "I wonder what that means."

"Means I feel guilty for enjoying this." Vadim murmured in Russian, reasonably sure that Hooch didn't speak it. "I miss you, but I want you to have fun, okay?"

"Are you in love with him?" Out of the blue, while Dan stuck to English. Not feeling the need to switch, or not wanting to, unsure why.

"I care about him." Vadim's brow was furrowed. "I don't know what the feeling is, I haven't thought about it. Maybe like you and Jean."

"Jean's a friend, I'm not in love with him." The smile was back in Dan's voice. "As long as you're not in love with the man, then why feel guilty because you're having fun? Besides, I've been thinking ... if you did fall in love with someone else there would be pretty little I could do." He suddenly chuckled, "except for ripping your guts out, cutting your balls off and stuffing them down your throat, of course."

"Charming way to say you're jealous." Vadim gave a soft laugh, and noticed the faint but good coffee smell spread in the kitchen.

"I'm not!" Dan protested, too quickly to be entirely believable. "Just ... damn, I remember I told you I'd never be separated from you again. Now that I am I don't fucking like it." No anger in his voice though, instead a long slow exhale of smoke.

"It's Berlin, not East Berlin. Strange. They can't reach me here. I think they should have forgotten about me by now. So, no risk." Vadim inhaled deeply. "But I get you. Strange situation, isn't it?"

"Aye, but a fair one." Dan smiled.

"Is that the new rules ... we spend time with friends every now and then?"

"I don't like rules. You know me, irreverent bastard and all that." Inhaling smoke, pausing, "but I figure if I want to shag others you can do the same. I wasn't made for monogamy, doesn't keep me from missing you, though. And occasionally wondering, when I have too much time on my hands - and I have a lot of time here."

"I can imagine ..." Fair was fair, Vadim thought. Not that he wanted half as many men as Dan wanted. He might see how attractive they were, but he didn't actually go out of his way to make a move on them. Might have to do with what Dr Williams had said. He had to be careful with people. He didn't have to be careful with Hooch, though. This man relished what he gave him. "What are you wondering?"

"That I was just asking for a taste of my own medicine, aye?" Dan chuckled, then another sound and shuffle, as he put out the cigarette. "As for Matt, I've booked the flight, but he's only got three days. How long do you need me to be away?"

Hooch had come out of the bathroom, unseen and unheard, and retreated once more, silently closing the door, to give privacy.

"Hooch has a week. You're welcome to join us, or join me when you come back."

"That wasn't what I asked."

"I don't *need* you to be away, Dan." Vadim frowned. "Having the week here is good, but you're welcome to join us or me when you return from Matt. No problem. Just leave me a phone number."

A small pause, before Dan replied, "I'll be there on Tuesday, then." The day after Hooch had to leave. "I'll let you know which plane I get, aye?"

"Okay. I look forward to it." Vadim smiled. "Especially regarding the reunion sex."

"Just don't get too worn out." Dan grinned audibly, "not sure about me, I have to deal with an insatiable kid, but I'll do my best."

"I'll be fine ... I'll have a day at least. ... It's what, eight or five hours flight? Plus the time at the airport. Plenty of opportunity to recover."

Dan chuckled, "I'll be off Thursday night, you got Matt's number, and if you don't, I'm sure Hooch has. You have fun, aye? And tell him he's a lucky man to get you."

Vadim felt his throat tighten. "I will. You enjoy the kid. I'll head for the shower, then we'll be off to a restaurant in Berlin."

"A fancy one?" The grin became more and more audible.

"He requested I should wear the most elegant thing I have." Vadim laughed. "If you bring a suit I might take you there, too. The waiters will be shocked, if I show up with two absolute stunners within a week."

Dan laughed out loud. "Figures! Well, I'll see what I can do, for good food I might even get myself into a suit. Unless you make me buy another one."

"Not sure I want to be that cruel to a certain shop assistant."

Chuckling, Dan answered, "enjoy, Russkie, and I won't say 'think of me', because that would be fucking stupid and I wouldn't do it if I were in your place." His voice sounded warm. "I'll talk to you when I talk to you. For now, have a good time." Adding, in Russian, "love you, bastard."

"Love you, lapushka."

Dan's tender laugh was heard before the phone was put down.

It took a couple of minutes before the bathroom door opened and Hooch reappeared, wearing a towel around his hips. "Everything alright?"

Vadim nodded, smiling. "He's just this side of jealous."

"Why?"

"Because I normally don't do this. I'm not that interested in most men. I'm interested in you, though."

"Sex, kink, me?"

"All three." Vadim pursed his lips. "And he says I should tell you you're lucky to have me. Otherwise, nothing much. I mean, he does it all the time."

"Being jealous? Or taking opportunities?"

"Taking opportunities. Sometimes creating opportunities, like with Beauvais."

Hooch nodded, "no different to me, then." A sudden grin lit up his bruised face, "don't forget matchmaking opportunities. I'd never have fucked a jarhead if he hadn't set us up."

"There's that. Seems he thought you'd be a good pair, sex-wise. Not that I think Matt plays quite as hard as you do, but he is damned pretty."

Hooch grinned, "no, Matt doesn't play hard. He's so damned wholesome, he makes me forget all the shit." He shrugged, "nothing can touch that kid, don't think he'll ever turn bitter. And yeah, he's 'pretty'." Giving a huff of a laugh, Hooch pointed at the clock in the hallway. "Let's get ready?"

"Yeah. Shower and shave." Vadim headed into the bathroom for a spot of 'grooming', shaving, and a quick shower, used some lotion after the shave. He then went for the dark blue suit, white shirt, cufflinks, and found the polished dark shoes in the wardrobe.

Hooch had been dressing in the other room to have more space, and when he finally came out, he was almost completely dressed, in black suit and silk tie, with the brand new gleaming shoes and the obsidian cufflinks. Shirt still open and tie loose, he held the neck brace in his hand. "Accident victim?" Raising the good brow with an amused grin.

"I don't think it detracts from your attraction," Vadim murmured. "I like how that straightens your neck. Weird."

"Reminds you of a collar?"

"Yeah. It does." Vadim brushed his suit with his hands, enjoying the smooth, elegant fit. "But I think it might not be great for eating. So, as long as we keep your wrists bandaged, you should still be respectable."

“Does the strangulation show?” Hooch stood still for Vadim to close his shirt and adjust the tie, while checking if the marks were visible.

“The collar rides fairly high. You should be okay if you don’t move your head too much. And if it shifts, I’ll gesture.” Vadim brought a hand up to his tie, straightening it. “Like this.”

“How are they going to believe I am not just another domestic violence victim?”

“You don’t look like a victim. You don’t feel like a victim.” Vadim grinned. “But you can wear that thing if you want to. Or I drop a remark about the car’s insurance.”

“Drop that remark.” Hooch grinned back. “I called a taxi earlier, it should be here any minute.”

And it was, turning up not much later. When they had settled in, the driver asked for the destination and Hooch answered, “Hotel Kempinski.” Leaning back and flashing a half-grin at Vadim.

Vadim glanced at Hooch. “*Nice.*” With clear appreciation. “And all I did was cook some steaks ... not sure it’s a fair compensation ...”

“You gave me what I needed - and more.” Hooch leaned to the side, the light of the street lamps threw his face into distorting shadows. “But let’s get to the deal over dinner.”

“Okay.” Vadim couldn’t help it, and reached over to touch Hooch’s thigh, resting his hand there for several long moments. They sat in silence, each man deep in thoughts. Vadim mainly thinking about what to expect, what would happen next. And thinking of Hooch’s body taking his cock any way he wanted him to. Hooch’s face twisted in pain, but lust just as strong. He needed to think something else, quickly, but neither was thinking of Dan particularly helpful.

Hooch leaned back into the seat, eye half-closed, as the darkening city moved past them. They arrived well in time, and he paid the driver, before getting out of the taxi in front of the splendid building with its footman at the top of the steps that led into the establishment. Hooch adjusted his collar and tie, making sure his neck was covered, before glancing at Vadim with that small smile of his. The footman held the door open, greeting them with a bow, and they walked into the foyer. Taking in the elegant furnishings, as they steered towards the restaurant, where a maitre d’ was ever so politely enquiring about their reservations, without even twitching an eye at Hooch’s appearance.

Vadim took in the surroundings, distinguished and relaxed at the same time. People who dined here did so regularly and didn’t seem particularly aware of the sophistication. Accepting it as a given. He followed the maitre d’ who escorted them to their table, which was set into a quiet corner.

Hooch ordered aperitifs for both of them, before opening the menu to peruse the selection. “Buddy of mine told me to come here. Jeff, team member, his ex-wife dragged him across Europe some time ago.”

“Very impressed.” Vadim glanced at the prices and calculated them into pound sterling, comparing them to what he’d paid for other things so far. “I might drag Dan here.” Grinning.

“Because he’d hate it?” Hooch smirked, good humoured.

“Yeah. Too much choice.” Vadim indicated the menu. “Sounds all great.”

“Better than rations. Not sure, though, if it’ll be as good as the first bite after starving for days.”

“That’s one way to see it.”

The aperitifs were brought, and Hooch took a sip, before studying the menu once more, finally deciding on a starter and main course. “Want to choose the wine?”

“Okay.” Scanning the wine card when it was brought, they all sounded good, and Vadim asked the waiter which one he recommended. Going with the recommendation, he tried the wine and nodded, feeling somewhat self-conscious, while enjoying the ritual. How many levels away from Afghanistan or Kuwait. Or any other shithole they might end up in. Yugoslavia. Charming place.

They ordered their food, and Hooch made an appreciative sound over the wine. Spending a while in silence, which was nothing but comfortable. He had been talking more than usual, and being silent was his natural way. Relaxing in the comfort of Vadim’s presence, until their first course was brought, which turned out to be exquisitely presented and delicious.

“You want to know the deal or eat first?” Hooch looked at Vadim over his food.

Vadim nodded, determined to make this food last, eating small bites, chewing with relish. “The deal. But I’m pretty sure that after this, I won’t be able to not agree to whatever you want.”

“I want you to take me prisoner. For two days and nights. No fight, no overpowering necessary. You’ll have me, and you know I don’t play.”

“Why?”

Eating a forkful, Hooch kept looking at Vadim. “If I’m not healed up by next week I’m in deep shit. Can’t afford any more injuries, but ...” leaning closer, “I want you to show me my limits.”

Vadim managed to swallow the bite of food, then looked at Hooch intently. “No visible signs,” he repeated. “But serious.” Prisoner. A game with very few rules. Safer than if anybody else did it, he thought. That answered the question ‘why me?’ “And no game.” Vadim took a mouthful of the wine. “You think that will last you for a while? Because – I’d rather know you’re safe ... well, ‘safe’ when you’re leaving.”

“I’m leaving for a stint at Fort Bragg, then off to another shithole. No time not to be ‘safe.’” Taking another piece onto his fork, Hooch half-grinned. “After the two days and nights, all’s fair. If I win, I get to fuck you, and vice versa. Sex. Fun. The other stuff.”

Vadim nodded. *The other stuff.* Two more days to feed the darker craving, and then fun and games for the rest of the week. Hooch knew exactly what he wanted, and also how to get it. “I wonder if I should ask or whether you want me to guess ... how you want to be treated. What presses your buttons. Authority, I get that, but ... any more hints are welcome.”

Hooch lowered his head while moving food onto his fork. Dark lashes shadowing his eyes. When his face came back up, he was so close, he didn't need to do more than murmur. "Pain. Nipples, cock and ball torture. Whipping. Humiliation. I want to know if I get off on it."

Vadim felt it was getting too warm in the room. "I'll do my best ... to get you off, too." He smiled, feeling somewhat apprehensive. "I haven't done it like that, but I'm sure I can work it out."

"You're a natural, because you understand." Hooch drawled, voice low, before leaning back and finishing his starter. The wine was excellent, it was flowing freely, and by the time the main course arrived, they were onto the second bottle. The room was, indeed, getting warmer. "What you been doing with Dan?" The silent understanding that if Vadim did not want to, he didn't have to answer.

"We sometimes play." Keeping his voice low. It was surreal to discuss this here, but Vadim didn't mind, there was enough privacy. "But it's a game. With our history, Dan ... wouldn't have it any other way. Sometimes he submits, but that's a game. I know if I force it too much, he'll snap and makes me feel it. That means it can never turn very serious. There's always ... some safety barrier. I can be grateful that he allows me to fuck him. For years, that was a complete no-go area. That's fine, I ... like getting fucked, so it was usually me. Most of the time, we have 'vanilla' sex. Passionate, rough sometimes, because I enjoy it rough. He can drive me up the wall when he fucks me slow, on our sides. I can't ... come when he doesn't give me a hand or something. He uses that against me Sometimes, I get tied up, but that's it. One thing he does is have some other guy fuck me while he watches. His friends, like Jean. Or Beauvais." Vadim inhaled deeply, while Hooch's full attention was on him. "But there's ... something very dark in me. One time, when I was on patrol in Afghanistan, and I left the group only to shit, he jumped me, fucked me against a rock. I was the team leader. My patrol was easily within ear shot. And we weren't friends then, it was fucking dangerous, but it blew my mind. I wanted that. I wanted to be overpowered ... and not asked what I wanted or whether it was good for me or anything like that. And maybe, after all these years ... that would keep it fresh. Don't want either of us to get bored, you know?"

"I understand." Hooch regarded Vadim for a moment, his hand dropped under the table to adjust himself. The effect on him all too obvious, and thankful for the table linen. "Do you want me to do for you what you do for me?"

Vadim smiled, accepting that he was turned on, knowing that Hooch was deliberately building expectation and need. "You're not made of that. You wouldn't get anything out of it."

"I can do anything, and for a friend I would."

Vadim studied Hooch's face, his eyes, knowing Hooch would do whatever it took. Likely detached, though, going through the motions. Which, in a way, would make it unreal, would be an act, not lovemaking or sex or whatever that kind of thing was called best. "I'm not sure, Hooch. After the sessions courtesy

of the KGB, I am not sure how I'll respond. There was a man, an interrogator, who dismantled me ... he took me apart like you or I would take an AK apart in no time. Some other doctor reassembled me, but I keep thinking some of the parts ... you know, are broken? They fill their space, but I'm not sure how much strain I want to put on them. The things he did ... the constant beating, sleep deprivation, the way he got at me from all sides ... they are very hard to accept. Sometimes, during sex, they come back. Then I feel the whole amount of shame and ... wanting to die ... and I feel like I'm about to vomit. I'm not sure I can risk it. Because that kind of humiliation isn't erotic. I have no idea what happens if you'd put strain on that old AK."

Hooch said nothing, placed his cutlery down and dabbed his lips with the starched napkin. Looking at Vadim for a long moment. His dark eyes were slightly shielded, but even so, the compassion and understanding was visible. "That's Dan's job, then."

Vadim inhaled deeply. "It's not that I don't trust you. I do. I want to play rough, but ... I don't want you to do it for my sake, and I'm not sure how much of it I can take. Dan has a way to get me there, but I don't know how. And it's nowhere near what you like and do."

"It's because he loves you." Hooch smiled the customary half-quirk. "You've got history." He nodded, picking his cutlery up again, "it's that simple."

"I guess that's true." He'd sworn it a hundred times. But at the same time, Vadim hoped that Hooch didn't mind that. Besides, what were the rules of such a situation. He cared about him. He trusted him. He wanted him. He felt fully at ease with Hooch and he was looking forward to being alone with him again. "We've come too far. Got the worst of each other, and now the best, too."

"Part of me envies you. Part of me freaks out." Hooch continued to eat, before raising his glass, gazing at the wine, then taking a sip.

"You're, what? Ten, twelve years younger than I am? Plenty of time to form a habit and then a relationship with some guy."

"Yeah, but I'd rather skip torture, scars, and insanity." Hooch grinned.

Vadim laughed. "Best hint: Don't sleep with an enemy."

"Anyone could be an enemy." Hooch took another sip.

"I don't understand."

"You go out to get yourself fucked and instead you get fucked up." Hooch shrugged, "forget it." Raising his glass once more to clink it against Vadim's. "Want another bottle?"

"Yeah, why not." Vadim chose a hot sweet apple pastry dish for dessert, served with ice cream. He'd better go jogging tomorrow, after he'd slept off the wine. Easy to shed the discipline, he thought. "But if you want to wrestle for the top position, I'd be more than happy to oblige you."

"Wrestle?" Hooch had chosen the cheese platter and was leaning back, fresh glass in hand.

"Yes. Wrestle. No punches, no kicks, just wrestling. I might tell you the story of the Tajik that wrestled me when I was stationed near the Afghan border. It's their national sport or something, very silly of me to take the bet,

but I was bored and a bit drunk. I ended up underneath him, all limbs that can be locked were locked, and he knew I was hard, but there was no way I'd let him fuck me – I was too stupidly proud ... - so we continued to struggle, and he brought me off that way."

"You get off like that?"

"It had been a long time since I'd had sex, and half the fun was the fact that ... well, I'm as Russian as you can be, and we have that ... superiority complex if it comes to non-Russians. The Soviet Union was as multiethnic as you can make any place, but the Russians always thought they were the best. Plus, I was an officer and he was just a soldier. I guess the double humiliation did it, too."

Hooch considered the idea, "I'll take that challenge, but not tonight." The dessert came, and it was as heavenly as the rest, going beautifully with the wine, which had both men tipsier than expected. "You know what completely threw me when it happened the first time?" Tongue loosened, Hooch grinned, "getting fucked *really* hard by some nameless freak, wanting to either scream or puke my guts out. That's when I came. Just like that. Completely blew my head off."

Vadim nodded. "I'd take *that* challenge."

"I bet." Hooch bit a piece off his cracker and cheese. "I wonder if I can come with pain and fucking alone. No touching."

"Want me to try?"

"Yeah, and no risk you kill me for real." He managed to produce a grin, finishing off his glass of wine. "But I'm not sure about the latter if we don't get back soon."

"Well, wave the penguin over and pay." Vadim grinned.

Hooch huffed a laugh but did exactly that, and after he'd paid, they finished their desserts and the wine, and had a taxi called for them. Standing in the foyer, well tipsy, which made the situation all the worse, especially for Hooch, who wasn't sure if he should try to piss or will his hard-on down in any other way. He stood close to Vadim, far too close, their bodies touching all the way, and he didn't give a damn. On the contrary, when an extremely well dressed middle-aged couple entered the hotel, and looked disapprovingly at them, he suddenly felt a devil-may-care attitude, and ostentatiously ran his hand down the middle of Vadim's back, until it rested on his backside, copping a feel. And Vadim, being drunk, didn't care enough to be mortified.

"Shit, I'm horny." Hooch murmured into Vadim's ear.

"Same here." Vadim pursed his lips. "You think we'd get a room in this place? Maybe a double or twin or whatever they are called?"

"With all the toys back in the bungalow? No way." The footman waved to them when a taxi pulled up outside. "Besides, I want you to make me scream." Hooch grinned, somewhat drunkenly, and they managed to get into the taxi, with Vadim telling the driver where to go. It didn't take more than two minutes, though, before Hooch leaned close, his hand between Vadim's legs. "Has Germany got a law against illicit behaviour between men in public transport?"

“No ... idea. British citizen. Fuck.” Vadim groaned when Hooch touched him. He’d wanted that all day, but had known that he’d had to save it for the ‘game’ later. Hooch going so recklessly at him confused him, dizzied him, or it was the alcohol. It was good to be taken by surprise. He managed to lean forward. “Driver,” he said, pretty clearly. “You get a hundred extra if you don’t look into the rear, right? Just ignore us.”

The driver glanced into his mirror, then nodded. “Okay.” Firmly taking his eyes back onto the road.

Hooch chuckled low, a husky sound, leaning even closer while his hand kneaded Vadim’s cock through the trousers. “You going to keep me tied up? Night and day? Make me wear that butt plug? Make me suck you, on my knees? Use my cock until I scream into the gag?” Leaning down, he sucked on Vadim’s neck, the spot right above the shirt collar.

Vadim couldn’t hold back the groans, reaching around to Hooch’s shoulder and pressing him closer, shifting, couldn’t get enough contact, felt ridiculously relaxed about kissing Hooch – another man! – in the backseat of a taxi, with the poor driver likely shocked and disgusted, but he didn’t care. For once. Alcohol was the likely explanation. He had no idea what was taking him there, apart from the bloody need. His hand on Hooch’s cock, the touch light because he kept getting distracted, tongues fighting, the heat just rising and rising. They wouldn’t manage to make it to the bed. He had no idea how they’d even get through the door.

Hooch was so hard when the car slowed down eventually and they pulled up in front of the bungalow, that he was ready to come with just another touch. Letting out a frustrated sound, he moved away, searching for his wallet, but too horny to find it. “Shit.”

Vadim managed to find his wallet, though, grinning brightly at the driver, handing him the money and the hundred marks bill extra. “Thanks.” It was nice to be able to pay for such liberties, and knowing, of course, that the poor driver had seriously earned the extra cash. He turned towards the bungalow, fiddling with his keys, while Hooch really wasn’t helping, running his hands all over Vadim’s arse, until he finally found the key and managed to get the door open, both stumbling inside.

Hooch just about kicked the door closed, when he pulled off his jacket, flung it across the low table in the hallway, no matter how expensive the suit had been, and was working on loosening his tie and shirt, while toeing his shoes off. Back against the door, he could feel Vadim close, Vadim pressing in to kiss and touch all over his body, grinding up against him and trying hard to lose his suit as well, at least managing to open his trousers and push them down. Kissing the strangulation marks, sucking on them – not hard enough to create more blemishes, but hard enough to be felt, and Hooch groaned, hit his head back against the door, while ripping the tie off. Managing to get the last of the shirt buttons open, he bared his chest, throat, his whole body. For Vadim to take, to use.

He almost tore the belt out of the loops when he opened it, fingers working on the fly of his trousers, pushing them down together with the briefs. He couldn't step out of them, though, pinned against the door by the weight of Vadim's body.

Vadim just barely remembered the game they had agreed on, and it was fucking hard, because he was torn between two instincts – one was to grind against Hooch, keeping him pinned against the door, the other was to turn him around and fuck him, but the latter one was impossible without lube, oil, lotion, whatever, and it was even more impossible to stop and separate to get to the bath- or bedroom. Still, Vadim pushed himself away, just enough to breathe for a few seconds. “Down. On ... your knees,” he murmured, taking Hooch by the neck and half-forcing him down.

“Fuck!” Hooch protested, struggled, but the fight was born out of his need to get off, nothing else. Once down, on the cold, hard floor, he twisted to pull his trousers, briefs and socks off. Naked and needing, yet he remembered that this was what he wanted. Prisoner. Thing. Used, and his head moved forward, taking Vadim's cock deep, with more reckless gusto than ever.

Vadim groaned, deeply, mind blanking with the touch that was so fucking needed, and he knew he wouldn't last that long, wouldn't be able to tease Hooch and just wait, no, he needed to get off now – and keep Hooch interested and needy because that was part of the game. He grinned, taking Hooch's head and forcing him to take him deeper, which the Delta did, with uncanny skill.

Gagging reflex suppressed with his own need to come, Hooch pulled his hands back, forced his throat to relax and his whole body just to take, and he almost came when Vadim started to fuck his throat roughly, leaving him no way out. Keeping him there, head controlled with both hands, Vadim moving quickly and with force, letting go of his need and when he came, he forced Hooch to take him all the way. Twitching cock buried deep in Hooch's throat, who couldn't swallow, gagging on the intrusion, and still just taking it.

Just a few deep, fast breaths, Vadim then managed to pull himself back together, pulled free and took Hooch's throat with one hand, not too much force, but showing off some of his strength. He half pulled, half pushed Hooch with him to the bedroom, who followed, had no choice, unless he tried to fight, and that was not an option.

Vadim released him near the bed. “Stay on your knees.” He found the blindfold first, while Hooch gained balance on his knees, and slipped it over Hooch's eyes, adjusting it, and covering up most bruises, then the padded handcuffs. Hooch's wrists were bandaged, but even so, these ones wouldn't hurt. He handcuffed him roughly, arms on his back, pulling Hooch's shoulders back, chest muscles standing out more. Then paused just for a second to look at him, naked, horny, tied, blind. What a piece of art.

Hooch knelt, breathing noisily, but despite being merely handcuffed, he did not move, didn't fight. Prisoner, he'd made a deal, and he always kept his word. Just that he was going insane with the arousal, which was growing worse with the rough treatment and the bondage.

Vadim pushed Hooch's knees apart with his foot, making him more vulnerable, then decided he'd make life more interesting for him. He took the cockring next, took hold of Hooch's cock and balls, and fastened the ring, giving his balls a firm squeeze and pulling on his cock. Playing with it, but roughly, causing Hooch to make noises. Needy, lust-filled groans and, again, the desperate whimper. He didn't beg, but so close, too close. Trying to move towards the hand, hips jerking.

"My, aren't you a needy bitch."

Hooch shuddered and let out another desperate sound.

Vadim grinned, then released the cock that seemed very close to blowing. His hands trailing up to Hooch's nipples that were small and hard, rubbing across them, then taking one between thumb and first finger and twisting it roughly.

Hooch jerked, throwing his head far back into his neck, panting through parted lips. Lips that started to move, as if talking ... begging.

That seemed to be the keyword. Vadim reached for the gag, hooked a thumb into Hooch's mouth to pull the jaw open, and slipped the gag in before Hooch could react. Closing it at the back of the man's head. "Shut up, cocksucker." In a low murmur, near his ear. "Nobody cares what you have to say."

Hooch shuddered, making desperate noises into the gag, his skin suddenly gleaming with sweat, when Vadim's hand slid back to the nipples, twisting and pressing and pulling on them. Slow, then harsh, gradually building up, until they were red and felt swollen to the touch. Only then did he add the cold metallic nipple clamps. The very moment the steel bit into tortured flesh, Hooch screamed into the gag, nearly lifting off the floor, ready to fight, because fighting was his first reaction, and Vadim's response was prompt and instinctive. Two slaps to the face, open-handed, not too powerful, he managed to restrain the first, violent urge, when Hooch fell back, breathing through his nose against the pain, the weights on the clamps swinging freely. Nostrils flaring.

"Never upset the captor. Never make him angry. He can destroy you. If you do, he will." Vadim stared into the blind face, tugging at the chain on the clamp that connected them, and Hooch screamed into the gag again, suppressed this time. "It costs me nothing to break you. You don't want me angry."

Hooch became still, very still, did nothing but breathe. A picture of concentration, his whole body tense, muscles in stark relief, but his cock still hard as a rock. Vadim ran his hand through Hooch's hair, took it roughly, pulled back his neck. "Do you understand?" shouted at him from no more than a few inches away, and Hooch jerked at the sudden noise. Disorientated from blindfold and lust. He nodded jerkily, best he could with his head pulled back like that. *Never upset the captor.* A nod. Yes. Never. *He will destroy you.* And destruction was above and beyond the lust.

Vadim stepped behind him and pushed him over, until he hit the floor with his chest, not having the use of his hands. "Down." Taking Hooch's hips until

they were in the air, on his knees, legs open, cock dangling between them, hard, and Hooch's shoulders supporting his weight. Vadim slapped the presented arse with his bare hand, twice, three times, the slaps too loud in the room, except for the noises that Hooch made when he pushed his hips back and up, towards the hand that was hitting him. The pain and heat on his arse exquisite, each slap a stab of lust, going right through his bound cock and balls, reverberating in his nipples.

"You enjoy this, bitch," Vadim stated, hitting the buttocks again, mesmerized by what this did to Hooch, how responsive he was, how much in lust right now. He reached for the larger of the two dildos, some lube, too, smearing the cold stuff into the crack. Hooch wanted pain. He couldn't relax him much for this. Coating the dildo with lube, too, then took hold of Hooch's hips, holding him firmly as he positioned the dildo and forced it in with considerable strength.

If Hooch had screamed before, the screams were nothing compared to the sounds that were ripped out of his throat now, muffled by the gag. Tensing until his body was nothing but a rock-hard statue, he took the pain and the intrusion with sheer will, until it broke through the barrier, the threshold that separated a masochist from anyone else, and he lost himself completely. Where movement had ceased before, he now recklessly pushed back, towards the dildo, despite the restricted movement trying to force even more inside his body, to take him beyond the bearable. Lust and pain, intricately linked, and Hooch was mindlessly, greedily, taking it all and begging for more.

Vadim loosened the grip, allowing Hooch to move, and began to fuck him rough and deep with the dildo, watching how it slid in and out, feeling how the body accommodated the size, because it had to, and then sped up, knowing he had to ride that peak that came with the pain. Hooch wanted all the intensity he could get, and it wasn't pain any longer, but pain squared with lust.

Hooch was lost, completely. If the gag hadn't had a safety hole, he would have passed out, unable to coordinate his breathing. Nothing but agony, lust, and he suddenly tensed, lifting his whole upper body off the floor, despite the position he was in, and he screamed into the gag; screamed with pain and release, with need and years and years of lust and want and greed and everything he had never been meant to be, as he came so hard, even the cockring did nothing to stop the explosion.

Vadim gently pulled the dildo out, ran his hands down the sweaty flanks, relishing how Hooch shuddered, trembled, and pulled him back up to lean against him. Vadim embraced the man, kissing his sore neck and shoulders, breathing across the sweaty skin. Just holding for a long time, while Hooch was coming down, still now and then wrecked with ever decreasing shudders. Vadim removed the cock ring first, eliciting a small sound, then the nipple clamps, which had a more violent reaction. Hooch doubled over, hissing against the gag. Vadim wanted to keep him like this, and he wondered if that fit into Hooch's idea of the game. Likely not. He reached for the blindfold, but then kept it in

place, and then, reluctantly, released him, and stood, looking down at him. The scent still in his nostrils.

Hooch was kneeling once more, lifting his head when Vadim left him, blindly searching for a point of reference, straining to listen for any sound. His chest expanded with each breath, fingers behind his back intertwined.

Vadim got rid of the rest of his clothes, putting them onto one of the chairs, assuming Hooch could place him in a general direction. What now. Getting the prisoner cleaned up would be good, but he'd have to remove the blindfold and the handcuffs if he'd order Hooch to do that by himself - never mind the mess on the carpet - but leaving him like that? He gave it some thought, then took the cuffs off and the bandages, too - he'd need to rebandage those anyway. Hooch remained still, head turning towards the movement and sound, but letting himself get handled. Perhaps not to antagonise, or perhaps he was just too exhausted.

Vadim used rope to tie Hooch up again, then pulled him onto his feet by his hair and dragged him into the bathroom. Hooch followed, like a parcel or a thing, and yet everything *but* a thing. Even when he was manoeuvred into the tub, despite letting himself being moved like a puppet. Vadim took the shower head to rinse him. The washing wasn't tender, not like he normally would do it - instead businesslike, rough, washing the arse and cock and balls, like Hooch was just meat, and making him move his legs and turn towards the water and soap. Hooch blindly followed, hardly making a sound, except for an occasional hissing intake of breath through the breathing tube. Vadim got him out of the tub again and rubbed him dry, with very little tenderness.

Hooch stood, hair still damp above the blindfold that remained in place. His body warred between relaxed and allowing anything that happened - and being tense, trying to listen to sounds and tracking movement. Standing with his hands back, legs slightly braced, and shivering as if he were cold.

Vadim had to remind himself again that touching and kissing wasn't what Hooch wanted. He seemed to expect something, maybe further pain. "Move." Pushing him roughly back to the bedroom, Hooch stumbled a few times, knocking blindly into doorframes and walls and furniture, until he reached the bedroom, not knowing where he was, but Vadim stopped him and made him bend over. He lubed up the butt plug, and pushed the thing inside, until it sat firmly in its place, and no amount of movement could dislodge it. Hooch groaned into the gag, but Vadim took no notice, instead took the rope off and rebandaged the wrists, only to put them back into the cuffs, but this time in Hooch's front. However, he used a length of rope to tie Hooch's hands to the bedframe, and made sure that the knots were tight enough to resist all fiddling.

Arms stretched out of his head, Hooch lay on his side on the carpet in front of the bed, fully concentrated.

Vadim took one of the covers and placed it over the man on the floor. "You will stay here." He'd much rather have him join him in the bed, but again, that wasn't the game Hooch wanted to play.

Hooch lay still, breathing, an odd sense of acceptance and relaxation about him. Calmness. Stillness. As if the darkness had no space.

* * *

The next two days were the most intense of Hooch's life, far more than any of his deployments. No battlefield, no close combat had ever been as deep-cutting as the combat with himself, and the final acceptance of truths that went all the way to the core. Never again forgetting what he learned about himself during the time, and when the two days and two nights were up, they changed into men once more, who laughed with each other, went sightseeing, supped in good restaurants and enjoyed a drink or two in one of the many bars and cafes. Fun and the 'other stuff', until it was time for Hooch to leave. Vadim brought him to the airport, and the man who walked through the gates walked with ease and a relaxed grin, raising his hand in greeting as he turned around the corner and out of view.

May 1992, Berlin, Germany

Vadim liked the very civilian feel of the car he'd rented. It smelled new, no scratches, dents, it was as shining and clean as only well-maintained rental cars were. Listening to the radio, some host talking about politics, taxes, and he was listening and not listening, following his own thoughts and catching only the gist of it.

When he got into Berlin, he found his way to the airport eventually, parked the car, and went to the arrivals terminal. Not far away from where he'd seen Hooch vanish through customs. A much more relaxed looking Hooch who had recovered well from the injuries and would be okay in a couple days – perfectly in time for returning to base. Vadim remembered the awkwardness of seeing him go. They'd got much closer during the week. The days of the prisoner game, and when that was over, the remaining days which seemed to be shopping, talking, 'vanilla' sex, jogging, cooking, and generally feeling comfortable.

Vadim bought a newspaper and sat down in the waiting area, watching the list of planes get shorter, the time tick by while he worked his way through written German.

Finally, the plane from America was announced on the screen, with the luggage now in the baggage claim area. It took another twenty minutes at least before the first passengers came out through the gates. Some time after the first passenger, a man appeared. Tall, fit, tanned towards a gleaming bronze, dark hair with grey temples fairly long and rather wild and yet so obviously tamed by a very skilled cut. Shades on top of his forehead, he had a bag slung over one shoulder and pulled a suitcase behind him. Dressed in clothes that seemed simultaneously new and most attractively rumpled, a dark olive jacket with an understated and sporty square cut thrown over an off-white linen shirt that did all it possibly could to show off the tanned smooth expanse of his throat, with the first two buttons open. He didn't seem aware of the way an expensively dressed lady was walking behind him, staring at the way the dark brown leather trousers with their dull surface were clinging to his buttocks. Brand new ankle boots on his feet, they had a certain air of Wild West about them. He stopped, patted down the inside of his jacket, before pulling out a packet of American cigarettes, and walking on.

Vadim folded the newspaper, enjoying the sight. Matt's signature all over Dan. The different style, the haircut, and, of course, the ease and calm with which Dan was beginning to head out, probably looking for a taxi. Vadim stood and walked fast behind him, moving carefully as not to warn him too early, then moved closer. "Handsomen stranger, do you need a ride?"

"Hey!" Dan flew round, startled for a second, his face immediately lit up with a giant grin. "Crap, Russkie, I'm getting old. My reflexes must be shot to

shit.” He let go of the suitcase, dropped the bag onto the ground and embraced Vadim, pulling him tight. He didn’t kiss, no matter how much he wanted to. Keeping the embrace somewhat ambiguous, even though the elegant lady’s face fell with disappointment and she turned quickly away and towards the exit.

Vadim kept him close and tight, Dan’s scent, the warmth, the strength. Like he’d never been gone. Or just briefly. Not over a week. “Come, the car’s over there,” he murmured. “I’ll take the other bag.” He gave Dan a bright smile. “You look like you’d been in Hawaii or somewhere exceedingly pleasant.”

“Pleasant? You must be fucking kidding me.” Dan grinned, lighting a cigarette the moment they were in the smoking zone. “The kid dragged me around town. Can you believe it? The only way to stop the little bastard was to just do what he wanted. ‘Get a haircut’, ‘buy this shirt’, ‘put your arse into those trousers’, and so on.” Dan rolled his eyes in mock exasperation.

“But he was right. You look delicious.” Vadim grinned and steered towards the car. “Part of me wants to drag you to a safe place and suck you ...”

“Damn.” Dan stopped, staring at Vadim, “I have no idea what Hooch did to you, but I think I got to thank him.”

“Why?”

“You haven’t wanted to jump my bones like that since Afghanistan.” Dan was grinning like a fool. “The place you rented not safe enough? Or too far?”

“Too far.” Vadim glanced around. “Let’s just get the bags into the car.” Maybe there was a place somewhere to do it. Or he could go with the slow simmering desire and unleash it once they were in the house.

“I guess the car’s not private enough?”

“I’m sure it could be.” Vadim opened the door for Dan, then tossed the bags into the trunk and sat down in the driver’s seat, just quickly adjusting himself. The tight dark designer label jeans were getting too tight. He steered the car away from the airport building, and out to the parking lot, which wasn’t very busy this time of day. Late evening. He stopped the car in the far corner, glanced around for a moment, then bent over, hands unzipping Dan.

“You’re not fucking kidding.” Dan stated, observing the obvious. “Shit, Vadim, is it really you?” Not complaining for a second, though, and as usual, he was commando. The leather warmed up by his skin. “Or is it a case of the body snatchers?”

“You’re not making sense.” Vadim freed Dan’s cock and held it, pumping it slowly, firmly, while Dan adjusted the seat to sit more comfortably and allow more space. What was unusual, however, was the sight of his groin. Clearly waxed, and far further than just his balls.

“Nice. No hair.”

“Matt ...” but Dan didn’t get another word in, when Vadim went down on his cock, taking Dan deep and soon deeper, rushing it, definitely, but he wanted to taste and feel Dan, more urgently than he wanted proper sex. He wanted him right now. There would be time to recharge. Different, again, so known, so good, the taste and heat as he started to deepthroat. A sudden, maddening need and hunger than he’d very rarely felt when sucking cock, but it was there.

“Fuck!” Dan arched up, towards Vadim’s lips. Everything different, everything the same, and yet everything so goddamned different. That hunger ... as rare as it had been, a lifetime ago. He was hard within a second, and panting within a few seconds more. Rapidly losing a control he never wanted to have in the first place.

Vadim reached for the door’s arm rest, supporting his weight there as he went down, fiercely fucking his own throat. Out here, in the open, but in the dark. His own need clouding his mind, and he concentrated only on one thing – to give heat and friction and show Dan how much he was needed, right now.

Dan reacted, as much quicksilver as all those years ago. Too surprised by the speed, his mind still caught in figuring out where to find a taxi and how to get to the bungalow, and wondering in what state of mind Vadim was in - while his body was crashing over the edge already. Cumming with a suppressed shout, he gripped the corners of the seat tight and lifted towards the lips and mouth and throat - and everything. Everything that was Vadim and that could never be replaced by anyone. No one.

He was panting open mouthed and with closed eyes, slack in his seat like a boneless weight, while Vadim cleaned him, sucking carefully and licking, swallowing, then looking up with a grin. “Welcome back,” he murmured, and kissed Dan, softly, tenderly, couldn’t see enough of him, couldn’t touch him enough. “Missed you.”

“Shit.” Dan breathed out, hand on his cock as he haphazardly tried to get his trousers back into a semblance of order. “I didn’t expect that.”

“Of course not.”

Dan reached for Vadim’s neck, pulling him closer again and kissing him for a long time. Breaking up, but so close, Vadim’s face was a blur. “Missed you a lot. Hate being apart, but ... it’s okay. The being back together is damn good.”

Vadim smiled. “It is. Maybe over a week was too long.” He started the car once Dan had tucked himself back in and fastened the seatbelt. He was still in a daze when they left the parking space behind, soon got onto the highway and were well on the way to Potsdam. “You’ll like the bungalow. It’s very secluded. How’s Matt?”

Lucid thoughts not quite returned, Dan lit a fag after opening the window. “Matt, oh, yes. He’s alright. Don’t think anyone or anything could piss on his parade. If he were any sunnier, he’d destroy the universe.” He shook his head, grinning. “And that even though his boyfriend threw him out when he got back at Christmas.”

“He did? For screwing with Hooch, or some other reason?”

“No.” Dan blew smoke out of the window, “for being in the Forces. Sorry, ‘US Marines’.” Putting on a fake American accent. “Seems the guy hated Matt’s job.” He glanced at Vadim, “can’t blame him, aye?”

“I guess that was not a case of uniform ... ah.” Fetish. Kink. The words he’d used pretty freely and that reminded him very much of the Soviet uniform in the wardrobe. Uniform fetish all the way. “What kind of boyfriend is that?”

"Hm?" Dan half-turned to the side, watching Vadim. "What do you mean? A boyfriend who isn't into uniforms? Guess that's just ... a boyfriend." He flashed a grin, "and not a kinky bastard, even though I wouldn't be all that surprised if the guy was taken in by the uniform but then didn't like the bitter taste of reality. Besides, they have some real shit laws. Britain's fairly easy: you gay, you out. US? Holy fuck. Prosecution, all that. Punishable offence." He leaned back again, taking another drag. "Fucking weirdoes. Must have turned their stomachs, having to give us medals."

"I bet." Vadim frowned and kept his eyes on the road. "I only hope it won't bite Hooch in the arse. But he seems far better adjusted than Beauvais likely ever was."

"And what about Matt?"

"You said he takes it all lightly. He should be alright. Didn't look like a rules breaker to me."

"Then again, Hooch? Never seemed to be the 'I am gay' type to me. Thought he was an opportunist."

"The opportunist stuff is gone. It was a mask."

Blowing smoke out of the window, Dan leaned back once more, regarding Vadim. "You got to know him well, didn't you?" Smiling slightly, "better than Matt, it seems."

Vadim smiled. "I think so ... I learned some surprising things, too." Like touching in public, like hitting and whipping a bound man who wanted all that pain. The tenderness mixed with power. The trust. He'd told Hooch so much in such little time, as if the man posed no threat, no danger, like dirty secrets were only half as bad like that. "Didn't have the opportunity to meet Matt much ..."

"Didn't mean that. Meant I think you know Hooch better than Matt does. Not sure how much of a clue the kid has." Dan shook his head slightly, blowing out smoke again before snipping the cigarette out of the window. "And he doesn't even realise that he's in love."

"In love? Oh bugger." Vadim laughed. "Poor bastard. Deltas and their travelling ... that should be almost as bad as when we started out."

"Fair enough," Dan grinned, "he doesn't realise it anyway, and I sure as fuck wasn't going to push his nose into the open secret. Figured Hooch wasn't a man to be in love with, not if you're a kid like Matt."

"Why not? Assume he's aware he's gay, and actually relaxed and talking? Which is rare, but I've seen it happen."

"What did you do to the man?" Dan grinned, head rolled to the side, towards Vadim.

"The usual. Shopping, cooking, eating, well, yeah, and sex." Don't forget hitting, dressing up, kicking, shouting, whipping, tying him up and fucking him, eating his arse and other things. "Seems there's Hooch the Delta and Hooch the man." And the man's name is Bozic.

Dan laughed, "must be the cooking, then, because Matt can sure as fuck do the shopping, and I wager he'd manage the sex." He looked out of the window when they turned into a residential street. "Well, as long as you had a good time,

all's well. Just don't tell Matt about 'Hooch the man' or his infatuation might become worse."

"It's not my job to blow Hooch's cover ..."

Dan grinned, noticing how the car slowed down. "Best to wean him off the Delta, eh? No future. And sure as fuck not in the US military."

"Who knows?" Vadim parked the car, then pulled the key from the ignition. "There we are. The bungalow behind the trees." He got out, grabbed the bags and then headed towards the house. "You like the place?"

"Very nice. You booked it for another week?"

"Yes. I can extend, too."

"Looks positively suburban." Dan smiled, following Vadim.

"Aye it does, doesn't it?" Vadim laughed and opened the door, allowing Dan to enter first.

"Got any plans or can we just hang out? Not that I haven't already done a lot of hanging out. Didn't do much but sun beside the pool and beast myself in the gym, back at Maggie's."

"We can drive over to Berlin to do stuff ... there are nice restaurants, I could show you some places." Vadim headed into the bedroom and dropped the bags there, then shrugged out of his jacket. "Home sweet temporary home."

The jacket already in his hands, Dan looked around himself, standing in the middle of the hallway. "Not bad." Throwing the jacket over the clothes stand. "By the way, want to know what Matt made me do? Tried to tell you, but you had my cock down your throat the next second."

Vadim laughed. "Sorry for that."

"I'm not."

Getting rid of his shoes, Vadim asked, "what did he do? New haircut, new dress sense and ...?"

"Dress sense? Fuck that, but he got me drunk and made me do this ..." Fingers on the buttons of his shirt, Dan had it open in no time, slipped it off his shoulders and onto the ground. "Said it was a shame because I was so tanned from Dubai." Opening the trousers as well, he bent over and pushed them down to his ankles, "and that you would appreciate it." Coming back up, he stood, arms wide, and ... completely hairless except for a neat patch of pubes. The scars pale in contrast to the smooth expanses of undamaged skin, which glowed darkly tanned in the low light. "The little bastard filled me up with booze and then got me waxed in some fucking beauty salon!" Turning slowly around himself, legs trapped in the trousers that were pooled around his boots, Dan looked more pumped and his muscles more defined than he usually did. The result of extensive gym work, good food, swimming and lying by the pool - and otherwise pretty much nought else. "And? Was he right? *Do* you appreciate it?"

Vadim licked his lips. Knowing how rare this was and likely how much pain, but Matt had been right. He adjusted himself again. "I ... do. Shower ... sauna ... or bed?" Dropping the food option.

Dan tilted his head, a slow grin starting. "Bearing in mind you've just blown me ... you look like a man who wants to fuck."

"Don't want you to suffer, I can wait." Vadim gave a pained expression. "Well, I can, but I don't particularly like it. But you know that."

Dan laughed. "I offer you a deal: you rim me, you get to fuck me. What about that?" He winked.

"Sounds good. Very good." Vadim began to undress, no games, uniforms or anything, just skin on skin. He smiled to himself at that thought. "Just wonder ... how much you want to know. Or me, for that matter. About ... the other guy. What you did, what you felt ... I know it turns you on to see me with somebody else. Would that be just me getting fucked, or me fucking somebody else – or just generally me with somebody else?"

Dan undid the boots, stepped out of the trousers. Naked and positively gleaming with sun, health, and strength. "You getting fucked. It blows my mind, I don't know why." He shook his head, thinking a moment, "don't know if I want to hear about it. Maybe I do, but I sure as fuck want to see it."

"Sorry, no camera."

"Damn." Dan flashed a grin before glancing behind and spotting a door. "That the bathroom? Shame we haven't got anything to get cleaned out properly. Or I might ask you to do your magic ..." wiggling his hand, "once you're done with the fucking." Grinning, he stood hands on hips, the picture of self confidence.

Vadim grinned. "Just look through the drawers." Hooch had left his stuff there, and Vadim had figured they might be needing it. But he fully intended for Dan to find out by himself.

Dan raised a brow. "I am not sure I dare ..." contrary to his own words he was at the chest of drawers and pulled the first drawer open. It took barely half a second before he pulled out a handful of rather interesting finds. "Holy fuck. What *did* you do?" Turning round with a dildo, a gag, a blindfold, and some chains in his hands.

Vadim crossed his arms in front of his chest. "No idea. But it felt good." Saying that with a straight face, watching Dan intently.

"On you?" The same intense gaze, and something ... a hint of a flicker perhaps in Dan's eyes.

"No. Hooch likes his pain real." Vadim kept the gaze steady, allowing Dan to grasp what he'd said, maybe imagine it.

Dan's first reaction was entirely involuntary. The flicker vanished, replaced with something that could almost be described as relief, before his expression was back to normal, apart from the once again raised brow. "Hooch? Pain?" He shook his head. "You got to be fucking kidding me."

Vadim smiled. He'd caught it, had seen whatever had coiled behind Dan's eyes, and it was the kind of thing that tightened his guts – more – and he figured it might give Dan ideas. "Feel free to have a look."

"Great answer." Dan grumbled when Vadim moved back and headed into the kitchen, allowing Dan some time and privacy while he made tea and waited.

About five minutes later, Dan reappeared. Still gloriously naked except for the Russian greatcoat that was draped over his shoulders. "So. Pain, you said?" Standing in the doorframe, hip jutted forward.

Vadim was just pouring tea, and looked up. "Yes. And I guess he'd have given Major Krasnorada a run for his money." Vadim smiled. "Only that Hooch is too professional to ever mix sex and job. At least that's what I think. You like it?" pointing at the coat.

"It reminds me of a time gone by. Good and bad, and some seriously awful shit." Dan pushed himself forward, smoothly, towards the kitchen table and its mugs of tea. "Did you play games?" Slowly looking up. If they weren't pretty much the same height, his eyes would have been shielded beneath his lashes.

Vadim met the gaze. "Aye. The prisoner game. He was mine, not the other way round." Did that matter? It did. The way Dan's eyes looked, the expression on his face, the timbre in his voice – it did.

Dan tilted his head, thoughtful for a moment. "Did you play rape?"

Vadim swallowed. "No." He frowned and now lost the staring contest, like his strength was suddenly gone. Only that it wasn't a staring contest, more like holding each other in balance, and he'd lost. "No." He shook his head and sat down, feeling heavy.

"Did you want to?" There was no accusation in Dan's voice, no relief, no nothing. Just a mild, if not gentle, curiosity. Brought about by slowly growing understanding.

Vadim's brow remained dark, his eyes moved up once, just a flash, pained, and he lowered the gaze again, reaching for his tea mug. "I didn't." Wanting and feeling the horror of it. The urge, and the disgust at the same time. Facing the monster, right now, expecting anything from Dan now. He'd deserve it. Whatever it was. "Fuck."

"I'd understand if you'd wanted to." Dan sat down slowly, great coat draped halfway across his body as he reached for a mug as well, but only looking at it. "It would have made sense. After all, you said Hooch likes his pain real. Something I still can't get my head around, though." Still looking at the tea, he tentatively raised it to his lips, but stalled halfway. Wasn't quite what he wanted.

"He's purging ... the job, the stress ... it's one way to do it. To ... deal with it. I don't know. I didn't do it. I made it as real as I could, but ..." It was too real and I didn't cross the line. Or I'd be sitting here, even more ashamed.

"Okay." Dan smiled a little, putting the tea down, untouched. "I won't ask anymore, because it isn't my business. Is Hooch's ... and yours." Glancing at the mug, "and apart from all of that," flashing a small grin, "got anything stronger than tea?"

"In the freezer." Vadim stood and brought out the vodka and two glasses, setting it down between them. Rattled, yes, and nervous, and with a churning unease in his guts.

"I knew I could count on you to have some good stuff." Dan smiled, pulling the great coat closer, fondling the coarse fabric for a moment, "also, how do I

look in this?" He was slowly getting back to his usual irreverent and easy-going self.

"Not sure it's quite your colour or cut." Vadim tried a smile.

"You rather have me in camo, Afghan rags, reporter gear, or suede leather?" Dan cocked a brow, hand creeping forward along the table, towards Vadim.

"Leather is good. A nice suit is good, too. Camo." End of story. No more reporter look, and rags were right out as well. Vadim poured the vodka, two and a half fingers of it, and tossed his back straight away.

"Well, in that case, if you went shopping for this," lifting an edge of the great coat, "and for *this* ..." wagging his brows, Dan indicated towards the bedroom with his chin, "you could very well go shopping for leather, aye?" Tossing his own vodka back, his hand moved towards its old spot, and closer, touching Vadim's hand that lay on the table. "I gained a remarkable tolerance for shopping and being prodded around, across the pond." He winked, fingers stroking Vadim's lightly.

Vadim grinned, still uneasy, but turning his hand to take Dan's fingers in his. "Tomorrow. We can burn some more money." He began to relax again and leaned back. "Whatever you want. Whatever ... turns you on."

"I'm not sure, to be honest." Dan smiled, refilling both their glasses with his left. A bit awkward, especially with that fucked hand, but he managed. "How long have we got to find out?"

"A lifetime." Vadim pressed his hand, then shrugged. "Or about ten days. Wasn't that what Maggie said?"

"Aye, I think so. Then off to the happy land." Dan rolled his eyes with a grin, tossing down his vodka. "What you want to do now, though. Abuse this old man, or let this old man sleep his jet lag off, or make love to this old man until he remembers why he fucking loves you as much as he does?"

"I think that's rimming, then, and then fucking, as requested." Vadim smiled. "Pretty sure we can do the fisting thing too, but maybe tomorrow, when we're rested a bit more. I'd like to take my time."

Dan grinned, teeth and all, getting off the chair. "In that case, I'll be in the bathroom with some of the kit Hooch left." He winked and was out of the room after another shot of vodka, to take advantage of being awake for another couple of hours.

* * *

The next day saw the unbelievable, the hitherto unseen, and the nigh impossible happen: Dan went shopping without complaints and with a remarkable amount of patience. With Vadim's help he got himself leather trousers that were simultaneously tight and comfortable, while not making him look like an aging man who was trying to recapture his youth. He stayed a long time in the 'toy' shop, poring over gadgets, but in the end venturing back out without having bought anything. All he could think of was already in the house.

Yet an idea had been brewing, and Dan enquired if the city had surplus shops, which they had - obviously, and if they sold British uniforms.

Vadim took him there, smiling as he watched Dan pick and choose. He was standing near the door, surveying the whole shop, deliberately not looking too closely what Dan was buying. He didn't want the hunger to get too bad.

Dan ended up with two rather full bags and an odd grin on his face, which was almost self-conscious. Stepping outside, he lit a fag the moment he was out of the shop. Joking if he should cut his hair, but the idea wasn't met with approval, and he grinned and shrugged, pointing out that he was hungry, needed feeding, was still jet lagged and wanted to get back to the bungalow, unless Vadim preferred him to be asleep instead of horny.

They headed back and Vadim heated up the sauna for Dan, while he started to cook something in the kitchen. Steak, salad, some potato wedges, solid food. Encouraging Dan to sweat it out, shower, and then rest. Still not looking at the bags or what they contained.

Only later, when they had eaten and Dan sat back with a cold Pils in his hand, did he look at Vadim with that expression that was part incredibly intense and part challenging. And part ... unknown. "I think you should get some of your kit on. But just the basics. Field gear."

Vadim cleared away the dishes. "Want me to prepare? Clean ... out?"

"You wouldn't have done ..." Trailing off, Dan lifted the glass to his lips, Adam's apple bobbing as he drank two gulps. "But we're not in the Afghan mountains anymore." He nodded, wiped his lips, and smiled a curious smile.

"Okay." Afghanistan. The word sent off an electric spark, every single time. "Be right back." Vadim headed into the bathroom and cleaned out. Not his favourite thing, but he did see the point. Then a quick shower, towelling down, and dressing in the 'field gear' in the bedroom. Commando underneath, would give Dan less to content with. And another thing which felt weird, but which was very likely helpful to what they were going to do. Using some Vaseline on his arse. If Dan wanted to fuck him roughly, he wouldn't even have to stop or pause.

By the time Vadim returned, the kitchen light was off and instead the light in the hallway on, and the living room and bedroom were dark, too. Dan was standing out of immediate sight, leaning at ease against the doorframe to the living room. Dressed in British camo, the boots, the combat uniform, the olive webbed belt with its brass belt buckle and the olive t-shirt underneath. Wild hair pulled back behind his ears, Dan had a black beret at the correct angle. Not the SAS sand coloured one, impossible to get, but this one would do. Especially since he'd found a uniform with the Sergeant stripes, even though the Staff Sergeant crown was missing. Glowing cigarette between his lips, he was watching Vadim intently. Perfectly aware that Vadim had never seen him in uniform before. Ever.

And the effect was like a punch to the guts. Somehow, it was like Hereford, or Royal Marines, suddenly *real*. Dan wasn't dressing up, wasn't faking it, this was pretty damn close to what Dan had to have been wearing once. He

suddenly fit into the stories he'd told, and Vadim could see Dan as a grunt. Well, NCO. He moved closer, dressed himself in the camo of the enemy. Not quite sure what the game was, exactly.

"You know ..." Dan breathed out smoke, away from Vadim, an old habit by now. "If I'd been who I am now, if I'd fucked who I fuck now, I'd have taken your offer ... back in the mountains." His voice no more than a low rumble. Dark eyes intense.

Offer. Of all the things he'd said, all the things he'd offered, Vadim knew exactly which one offer Dan meant, and it made him break eye contact. Another punch to the guts, but good, excruciatingly good. Do what I did to you. And we're even. Vadim shivered.

Dan paused, watching Vadim. Inhaling the smoke deeply. "You're not Hooch. I'm not you." Another pause, slowly exhaling, "how real do *you* want to play?"

"I don't know." Naked, blind truth. Dan wasn't KGB. Dan had tortured him before. Love. Trust. The brink of madness. "I ... trust you." Keep me this side of sanity.

The cigarette was almost down to the filter, and Dan lowered his hand. "I want to take you back to the Afghan mountains. Will you come with me?" His voice was hardly audible.

The most wretched time in his life, apart from the prison, of course. "Aye." I was strong then, Vadim thought. A lion of a man. Reckless. Unbroken. Until I did break. "Before ... or after the torture?"

"You'll find out." Leaning down to bury the butt in a pot plant, Dan pushed himself away from the doorframe, standing face to face with Vadim.

Vadim didn't budge, looked into the dark eyes, and nodded. Accepting whatever came, agreeing to the 'game' if it was a game, and trusting Dan to begin it and to end it and keep control throughout.

Dan nodded slowly and smiled. Unveiled, disarming. "After you." Gesturing towards the living room.

Vadim's guts tightened, but he turned around. In Afghanistan, that had been a mistake, and he knew it, that very instant.

The next second there was a faint sound of fabric, movement, and then the full weight of Dan's body, shoulder, knee and hip impacting into Vadim's back.

Vadim lost balance, the weight brought him down, the impact painful, but mostly disorientating. He tried to half-turn at least, reflexes, tried to land on his back, or in some other position where he could defend himself, but Dan made that impossible. The impact pressed the air from his lungs. The game was on.

"My Russian cunt." Dan said softly, an echo of long ago. 'My', now, not 'you'. "You're not going to trick me this time, aye?" He was moving swiftly, a handcuff clicked around one wrist, first, then pulling the other arm close, with another metallic sound the second one shut. Steel, not ropes. Vadim's fingers found the connection, the steel links, and he remembered what Hooch's wrists had looked like. He shuddered. There was nobody that forbid Dan to kick the

shit out of him, as long as he was fighting fit in ten days. And no chance to escape from these cuffs.

"I'll do what's necessary," murmured Vadim, glancing over his shoulder. The weight left his body when Dan stood, walking around.

"Get up." Standing right in front of Vadim, hands in the pocket of his uniform trousers. "You're more trouble than it's worth." Growling, softly, "I should have killed you."

Vadim stood, body tensed, expecting kicks or punches, somehow. Natural response. Reflexes, like one of Pavlov's dogs. "Maybe." Vadim's lips were dry. "Maybe I can be useful. Don't kill me." He remembered how he had begged for his life, the blurring of tears, the nausea, the realization that he'd been at the end of what he could endure.

"And why shouldn't I?" Dan took his hand out of the pocket, casually weighing a knife in his palm. Combat knife, surplus, and he twirled it between his fingers as if he'd never done anything else in his life. Until it lay firmly and steadily in his hand. Light glinting off the blade. "Why the fuck shouldn't I get rid of you, you Russian cunt? Why shouldn't I cut you, and this time watch you bleed dry?" Voice trailing off, lowering with every word, but increasing in intensity. A game, perhaps, but it didn't feel like it. "What's keeping me here ..." whispered, "what's keeping you alive ...?"

Vadim kept his eyes on the knife, felt his back tighten, like the muscles remembered the pain, being wounded. Suddenly breathless. Bleed dry. Cut his throat. Carve more words into his flesh. Blood. Pain. Glinting steel in that tanned hand. Vadim's eyes were somewhat widened, and he glanced at Dan's groin. "I'll be useful," he murmured.

"How?" Sudden movement, barely a glint in his eyes, before Dan's body moved full-force into Vadim's. Pushing him against the wall, impact of shoulders into chest and a fist resting in the pit of Vadim's stomach. Right next to the blade that was nestled in the uniform cloth. "You remember?" Whispered, Dan's face so close, lips ghosting across a cheek, jaw, earlobe.

Vadim bared his throat, lust hitting him with the impact, with the fist, and fuck, the knife. "I do." No more than a whisper now that his throat was so tight. "Whatever ... you want me to do," he managed. "I could ... suck you, or ..."

"What?" Voice sharp, body, hands, eyes and blade drawing closer, voice gaining in intensity. "What the fuck makes you think I'd want *that*?" Dan was hard, shit, and the game was too real. Too much, no, just right, and fuck he'd been jealous and Vadim was his, and damn he'd never admit it and ... "What the *fuck* did you *say*?" Hissed.

Vadim's breath was going faster, eyes now wide, recognising the intensity, remembering. "Nobody would know," he managed to get out. "I'm your ... prisoner, nobody would know what you did, and it's ... just a deal. For my life. I'll do whatever you want."

"But I'm not like *you*, cunt." Dan hissed, remembering, body pressing closer, the knife slipping upwards, towards the throat, the other hand downwards,

pushed against Vadim's groin, trapped between thigh and cock. "I want *more*. You understand? You fucking understand?"

Vadim moved his head back, eyes on the knife, wanting the touch at the same time, need and knife, each one heightening the effect of the other. Fuck. Pull a knife on me and I'm yours, part of him thought, and he swallowed. "Yes. I ... understand. You can ... have more." Struggling with the word. "Fuck me. Do what you want. Just keep me alive." Wrong. "Let me live." Keep me alive. Both sentences so close in English, but very different meaning.

"And why, why should I?" Pressing in hard, Dan's hands twisted in the confinement, blade to the throat, whispering along sensitive flesh before moving down, cutting the fabric of tunic and shirt, cutting the surface of flesh and skin as well, which made Vadim shudder and sweat, feeling the burn when the sweat entered the cuts. "Why should you live?" One swift movement, and Vadim's chest was bared.

Vadim's lips were open, catching breath. Why. Why. He had no idea. What should he say? "Because ... I need you." It broke the game, whatever, but Vadim did, and it was the only thing that made sense, and yet it didn't break it, because Dan didn't even stop, nor flinch, nor noticed anything, except for skin beneath his hand and the minuscule line of a shallow cut between the pecs.

"You wanted to fuck me. Right? Admit it, you fucking bastard." Dan was breathless, suddenly, and hardly above the audible.

"Yes." Vadim met his gaze, swallowed again, against the knife against his throat. "I still ... want to fuck you."

Aggression and lust, in equal measure, blazing in Dan's eyes. "And how many others?" Catching himself too late, he growled, "but you're mine, you cunt." Almost forgetting the game, far away, back in the mountains. In heat and dust and anger. Pushing forward, hand twisting into the cut fabric, pulling Vadim close, before bodily thrusting him towards the living room door. "Inside!"

Vadim didn't resist much. How many others. It wasn't about the recruits. It was, at least in part, about Hooch. "Yours," he said, almost too loud in his own ears while he stumbled into the living room.

"Why?" Dan laughed, once, harsh, like he might have done, back in the mountains. Delivering a kick once Vadim was inside that made Vadim stumble and go down on his knees, barely managing to not fall onto his face.

"Because you keep me alive," Vadim whispered, "and sane."

"And what the fuck did I get for it?" Past, present, future, make-believe and reality all blurring together. "You know what you got yourself into? With your fucking foolishness? You won't get rid of me, Russkie. Never again."

Vadim glanced over his shoulder, then opened his legs to brace himself, after Dan had opened the buckle, pulled Vadim's trousers down. "I don't want to."

But Dan said nothing, didn't react, just bared the arse before him, and stared down at it. "I never finished the line."

Vadim's legs and arse tensed, the hands in his back clenching, remembering the madness and pain when Dan had written into his flesh. He wouldn't ...

would he? Do that? Again? His stomach grew so taut that he was bordering on nausea. He wasn't sure. He simply wasn't sure. He couldn't place this, had no idea where Dan was heading, felt disoriented. Still horny, fuck, yes, but otherwise had no idea what was going on. "Fuck me," he murmured, hoping that that was where it was going. Sane. Something he knew. What he'd set out to get.

"No." Running a hand across that arse, Dan had to physically hold himself back. "Got to prepare you." Close by, the heap of 'toys' he had dropped, and he chose the dildo, the smaller one. A brief, unseen quirk of a brow, when he realised Vadim had greased himself up. Poised and ready, he worked the silicon cock deep inside. Steadily, no mercy. "What did they teach you, Russkie?"

Vadim had no idea what Dan was talking about, who 'they' were, or anything else, what Dan could possibly mean, instead fully focused on the thing that was entering him. And which would allow Dan to do this as much as he wanted, and as long. "Who ... what?"

"Your handlers." Murmured. The dildo had already been accepted, and vanished inside the body he'd never stopped craving. Touching, watching, the contrast of taut flesh, black silicon, and camo cloth of uniform and black leather boots. "Never fraternize." Dan recited, quietly. A memory from his old SAS days. Pulling the cut-off tunic and shirt over Vadim's shoulders and down, until the fabric ended bunched-up at his shackled wrists. "What would you do to survive? Tell me."

"Anything." Vadim groaned, his eyes were closed now, and it was true, he'd do anything and had done anything to survive. Including 'fraternization'.

"Good." Dan breathed out, reaching for a length of rope. Still in Vadim's back, unseen, he swiftly and securely tied the rope around one booted ankle, leaving a short length in between the feet, before tying off the other ankle. He'd be able to hobble, no more. Then walking to the front, Dan looked down while fishing for his cigarettes and a lighter. "Look at me, *cunt*."

Vadim's eyes opened, his head raised slightly to be able to meet Dan's gaze. Lust and confusion in the bright blue eyes, a hint of worry, more than a taste of fear. Cigarette. The burn mark at his throat. "What do you want?" he asked, voice rough. "Me to do?"

"Not to ask so many questions." Dan raised his brows, exhaling the first plume of smoke as he put the lighter back into his pocket. A slow smile started to creep into his face. "Silence, aye?" Putting his index finger in front of his lips. "Sssshhhhh ... no sound. I want you to shut up. Not a peep. You think you can do that?"

Vadim nodded, jaw muscles tightened. Shut up. He had gagged Hooch. But he preferred to be able to scream. Just in case. If that was what Dan was planning. Konstantinov had allowed him to scream. It had been the admission that he was in pain - something he hadn't given him for a long time. At least it had felt like a long time. Vadim shuddered.

"You know what they do to prisoners in the SAS?" Dan smoked slowly, leisurely. "When we have to interrogate them?" Half-turning, he walked over to

the sofa, pushing the low table away, but leaving the rug. A space now, freed, and he sat with legs braced, leaning back, as if he were holding a relaxed conversation. Crooking his finger towards Vadim to make him come closer. "Well, do you?"

Vadim shook his head, then straightened a bit, and moved, on his knees, shuffling closer with the small movements the rope around his ankles allowed. His eyes meeting Dan's, watching him closely. Just in front of Dan's feet, he stopped and straightened more, fingers in his back intertwined.

Dan smiled, not his usual smile, but a dangerous one, an old one. A smile from long ago. "We work at them. Slowly. We take our time."

I have years. But I will not need years.

Konstantinov.

Opening his knees further, Dan crooked his finger again for Vadim to come closer. "I could fuck you now, or I could make you suck me." Inhaling the smoke, the cigarette glowing bright red. "But that would be too easy, don't you think?"

Yes or no were both wrong answers, so Vadim shrugged and moved closer, as ordered. You call the shots, he thought. Eyes flickering to the redness of the burning tobacco, the smell, and the spot under his throat itched. Might be sweat.

Dan watched, the uniform cloth on his own hairless skin an overpowering sensation. Unknown, not just long forgotten. Simply unknown, like the waters he'd jumped into right now. He'd sink or swim and didn't care either way. Whatever happened. "Would definitely be too fast." Nodding to himself, Dan dropped his free hand, taking hold of a nipple and twisted, hard, while moving the cigarette down to the hollow of Vadim's throat. Not touching, but the heat was there. Right there, making Vadim squirm, inside, outside, biting back the groan from the nipple, and the pleading to not get burned.

"Remember, no sound." Smiling. "Unlike in the mountains."

Vadim breathed hard, nodded, but he was definitely sweating again. Eyes now showing more fear than confusion. He was settling into the rules, followed them, didn't think about them anymore. Minimizing whatever danger he could.

The cigarette went upwards. Slowly, ever so slowly, and almost touching the skin, but never quite. If Vadim did so much as just twitch, he'd burn himself, but as it were, Dan moved it all the way up towards the face and then took it away. Only then stopping to twist and flick the nipple. "You know where the knife is?" A strange sort of amusement in his voice. "You think you could get hold of it if you knew?" Moving to the other nipple, twisting, again and again, short nails flicking across the hardened bud.

Knife. Where had the knife vanished to? He couldn't remember. Didn't see it right away, and his nipples were the focus of his attention, the slow torture that still kept him hard, the pain and the pleasure, making his breath catch a few

times. He didn't want to betray the effect, but he did. The question. Vadim shrugged again. Teeth clenched, lips had opened a bit.

Dan let go and leaned back, regarding the man in front of him. As well known as his own body and yet right now as deep and dark as the water he was in. "This is no game, aye?" Musing, more to himself than to Vadim, as he smoked slowly until the cigarette was finished. Abusing another plant to stub out the butt.

Was it? Was it not? If it wasn't, why had Dan not added another burn mark? If it was ... why was he asking. And if it wasn't, why wasn't he fighting, resisting? Because Konstantinov had broken that bone in his body, Vadim realised. He'd learnt that he couldn't resist, that he was powerless, fully dependent on the torturer. Lover. Assuming that that was what Dan wanted to see, he shook his head. No game.

"As little as with the Delta?" Dan traced a line from Vadim's jaw down to a nipple, before taking it between his fingertips and twisting it once more. Slowly, everything slowly, making Vadim flinch, his hands formed fists.

Vadim nodded. He was at the receiving end of the same kind of not-game. And maybe he should fight this, only, he stood no chance. He couldn't get away, couldn't run, couldn't punch or kick.

A sudden flash in Dan's eyes and he nodded, once, and stood up. "Move." Pointing to the rug and its very centre.

Vadim shuffled backwards until he was in place. Thinking about the knife's whereabouts, when Dan was behind him instantly, another length of rope in his hand. Doubled up, he fixed it in a loop around the steel links of the handcuffs, each end tied to one ankle. Pulling hard, until Vadim's shoulders were taut and his chest thrust out, shackled hands as far down as physically possible - and then a little more, forcing a groan from Vadim, who felt it keenly in his shoulders, chest, neck, the small of his back.

Dan moved to face him, crotch at eye level. "I have time. I even give you a choice, cunt. Knife or cock." And there it was, the blade gleamed once again in his tanned hand.

Vadim nodded towards Dan's groin, then glanced up, hoping it was understood. Shuffling slightly forward, to move his face towards the cock. Knife was not an option.

Unbuckling the belt, Dan opened his fly, letting the uniform trousers fall to his ankles, all without a word. His cock interested, but not fully hard. Too much concentration - until now. Still no word, when he stepped closer, one hand gripping the back of Vadim's head, the other holding the knife against his throat, which made Vadim's cock jump.

How would he give head to an enemy? Vadim pondered just for a moment, then opened his lips, moving to take the cock in. Smooth, he had to do it, and it was the first chance he got to fuck Dan's mind as well. Careful to not put pressure against the blade, he made a show of reluctance to do anything with the flesh between his lips, undecided. Swallowing as if he were nervous, then

slowly using his tongue to run it across the flesh, probing, trying out, breathing through the nose, a loud sound in his own ears.

The feelings real, and the reluctance a make-belief that was too realistic to ignore. Dan shuddered, his own breath quickening after a few short moments. "Best make it good." His voice husky, tilting the blade to avoid cutting, yet letting it scrape against the skin as he pressed in harder. Making a statement between the hand that forced Vadim's head closer, his cock deeper, and the blade at the jugular.

Vadim took another bit, some more cock, right to the point where novices could get it, and moved his head back and forth in the constraints of hand and blade, trying what many tried, to do it just with the friction from the lips, which didn't work and couldn't work, but that was beside the point. He remembered how much Dan had enjoyed this from Jean, who'd been anything but a pro in this, but he'd made a few serious attempts. He sped up those movements, as if his jaw was getting tired, wondering if he should let Dan force him, or force himself to go deeper.

The decision was made for him, when Dan hissed out, "useless!" Before the hand in the back of Vadim's head pushed harder, brutal, with no way to go but forward, forcing the cock down the throat.

The choking was damned real, and Vadim did struggle against that reflex like he hadn't in ages. He managed to focus, forced himself to focus, even if his body fought the panic of not being able to breathe. Moving again, raw throat giving Dan more friction, and he doubled his efforts, sucking on the cock, focusing on getting the other man off, trying to be free and to breathe again. Soon, finding a passable rhythm and strength, enjoying this, he stayed hard, using some of his skill, as if by accident.

Dan's breathing was harsh now, faster and shallower, the closer he got, yet the blade remained steady, hand and knife moving along with Vadim's rhythm. Pulling suddenly out, almost all the way, allowing a split second to catch his breath. Eyes intensely on Vadim, whose eyes were burning, before he bore down once more, cumming that very moment. The blade pressed flat against the throat, his hips jerked, as his cock was buried deeply. He spasmed, and Vadim took it, swallowing for every overspill, a reflex as his throat fought the intruder, but his breathing was under control, allowing Dan to stay there, keep the cock there. His own twitched, too, but he knew making him come was not high on Dan's list of priorities right now.

Breathing deeply, to counteract the aftershocks, Dan pulled back and out, using Vadim's lips to ensure every drop was caught and his cock was cleaned, and Vadim swallowed again, but the taste lingered. The feeling of having been used, of having offered and that this game had turned real.

Dan smiled briefly, face flushed beneath the tan, as he struggled for a moment to bring his breathing back under control. Slipping the knife into the utility pocket on the trouser leg, he tucked himself in, closed fly, buttons and belt, and went towards Vadim's back. He said nothing, not even when the knife

came back out and he started slicing the remains of the tunic into strips, before cutting the fabric off that had been bunched around Vadim's wrists.

Vadim closed his eyes, felt the motions in his back, around his arms, assumed Dan wanted him naked. Or maybe it was to bare the scars that were on his back. He cleared his throat, but no other sound.

A doubled-up strip of camo fabric was slipped over his eyes, then knotted tightly in the back. A touch of Dan's fingers along his jaw the last contact Vadim felt before Dan turned and walked out of the room. Closing the door behind him.

Gone. Empty. Vadim shuddered. *Taking our time.* Remembering how he'd been left alone, for weeks, hours, years, how his mind had started to race, and right now, he had to cling to the fact it was a game, but his face twitched. Fingers tensed, hands became fists, the stress position growing painful, keeping him upright by using his own body against him. Vadim began to sweat. As time passed, the fear came. Crawled up to him, curled around his mind, until he felt himself breathe fast. What if he was back in Moscow? Everything else just a dream. Just an illusion. One of the many dreams. A hallucination? Carpet under his knees. That was the only clue. He wasn't hungry, hadn't been beaten, and Dan's cigarette could still be smelled in the room. Nevertheless, the reaction was violent, nausea, fear, and cold sweat.

Eventually the door opened quietly, muted steps were felt rather than heard, as Dan returned. Stopping in front of the bound man, Dan studied Vadim for a while, before his fingertips lightly touched the face, which moved forward to nuzzle against the hand. The touch growing firmer, caressing the cheek, then running down towards the sweat gleaming chest. Brushing over a nipple, no pain this time, before the hand came back up, ending as a steady presence in the back of Vadim's neck. Cool glass then touched the lower lip, offering water. Vadim tilted his head and accepted the drink, swallowing, drinking without restraint, trusting the kindness. Dan.

He raised his face, blindly meeting a gaze he only guessed, shifting his weight and broadening his stance. Close to speaking Dan's name, or something like 'please', but a finger was placed against his lips, silencing him without speaking a word.

The faint sound of cloth shifting, as Dan leaned down, lips moving against Vadim's, silently urging to open up, while both hands caressed the bound body. Running across sweaty skin, moving along tense muscles. Towards cuffs and ropes, back and up once more.

Vadim answered the kiss, opened up, fully, hungrily, needed the reassurance now, needed the kiss more than anything. There was a small sound, for a moment, that he couldn't suppress, but Dan didn't stop, allowed the sound, as he kissed deeply, hungrily, tasting of vodka. One hand moving down, towards the dildo, manipulating the base that held it securely inside, pushing it deeper, moving, rhythmically, while he drank in every emotion, as they kissed for long minutes. Vadim's need growing, and he moved as much as he could, pushing back against the intrusion, like he'd welcome a real cock.

Dan finally pulled back, caressed Vadim's face once more, before his muted footsteps retreated out of the room and the door closed.

"No," said Vadim, but Dan had not heard, too quiet, and he was already gone. Left alone with the need and the taste of Dan. Wanting. But there was no way he could come, even if he could fuck himself on that thing, it would only worsen the need. Forced to wait again, and soon disoriented about time, but not space. He knew where he was, but his mind just didn't respond to that. There was the fear again, of having been abandoned, forgotten, made to wait, and he soon had no idea how long it was.

Once again the door opened and the scent of cigarette smoke crept into the room. No sound, though, no footsteps, not for several minutes, while Vadim's heart raced, listening for the smallest hint of movement, of presence.

"Please," he murmured, swallowing harshly, turning his face to where he'd heard the last sound. "I'll say everything. Do anything."

No answer, no sound either, not for another couple of minutes, but neither punishment for speaking. Finally the footsteps once again got closer and the cigarette smoke got stronger. Dan came to a stop, once more in front of Vadim, and sat down on his heels, face on the same level. Still not a word, just the slow inhaling and exhaling of nicotine.

Vadim could feel Dan's breath on his face, smell him, and his heart calmed. He shivered as he wanted to see him, touch him, know it was Dan. He didn't speak again, only shuffled closer, towards where he knew Dan was. Trying to touch, somehow, even if his hands remained tied in his back.

He was met with fingertips that touched his face, the cigarette gone. With lips that replaced the fingers, when hands once more ran over his body. Touches, everywhere and constant. Caressing the tensed up muscles, a touch that grew firmer, kneading tension out of shoulders and arms, while the lips, those kisses, travelled across Vadim's face, throat, down to his chest. Never ceasing, as if hands and lips worshipped him; adored his bound helplessness, relishing in the control they had over him, and Vadim relaxed, calmed, found a deep, strange solace in this. Half-leaning into it, still feeling the thing inside him, but it was less torturous now, just a reminder.

A reminder that grew in intensity when a hand dropped to his cock. Strong, calloused fingers closing around the flesh, stroking slowly. Taking their time - with time the most precious commodity they'd ever had in their lives. The other hand moving down, down, once more manipulating the dildo, embedded deep inside. The kisses continued, now back on Vadim's lips, concentrating on coaxing them open, allowing Dan's tongue to slip inside, to explore, clash, and taste. Vadim moved - the clever hands stoking the fire until he was breathless, wanting to be properly fucked, by flesh, wanting to come, but Dan's hand didn't go that far, never quite that far, instead keeping him right there, wanting, and he groaned with frustration into that kiss, wanting to beg again, ask for it.

Dan pulled back after long minutes, voice husky. "Almost ..." You've almost conquered the mountains.

"More."

“Not yet.” No comment on Vadim’s lack of silence, no move to enforce it either. With hands and lips gone, something ice cold went to Vadim’s lips, with the strong scent of vodka. Vadim opened his lips, drinking, thirst and need making him reckless, downing all of the offered vodka.

Instead of wiping Vadim’s lips, Dan licked them, caught a drip off the chin with his tongue, then stood up and walked away again. Again. This time, though, the door remained open and yet there was no sound once the footsteps had disappeared into another room.

Vadim hung his head, relaxed, feeling the burn of the vodka, focused on breathing, on the tingling memory of Dan’s lips on his. Shifting his weight again, as much as the restraints allowed, relaxed his muscles. His arse was beginning to feel sore, he should have used more lube, but he hadn’t seen this coming, not at all. He waited, clinging to Dan as a memory. Dan, who might be watching him, Dan, who would come back to do the same thing again - for as long as he wanted, and as often.

But Dan didn’t come. Watching Vadim from the hallway, in silence. No sound, not even cigarette smoke. Sitting in a kitchen chair he’d brought out, legs braced, booted feet planted on the ground. Fly open, he was stroking himself without any hurry. Just stoking the simmering lust while he watched and sat, relishing in the sensation of power. Control. Yes, that’s what it was: control. Controlling each breath, each movement, each moment of lust and each taste and kiss and thought. Watching, studying. This work of art, the glimpse of scars in the back - *his* scars - the knowledge of another, hidden between the opened knees. The way the sweat increased on the smooth skin, glistening in the low light of the single lamp in the room. How the body shifted from time to time. Imagining the strain, the fatigue, and the impossibility of knowing. Control ... like he should have had in the Afghan mountains.

The fear came back, Vadim’s mind suddenly shifted with fear, a moment of losing it all, the focus, and any thought, when everything became a swirl of emotions he couldn’t name. Vadim groaned as it hit him, he remembered that feeling, the fear of going insane as his mind was coming apart. Struggling, breathing harshly through the nostrils, just aware of sweat running in drops down his back, his flanks. “Oh please,” he murmured in Russian. “Get me out ... get me out ...”

Dan looked up, alerted, tilting his head as he strained to hear the words. Still for a moment, he stood up, as quietly as he could, cock still out and he didn’t care. Trousers barely held up with the belt, he took hold of the tub of Vaseline he’d stored beside his chair, and the bottle of vodka he’d been drinking out of. Seemed it was time, now. Vadim was ready. No mountains, this, and a long time since, but he could still smell the heat and the dust.

Vadim wasn’t aware that anything had shifted. He pleaded, and his words didn’t make much sense. They sounded strangled, half Russian, half English words, many of them just stuck in his throat, choking him, but the despair was audible, and ‘please’ was the word he used most.

Dan frowned, placing bottle and tub down, and knelt once more, sitting on his heels. Right in front of Vadim, who hadn't noticed him this time. No touch, yet, speaking instead, to make a difference. "You're ready, aye?" Softly, Dan's voice a mere rumble, when he did reach out, fingertips touching Vadim's face.

Vadim shuddered violently, and nodded, biting back the fear and insanity. Dan. Touch. Ready. Yes. "Please. Dan." Voice strangled. "Use me."

Dan breathed out, shuddering when the words hit his core. Shooting straight to his cock - and to his heart, mind, his entire being. Touching something deeper and beyond any 'game'. This was different, this was far more and he'd eventually understand its importance.

"Aye." Touching, moving, the knife was back, cutting through ropes. Severing wrists from ankles, making Vadim groan with relief. Free. Pressure off his back, but he was so stiff now he had no control of his body.

Dan was steadying the body that slid against him, helping Vadim's chest to the ground. Arse up, back arched, the rope between the ankles allowing enough access. "I will use you alright."

Vadim rested his cheek against the ground, shoulders taking his weight. He opened his legs as far as the rope allowed, knowing full well he didn't look very dignified, instead submitting, completely submitting to Dan like this, while at the same time being hard and more than ready with the silicone cock up his arse, which was moved the next instant, slowly being pulled out. No harshness, not right now, not before it was out and gone, and Dan's hand was back, this time with more Vaseline. Slicking himself up, as well as Vadim, he paused a moment. Kneeling between Vadim's legs, his hands spreading the grease-glistening buttocks, opening him up. Lips moving, but the 'you're mine' was not audible, just a silent whisper.

He pushed forward, the muscle relaxed enough to accept his cock without resistance, and Dan groaned out loud when he rocked himself in, once, twice, before he was deeply engulfed, to the hilt, balls pressed against Vadim's arse. Vadim shuddered hard, uncontrollably, his cock twitched, whole body tensed and tried to come, but didn't manage, of course not. He pushed back, hungry, wanting, sore, fingers reaching for Dan's body, desperate for more contact.

But Dan just fucked him, long, deep strokes in an ever increasing, near-punishing rhythm. Holding Vadim's hips steady with both hands, he had stamina now, the second time round, and was putting all his strength and need into each thrust. Using the body and mind, one with his own.

The ever-increasing pressure, the fact he couldn't move, the burn and soreness in his arse and the way Dan fucked him, no consideration, really, truly using him, built up the pressure to a point where Vadim didn't know what hit him. The pressure tearing, close to bursting, going through him, and he came, hard, with a sound that was between pleading, shout and groan, cum splattering the carpet, while his whole body tensed.

Dan's mind imploded, realising that Vadim had come. Just like that - fucked, while his own cock was gripped tight in the convulsions. Unable to retain the rhythm, Vadim's orgasm took him along, topped him over, and Dan threw his

head far back into his neck, groaning out with abandon as he came, deep in Vadim's body, erratically thrusting.

Vadim gritted his teeth, keeping the tension to not collapse, but it wasn't easy. Dan's strength rocked him, and all he could do was take it and resist, for his own sake, and Dan's. Then, the movements slowed, stopped, and Vadim managed to breathe again. Fuck. There had been no hand involved. Nothing to help him along. Just like this.

Dan lowered his head, breathing hard with his heart racing, hammering against his chest as if it tried to kill him. Mindlessly stroking the damp body, sweat-gliding skin, until he had himself enough under control to pull out carefully. Struggling to breathe, still, he was searching for the key, and unlocked the cuffs, then reaching over to pull the blindfold off. "Holy shit." Voice husky, he smiled at Vadim.

Vadim fell to the side, breathing harshly, and reached up to his face to wipe the sweat away. Removing the cuffs that were dangling from one wrist, while Dan cut off the rope that connected his ankles. They didn't speak. Dan helped Vadim up, to the bathroom, and cleaned him up, while Vadim felt so sore and stiff and tired he didn't manage to string two thoughts together. He was washed and towelled, and then brought to bed, where he lay on his side, shuddering every now and then. Dan close behind him, until they drifted off to sleep in the shared warmth.

* * *

The next day saw both of them having a lie-in, with Dan being more attentive than usual. He actually managed to get a coffee going before Vadim was up, serving the strong brew in bed, after he'd had his first cigarette in the kitchen. Preparing breakfast was obviously too much for his abilities, and he suggested heading out for brunch. So they did, staying in the area, they found a nice café that served a buffet of everything imaginable that tickled the Continental palate.

Heading off for the Berlin Zoo afterwards, Dan enjoyed the animals more than he would any museum or art gallery, but let Vadim choose the evening's entertainment. Vadim seemed thoughtful, attentive when Dan looked at him, and more mellow than usual, every now and then thinking back to the previous night and what he'd experienced, but he didn't feel like talking about it. Good that Dan didn't appear like he wanted to talk about it, either. So he took Dan on a tour through East Berlin, showed him places he'd lived, met people, witnessed things, where the Stasi had kept their prisoners, back in the days. He told the stories with a sense of bewilderment, as if it had been a thousand years since he'd been involved in these matters.

Dan watched him, far more intensely and with a much increased frequency than usual, as if the man who told stories of the past was recalling events of a certain frailty. Eventually, he coaxed Vadim away from those places and to a bar that looked inviting. Finding good beer 'vom Fass' they settled into a nook for an hour, before it was time to head for dinner. Deciding on a whim, Dan

stopped in front of a Turkish restaurant, and with light-hearted banter luring him inside, where they found the service friendly and the food excellent, with a burst of flavour in every bite. It was still early when they ventured out again, pleasantly filled with food and drink, and with Dan musing aloud if they should look for another bar or club or if they should return to the bungalow.

Deciding to return, they hailed a taxi fairly quickly and were back in the bungalow just a little later, where Vadim opted for a quick shower, some lotion in a sensitive area, and then crawled into bed.

"You alright?" Dan stood in the doorway, naked, finishing off his last cigarette for the night. Vadim stretched out, pulled the pillow closer and stuffed it under his neck.

"Aye. You?"

"You've just been damned quiet all day." Dan flashed a smile, "not that you are usually a grand talker, but ... been wondering if I went too far last night." Stubbing out the fag in an ashtray he'd been holding, Dan stepped into the bedroom.

Vadim smiled and pulled the covers back to allow Dan to get skin to skin with him. "No. It was ... intense. I wasn't quite sure what you were doing ... where it would get us. You. Me." Vadim kept his eyes on Dan, admiring the body, the grace, the scars. "Felt strange." And I came. I came without having been touched. Couldn't help it, and it was nearly painful.

"But you seemed to enjoy it." Dan grinned, a little wistful and oddly self-conscious. "Well, it just felt like what was right at the time." Sliding under the covers, he moved close to embrace and hold Vadim. Chest against back, legs and arms moulded.

Vadim leaned back, holding Dan's hands. "I did. Fuck, I did." Thinking for long moments. "Getting ... off on it. It's too strange. But it was ... good. The ... kit, and the ... memory, the knife. Danger. Brutality. Not ... caring what I want. That's all ... part of it. Guess you just fucking me after you ... broke me is always with me, somewhere. It's when I give up, Dan. When I'd do anything. That's ... a very strange place to be."

Dan frowned, unseen in Vadim's back. "I don't get it. I didn't fuck you after I broke you. What the hell do you mean?"

"But I wanted you to," said Vadim, keeping his eyes closed. "Yeah, and that's me, telling Hooch to accept what he wants and I'm still fucking ashamed of myself."

"Ashamed?" Dan asked quietly. The taste of ashes was back in his mouth and had nothing to do with nicotine. Remembered what he'd been told after the blow-up over visiting his family in Scotland. "Ashamed of being gay?"

"Ashamed of wanting ..." Of wanting. Of wanting to be hit, fucked, tied up, threatened, brutalized. Of wanting to rape and brutalize in return. "That darkness. That extreme. Things like the cutting, the ... games we play. I want that. I'm still sore, I still remember what you did last night, what I ... allowed you to do. I keep thinking I shouldn't."

“But why not? Who’s there to tell you what you can and cannot do?” Dan nuzzled his face into the back of Vadim’s neck for a moment. “I certainly don’t judge you. Ever.”

Vadim smiled. “I guess I just want to be strong and honourable ... worthy.” The smile was ironic - he’d long since said goodbye to the notions of honour and worthiness. Strength had remained, and he’d even learnt the limits of that - the very hard way.

“But you are. I don’t understand what sex and lust have to with being strong and honourable? As long as it is consensual?”

“You don’t look down on me when you do that? You don’t think ... what a pathetic bastard I am?”

“What?” Dan physically coiled back, propping himself up on his elbow. “Tell me you are fucking joking and this isn’t really a question.”

Vadim half-turned, studying his face. Seeing the truth. “No. Not a question. You don’t. I’m sorry.”

Dan looked down at Vadim, reaching out to touch his face. “Don’t be sorry. We’ve been through so much ... no need to be sorry. Ever. Aye?” He smiled.

Vadim smiled and placed his hand against Dan’s, kissing the inside of his hand, relishing the warmth and strength. “No. I’m okay. I’m just thinking too much. Worrying.”

“About what?” Dan settled back in, couldn’t think of anything at all to worry about. They were alive, had jobs, were financially settled, as long as they could keep working for a while.

“Everything. And nothing. My mind just does it. Always something going on.” Vadim leaned back against Dan. “Bad habits.”

“Would sleeping help? While being ... ‘cuddled’?” Dan grinned, lips curving in the back of Vadim’s neck.

“Always works.” Vadim smiled and reached over to switch off the light on the nightstand. “Sleep well, Dan.”

“Yeah.” Dan murmured, smiling. “Sleep well, Russkie.” His voice carried all the tenderness of a man who knew who he loved and had known for a long time.

It didn’t take long for Dan to fall asleep. Less than ten minutes later and he breathed regularly and softly, while holding onto Vadim.

* * *

All gloom was gone by the morning, and they started the day far more light-hearted than the one before. Laughing and joking, Dan was in a good mood, especially since they were off to explore, and that included a visit to the local pool. The evening brought good food and even better entertainment, and surprisingly, Dan enjoyed the theatre that Vadim got him into. It was fun, and a lot of banter, half of which Dan couldn’t understand but laughed anyway, and they spent the night in a local bar, enjoying the initially reserved and then rapidly warming friendliness. The day after that wasn’t much different, except

for a bit more sightseeing and the odd gallery that Dan let himself get dragged into, but most importantly, a tender session of lovemaking at night. The comfort of two men who knew each other better than each on their own could know themselves.

Vadim had fallen asleep after that, relaxed and happy, even though aware of the fact that time was moving on and they'd have to head back in less than a week, but at the moment, the little holiday seemed to last.

It was that same night when he suddenly awoke with a start, unaware he'd been screaming, and sat in bed, upright, drenched in sweat. The dream too real. Far too real, and disturbing like few others. He'd dreamed Konstantinov had pushed something with steel blades into his mouth, cutting his lips, his gums, his throat, laying bare the roots of his teeth and penetrating him through the neck. And with the logic of dreams, this very disturbing thing had been Konstantinov's *cock* - if the cold-hearted bastard even had one - it was bizarre and his mind reeled, at the same time he kept swallowing, half-expecting to taste his own blood again, feel the shredded flesh in his mouth, and whistle through the open wounds in his throat and neck that he'd suffered in his dream.

"Vadim?" Dan was scrambling for the light, unable to find it at first in the unfamiliar room. Alerted and frantic, he sat on the bed when he finally found the switch and light flooded the room. Heart hammering.

Vadim shuddered, only slowly coming back. Light, room. Dan. His hands were on his lips, teeth, checking his flesh, making sure he was okay. "Just ... a dream." Only they weren't 'just' dreams.

"Shit, Vadim, you've been screaming your head off." Dan stretched out with his hand, but stopped mid-motion, remembering. "Can I ... can I touch you? Want some water? Want to be left alone or not? Or ..." trying to calm himself and make sense. "Fuck. Thought the nightmares were over. Shit."

Vadim shuddered, again, his cold sweat smelled foul, rotten, somehow. "He's still there. He's still in my head." He shook his head, felt he was panting, and kept swallowing what should have been blood and was only saliva. "It's okay. Water's good. I'm ... calm."

"Okay ... okay. Just give me a sec." Dan jumped out of the bed and managed to get to the kitchen and run a glass of cold water in record time. Returning to the side of Vadim's bed, where he sat down, offering the water. "With 'he' ... did you mean the torturer?" he asked quietly.

Vadim reached for the glass and drank it, deeply, thirstily, hoping to wash the memory of the blood away. "Him. Konstantinov. Fucking bastard." Saying the name conjured him up, brought the face back, the voice. The touch.

"Shit." Dan looked down, shook his head. Remembered Dr Williams, and the fact that no matter what, he was actually helpless. No matter what the doctor had said. "Any idea why now? Anything I did or said?" Of course, the sex, a couple of days ago.

Vadim shook his head. "Don't think so. I was fine when we went to bed. Relaxed. Nothing that could have triggered this." And the thing with the blades had been a new invention, at least he hoped so. Most dreams were wordless, no

images, just bone-grinding dread. This one had been more immediate, less severe, if disgusting and appalling, but different. Less bad. "Not because of Hooch. Not because of you. The dream was nothing like that."

"Nothing like *what*?" Dan tensed, alerted, but tried to keep looking as relaxed as he could. "You mean you have the dream more often?" More often than the last and first time he'd encountered one.

"Too often for my taste," Vadim said wryly, reaching for a discarded T-shirt to wipe off the sweat that annoyed him. "Sometimes I just wake up. Sometimes I don't - it just stops, I think, eventually, and I sleep like normal. This one ... wasn't just ... an emotion, it was more immediate, clearer, more of an ... image, and a sensation. More physical."

"Fucking hell, and I never realised."

"It's not every night. Just ... often enough." Nice way to skirt around it, but Vadim really didn't want to think of it, didn't want to speak the words. Dan wouldn't want him give head for a while if he had to fear that that was what Vadim thought when sucking him off. No reason to do that. "Something ... weird. I got injured. I was bleeding."

"Did that have anything to do with the knife?" Alerted again, and undoubtedly confused.

"That wasn't a knife." Vadim shook his head, wiped his brow again. "No. I like you with a knife." Reaching over to press Dan's hand. "Don't worry about it. I try to ignore it ... maybe I should have a shower. I'm reeking."

"What about a bath?" Not worrying about it? Bullshit, but Dan understood that the chapter had just been closed and Vadim didn't want to talk. "I'll join you in a nice hot soak, what about that?"

"Sounds great. I'll start the water." Vadim stood, noticed his legs were tired as if he'd run a half-marathon, but he started the water and soon they shared the tub, relaxing again, and thoroughly warmed up, refreshed and tired, they went back to bed, even though it was beginning to dawn.

Dan was holding Vadim once more, but this time, he couldn't fall asleep again. It was bright morning when he finally dozed off, still wrapped around Vadim.

* * *

The last days were mellow, though. Taking it easy and enjoying the luxury of freedom. No routines, no duties - and no more nightmares for now. Letting their R&R between jobs peter out in the best possible fashion.

They had their marching order, and what had been crystallising was now a definite on black and white: the Balkans. In a few days' time, after organising storage and stopping over in Britain to leave all their fanciful new civilian possessions behind, they were finally back on a plane, heading towards their next destination

No more Jean, no more wine; no more Hooch, and no more whisky. No more Maggie nor Dr Williams and no more Beauvais and no more Matt. No more desert, and no more heat.

But plenty of hatred.

20 July 1992, The Balkans

Dan was leaning out of the open window of the Landrover, letting the minimal breeze cool the sweat on his body. Flimsy t-shirt rolled up to his shoulders, he adjusted the shades, before glancing at Vadim. "You think tomorrow's job will be just like today's job, which is just like yesterday's job?" Yawning, he reached for the lukewarm water, bottle squeezed between the seats.

"Let's hope so. No combat." Vadim wore shades, too, much better for driving, as the sun was belting down and exploding on every reflecting surface. He was sweating, even though he wasn't wearing any body armour. "But the Balkans are volatile," he cautioned. "Just when everyone thinks it might get better and people get some sense back ..."

"Where, though, I ask you. I hear of shit happening, but all we see is exactly ... nothing." Tipping his head back as he drank, Dan handed the bottle to Vadim, who rested it against the wheel, took a curve, then drank on the straight bit of the road. "I'd like to know what the fuck's going on here. I mean, I know what we're being told, I know what I hear, but what do we actually see? Nada. Bodyguarding for *what*?" Yawning again, Dan settled back despite the bad road, drumming his fingers against the outside of the vehicle door. "Oh no," he rolled his eyes and pointed forward, "not another road block with nothing to show for. Bastards."

Vadim gave a tired laugh, finished the bottle and handed it back. "Guess they have to spend the time somehow," he muttered, already fishing for the papers as he slowed down.

A couple of men with AKs stepped closer when Vadim came to a stop. Paramilitaries, not quite like the ones they'd met before, and Dan frowned, but said nothing, remained in his seat, watching them closely. Something different about them, something ... and then he spotted the two Cs and the cross, which left him pondering.

The first man hardly glanced at the papers and shook his head, telling them in monosyllables, that there was no way they'd pass. No, and no again, waving his hand as well, while the other came closer, clearly menacing, the AK raised, while keeping the Landrover and the two passengers in check.

Vadim gritted his teeth, but then managed to get his papers back, and drove backwards turning on the narrow dusty road. "Don't like this," he murmured. "No bribes. That means it's a bit more serious than their usual dick-waving."

"Yep." Dan's frown had turned into a steeple between his eyebrows. "Bad enough to go insane with absolutely *nothing* happening, but this doesn't make me happy either. Suggest we have a wee gander, aye?"

"Same idea. Will be good to stretch the legs." Vadim drove on, making sure he was out of sight before the turned off the road into the trees, until they were protected from curious eyes. "My best bet is they're trying to shield the road

right after that block, about two hundred yards down the road.” He murmured, consulting the map. “Not much of a road, really, but there’s a village down there. Here.” Indicating on the map.

“Aye.” Checking the map, Dan pushed the shades off his eyes. “Seems to be a fairly small place, but what the fuck would they want with that?” The frown wouldn’t leave him, and with the shades back down again, he grabbed his armoured vest and the weapon. “I figure this is part of our official duty.” He winked, but without humour, “recon for tomorrow’s run, aye?”

“Oh yes. Very official.” Vadim took the armour as well, got out of the car and got kitted up in no time, checking Dan’s kit once Dan was fully dressed, who returned the favour straight away, then pocketed the map and grabbed his own weapon. “Let’s go.” They headed off, fast, using the terrain for cover and protection wherever possible, moving first parallel to the street and then up the side of the hill, well above the checkpoint.

Dan was slightly slower, the knee had been bugging him more lately, but he’d never uttered a word about it. Figured that ignoring the pain was the best way forward. Once they had reached the brow of the hill, vegetation was sparser, and they got onto the ground, just in case. Tapping Vadim’s leg to get his attention, Dan asked quietly, “you think they got some illegal weapons stores down there?” Before crawling forwards until they had a fairly clear view of the village.

“Entirely possible. Ever since the story with the German King Tiger tank or whatever it was, I believe anything,” Vadim murmured. Rumour had it that when the Serbs had attacked a village, the villagers had brought out a fully functional King Tiger tank the Germans had left behind sometime in the Second World War, and somebody in the village had kept it in working condition for all those years. And true to the doctrine of deterrence, the Serbs then left, not risking to find out whether the steel monster could still spit death and destruction. It was just one of those insane little stories that made Yugoslavia the madhouse it was.

What they saw, the moment they stuck their heads out enough to look down, though, made them freeze. Dan disbelieved his own eyes for a second, until he caught himself and got hold of the binos, checking. That’s when he took in a hissed breath. “What the *fuck!*”

Zoning in on dozens of bodies on the ground. Dead. Some torn to pieces, others killed ‘cleanly’.

Vadim’s eyes narrowed behind the binoculars. It was strangely familiar, the obscene dance of armed men and unarmed people. The dance of flashes of guns, slow, almost agonizingly slow advance, no cover, nothing tactical about dropping bodies while walking. Walking the survivors into a corner, and rounding them all up. Men, women, children. No matter the age nor the gender.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!” Dan breathed out, guts clenching. No matter how many he’d killed, no matter how much he’d seen, this was ... this was Afghanistan all over again. Cleansing. Mindless killing. Genocide. Just without the Hinds. “What the *fuck’s* going on here?”

Vadim reached over and clasped Dan's shoulder. "Fucking the Geneva Convention up the arse," he murmured, but his own words rang hollow.

"What the fuck are we going to do?" Dan turned to glance at Vadim, but only for a moment, because he couldn't, just couldn't stop watching the evidence. What the hell were they to do indeed? *What?* What besides watching the survivors being rounded up, over a hundred of them it seemed, and the paramilitaries arguing amongst each other. Difficult to tell what they were on about, but Dan had a guess. "Looks like they can't decide if they should get rid of them there and then." His voice was without inflection. Not sure if he felt anything at all, anything beyond the horror. Had he turned old, soft, mellow, sociable and human since Afghanistan and the slaughter of the black crows and their children? He felt sick, a growing anger like a red-hot fist in his stomach.

"Yeah." Vadim shook his head. The banality. Arguing while the as yet survivors watched, sweating blood and piss. He closed his eyes for a long moment, hand still firm on Dan's shoulder. "We can't take them on. Too many. We're not equipped for it."

"Shit." Dan was sweating. The man who'd never been bothered by extremes of weather was dripping with sweat. Cold, clammy, and fuelled by a rage that would never know an outlet.

Suddenly movement, down there, and Dan adjusted the binos. "What fucking bastards!" Hissed between clenched teeth when he saw a sudden flurry of men beating with clubs and rifle butts onto the helpless civilians. Like animals, corralled and readied for the slaughter. When shots rang out, more bodies lay slain, and the beating continued, until the survivors were forced into waiting trucks. Limping, blood drenched, and separated into men, women and children.

Dan was breathing hard, rolling to the side when the trucks drove off, leaving some of the paramilitaries with a handful of civilian men behind. Obviously to clean the place and to dig a grave where no doubt those as yet survivors would vanish into as well. Despite his tan, the pallor was visible in Dan's face. "Does the UN know about this?" His voice sounded forced. "Shit, we have no fucking evidence."

"I'd be fucked if I knew what they know." Vadim inhaled deeply, tried to think straight. Bad enough they had no chance to do anything about this now. "We need to get away." He dug the map out of his pocket and marked the spot, the roadblock, and noted down the time and date. "We need to get back to base. Maybe they can send UN guys to check the village."

"Aye." Dan nodded hastily. "If I ever complain again that there's nothing happening and we are just waiting around, tell me to shut the fuck up."

"You didn't make this happen." Vadim gave a half-hearted grin. No, Dan hadn't, but he had. Not here, not now, but somewhere else, in a land that everybody had now forgotten about, where the sky was a unique shade of blue.

Dan looked at Vadim and nodded once. "No. But I didn't stop it either. I never stopped it." Not here, not there. Crawling backwards to get up and away

as quickly as possible. He didn't have a clue what the peacekeeping forces could do, but they bloody well had to do something.

Vadim led the way, staying low, moving fast, finding the way back that Dan only had to follow. His hands in the gloves were sweaty. He wanted to do more than crawl away, there were lives being lost, and there was absolutely no way to stop that now. "They have to do something about it. This must be breaching contracts, treaties or whatever."

"Aye, they got to do *something*," Dan was limping for a few steps when they had reached the lowest area, but soon had himself under control. Damn the knee. "Let's get cracking. Not a fucking clue what they are going to do, but at least they need to know. Have to stop that happening again, and where were they taking them anyway? The main detention camp?" He got into the Lannie, leaving the armoured vest on. For safety, now that they knew what was really going on.

"No idea." They might just drive them somewhere better to shoot them. It was impossible to predict. What if the naysayers in the discussion won the upper hand on the way? These guys didn't have a master plan, no grand design. It was random. Vadim started the car and began to manoeuvre it back out of the woods, then, with gusto, turned it into the other direction and sped away, racing the way back they'd come, until they got to the other road, and, after a long delay that they owed to the fact this route went all the way around the valley, got them into camp.

Yet their discovery was not met with the reaction they had hoped for. Meticulous noting down, of course, but otherwise ... nothing. They had no orders to act. None that would mean interference. On the contrary, the peace keepers were strictly in the region to show strength - as deterrent - and to otherwise do nothing. Intelligence and careful noting of data, but that was it. They were not at war - even though the country was, according to what they had witnessed.

"I don't get that idea of deterrence," Vadim murmured, sitting in the Mess, having a very subdued meal. He should let it rest, but he could see in Dan's eyes that he was thinking about it, and in that case, it was better to bring it out into the open. "Deterrence means the enemy needs to believe you do something. We are clearly doing absolutely nothing. What's the deterrent value of that?"

"I have no fucking clue." The answer came too quickly, too violently. "What the fuck would you lot have done if they'd had fucking blue berets parading the fuck around in Afghanistan and do otherwise fuck-all?"

"Invite them for a drink, take the piss out of them, then send them home to mommy, drunk and dishevelled." Vadim gave a short, coarse laugh. "Or my Colonel would have mopped the floor with them, one way or the other. Or the politicians would have accused them of anything we could dig out on them. Or work with their backers. There are fifteen different ways to get rid of them that I can think of."

“Yeah. Precisely.” Dan grunted, concentrated on the food with far more effort than necessary. Shovelling it down until he was almost done, suddenly raising his head. “Knowing you, you’d probably just fucked the pretty ones.”

Vadim shook his head. “Couldn’t do it. Not on the job. Not with any real danger involved.” He gazed at the plate, thinking, for a moment, how these people had been dropped, then shook his head. But it wasn’t that easy. They were here to prevent this kind of thing from happening, and it did happen, and nobody cared?

“Well, damn.” Dan mopped up the rest of the sauce off his plate with a leftover bite of bread. “Nothing for us to do then right now. Just plan tomorrow’s route and itinerary, and check the teams. Aye?”

“Yeah.” Vadim reached across the table and took Dan’s hand. “Let’s see what else we can come up with, hm?” He gave a wink, and even if he wasn’t in the mood for sex, it would take their minds off things. Things like dying and mass murder.

“Yeah, and I told you a couple of videos arrived that I ordered back when?”

“No?” Vadim glanced around. “What did you order?”

Dan’s grin was back from gloom and reality to the irreverent man who’d waded in gore and came back mentally unharmed - and physically a ragtag of scars. “Let’s just say ... you’ll like it. Want to watch? Right now?”

“Beats the usual entertainment.” Vadim gathered up the trays and carried them back to rack, then walked at Dan’s shoulder to their room. Here, people knew they were ‘an item’, but it was easier than in Kuwait. People tended to mind their own business, even though Vadim missed the light touch of Jean – even if he’d never admit that. Besides, that place had brick-built low-slung buildings that housed two or three men rooms for the affiliated personnel like Dan and Vadim. Who, naturally, shared a room with its single beds pushed together. Two men staying in one place was too normal to be commented upon, and the camaraderie was far less evident than it had been in the Gulf.

Watching the porn, followed by the inevitable sex was enough to diffuse the earlier horror, which had had more impact than anything they’d seen or done in Afghanistan - because it had been unexpected. And because this was brother against brother and neighbour against neighbour. Not an enemy flown in from a foreign land.

They didn’t talk about it anymore, and the next day went by as if it had never happened.

25 July 1992, The Balkans

Dan was on duty, watching some politician’s back, while Vadim remained in camp, partially because he’d got a whole range of immunization shots. One thing the medical personnel amused themselves with when they were bored, he reckoned, and consequently he felt like he was fighting the onset of a flu or something. Tired, washed out, and they’d told him he should give his immune

system a day off, which he did. Not quite voluntarily, especially with Dan out in the field.

Nevertheless, sitting on his bunk or sleeping was too boring, and he didn't manage to focus on reading. So he headed over to the phones, which were unoccupied – he could make five parallel calls as everybody else was out and about – or in the Mess, which he'd given a pass today. He had a notepad and a pencil, and made a range of calls with the phone cards he'd purchased, starting with one number he remembered, and then asking for numbers he should remember but didn't. He felt detached and unreal, until he heard a female voice answer the phone.

"Katya?"

"No." The voice was petulant, annoyed that he wasn't who she'd wanted to call. He was taken aback for a moment, then smiled. "Is your mother home?"

"Who are you?"

I'm your father. Vadim smiled, shook his head. "Your mother, now."

There was an audible intake of breath, then he heard Katya's voice. "Who is it, honey?"

"He's *not* telling."

Vadim laughed, tonelessly, but covered the receiver. So petulant. She sounded just like an ordinary teenager. His leaving hadn't broken any spirits there.

"Hello?" Katya.

Vadim's grin faltered. "Hi. It's me."

There was no response, and then he heard Katya tell Anoushka to go, she was missing her lessons, then the door. A deep breath. "I'm sitting down now," Katya said. "Are you ...?"

"In trouble?"

"No. But ... yes. Are you?"

"Depends how you define trouble." Vadim put the pencil down and leaned back. "I'm in Yugoslavia. What's left of it. But it's not my kind of trouble. I'm just a mercenary here."

Hearing she wasn't going to ask or say anything, he gave a sigh. "I'm okay. I'm just a bloody coward. I meant to call you much sooner, but I just ... kept pushing it away."

"Why? Why now?"

"Plucked up my courage, thought I could face it if you told me to put down the receiver and never again call you."

"That's why you didn't tell her it's you?"

"Yes." So I can be just a mystery caller and not the father who's not talking to her. Vadim closed his eyes. He really didn't want to fuck this one up. "I'm not giving you any more trouble, Katya. I already owe you too much. I don't want to make this worse for you. I want to be ..." the man you deserved. You'd have liked to marry. "No more trouble for you."

"Don't be apologetic." Her voice was warm, like he remembered it, when they had whispered plans for the future, at night in bed, cuddled up, but chaste.

Brother and sister. "It's good to hear you're alive, I've been hoping for that, for you. That you're alive and well."

Alive yes. Are you well? He could still guess her questions. "I'm doing alright. Starting to tire of the work."

"Yes, you're not getting any younger. Poor darling." Gently admonishing, her way of being tender, sometimes. "Did you get injured? What do you look like these days? I cut my hair. I can send you a photo."

"Just older. More tanned, I guess – we spent a lot of time in Kuwait." We. He winced slightly.

"That means you're not alone?" Clever girl. As fast to riposte as she was with the lunge. Her voice made him think of a kick-lunge, when she threw the opponent with a change in rhythm. What an elegant, tricky bitch she'd been on the piste.

"No. Dan ... the man I met in Afghanistan ... he's still around."

"Oh. That's good to hear." Her voice tinged with something, but it wasn't jealousy. Maybe something like surprise, expertly hidden. "And you are happy?"

"Hmm-hm." Somewhat non-committal, but it felt strange to talk to her about it. He'd have preferred if she hadn't asked. He really wanted to keep these two things separate. "The job's a bitch, but we earn double the money. Enough to retire in a few years. Do you ... need anything?"

"No, we're fine, Vadim, thanks for asking, I appreciate that. But it's really time you look out for yourself. I'll get these kids up to be good adults, I've managed so far, I'll get them the rest of the way, too."

"I know you will." He was relieved. The kids were doing fine. He'd never have doubted that, but it was good to know it now. Katya was managing, she was doing fine. Another unbroken spirit. "You're living with Szandor still?"

"Not ... quite." There was a ringing silence for a long moment. "I'm afraid, Vadim, that Szandor is dead."

"But he was ..."

"Two years older than you, yes." Katya made a gentle sound. "It was an illness. A disease, and it went on for almost three years. In the end, it was pneumonia."

"Pneumonia? Of all things?"

"No, Vadim. He died of AIDS."

Vadim couldn't speak. Thought of Szandor, the old-fashioned gentleman that had belonged into a French fencing salon somewhere in the late eighteenth, early nineteenth century, maybe. He'd always had something dandyish about him, tall, elegant, long, strong legs made for fencing. One of the first men who'd ever kissed him. The second man to fuck him. The first man who had allowed him to fuck him. Szandor of the noble brow, the aristocratic nose, lean, deadly, drop dead gorgeous in the white dress. The same man who had a way to salute you on the piste that breathed a decadent elegance that must have made any communist fencing bureaucrat apoplectic.

He cleared his throat. "Sorry. I ... I just don't know what to say."

"It was hard on all of us," she said. "He'd have liked to meet you one last time, sorry to say that, that must seem cruel now. But he did care a great deal about you. I hope he felt I was there for him enough towards the end."

"Thank you." She'd been there, and he hadn't. Vadim rubbed his face. "Was it ... very hard?"

"It wasn't pleasant. I think you might want to come and look at the things he left for you. If you want to and find the time. I'll keep them for you, if you'd rather not."

"Let me guess ... the weapons?"

"Yes, and a box full of memorabilia. Some collector has been trying to get in touch, but I'm not selling it before you've decided what to do with it."

"Thank you." The blow resonated like a vicious hit he hadn't seen coming. And he'd only called to check on her and the kids. That Szandor was dead – that was something he could hardly grasp. AIDS. Holy fuck. His ex-lover. Courting death, until it got him. And he'd have thought being a soldier was risky – but being good-looking, gay, and easy to drag into bed was even riskier, apparently. The papers were full of people dying of the 'gay disease'. But Szandor? Of course, he hadn't been enough of a celebrity to get his own obituary anywhere where Vadim could have read it. "When did he die?"

"About ten months ago." Katya's voice was warm, mellow, tender. "During the night." She waited, but picked up that he didn't want to talk about it any more. "Is there any way I can reach you?"

"Yes. We have a postal address. I could call you ... more often."

She smiled audibly. "I'd like that very much. What about this ... you give me your postal address, and I'll send you some photos? I might even send you some of the letters I never posted. Silly me, it's a habit hard to break. I guess it was my way of keeping a diary – writing you all those long letters."

"A habit."

"Absolutely. A habit."

"I'd like that."

"Then it's sealed." Katya smiled again. "Should I tell the kids?"

"If you think that's ... the good thing to do?"

"You are still a memory in this family, Vadim. We never decided you were dead. You were just far away, but never dead."

Vadim swallowed hard, felt his eyes blur and wiped at them. "Tell the kids. I might ... come for a visit, maybe, but in the meantime, letters ... letters would be good."

"You'll live to regret that, Vadim Petrovich," she joked, "There are so many letters waiting for you."

He thought it was banter. But she did speak the truth. He did live to regret that.

6 August 1992, The Balkans

They were glued to the television set. The Mess TV room was crowded, and deadly silent. Silent except for the voice of the presenter, talking about a camp that had been declared by the paramilitary as a prisoner of war camp, and was a kick in the face of the Geneva Convention and the International Committee of the Red Cross - and a place of terror to all inside.

“The men are at various stages of human decay and affliction; the bones of their elbows and wrists protrude like pieces of jagged stone from the pencil thin stalks to which their arms have been reduced.”

Dan was pulling nicotine into his lungs, watching the pictures that did not hit him as much as some of the others - not after what he'd seen in his life - but which clenched his guts once more, the helpless rage returning, and with it the realisation he was human after all.

“There is nothing quite like the sight of the prisoners desperate to talk,” the presenter went on, “and to convey some terrible truth that is so near yet so far, but who dares not.” Images now flickering across the screen that were unlike anything any of the men had ever witnessed. Including Dan and Vadim, and Dan tensed in his seat. Metal crates, stacked on top of each others, and prisoners existing in hundreds in their own filth, which ran through the metal grids and dripped on skeletal bodies with vacant stares.

“Their stares burn, they speak only with their terrified silence, and eyes inflamed with the articulation of stark, undiluted, desolate fear-without-hope.” The reporter trailed off and let the images speak for themselves before carefully selected prisoners were allowed to talk - and yet didn't. They didn't need to, though, it was all too clear. This was no war. This was systematic killing, terrorising and torture.

Dan suddenly snapped, the sound of his fist hitting the armrest of his chair a sudden explosion in the silence. “Fuck!” Jumping up. “Fuck that!” When he stormed out with the air of frustration and utter, *helpless* rage around him, many eyes followed. They all knew what he'd been thinking and what he hadn't said, nor asked: why the fuck was no one doing anything about this?

Vadim was right behind, swallowing empty bile that kept rising in his throat. He'd grown up with images like that. The Glorious Soviet Army liberating the Nazi death camps. Very hard to resist the parallel, even though the Serbs had been the Brother Nation, and that alone made him angry, that these men had been allies, brothers, had a similar culture, a similar image of themselves. Slavs. But he couldn't even utter these thoughts anywhere here, where a Russian name conjured up the wrong ideas, even though people accepted he was on their side and for all intents and purposes a Brit. Only that he wasn't.

He reached for Dan's neck, pulled him close, in the middle of camp. “Dan.”

“Fuck!” Dan was fuming, but the burning fire in his eyes had no outlet. “What the *fuck* is anyone doing about this? Why the fucking fuck does everyone sit here, unable to do any-fucking-thing?” Taking a breath that didn't reach his

lungs. “Damn!” He was shaking with frustration. “I want them to give me some fucking orders to go out there!”

“We don’t need orders.” Vadim’s words were cold, fully rational. “We’re made for this kind of war, Dan. We’ve done it all our lives. We can give them a piece of hell *back*.”

“What are you talking about?” Dan stared at Vadim, fists clenched.

Vadim opened his lips, then closed them, frowning, instead used more strength to hold Dan, trying to convey the meaning without words. Let’s go. Let’s kill them. Kill them all.

Dan stared at him for a long time, until he finally shook his head. Lowering his voice, aware they were in the middle of camp. “That’s vigilantism, Vadim. We’ve been soldiers ...” not killers, he wanted to say, but it got stuck in his throat. “We can’t do that.”

I’m a soldier. Words that, once upon a time, had saved his life. Vadim’s face twitched and he looked towards the camp gate. It would be so easy. Operating behind enemy lines. Not with those kids, but alone. Wolves. Hunting. He shook his head, rested his forehead against Dan’s. “Maybe we should leave,” he murmured. “We’re wasting our time here. They don’t let us off the leash.”

“But what are we going to do if we leave?” Dan murmured. “We haven’t got enough money yet for the farm. But ... if that’s what you want, shit, I’d leave. This place is ...” He trailed off, shaking his head.

Vadim moved closer, embracing him, holding him close and tight, not caring for a moment if anybody saw it and what they were thinking. Dan was right. They couldn’t just walk out of the job. “If it’s too ... much shit for you, Dan, we go. Okay? We find some other place. Somewhere where we can actually do some proper work.” Whatever that was.

“No, I’m okay.” Dan grimaced. “What about you?”

“As long as I have you, I manage. Whatever. Anything.” Vadim ran his fingers through Dan’s hair, kept holding him like that, tried to fuse their strength, Dan’s with his, his own with Dan’s. Hard steel, soft steel. Combined, they were a weapon to behold.

Dan smiled, didn’t think about anything else that moment than Vadim, and how they’d been the lucky ones so far - despite everything.

11 September 1992, The Balkans

The letters came. It was a brown padded envelope, and it was full and heavy with paper. Vadim took it with him to their room, sat down on the bed and reached inside, making sure he’d get the whole lot in one hand. He didn’t want it to spill over, then put the envelope to the side. Letters, individually sealed and dated, like she did, so he knew in which order to read. Laid out much like chapters in a book, ordered, with their own internal logic that he could only grasp when he followed the rules. Her neat handwriting. He checked the dates. One every few months. Twelve months ago, one every week. Szandor’s dying

and death. Vadim swallowed hard, wasn't sure he wanted to confront that, didn't know whether to follow the rule or leave those out that he knew were bad.

He sorted the letters on one pile, ordered by date. Old ones on top, new ones below. The photos showed the kids. Fourteen and twelve years old. Anoushka was growing up to be a beautiful girl, just like she had been beautiful as a child, even as a baby. Silvery blond hair, fair, pure complexion, teeth white and straight. The very image of health, and he smiled when he saw a semi-formed frown that made her face darker than it should be. One photo showed Anoushka, flushed and victorious in fencer's kit. The second and third 'winners' framed her, and Vadim could see that they were positively intimidated still. Or maybe they had just been soundly beaten – or he was imagining things. He knew for sure that Katya wouldn't have sent the photo if Anoushka hadn't won. A family of winners, at all costs. It would certainly build her character, he thought, especially dealing with setbacks and superior forces. At that age, it did no harm to feel invincible. Quite the opposite.

Nikolai. He looked so much like his father that it was painful. The shattered body of a pilot, smashed against Afghan rocks. Disfigured, dismembered by wild dogs, both humans and animals.

A certain sweetness about him, deep thoughts, a withdrawn boy, lanky and clearly not at peace with himself, or anybody else. Vulnerable. Vadim tried to divine what he was like. His father had had an infectious, open laugh, the easy charm of a pilot, removed from the dirty war below, a rider on the flying steed, coming in to punish and rescue. Nikolai had nothing of that, he seemed honest, but not open, and he, too, would be growing up to be attractive, if very differently from Anoushka. She'd break hearts, he might just mend them. But there was little else. Nikolai clearly didn't like to be photographed.

Vadim placed the photos back into the envelope. He couldn't carry any of those with him, that would look funny, and, besides, in Yugoslavia, he didn't want them that close. And he could hardly pin them to the wall, either. It just didn't feel right. He didn't want to remind Dan of the time Before. In a way, this was a new life, keeping visible tokens of a past – that was a parallel present – didn't feel right. Maybe one day. Maybe it was easier not to be reminded every single day. He didn't see any photos of her, though. Maybe she had sent it right away and didn't have any photos on hand that showed her with the new haircut. That would be very Katya.

He looked at the pile of letters. That would be the hard work. Part of him feared it. It took him forever to read, and often enough he didn't grasp any of the meaning at all and had to read a simple text several times. These letters had meant so much. His protection, his connection, the reminder that there was a world that was not Afghanistan. Wasn't madness and heat and the insane need to take, plunder, destroy. Humanity could be letters. Vadim groaned and got up. He'd take this slow. Be careful. Her letters always had an effect, he'd have to be careful with the dosage.

23 September 1992, The Balkans

Dan was standing outside in one of the few relatively dark corners that weren't awash with the constant floodlights. The night was blissfully cool, and he leaned against the outside wall of the accommodation block, smoking. Yet there was nothing tranquil about it, nothing at all, because the sounds in the night were everything but peaceful.

He shook his head, as if to clear his ears and mind, but the sounds were still there, and would haunt him throughout the night. In his dreams, during waking hours. He wasn't the only one affected, he knew that, and he nodded to one of the British soldiers who walked past and whose facial expression was as clouded and angry as his body language was tense. They'd all suffered the sounds - and the helplessness.

Dan looked up when a shadow darkened the corner of his eyes, and he smiled at Vadim, but the smile never reached his eyes. "Guess it's better to watch a video, aye?" Stubbing out the fag as he turned towards Vadim, "and make sure it's loud."

When they walked inside, the screams of the girls and women were still echoing in his mind, and his fist remained clenched for a long time to come.

17 October 1992, The Balkans

"Hey, Mad Dog!" One of the guys was calling out from the admin block, cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

"Aye?" Dan stopped walking, had been in the process of rubbing the remains of his fried breakfast off his sweater, eyeing the egg yolk with distaste. "What's up?"

"Letter for you." The chap was waving a brown, battered looking A4 envelope.

Curiosity piqued, Dan gave up on the egg and turned 90 degrees to march up to the admin HQ instead. "Can only be from my brother." He shrugged, reaching for the envelope.

"Don't think so," Blowing cigarette smoke in Dan's face, the guy dropped the letter into waiting hands, "funny stamps."

"Trust you bitches to snoop around." Pulling lips back from his teeth, Dan mock-snarled.

"Don't get your heckles up, diva." The guy laughed, rolled his eyes and spat the end of the fag to the ground, "that weird-arse stamp is too obvious even for you lot."

Dan made a rude gesture in front of his groin. "Wanker." Half-heartedly. He liked the admin guys, and the continuous banter between 'fags' and lower end of HQ had established itself like a comfortable custom.

"Not that funny anyway, it's ..." Dan turned the envelope, peering at the stamp, he could make out a bird and its nest, which looked like an eagle, but

also the word 'Magyar Posta'. He shook his head, snorting. "Bullshit, that's a stamp from Hungary. It's for Vadim. You lot are such dickheads you got it wrong again. Do I look like a Russian hunk?"

The guy was fishing for another fag, couldn't get the cigarette fast enough out of the packet when Dan had already snatched it, under no more than eye-rolling protest. "No, but like an aging pimp."

"Arschhole."

"With pleasure."

"Lighter?"

The guy lit Dan's cigarette after lighting his own. "It's your name on the envelope, mate, despite what you're going to tell me in a second, yes, I do know how to read and write."

"Yeah, whatever." Dan took a deep drag, keeping the smoke in his lungs until he spotted the tell-tale blond head turn round the corner, straight out of the Mess.

"Hey, Vadim!" Calling out and waving the envelope, before he'd even looked at it properly. "Got a letter for you."

Dan could see that Vadim would rather have gone straight to the toilet blocks, but he approached anyway, nodding at the admin guy who seemed to suddenly have something important to do, retreating back into the low building, leaving Dan and Vadim alone.

"For you." Dan handed the envelope over, but it took less than a glance for Vadim to hand it straight back.

"Your name."

"Huh?" Fag secured in the corner of his mouth, Dan finally took a proper look. His name, no doubt. Daniel McFadyen. Dan frowned. 'Daniel'? Who the fuck ... and Hungary? The frown deepened, he knew only one person in Hungary, and that couldn't be. He hadn't heard from the bitch since January 1990, no reason why now. "Makes no sense."

Looking at Vadim, who shrugged, Dan wiped his nose with his sleeve, skilfully avoiding the burning cigarette. Autumn was getting cold in the Balkans and his nose kept running. "Okay, let's see, then." Turning the letter in his hands, "no sender. Ach well, only one way to find out."

Dan ripped the letter open, but his finger slipped and he tore most of the envelope in two, scattering a few pieces onto the ground. "Shit." Mumbled, they both knelt down to catch the three pieces of paper before they got blown into a puddle. One white, two ...

"What the fuck?" Dan picked up what seemed like a very short letter and one photo, the second photo ended in Vadim's hand. Standing back up, Dan stared at the photo, uncomprehending. A girl. A toddler, no more than possibly two. He had no clue. Grinning impishly into the camera with her dark hair wild and loose, in long curls, with dark eyes and a few freckles on her nose.

"What ...? Who ...?" Dan stared, turned the photo, another angle, but always the same face and same grin, shook his head again. "Who the fuck?" He

felt his hand slapped, the one that held the letter, reminding him of its existence. Casting his eyes over the few lines, he froze.

Mr McFadyen,

I think it's only proper to inform you about my daughter Kisa. She is a healthy, happy child with a temper that appears altogether un-Russian. These were taken on her second birthday on 13 September, a bright day for all. You can see her presents and a friend in the background. I am not sure how much of an interest you take in this, without whom this would not have been possible. I will keep you updated, just in case you do.

Kind regards

Katarina

“Oh fuck.” That was all. Frozen with shock. “Fuck.”

Vadim frowned, looked at the photo. Katya sending this to Dan? But realization hit him like a sniper's bullet. Heavy calibre, right to the brain. Immediately shutting him down, off, and he knew in all clarity what had happened. Katya. And. Dan.

“You bastard,” Vadim snarled, the anger so pure, so red-hot, so *darkly pleasant*, something that burned everything else away, something strong and hot and all-consuming. Rage. His fist went right into Dan's face, who didn't have much time to react, taken by surprise. Elbow following as Vadim went close quarters, knowing instinctively his bulk and strength were his advantages. Had always been.

Dan lost balance, pain exploding in his face, chest, and he lost his grip on photo and letter. Stumbling backwards, too shocked, too surprised at the violence. Grunts of pain, unable to think, understand, nothing at all. Reactions delayed, never got his defence up fully, he crashed to the ground, on his back, below Vadim.

Lying bastard. Lying cheating fucking bastard. Vadim's mind was empty, there was no horror that this was Dan, and what he was doing to him – punching and kicking him like his worst enemy – no reasoning beyond the feeling he'd been massively and unforgivably betrayed.

Dan shouted Vadim's name, once, twice, and then nothing but groans when his survival sense kicked in, but too late, he could do nothing but protect himself best he could. Getting in the odd punch or kick of his own, but his defence had been weakened from the start, and his mind was reeling, unable to find one clear thought, while his body could not grasp what was happening to it, could only rely on the most basic instincts of fighting to survive.

The ruckus alerted a team of other mercs who came running and it took five men to pull Vadim off Dan, and even they struggled. The frustration in camp often gave way to violence, so people reacted immediately, and once Vadim knew he was bested, he stopped and got to his feet. Several guys now between

him and Dan, who'd scrambled to his feet, refusing help. Face bleeding, bruised, dark eyes betraying the shock that had rendered him numb, incapable of reacting. No feeling. No understanding. Just pain. Body ... his mind hadn't grasped the full extent of terror yet.

Vadim stared at Dan, rage still burning in him, his knuckles hurt, the anger pounded like a red flood against his throat.

"Vadim! Fuck!" Dan managed, tried once more, emotions in such disarray, not a thought left. No sense of reality. A bad dream, a nightmare in broad daylight. This couldn't ... didn't Ignoring the men around him. The stares, the questions. He had no answers.

Vadim switched to Russian, immediately, code reasons and all that, breathing so hard it took him several moments to put together syllables and words. "You bastard fucked my wife!" he snarled, noticed his error, "Ex-wife, whatever! You bastard did it!"

Dan jerked, as if he'd received another punch. Fuck, since when had he turned into a victim? Since his goddamned world had collapsed and become a nightmare, a few minutes ago. "You don't understand!" Wiping blood out of his eye, spitting blood onto the ground. Russian, too, the switch came without thinking. "Listen to me!"

"There's nothing to understand. You fucked my wife, while I was fucking dying. And you thought I wouldn't find out? Fuck you." The betrayal was worse. Both. It wasn't just jealousy, he could deal with that, he'd proven that over and over. It was the fact it was Katya, his past, his children, and Dan had just broken into that world and ... fucked around with it. His world, his anchor, at least back then. And that Dan had become one of Katya's men – that was even worse. Again, sharing. His lover and his wife, and now this. A child. As if to mock him and remind him he'd never been much of a husband, not much of a father, not even much of a lover. Katya had taken something that had been his, alone, his, and the barrier between old life and new life had been torn down and created ... what? Pain.

Mouth open, Dan paled beneath tan and smears of blood. *You fucked my wife.* No sound came out, as an ice cold fist slammed into his guts. *While I was dying.* I know. I remember. And it killed me, too. He stood frozen on the spot, no more words, no attempts. She'd done it. She'd won. He felt so sick he wanted to throw up, and it wasn't because of the kicks and punches.

Vadim hadn't given him a chance.

"Leave me the fuck alone," Vadim roared, unable to contain that pain, and he forced his way through the other mercenaries who tried to hold him back, but he would have none of that.

Dan didn't move. No reaching out, no calling Vadim's name. Nothing. *You fucked my wife.* He shuddered, stared at Vadim running away. No chance. No questions. No chance for explanations. Believing he'd done it. Betrayed him. Expected the worst, convinced he was a traitor. Twelve years ... and nothing.

No chance.

He shook his head violently when some of his mates tried to talk to him, and pushed them away when they grabbed hold of his arms. Didn't want to hear them, no voices, no well-meant taking him to the medic to patch him up. No queries, couldn't bear it. Just alone. *Leave me the fuck alone.* He could do that. Mind reeling, world shattered, and Vadim believed he was a traitor. She'd won. He hoped she would rot in a hell he didn't believe in.

He looked around on the ground, gathered the letter, muddy and torn, then found the photos. Dirty, crumpled, and he straightened them, wiped the specks of blood off the kid's face with his sleeve. Still in the front of the admin block, the mercs and soldiers were starting to scatter, when he ignored each of them.

Staring at the picture of the girl, he couldn't grasp what he saw. A child. Laughing. Dark hair, dark eyes. A girl. The kid that had destroyed his world.

He hated the mother. Hated that bitch with more fervour than he'd ever hated anyone. Even Vadim. Back when ... no. Not going there.

He hated the bitch but he could not hate the kid.

His daughter.

* * *

Vadim received a major dressing down just two hours later. The CO, his own nerves clearly frayed by the images of a reality outside that none of the soldiers could actually deal with, coldly told him his punishment, after he'd asked whether Vadim had, in fact, without provocation, attacked a fellow soldier. A fellow soldier. The word the CO did not use was 'partner', or 'lover', but Vadim knew exactly what he was thinking. That their kind of bond could only lead to this kind of quarrel. That two gay soldiers would always turn against each other, and be not only a nuisance, but a liability. Not professional. Emotions had no space in places like these, least of all two faggots punching each other up.

Vadim took the pay cut stoically. He was really expecting, hoping, to be kicked out. Only so he could go outside. And. Do. Something. He had nothing left to lose, nothing but the pain. He remembered he'd been in that kind of mindset before, one hundred percent soldier, zero percent human. He knew how effective he could be. What a force. And there'd always been something that had held him back. Doubts. A family. A man he'd meet as a lover. Very rarely had these been there and not impeded him – when they had paled, or he'd been so tired that he couldn't feel them, but right now, they were gone. Now all that baggage had fallen off him, he was free to do whatever he pleased. And that gave him a sense of purpose, cut loose the chain that had grown into his flesh so deep he'd really believed it was part of him. It wasn't. He was free.

He acted properly repentant, which meant he kept silent, didn't protest, just accepted that bastard telling him he'd expected him to be more professional and he'd hoped that would be the last time.

Vadim saluted, and went back to his room. Their room. Pushed the beds back to where they'd been at the start, took the envelope with letters and photos, his own beginnings of letters he'd never finished, and burned the lot

outside, where nobody could watch. Let it go up in smoke, Szandor's death, the stories from school of his kids, the local fencing association stories. It was soon gone. The last of the photos that browned and crumbled to ashes was a photo of his other cuckoo's child, Nikolai, whose withdrawn, sceptical and soft face seemed to say: I knew it wouldn't last, so I didn't smile at you.

* * *

When Dan finally returned to the room - since he had nowhere else to go - he'd been cleaned up. The dark bruises vivid in his face, and the split at his brow kept together with butterfly strips. He froze when he opened the door. The beds - pushed apart. He'd have thought he was prepared for anything by now, but the sight slammed into his guts like another fist.

Vadim was sitting on a chair, polishing the boots, cleaning his whole kit, it smelled of boot polish, soap, and metal. While it was a ritual, part of everyday duty, Vadim was fully focused on the task, didn't look up, just worked through the leather of the boots to keep them waterproof and in fighting condition. Precious little else they could do. Aching inside, though, it fucking hurt, but he was good at keeping a straight face, just pretended the muscles in his face were not connected to anything else.

Dan's mouth opened, old habit, but no sound came out. No word of greeting. Everything he might have wanted to say was silenced by *traitor*, *liar*, and *no chance*. He walked over to the bed that he assumed was 'his', and the fist in his guts was churning his insides. Beds. Not bed. One bitch had destroyed that and he couldn't see a way out. Too hurt to try and explain, too proud to talk, and too shattered inside.

He turned his back to Vadim, carefully placing the photos amongst his kit. He'd destroyed the letter. Nothing in there he wanted to ever see again. Not the bitch's writing, not her words. September thirteen was all he needed to know, and Kisa. 'Kitten'. Lapushka. How fucking ironic if it didn't hurt so much. Taking his muddy and bloodied clothes off, he reached for towel and soap bag. He needed a shower, had to ease the soreness and ache and had to try to wash away what could never be cleansed. *No chance*. After twelve years. Assuming the worst and proving that no matter what, the ex-wife, the *bitch*, was more important than him. She'd won. Well and truly, at last.

He was out of the door without a sound.

Vadim looked up when Dan was gone. Being in the same room was hard. He didn't want to see him, hear him, smell him, ever again feel him. Stupid fucking need. Sex. Men made themselves fools for sex. Gave up their honour. Gave up everything. He shook his head, stowed away the kit. He'd have to arrange something, so he took a wad of money and went to the NCO who planned the shifts. The staff sergeant had already heard the story, and it didn't take much convincing to be put on opposite shifts. Vadim was fairly sure the man had no idea how serious it was - he played along to "give both of them space," as he called it, and Vadim took the boon that came for free. It was

understood he owed him, but that was fine. As long as they would spend as little time in the same area as possible. Bad enough he couldn't ask for different accommodation, but he left that move to Dan. Dan was the man who made friends and who found other lovers, like Jean. Tough luck, no Jean in sight in Yugoslavia.

When Dan returned to the room Vadim was out. Better that way, it hurt less. Mind numb, he couldn't get one single coherent thought, let alone string several together. All of this had to be a nightmare, couldn't be true, utterly impossible that Vadim would have done that, would have condemned him like that. Like trash. Worth nothing. Twelve years just gone.

He dressed, had to somehow get ready for nightshift. A couple more nights of that, how the fuck was he going to function though? Beside Vadim? But even on his own, how was he going to keep himself from getting killed, because he just couldn't focus? Damn. He was a soldier, still. Mercenary, PMC, whatever. He was still a professional. And if he got killed ... right now, what did it matter? Wouldn't make things worse. Perhaps in the light of the morning, but at the moment, it seemed a damn viable option, and he didn't care.

Managing to get some food down, Dan smoked fag after fag, popped a couple of painkillers the medic had pushed into his hand, and then it was time to get kitted out and back onto shift. But when he got into the Landrover, one of the other mercs was standing there, claiming he had taken over the shift and that Dan had been put onto permanent night shift. Dan just nodded, didn't ask questions, didn't complain, didn't give a damn. Figured it was easier to work with anyone but Vadim, and existing at different times without seeing each other.

That night, he hardly talked and he did his job. No more, no less.

* * *

Vadim found a new rhythm, a faster rhythm. Doing his duty, he was silent, the type that did the job by the book. There was no sign of fraying about him, and people seemed to believe that. Running security, showing weapons, guarding compounds, watching the blue berets do nothing but show off their pristine uniforms below haunted eyes. Vadim wasn't haunted. He was possessed.

The area around them swarmed with irregulars. The same men who killed and murdered and raped and tortured, living like wild dogs off the land, feeding on human flesh and blood. Breaking the soul of a people, shattering a land so it would never grow together again. They feared nothing. They ruled the land by force of arms, by force of brutality, and that reinforced their fearlessness. The feral dogs feared nothing.

Vadim wore black camo on his hunting expeditions. He went to bed like anybody expected, waited for the camp to calm down and Dan to leave, then got dressed again. A boring, pointless day gave way to the thrill of the hunt when he put on the unmarked black camo, ammunition, knife, garrote, gloves, something deadly or useful in every pocket. Getting out of camp was easy

enough – he knew the routines, he was an insider. Any insider can fool the system. He'd fooled the Soviet Army for years, deep in enemy territory. This wasn't so different, now.

He followed the noise they made, waited in the dark for them to fall asleep. Took out their guards, then killed the sleeping men. For I have become death, the destroyer of worlds, he thought, smiling, after he had done the work. Killing sleeping men was easy. Just the finale to the stalking, the watching, fanning the flame of anger inside and getting ready. Feeling alive inside while he hunted, and calm, focused, centred, after it was over.

He returned to camp past midnight, slept for four or five hours, then did his day shift. He couldn't go out hunting every night, but he made it a priority to go out at least twice a week. Leaving bodies behind when he'd found peace.

November/December 1992, The Balkans

Dan figured the building had been a school or similar once – shelled until half of it had collapsed, and what remained standing didn't inspire confidence in the structure. He picked his way through the rubble carefully and as quietly as possible, finding relatively easy access once the rubble was left behind. That's when he slowed down, turning into stealth mode, all senses honed. The air still tasted of dust and he could sense Vadim close.

The cellar was still intact in one wing of the building, and that was where Vadim had been heading. There was a room that might have been a boiler room before the war, and Dan crouched behind a steel girder, the moment he saw a small light. Too insignificant to be seen from the outside, a tea light. There was a sleeping mat close by, a woollen blanket, and a man with his hands chained to one of the massive boilers. The light barely touched his face, he appeared worn, dusty, but above all, cold, forced into hardly moving.

Another man was crouched next to him, and Dan's eyes narrowed. That man was Vadim.

Vadim was feeding the man on the ground, canned meat and dry biscuits, and then water from his own bottle. The lying man ate everything Vadim gave him, clearly hungry, or just simply not protesting much, or resigned and knowing he'd need to preserve his strength. They didn't speak, but there was an odd sense of understanding between them.

The man moved his hand to indicate he'd drunk enough, and Vadim closed the bottle and put it down, then checked on the wrists, all in a perfectly calm, businesslike manner. Like keeping prisoners was perfectly normal.

"You okay?" Vadim asked, his hand now resting on the man's shoulder, then moved a few inches to his chest. He was speaking Russian.

The other man looked up, met Vadim's gaze, there was the beginning of a smile or grin, or similar dismissive notion, but then he pressed his lips together. "Let me go."

Vadim frowned, thoughtfully, hand moving across the man's chest, as if checking the pockets of his vest for hidden, illicit goods. "Anything else?" When no answer came, he shifted, packed the remainder of the food and the wrappers back into his bergan, silently watched by the other man.

"When do you plan to be back?" asked the captive.

"I don't know. Not long."

The captive shook his head. "Fuck you. You'll leave me here, right? Like this? Like the other days?"

"Nights. Too dangerous in the light."

"Fuck you."

"Yes. Fuck me." Vadim's hand ran up to the captive's face, his neck, searching, testing, but there was no response that Dan could see, then down

towards his navel. Without a word, with no further comment or question, Vadim suddenly rolled on top of the other man, whose hands formed fists in the handcuffs, breath growing laboured under Vadim's weight.

Dan remained frozen, even if he could make a sound, he wouldn't be able to. Staring at the two men, seeing ... what? Some kind of rape? What the fuck made it 'rape' anyway, but a set of chains and manacles was a damn convincing indicator for 'unwilling'.

Vadim was moving on top, hands on the other's ragtag uniform, pulling his vest free, baring skin, pulling flies open and apart, grunting with forceful grinding motions that made the captive's neck and throat tense visibly in the sparse light. A flash of skin, the scent of sex, Vadim grinding against the other's body, cock against cock, until he came, and remained on top for a while longer. Working against the other's motions, who arched, both hands clenching around the chain, so hard his veins stood out visibly. His groans tortured, losing, after his freedom, the control of his own body.

Vadim rolled off, leaving the panting man, put both sets of camo back in order, after using the scarf to clean himself and the other. "Sleep. Time passes quicker, then."

"Fuck you."

"Tomorrow. Five or six hours." Vadim stood, shouldering his bergan.

Dan felt bile rise in his throat as he watched Vadim disappear, pressing his body further against the girder, blending with the shadows.

Then Vadim was gone, and he was left breathing. Against the nausea and against the urge to run after him and kick the shit out of the bastard, hurting him until he bled, to make him talk, explain, any-fucking-thing, just as long as it took those images and thoughts away.

The lying man had turned his head, staring at the flame of the tea light, eyes catching the light. They seemed dark, mottled, and the dusty, tired face was as far removed from peace as was possible. Not resigned, just tired, and focusing on the flame. Knowing that the light would be gone in mere hours.

Dan waited a while longer, most of all to ensure Vadim would not return, not now, or he'd follow his urge all too efficiently. He finally took one deep breath, before stealthily crawling back the way he'd come. It would be no good to let the man - whoever he was - know that he'd been witnessing the scene. Once sufficiently far away, he turned again, this time picking his way through the rubble like a man who was cautious, but not overly worried about making a sound. He didn't have a plan yet, but he'd be fucked if he wasn't going to do *something*. Barge ahead, and think later.

The candle light vanished. A mere breath, the captive's body twisting, and the light was out.

Dan stopped, reached for his torchlight, and shone it around, as if he didn't know that someone was there. Randomly shining into corners and along walls. "Anybody in there?" Calling out in his broadest Scottish accent. No way he was going to be mistaken for anything but a Brit. Carefully taking a few further

steps, avoiding tripping over the rubble, He knew he was getting closer, but deliberately walked a few steps away. "Hello?"

Not a sound. Not a breath, not a scrape of chain against boiler metal, no shifting of a body. Dead silence.

Dan glanced to the side where he knew the prisoner was, allowing the torch to glide over the still body. Stopping, light and man, and he turned, shining the beam of brightness right onto the still lump. "Hello there, you Okay? You understand me?" Not quite naïve, certainly not trusting, least of all when he slipped a weapon out of its holster into his hand, but acting well enough. Moving cautiously closer, until he looked down, but could not be reached by a suddenly flailing arm. "Hey!"

The man's eyes opened. He might have preferred to be thought of as a corpse, but he squinted against the light, shadowing his face with his elbow. Hands still around the chain to suppress every sound of the metal. Face blank, trying to make out the eyes of his 'visitor'. Nodding, blinking like he'd been roused from sleep. "Are you British?" he asked, his English coloured with Russian. Not that most non-native speakers would be able to tell the difference between a Russian speaking English with a Russian accent and a Serb speaking English.

"Aye," Dan nodded, shielding the light away from the man's eyes. "What the fuck are you doing here? I'm going through all the buildings that are still more or less standing. Fucking boring task checking the ruins, and then bingo! There really is someone lying here. You sleeping rough? And who the fuck are you?" Sticking to his not yet existing plan, but whatever it was, there was no way he'd let on that he had anything to do with Vadim.

The man stared at him, then slowly nodded, as if understanding. "I'm trapped," he said, glancing at his hands. "Are you a mercenary? Somebody's bodyguard, perhaps? Or a journalist?" The man attempted a smile, somewhat sheepish. "Can you get the cuffs off?"

"Trapped?" Dan played as dumb as he could without looking unconvincing. Shining the light onto the chains, he let his eyes grow wide in surprise. "You're chained up, who did that?"

"I don't know. They didn't introduce themselves," said the man, maybe now slowly beginning to hope he might be set free. But cautious, watching every movement, and the gun. Shifting to lie on his side, peering up at Dan. "Are you a mercenary? British?"

"Aye." Dan nodded, put the gun away, making sure the other saw his movements. "I'm one of the mercenaries in the camp nearby." Getting to his knees, he put the torch onto the ground so it provided sufficient light, then patted the man down, as if checking for injuries. There were no open wounds, just the cold skin of having been in the low temperatures for too long, days, maybe. He smelled of sex, the lingering scent of Vadim still on him, and Dan paused, staying far too long, before he let go of the man.

"I'm alright. I'm not wounded. But I'm slightly dehydrated, and I should get out of the cold," the man gave a rational summary.

“Could you make out who caught you? There must be a reason why you are chained up?”

“I don’t know. I honestly have no idea. I’ve been here for days, I don’t know. Set me free, yes?” Indicating the handcuffs again. “I kept thinking the building would come down and bury me alive.” Smoothly said, but there was something in the man’s eyes that told Dan that indeed, that had been one of the lingering thoughts during his captivity.

“Aye.” Dan nodded, looking around, “but you don’t seem to be in too bad a condition. They fed you alright?” His hand came back down onto the man’s chest. “By the way, I am Dan. Who are you?” Figuring that there was no way Vadim would have mentioned his name.

Hesitating, the man looked at Dan’s hand on his chest. He was wearing a mix of various uniforms, some Russian, some from somewhere else, some civilian survival kit. No dog tag. “Dima.” Choosing the nickname of Dmitri. “Friends call me Dima.” Glancing up, as if asking Are you a friend? His eyes appeared dark green, with brown in them. He was roughly Vadim’s age, the dust made his features appear older, washed out. “Let me go, please.”

“I don’t even know who the fuck you are.” Dan left his hand on the chest, if anything, applying more pressure, as he leaned down. Too close, far too close to those strangely speckled eyes, but feeling strength under his hand. The whole man resisted, tightened, eyes narrowing.

“You could be a chetnik, Dima, and the moment I turn round, you blast a bullet into my back.” He was metaphorically speaking, he saw no weapons near. “Why the hell would anyone chain anyone else up, keeping them fed and watered and a candle nearby, and a couple of blankets.” He lowered even more, face to face, with barely a hand’s breadth in between. “You tell me, aye?” Murmured, but he flashed a grin after that, his sunniest one, which almost touched his eyes.

Dima stared at him, and every piece of that harmless veneer vanished from him. His hands tightened again around the chains and he met the gaze, full on, not a challenge, but stubborn resistance. “If I was chetnik, the kidnapper would have killed me. If they were mercs. If I wasn’t, and I was kidnapped by chetniks, I’d be dead, too. I’m a mercenary, too. Not a chetnik. I’m not a Serb.”

“Then who captured and kept you?”

“I told you, I don’t know. Could be your side. Could be chetniks. Could be anything.” He kept his eyes on Dan’s.

Dan smiled, sunny again, teeth and all, but he dropped the pretence for a second. “And why does it smell of cum around here? Wanking with hands chained to a boiler seems damn difficult to me.” The grin was back in place immediately. “Or are we talking a great big kinky feast, here? In the middle of shitty Yugo-land?” And maybe, just maybe, what he had seen had been a game and not real. But Vadim ... what had changed him back? Dan’s dark eyes suddenly became hard and cold, the moment he thought of the bitch and how she’d destroyed everything, even from afar.

Dima stared at him, paler now under the dust. "Seems there was some kind of sexual encounter, then. Why? You interested?" He was tense, taut, hating every second of being helpless and Dan clearly not a friend.

Dan stalled for a moment, looking down into those strange eyes, until he finally pulled his lips from his teeth in an entirely humourless grin. "I might be the camp faggot, but I don't 'do' prisoners. Especially not if they are someone else's." He let go of the other and moved back, away from the light and out of the vicinity.

Dima's eyes stayed on him, not a muscle in his face had moved at the 'faggot', clearly focusing on Dan, every move potentially threatening. "Where are you going?"

"What, you worried about being left alone?" Dan's voice disembodied in the gloom.

"Fuck you," Dima murmured in Russian, more to himself. "No, why should I? I can feed myself, I can piss and shit in a hygienic manner, I have drunk so much water the last days I can last a week, and I enjoy lying in a shelled building that makes strange sounds every now and then. Nice and cosy and warm here, my socks are clean and fresh, my feet dry and snug. I can do my job and I'm not bored. You fucking joker."

"Then what is your job?" Dan hadn't moved, no sound in the rubble.

"I'm a merc. Speciality medic." Dima huffed. "Which, translated, means I know how a body looks that had a house fall on it. I am also fairly aware of exposure, and, of course, I know starvation and dehydration."

Dan let out a snort and turned back into the light, studying the man on the ground, who met the gaze, looked at him past his elbow that half-shielded his face – probably to give a measure of protection. "Despite being that perceptive, you still trying to tell me that you have no idea who captured you and then ... used you?"

"He's a merc, too. No allegiance. Or rather ... British." Something made Dima's voice sound thick and almost emotional and Dan's eyes flashed for an unguarded second before he had himself under control again. "He's one of yours, then. Happy now? He keeps me here and alive, but that's it. If he gets shot out there, I'm fucked – terminally. So, yeah, whatever. Fuck me, kill me, leave me. You're just here to gloat or interrogate me. So, go ahead, kick me around a bit. Teach me you mean it. Break a rib or two. It's not much I can do about it. If you think I'm a chetnik, I deserve that, right?"

"You're Russian." Dan said, suddenly switching into Russian, while ignoring anything the man had said, "which makes me wonder why the fuck you are here. Don't tell me you had the orders?" Still speaking fluent Russian, getting faster with every word.

Dima frowned darkly, not used to be addressed in his own language like that. "I'm not cleared to tell you that. Remember? Soldiers are not supposed to give anything away that isn't their name and number."

“Aye,” Dan switched into English, “but I’m not bound to any codes anymore.” Back the next moment to Russian, “unlike the days in Afghanistan.” Watching the man’s face very closely.

“Good shot. You think I was one of the ‘lost generation?’” Dima looked pointedly at his hands. “I’m old enough, yes.”

“I think you might be.” Dan nodded, “and that might be how you know that ‘British’ merc of yours.” He shrugged, still sticking to Russian, it felt strangely good to use the language again. Fierce and primal, a reminder of times worse and better and entirely straightforward. Enemies. Lovers. Dust and pain and lust and love.

“As in, I patched him up near Salang Pass one fine, dusty afternoon?” Dima grinned, sharp, white, flawless teeth, if not for two eye teeth that were crooked.

“No, not quite.”

“Listen, you don’t get a word from me unless you’ve untied me. Simple. You want information, I want my freedom. You either give this to me, or you break the words out of me. I’m gambling. You probably have the stomach to do that, but just telling you what you want to know without getting anything out of it for me is shit. Do you agree?”

Dan laughed without humour, and yet the sound was dark and strangely enticing. “I’m ex-SAS, mate.” Switching back to English, “I have the stomach for a hell of a lot of things, including carving ‘cunt’ into the back of that captor of yours.” He shifted his weight, leaving free range for his right arm.

Dima fell silent, eyes narrow, and there was something in his face. Shock. Maybe disgust. But he did understand. Understood the implications, suddenly understood the connection: SAS, Vadim’s scars, Afghanistan, mercs. No longer daring Dan. Instead, realising something of the scope and the meaning. “Okay.” No humour, no lightness, no challenge left. Mind working on the information, but he seemed to withdraw suddenly, build up his defences, maybe his courage.

“I see.” Dan nodded, could indeed see a lot of things in the man’s face, who was bolstering himself for the worst. Torture, execution, whatever else. As a medic, he would know a lot about what could be done to a human body.

“But if you think I leave you here in this rat hole, you’re damn wrong.” A twitch of Dan’s arm when he leaned further down, and Dima met his gaze, remaining calm. “And I think you don’t know anything of the real story ...” Dan’s arm suddenly moved, faster than Dima could have predicted, his fist connecting that precisely with the other’s temple, it knocked the man out in the next instance. Dima’s elbow relaxed, head rolled to the side. Out like a light.

“And what the fuck do I do with you now ...” Dan murmured, glancing around. He’d have how long for this? Had got a bit rusty in kidnapping and other extortion, but it had to be like riding a bike, aye? All he could think of was the next small step ahead and that he had to get that man out of this unsound building and away from Vadim - whatever that meant and whatever he felt it was necessary. Trying to think of a suitable place, he shook his head at every idea that came to his mind, until he finally grinned. That was it, the only place, he’d just have to carry the guy for a while. Aching knees or not.

Dan quickly went through his pockets, the rifle beside him on the ground, took his scarf off and cut it into strips, quickly blindfolding the man. Wouldn't do him any good to have ideas of where they were heading. He just had to break the chain, and the rifle was the only way. Standing. Aiming, thankful the man was still out, even though he started to twitch, Dan fired a round into the ground, which split the chain and freed the captive.

Dima came back round, the gunshot tore him out of what might have been sleep, and the first instinct was to get away, roll away, reach for a weapon, all of these. Frantically scrambling before he realized that he couldn't see, then reaching for his eyes.

"I wouldn't do that." Dan's voice cut into the blindness, and Dima stopped. "I still have the rifle in my hands and it's trained on you. You want to take the risk?" He waited a moment, but Dima shook his head. "I'm going to take you to a safer place, you want to walk or want me to carry you? I can knock you out again, no problem. Your choice." His voice sounded almost entirely uninterested.

"Out of the frying pan ..." muttered Dima and raised his hands, while getting to his feet. "I'll walk. One headache's bad enough."

"Good choice." Moving into the man's back, Dan picked up the torch, slung the rifle across his back, and guided Dima across the rubble with his hands on his shoulders. Shoulders that were stiff, and Dima was slow to respond at first, but eventually he took his clues from Dan's hands, following the motions.

Making their way to the outside eventually, despite several times of almost tripping and catching Dima when he lost balance, and every time the medic cursed. Strings of curses that almost seemed to mean nothing, more a habit than actual anger.

Dan manoeuvred them to the Landrover that had been parked out of sight, and opened the door of the passenger seat. "You manage to climb in?"

Dima reached out and found the door. "Why don't you just let me go? Why all the hassle? You keeping me for later?"

"I'm keeping you out of shit until I know more." Helping the other to climb in, Dan was quickly in the driver's seat. Reaching across Dima's lap to close the door. "As I said, I bet you don't know the story." Starting the engine, he murmured to himself, "I'm not even sure I know it either." They drove off into the night, towards the direction of the camp.

Dima shook his head, but he seemed glad he could sit and move, and while Dan drove, he massaged his shoulders, rolling them and kneading the muscles, working the ache out of them. "You said 'faggot' ... are you his lover?" Dima turned his face towards Dan. "He told me he was homosexual."

"And that was a surprise to you?" Ignoring the first part of the question.

"Yes. There wasn't even a rumour about him. Never. Not that I checked on that, but soldiers talk when they wait, and we waited a lot in those days."

"So you did work together with him? Spetsnaz medic ... I wonder if I ever came across you."

"I doubt it. One of us would have died. Turkey."

Dan shrugged, "you wouldn't have known when I was really close." His face hidden in darkness, while driving towards the abandoned bunker close to the camp. Hiding the man under everyone's nose - and most of all Vadim's - was the best plan he'd had in a long time. Not that he felt like any plans lately, but what the fuck. It had to be done. "Congratulations, seems you didn't count as suitable material, then."

Dima laughed. "It would have been too fucking risky. Out on patrol? With the fucking team leader? With comrade captain Krasnorada? Oh please."

"You have no idea." Dan's face had turned grim, lips pressed together, as he accelerated into a corner, tearing the Lannie around that fast, it threw his passenger against the side of the vehicle. A moment later and he slammed the brakes, which made Dima shut up, and brace himself with his arms.

"Right." Turning to the man, who listened attentively, face remaining a studied mask. Despite his best attempts, Dima knew Dan hadn't become some kind of buddy. Still very much an enemy.

"You got two choices again. Walk with me, quietly, and lay low in a safe place, while I get provisions, or make a ruckus and face whatever shit someone like you might face around here. Up to you, but it looks like I'm your best chance at the moment."

"What about option three: let me go?" Dima inhaled. "Why keep me as a captive at all? Especially since you don't 'do' prisoners?"

"I don't 'do' prisoners as in: I don't fuck them. Got that? But that's all." Turning the ignition off and pocketing the key for now. "Letting you go is not a fucking option, because I have no fucking clue why you're here. Getting an idea who you are, but that's not enough, mate." Switching once more into Russian. "This is a shit place, even good old me is getting that. And letting an unknown factor loose into a pile of shit is not a good idea. Got it?" And he needed to know, had to ... why? Because hurt ran as deep as blood and lust, but nothing ever reached as far down as the love. Battered, broken, full of anger, but he'd been through too much to give up on it. Not yet.

"Then let's do the torture bit and be done with it," said Dima, climbing out of the car. "I can't tell you, and you need to know. I call that a conflict of interest. Or is it that you weren't aware of me? And you are still his lover? You are both here, that's not a coincidence. I don't think it's jealousy. Just because there were sexual acts committed ..." Dima shrugged. "What's the problem?"

"You're one smart motherfucker, aye?" Back into English, hopping from language to language with an old, worn-out ease.

"I got top scores in the IQ test, 'mate'. Medics are smart people. We have to be, because apart from the soldiering, we actually need to know how the human body works. And that's one complicated machine."

"You'd be getting along hunky-dory with a friend of mine." Jumping out of the vehicle, Dan swiftly stood once more behind the other man, hands on his shoulders. The muscles under his hands tensed. "The problem is I don't know what the fuck is going on, other than blood soaked kit and shots in the distance." His fingers tightened in the shoulder muscles, which tensed even

more, and Dima tilted his head, as if to listen very closely for whatever Dan would say next.

“He’s killing them. The chetniks. He walks like death and cuts their throats.” Dima said quietly.

Dan’s hands twitched, until they were digging in so hard, they had to be hurting. Giving far more away than ever intended. The pause too long, too silent. “And you, did you consent?” Voice dropped, body tense.

“Consent? To them getting killed? Fuck, no.”

“Aye.” Fuck, wrong question, and he’d lost the slot, impossible to pursue. “Move.” Gruffly, as he pushed the other forward, none too gently, making Dima curse again as his foot hit a stone and he nearly lost his balance, but caught himself.

Walking in silence towards the half overgrown entrance of the small concrete bunker that was entirely stable, with the iron door still intact. Dan had been there before, recced the area, a mere stone throw away from the camp. Yet the air slits would be too small to allow any sound to travel far enough.

Once inside the building, Dima tensed again and walked slower, doubtlessly hearing that the building he’d entered was sound-proof. Expecting the worst. It was a good place to shoot somebody. He was sweating, but silent, likely clinging to what life he had, or remembering, or that hyper focused sensorial overload that undermined his will.

Dan stopped. The bunker itself was small, no more than a square room, with some daylight through slits, which provided fresh air. “Home sweet home.” Dan’s calm voice a mockery of his thoughts. What the fuck was he doing? But could it be any fucking worse than a fucking madman out on what seemed to be a killing rampage? What the fuck had happened to them, where had the ‘honeymoon’ on Thailand vanished to, family and friends in Scotland and France, and their home-to-be in New Zealand? Was it all the bitch’s fault?

“I’ll be back in an hour.” Dan didn’t bother to take the blindfold off, as he slipped out of his heavily padded winter jacket. “Here.” Draping it over the other man’s shoulder, “and I wouldn’t try screaming, it won’t help.” He turned towards the heavy iron door.

Dima’s hands, still shackled, went up to take the blindfold off. He glanced around, then at Dan, but shrugging into the jacket that was still warm. “One hour? Don’t get killed.” Captivity of a different kind, but at least he could see, and move, and was reasonably warm. Looking tired and worn after the battle with his own fear, and after escaping from the other place.

“It’s too close to get killed.” Dan flashed a humourless grin before he vanished into the darkness, the iron door shutting firmly behind him, wedging it shut. Running back to the vehicle, he huffed against the cold, then drove back into camp. Counting on Vadim still being out, he signed the Landrover in and made his way to the cookhouse, blagging his usual bag of sandwiches at this time of night, with the leftover dessert on top.

Stash under his arm, he made his way to the room he ‘shared’, and the lights were out. It had to be true, then, and he was going to find out what the fuck

was going on with Vadim, after he'd delivered the goods. Rolling up the couple of extra blankets, Dan grabbed his bergan that had his sleeping bag in the bottom, and stuffed it full with the blankets, food, a couple of water bottles, a torch and a stash of batteries. Rummaging around until he found spare shaving kit in a tin, soap dish, towel, and pulled out some old BDUs that Vadim particularly disliked on him because they were too worn, and a pair of socks, t-shirt and thick jumper. Holey but functional, and his old paratrooper smock as well, which was warm but faded so badly it hardly showed the camo anymore. As an afterthought, taking a third bottle as well, securing the whole lot on his back. He had to be on foot, couldn't risk signing the vehicle out again, and he went for his second jacket, even better padded than the first. All the shit that Vadim had made him buy before they'd gone to this damned country was coming in handy now.

More jogging than walking towards the gates, he avoided anyone's questions by making some stupid arsed jokes of a sweetheart in town, and while no one believed him, he made his way through without any further ado, and was on his way to the bunker, no more than seven minutes away on foot. Once he arrived, he pulled the door open with all the swiftness and simultaneous care that a vertical coffin demanded.

Dima looked up, bleary-eyed, where he'd slept, huddled in a corner, but stood immediately, surprised at seeing Dan return – and laden with kit. "Okay. Explain. What's going on? What the fuck do you want?"

"There's obviously a reason why the hell Vadim locked you up." Throwing the bergan onto the ground, Dan pulled out the goods and laid them out. "And I'm going to find out what the fuck's going on." Most importantly, he pulled out the heavy tool he'd taken from the Landrover. "You're a medic, aye? You tell me why the fuck he's behaving like a madman." Brandishing the tool, Dan pointed to the cuffs.

Dima nodded, moving closer. "Madman? He's very much like I know him ... okay, changed in a few ways, darker. But he's always been fierce. Ten years ago, though, he wouldn't have killed *that* side."

Placing the man's hands down to have leverage, Dan slipped part of the tool between metal and wrist, applying sudden pressure, with Dima helping as best as he could by offering resistance. A few groans later, the metal had snapped apart. The cuffs had never been particularly safe in the first place. "Does it matter in this godforsaken place who to kill? Right now one side seems worse than the other, but give them a chance and it's turned tables."

"That's ... true."

Dan set to work on the second cuff. "And which side *would* he have killed? Mujas and Turkeys, just a shame he never killed this one here."

"The side he was ordered to kill. Of the old unit, only I'm still active. One of us got his legs blown off by a mine. I stabilised him, but with the missiles hitting our helicopters, they had to bring him out by truck, a dozen wounded in a car, across the mountains, and I don't know whether he made it to Kabul. Well, I do know, because he's never been in touch. I hope sometimes he was just too

ashamed of losing a good half meter of height ..." Dima shook his head. "Doesn't matter. We're all just meat."

Managing to get the second cuff off, Dan placed the tool far enough away so it couldn't be used as a makeshift weapon. "He was more than meat." He shrugged, but the casual attitude was not convincing. "Anyway, I got you clothes and water, and enough food to last. You find a sleeping bag and extra blankets, torch and batteries. Got you my old safety razor as well, you look like shit and frankly, you could do with a wash and a change of kit. I'll be back tomorrow after night shift." Stashing the tool back in the empty bergan, "and I need my jacket back, too obvious otherwise." He held out his hand to the other man, who didn't make any movement, instead looked at him with those mottled eyes.

"I can see you've given this quite a bit of thought, 'mate'. And that does take care of me ... all basic needs met, for the moment, anyway. But why you're doing this escapes me. You have good reason to think I'm a chetnik, and I can't prove otherwise ..." leaving that deliberately ambivalent. "And now you keep me like a guest almost, a guest that can't leave because your side would take him prisoner and do God knows what with him. Okay. That's the bottom line. Why do you do that? Why do you feel responsibly for Vadim's 'prisoner'?"

Dan's hand fell back down to his side. "You're not chetnik. You worked with Vadim, back in Afghanistan. A spetsnaz medic."

"That's a good working hypothesis."

Dan shook his head slowly. "I'm forty-three years old. Perhaps I'm just sick and fucking tired of deaths that are too damned pointless. Perhaps I just dabbled too much in the civilian world, friends and family and all that goddamned shit that I had always tried to stay clear of before, to make it easier to walk back into the shitholes." He shrugged, strangely uncaring about anything he admitted to right now. "And let me tell you that, you chose the worst possible affiliation at this moment in time and place, that you could have possibly chosen."

Dima nodded. "I'm forty-four, for three weeks yet." He was silent for a while, mulling it over, or just allowed the words to settle. "Random acts of kindness, then. That's as good an explanation as any other." He reached over and began to idly rifle through the 'gifts' Dan had brought, spread out the blankets and sleeping bag, every motion smooth and rehearsed a hundred thousand times. Dima pulled the tin closer, while Dan just stood and watched, strangely reluctant to leave, as the other poured water in the tin and washed his face, and, as there was plenty of water, his short hair, too. The original colour must have been dark brown, but it was shot through with so much grey it was more salt-and-pepper. "You know," he murmured. "I'd be glad for some company. Being a prisoner is boring as hell, and my head hurts."

"Aye." Looking around, Dan settled on leaning against a wall. The damned cold seemed to freeze up his joints. "I got painkillers in the inside pocket of my jacket." Adding with a dry huff that harboured a hint of humour. "The one you are still wearing and which is getting wet right now."

Dima grinned and slipped out of the jacket, brushing the water aside with his hand, like he'd smooth a kid's school uniform. "Painkillers? Your knees are that bad?" Casual, while he dried his face on one of the blankets, and then ran a handful of water over his stubble.

"Fuck you. You medical types are all the same." Dan rolled his eyes. "I'm alright, I can keep going for a while longer. It's just the damned cold." He shrugged and almost believed himself. Had to, no other option, was all the life he knew and had and ever wanted. No. Wrong. Had wanted Vadim, but ... not go there.

"Yeah, cold makes it worse. I know. I am getting arthritis in my fingers. See?" Dima held up a hand. "The way some of the joints are swollen? It's an inflammation. Great fun."

"Aye, I can imagine. Must be shit as a medic."

Dima felt around his face, and shaved, guided by his hands and experience from too many wars, clearing the grey and brown stubble out of his face, cheeks first. He glanced at Dan before he got to the chin. "Dima' is for Dmitri, by the way. I figured you probably know that, speaking Russian as well as you do."

"Aye, but good you remind me, was starting to wonder if I'd caught the name right." Tilting his head, Dan watched the blind shaving effort. "I'd offer to help in the awkward places, just depends on how paranoid you are."

Dima laughed wryly. "It's messy killing somebody with a safety razor, and you stand to gain nothing by soaking your blankets in blood." He swiped the razor in the water, then offered it, dripping, to Dan.

"Trust me, I had much better reasons to kill the man I shaved than I have now." Tipping the other's face back with the tips of two fingers on Dima's chin, Dan concentrated on the task.

Dima tilted his head to make things easier, looking past him, the specks in his eyes had a strange copper colour. No visible tension in his body, no mistrust, just calm. "Oh? That's the usual treatment for your prisoners?"

Dan chuckled dryly, but his gaze got caught in those weird eyes for a moment. "It was, once upon a time, something as crazy as over ten years ago." Cleaning the razor before starting again on another part of the throat, taking his time to run the razor along the skin.

Dima kept his face straight because of the razor, but his lips twitched. He had very different features to Vadim, less Russian, in a way, and less handsome.

"Been a while." Dan murmured, as he continued his task.

Dima raised his chin to allow Dan access to his throat once more, swallowing only when Dan had lifted the razor to swipe it in the water. "Shaving, or something else?"

"Everything." Dan finished his task, turning Dima's face left and right, satisfied with the result, he dropped the razor and let go of the chin. "Done."

Dima wiped his face on the towel, then looked at Dan, a much different man to the dusty guy Dan had knocked out, meeting at least some very basic standards of hygiene. He stood, then began to undress, peeling the dirty, grimy uniform off his body, with the same ease as if he was changing in the barracks,

among dozens of comrades. He was more stocky than the athletic Vadim, the same salt-and-pepper tone on the hair on his chest and the glory trail. No tattoos, no dramatic scars that became visible, just one on his belly that was likely ancient, and in the same location where everybody had it who'd got their appendix removed; a good, healthy body. He washed with just a few handfuls of water and soap, keeping clean, devoting the proper attention to the task, while Dan simply stood and watched. As much interest or as little as watching his team mates shower.

"Keep your old shit, you never know."

"Yeah, I'm just sick of the smell." Dima glanced down at the pile for a moment, then continued with the task, in silence for a while, before speaking again. "Vadim Petrovich had the reputation for being a hard bastard, the kind that doesn't go native. He hated the Afghans, while other officers would strike a truce or sometimes found a way to coexist. Good leader, inspiring. Great personal courage, cunning, and clever enough not to speak his mind. I've seen many soldiers get sent to the army psychiatric ward for speaking their mind or, God beware, protest against an officer. Vadim Petrovich was clever enough, never got involved in the politicking, always keeping his own counsel. I sometimes thought he was too perfect, like he was compensating something, you know what I mean? But up there, you couldn't mistrust somebody for too long. The mountains don't allow that. They make brothers out of men. Or, in some cases, more." Dima rinsed the tin with a bit of water and straightened.

"Were you?" Dan's face still as neutral. "More?"

"No. I didn't guess he was that way ... inclined. He got the regular letters from his wife, I knew he had kids, and he was my superior officer. But I heard stories, a while back. About his trial. In fact, my superior officer asked me whether I'd noticed anything untoward. As if I'd be a witness against him." Dima shook his head. "The functionaries didn't get it. The soldier thing. Vadim Petrovich could have done far, far worse things, and I wouldn't have spoken about it. He was my superior, and I always felt loyal. After seeing other superiors, how they'd scheme and bribe, dodge the unpleasant parts of their duties, I couldn't possibly have given them something to beat him with. That is not how it works."

Dan smiled briefly. Loyalty was still something that meant the fucking world to him.

Dima reached over to begin dressing in the clothes Dan had brought. "But since you were asking, yes, the sexual encounter was with Vadim. There was another one, back in the farmhouse, at night, two or three days back."

That hurt, but Dan wasn't going to show it, or at least he tried. But did it surprise him? No. The bitch had done good work, had destroyed everything. He wondered if she was happy now. "So, you never knew that Vadim was gay? And what the fuck did they tell you about his charges?"

"I just thought they were trying to destroy his pride. If you make something like that stick, it's like a bad smell, no way he could wash that off. Spetsnaz. Such a male thing, being tough and all that. I remember thinking that it must be

something personal when they used that angle. They tried to destroy his reputation, his friendships, the same loyalty that was still holding things together. Seems it worked with several others. If they'd have taken too much of an interest, they would have risked their own reputation. When he was charged, I was shocked, but I had some personal matters to deal with ... my brother was dying at that time. It's not an excuse, or maybe it is. Moscow was a long way away." Dima slipped into the warm jumper and draped one of the blankets around his shoulders.

"Aye." Dan said dryly, "guess no one could spare the time, back then." He turned away, busying himself with his empty bergan because fuck it, he wanted to strangle that man. Taking a moment to get over the urge.

"And I didn't want them to look too closely at my life."

Without lifting his head, Dan's voice came from the corner, still busy with whatever non existent content was in his pack. "What would they have found?"

"A lot of one night stands with men." Dima looked up, with irony. "I thought he was innocent, but I was guilty."

Dan straightened, turned to finally look the other in the eye. "Vadim *was* innocent, he never divulged any information to me and neither did I to him, not through nine years in that dusty hell. But he was 'guilty' for ... aye, for what. Sex? Love? Lust? What-the-fuck-ever." Dan shrugged, was hard to keep the façade up. "With me."

"I figured. The only way to see anything going on in your face is to speak about him." Dima gave a smile, and Dan shook his head. Guilty as charged, but he'd known that all along.

"Guilty or innocent ..." Dima mused, "that depends a lot on many, many factors. It's what they thought, they set the rules. Sleeping with men was wrong and illegal, I thought he hadn't broken that rule or law, but I had. So I did worry about myself first. Plus, I thought he'd get protection, so when he was actually found 'guilty', that was when I was getting really worried." Dima sat down, put fresh socks on and his face betrayed that simple pleasure of having clean, dry feet again.

"Aye, I guess that must have been worrying." Dan was leaning against the wall, "I was out of the Forces by then." His face twitched, "would have given everything I had to get him out, in fact I did, but I guess it was too late." Pushing himself off the wall, he put on a fake grin. "C'est la vie, eh? And isn't it ironic that you shagged blokes but never realised Vadim would have been fair game."

Dima studied Dan closely. "He sometimes had that expression in his face, a strange kind of smile, too, like somebody has who's fallen in love. I misinterpreted that. And it's nothing you'd talk about to him. He didn't talk about that kind of thing."

Dan suddenly laughed, dry, and humourless. "You might even have been only a few steps away, when I fucked him right on patrol. Up there in the fucking mountains."

Dima inhaled sharply, what that thought did to him was anybody's guess "You fucked him ... I can imagine that. Strange. I'd have never thought he'd let a man do that, but I was wrong about other things. Well, I didn't. It was a hand job on the farm."

"Which farm? Is it where he 'found' you?" Emphasis on the one word, and Dan knew he'd given too much of his hurt away, the way his face was trying so hard to keep neutral and so utterly failing.

"Yes. He walked right in, I saw him first, and I swear to God, he lowered his gun – not in greeting, but to not shoot me. I didn't get that part, not at first, but I told the other guys that he was a friend, just like me. I vouched for him. They accepted that, I guess they didn't want to piss off the medic by shooting his old comrade. That night, we caught up on some stuff, and I ... I was curious, and I guess I made a move. He'd changed so much, and not at all. Next thing I know, next morning, I'm tied up like a goose and Vadim stands in the room, covered in blood. I knew he'd killed each and every single one of them. In their beds, on guard, playing cards. He'd killed the whole band. Fifteen men in total."

"Fuck!" Dan moved away from the wall like a bullet. Hands clenched into fists, he was strumming with a sickening energy he couldn't dispel. "When was that?" Concentrating hard to string logical words together, his dark eyes so intense, they could belong to a madman.

"My best guess is about three days ago. My only thought was, how lucky I was to be still alive. I was scared of him. Then him messing with my head, keeping me in that boiler-room ... and then what he did, the ... well, sex. Like he meant something else, but he never said it. And then you, and my fucking head still hurts, well, and that's the whole story. What you wanted to know."

"But what *you* don't know is that Vadim is fucked up alright. You're a medic, how much do you know about trauma? He was tortured by the KGB, and he's ... functional, more than that, he was ... was ... fuck!" Dan slammed his fist into his own thigh.

"Stop. Slowly. Give me the story slowly."

"Something happened, beyond my control, and he's gone off the rails. I only found out when I discovered the blood soaked kit. He won't talk to me, won't touch, won't ..."

"Won't?"

Dan shook his head. "No." Won't nothing, nothing ... as bad as it had ever been. Worse. "I need to find him and stop this madness. I know his shrink, I got to get him to that guy. He's in England, but ..." Shaking his head again, fuck. "I just got to find him when he's out there, and confront him."

"Calm down. Breathe. Trauma, you say? We called it 'nervous breakdown'."

"Nervous breakdown? After almost two years of torture? You must be fucking kidding me."

"Yeah. The beauty of Communist logic. I could tell you stories ... and maybe one day I will." Dima thought for a while, then looked at Dan. "Vadim Petrovich having a 'nervous breakdown' is a really bad thought." He inhaled deeply, then rummaged through Dan's coat pocket, checked the label of the

painkillers and swallowed two pills dry. "I'll help you stop him." Pausing, incredulous at his own words. "That should be the best thing for him. My guess is, he's running away from something. Coping by not coping, you know what I mean?"

"I know too well what you mean. After all, I'm the one who didn't know what the fuck to do about his nightmares." Dan looked away, rummaging in his pocket for fags, offering them to the other, almost in an afterthought, and Dima pulled one free, nodding his thanks.

"He'll return to where he left me, unless he gets shot first. I could talk some sense into him? One spetsnaz to the other? Or we bundle him off to that 'shrink' of yours. Vadim, in this state, is not fighting fit. He might think fighting is what he wants to do, and sanity and war don't really match at all, come to think of it, but there's normal insane and insane insane. And that calm maniacal way he stood there, the blood running down his chest ... that's something I don't want to see again. That's something that I don't want to see *him* do. He always was a decent human being, a good officer. He's not coping." Dima frowned. "Thinking about it, I'm not quite sure about ..." He shook his head. "We all go insane, definitely in this war."

"About *what*?" Dan focused only onto the one thing.

"My own sanity, but never mind." Dima nodded pointedly at the cigarette. "Light?"

"Ah. I see." Dan nodded, lighting first the other's fag, then his own. Pulling the nicotine deep into his lungs. "I got to do this myself. Facing him. But whatever happens, you won't rot here. I'm beyond that shit, aye?"

"Well ..." Dima didn't look happy about it, but he accepted it at face value. "You going to tell somebody I'm locked up here, then?"

Dan nodded, "I will. Chances are, though, that someone will investigate this place anyway, too close to the camp, but I'll tell my surgeon mate. He's French, a bastard, and works for the French embassy in Belgrade. Only happy when the shit really hits the fan." Dan huffed dryly, "but we have to find a good story for you, or you'll get fucked sideways after all. You haven't told me, why the fuck are you here anyway? And why on that most unfortunate side of all? Don't you give a damn about what the fuck's happening here? No one in their right mind can turn much of a blind eye." Adding, while taking another drag, "least of all a medic."

"I've seen it. This war isn't easy. It's not easy at all ... I was sent ... here, and while certain, more legal, factions were sitting tight and the whole place goes to hell, some people go out there and fight. They do other things, too, but they also fight. I was getting stir-crazy, so I sought them out and ... joined one of the bands. It's keeping people alive, that's my job. Soldiers. Or irregulars, many are just civilians with a rifle. I don't buy their reasons, but there are many reasons for this. Cleaning up a mess by removing the people. It's not unique. It happened in other places. We did very similar things in the South of Afghanistan, against the Pashtuns. Their kishlaks, their villages ... There were campaigns to clear certain areas. It's everybody locked in a struggle to the death.

But there is no white or black here. It's all grey. And I'm too busy to think much. When somebody gets shot or blown up, all I'm thinking is to plug the holes and remember who has what type of blood, and patch them up so they make it to a proper surgeon or hospital. That's all I'm doing. It's easy to lose everything else."

"And you still do this shit despite your age?"

"It's the last one. This war. But I'll finish it. I don't quit."

Dan blew the smoke across the small room, eyes wide and dark, and entirely too intense. "You haven't seen enough of it yet? Have you seen them rape, bash heads in and watch the half-dead corpses crawl and wail, while they laugh and piss on them? Have you seen them slaughter families, and torture kids and women and boys, just because they bloody well can?"

Dima inhaled and looked away. "I'm usually not ... directly there. I don't watch it if I don't have to. I can't help them. There's nothing I can do. I have to concentrate on the stuff that I *can* do."

Dan shook his head, chucked the cigarette butt onto the floor. "Whatever. This place fucks anyone up."

"You should rest," murmured Dima. "Get some shuteye. You're quite clearly exhausted."

"Don't try to bullshit me. I'd still kick anyone's arse if I had to. Exhausted? You have no fucking idea what exhausted really means."

"I don't?" Dima shook his head. "If you've kept a man alive for two fucking days after digging a bullet out of his perforated guts, we talk exhaustion again. Bastard."

"Well, maybe you do." Dan shook his head once more, but stooped to get his jacket. "I'll be going after Vadim tomorrow night. Will get you food and stuff in the meantime. If I don't return ... just wait for the cavalry, aye?"

Dima's hand closed around Dan's wrist and he pulled him closer. "Don't ..." He shut up, looking angry, at the same time clenched his teeth hard and let him go, like something hot or dangerous, unable or unwilling to complete the sentence.

"Don't. Fucking. What?"

Dima shook his head. "I should have brought something to read," he murmured, not meeting Dan's gaze.

"Liar." Dan commented, almost kindly. "And I don't fucking read, so tough luck, but at least there's a packet of tissues in the jacket pocket so you can shit." He was about to turn, when he suddenly stopped, remembered, and looked at the other with an odd intensity. "If I don't come back ... remember one thing: you're a Soviet soldier, you were sent here, you were captured but you don't know by whom." Dan shrugged, when Dima looked incredulously at him. "unless you're desperate to get back to Mother Russia, you stick to that story." Shrugged again, "anyway, if you don't stick to it my mate can't help you. Remember that? You got to be official."

"In short, I have the choice between deserting and ... being tried for war crimes? Is that it?"

“Don’t be stupid. No one needs to know what the fuck you actually did. You think Vadim’s going to blow the whistle on where and with whom he found you? Mother Russia sent you off to this hellhole, and you did what you could, saving lives, no idea for whom, and then you got kidnapped and mistreated, and fuck, you have no idea by whom, either.”

“That’s ... a nice, clean way out.” Dima was sceptical, but thinking about it, beginning to think, and he’d have hours and hours more to think about it.

Looking around the room, Dan pointed to his kit, “and if it’s my mate who is going to ‘find’ you, get rid of my crap, will you?”

“Sure. I don’t know why, the stuff could be anyone’s, but sure. No problem.”

Dan nodded, “I’ll be back tomorrow. Swapped the nightshift with the day shift, but Vadim doesn’t know. We share a room, but ...” Dan shook his head, “doesn’t know anything anymore, I guess. If I’m not back the night after, you’ll be picked up, I vouch for that. Just stick to the story.” With that he moved to the door, wielding it open, to slip through.

Dima followed to the door, but stayed out of threat range, seemingly torn for a moment, his face somewhat pinched, but compared to how he’d been found, this was a massive improvement. “I’ll stick to the story,” he said, by way of goodbye, then turned away, not wanting to see or hear how the door would be closed or wedged shut.

* * *

Vadim woke after a leaden sleep that had eventually felt like it had grown more and more fitful. Unconscious like a stone, then the feeling of being trapped asleep, and he awoke without feeling rested, well before he had to. For a good half hour, he just couldn’t get up, just lay there, staring at the ceiling, thinking and feeling nothing but the vague desire to sleep on, but this time, maybe, rest.

Eventually, he got up, shaved, showered, dressed, boots, breakfast - or rather, the first meal of the day; as expected, Dan wasn’t in yet, and he had plenty of time, so he hurried to make it to the shelled building, grabbing more water than he needed, another 24hr MRE, and soon picked his way through the rubble, torch light dancing in front of him. The place smelled of a human being, that stale smell that just stood out despite the dust and the oil and grime; strange, really, it reminded him of his training, when he’d learnt to trust those senses that civilians rarely used - smell, taste, touch.

Coming closer, he softly called out Dima’s name to not startle the man. No answer. Asleep? Vadim came closer, turned the last corner, light hitting the general area where Dima had to be - and wasn’t.

For a long moment, he didn’t comprehend what he saw - or didn’t see, but there was no Dima. Vadim knelt on the ground, saw a broken chain link lie next to the boiler. Nothing had been taken, the blanket was still there, but cold. No other trace. There was one bullet cartridge, but no blood. He checked that again, but it didn’t smell of blood, either. So the chain had been shot through.

Dima hadn't been killed. Or, correction, hadn't been killed here. It was impossible that the medic had freed himself. Otherwise he'd have done it long ago. Dima wasn't one for waiting. And he'd likely, in this weather, would have taken the blanket.

Vadim stared at the place, fought rising bile at the thought that somebody had taken Dima away and - judging from what was going on in this crazy place - killed him. Chetniks? Mercs? Who else was here, close enough, who else did this kind of thorough scouting. Dima gone. Vadim felt his hands clench into fists, his mind was a jumble of thoughts that didn't want to calm nor settle.

Couldn't matter. He had to work. Officially, Dima wasn't here, had never been here, that meant that he couldn't look for him and try to find the body or track him. Maybe they had shot him upstairs? He walked back out, went through the part of the school that was still mostly stable, all the places where he would have shot a prisoner. No body. No smell of blood.

He checked the time. He'd be late if he didn't head back now. Gritting his teeth, he stopped the search and headed back. Being late could lead to questions he wasn't prepared to answer. But work was hell, he found it hard to focus, kept thinking of Dima pressed against him, his cock sliding in and out of his hand, how they'd touched with ease, but nothing more, a friendly handjob between comrades. The thought that Dima was dead was unbearable.

* * *

Dan had returned to the camp and the room he shared without sharing, at exactly the same time that he would return if he were on shift. Vadim was gone, as expected. He wasn't sure if Vadim was deliberately avoiding him, or if it just happened. More bearable that way, perhaps, but it never stopped hurting like a motherfucker, every time he stepped into the room and the beds were pushed apart - as far as possible.

He took a shower, smoked a fag in the room, despite or because he knew how much Vadim disliked the smell of nicotine. A petty gesture, and Dan felt even worse for it. He was trying to sleep for a long time, knowing he'd have to be alert at night, but the thoughts were chasing one another in his head, hardly able to relax enough to drop off. With the noise of the camp, he gave up around lunchtime, got into his clothes to eat in the cookhouse with several others, and pondered if he should go and see his surgeon mate, but decided against it. Looking dead tired on his feet, he managed to share a few jokes with some of the other guys, before heading back to his room to try that elusive sleep thing again.

On his bed, smoking another fag, he pulled out the photos, the ones that had caused the whole damned shit he was in, but he couldn't stop looking at them. Strange, how he didn't feel any anger towards that impishly grinning kid, while he hated the mother and would gladly rip that bitch's throat out.

Dan eventually rolled over, the blankets above his head shutting out the light, he kept thinking of the notice to send to Maurice, to make sure he'd

understand, without cocking it all up. At some stage, without having found the solution, Dan fell asleep.

* * *

Vadim opened the door. First thing, the smoke. Cigarette. He shook his head, but that thing that was building up inside, that fear and worry and nervousness, the need to find out what had happened to Dima - the smoke seemed trivial compared to that. He dropped his kit, knew Dan was awake anyway, so he didn't try to be very silent about it, no way Dan had slept through him entering the room, but there was no stir. Vadim didn't rummage around for the shower kit, instead found the black camos and changed, swiftly, efficiently. He needed to go out and try and find Dima. Or tracks of him. Or any sign, any message that he'd left behind, wittingly or unwittingly. Maybe he hadn't checked the place enough. His face was dark with anger and worry, and as always, he avoided looking at Dan. Last thing he needed was a set of questions he wouldn't answer anyway. He didn't have to justify himself. What for?

Dan remained silent and tense beneath the blanket. Wondering, knowing, yet saying nothing. He had an idea where Vadim was heading to, but he remained under the blanket and did nothing. Too hard to talk to that stranger, who had barely any resemblance to the Vadim he loved, not even to the man who had stepped out of a car in Finland. Least of all to the man around whom he'd slept wrapped every night.

Waiting in silence, hardly breathing, until Vadim left the room, and even then he stayed still for a while longer. After ten minutes, and no Vadim returning, Dan sat up and the first thing he did was light another fag. He had to find a way to let Maurice know, but damn, he still didn't have a failsafe plan, despite the promises to the Russian medic.

Couldn't be helped, and that meant he wasn't able to follow Vadim that night, instead he was going to take supplies to the bunker. Wondering, too, how long it would take anyone else to find the bunker, its entrance hidden beneath some bushes, and if, once they had, they would check it out. He had to be realistic. It wouldn't take too many nights for Vadim to find the place, if he continued looking.

Best to get out there, and Dan got ready, kitted himself up as if he were going on duty, and headed towards the cookhouse. Ladling extra portions onto his plate, which he slipped into a carrier bag, he got some sandwiches made, picking up chocolate bars from the shop they had access to, and whatever else he could think of and might be useful. He even blagged a flask with coffee from the kitchen maid, who kept flirting with him, despite knowing he would never be interested. Packing his bergan once more, Dan headed out of camp and towards the bunker. No weapons this time, only his trusted knife but he didn't have a chit to get himself clearance that night, and he couldn't afford to draw attention.

He was soon at the bunker, calling out Dima's name before pulling the door open.

Dima made an affirmative sound, and repeated it in case the other hadn't heard, but continued to do his press-ups. The boredom was bad and had been bad, but at least he could move, and that meant exercise. Having arranged the insides of the bunker as much as possible - one corner for hygiene, another for the human waste, another to sleep, and this one was the exercise area. Almost as good as a nice flat. He kept pushing, lowering, pushing up again, shirt in his back had a dark sweat patch, and raised his head when Dan entered and closed the door behind him. Doing a few more until the burn set in, then smoothly pulled his legs under himself and straightened.

"You'd make a good wife." Dan commented dryly but with an unmistakable grin on his lips. "I fear this place still needs some more homely touches, though." He put the bergan down, once again full to bursting, as if he expected Dima's stay to continue for a while longer.

Dima looked at the bergan, then back to Dan. "You mean because I'm organized and tidy?"

"Aye, or because I'm just a sucker for cracking stupid-arsed jokes."

Dima looked around, then back at the bergan. "Change of plan? How long are you keeping me like this?"

"I have no idea, but I figured you'd be stir crazy by now anyway, so I got you some stuff." Pulling out several used carrier bags, "figured you needed something to get rid of your shit." He grinned, "literally."

"I figured ..."

Chocolate bars, sandwiches and water followed, then the hot food, still warm. Dragging a shaggy pillow out of the backpack, Dan flashed that odd grin again, "while I doubt you'll be hugging it, thinking of me, I had a spare."

Dima shook his head, but smiled. "I'm not really a hugger."

Dan grinned, "doesn't surprise me." Feeling strangely relaxed around that man, who he didn't know at all. The last of the goodies were a couple of newspapers he'd got from the shop, a packet of fags, and finally a bottle of Vodka. "And don't accuse me of being stereotypical."

"Vodka is great. You can disinfect just about anything with vodka." Dima nodded, exhaling deeply. "Nicest jailer I've ever had," he murmured, grinning, and ran a hand over his hair, smoothing the short hair towards his face, the most Russian of all haircuts.

"I'm keeping you out of shit." Dan watched the movement of the hand, then back to the bottle. "Frankly, I don't know what the fuck to do with you, not with Vadim around. I'd take you to the authorities to try and get a working permit, just as I explained yesterday, but ..." he shrugged. "Things aren't that straightforward with Vadim around, and I don't understand jack shit anymore when it comes to him. He fucking ..." He suddenly shut up and shrugged again. "Whatever. You want some? Guess you won't get deadly killer germs by sharing a bottle of plonk, aye?"

Dima had listened attentively, and it took a second before he reacted to the question. "You're welcome. HIV isn't really an issue when sharing vodka, and apart from that, I'd be more worried in your case because I've actually dealt with a lot of corpses. There's stuff living in my skin's flora that can be really unpleasant. It happens, part of the medical profession. And not an issue unless we should have messy sex. And I don't do messy. Too much risk. I've seen too many infected cocks in my life to ever get frisky under unsafe conditions. Syphilis isn't pretty, you know?"

Dan laughed out loud, unscrewing the bottle. "First, I was *amongst* rotting corpses, buried beneath them, until Vadim pulled me out, half-dead and more than three-quarters insane. Second, I keep getting myself tested and condoms are your friend, aye? Third, who the fuck said we'd have sex anyway? Not on my agenda, forget it." He shrugged, put the bottle half-way to his lips, "and fourth, haven't had syphilis nor any other shit and no intention to do so in my old age. Fleas and nits were enough. Cheers." Tipping his head back to down a rather large mouthful of vodka. Shuddering when he was done.

"Nice war story." Dima stepped closer to take the bottle from Dan's hand, as easily and calmly as if they were friends. "You go off to war to experience things, something out of the ordinary, and then you can't tell the stories because people wouldn't believe it or are disgusted."

"Aye, and when you tell them to the younger kids, they just want the boring old fart to piss off."

"That's clearly your decadent Western youth ..."

Dan flashed a grin while Dima drank, deeply, eyes closing briefly, and remaining standing right where he was, in touching distance, then handed the bottle back, giving a grin that revealed once more those crooked eye teeth. "Actually, I went because I was sleeping with the son of somebody important and people were starting to ask questions. I'd done my two years, had begun to study medicine, then dropped everything to reenlist. They called it patriotism. I only wanted to get away from a pair of hazel eyes."

"So, you gay? That simple? And you worked with Vadim and neither realised you could have had a safe shag?" Taking the bottle, Dan downed another shot. "Damned unlucky."

Dima sat down and started to examine the food, trying the selection, then settled on the sandwiches for the moment, eating slowly, thinking, and then responding: "Do categories like 'gay' actually help organize our understanding of human sexuality? I've had women, too, but there's less opportunity in my line of work, and apart from that, I'm not too sure these days I accept that category. If I say I'm gay that means I cannot be aroused by women or anything else, right? Is that helpful? I don't think so. Arousal is a fairly complex thing. Many people masturbate when they're bored, not because they're aroused."

"Shit, you have to pull that deep-thinking crap on me, don't you?" Despite his words, Dan grinned and shrugged. "I don't care. I have a friend who's straight, he thinks, but that's bullshit. He's all sorts of things, not just one. I used to shag girls, way back, the first thirty-two years of my life. Nowadays?"

Dan was about to say 'no', but then he remembered the picture of a kid with his hair and his eyes and who knew what else. "Not by choice."

"You're spot on. We're all kinds of things. We're sexual creatures. There's hormones, and situational stimuli, and the mind that can give us all kinds of troubles. Healthy men can stop getting aroused by a thousand factors, and sometimes we get turned on by things that wouldn't have interested us a while back. It's fluid. 'Homosexual' or 'heterosexual' doesn't help at all. I sometimes have the feeling that these terms are political more than medical." Dima poured himself some of the steaming coffee, regarding Dan over the rim of the cup as he drank.

"It's all about what you consider yourself to be." Dan shrugged, downed more of the vodka, before handing the bottle back, "but labelling helps. Makes it easier somehow, at least for me."

"Well, if it helps you, I'm 'mostly gay'." Dima continued, "Vadim ... was, most of all, my superior officer. Yes, I find him attractive, and I think I always did, on some level, but I didn't constantly think of having sex with him, because he was my officer and we had a lot of other things to worry about. Even if I had known, I wouldn't have moved on him ... it's too complicated, too many problems. Nevertheless, he aroused me." Dima regarded Dan, drinking again. Not wiping the bottle before drinking, either.

"You could say that. I didn't have a choice, though." Dan looked towards the 'sleeping place', eager to sit. The cold was getting into his joints.

"Do sit down. My 'house' is your house." Dima glanced at him. "No choice?"

Dan looked up, while sitting down, not the most elegant of movements. Not in this cold anyway. "Let's say it just happened, aye?"

Which narrowed things down, really, but Dima didn't blink, just paused, looking at Dan's movements while he sat down. He moved closer, into the space he began to call 'the bedroom' in his mind, and settled in next to Dan, offering the bottle and unwrapping another sandwich. Eating it with a few large bites, chewing, then swallowing. "Part of what I like about my job? I never know what happens next." Leaning back, placing a hand on Dan's shoulder, a firm touch meant to calm. "It's all about going with the flow. Feeling something alive respond, weaken, or become stronger as a result of something I'm doing."

"Like feeling me up?"

"I'm not hearing shouts of indignation," said Dima.

"Aye, but if you were thinking about sex, forget it. Last thing on my mind." Dan cast a grin over his shoulder, the vodka was kicking in, and fuck it was good. Similar to sitting and talking to Maurice, but with a more comfortable component. Maybe it was the 'Russianness'. Taking another mouthful of vodka. "It took us a few years of fucking before we realised the love thing." Dan shrugged, twisting, to hand the bottle back.

Dima ran his other hand up Dan's back, a firm touch, like checking the position of the spine and vertebrae. "Was that a shock or a pleasant surprise?"

“Both, but then again, as far as I remember I was weary as death by the time I ‘got it’. Kind of made sense, then. Only took us six years of shagging at every possible opportunity, before we kissed.” Dan huffed and shook his head. “Nothing’s easy with that bastard.” He wasn’t really that different, but couldn’t be arsed admitting to it.

“I imagine. Vadim would wear his mask, and I can’t imagine falling in love with him would be easy on the best of days.” Dima continued to touch, slow, firm, conscious motions. Back, shoulders, then to the neck, massaging it, stroking, matter-of-fact, somehow, while Dan remained silent. Nothing he could add, because he’d lost Vadim to a distance he couldn’t breach. Never a chance, not given one, and assumed the worst. As if. But he was no fucking victim and he wouldn’t bloody talk. The truth was a whore, after all, he’d learned that some years ago.

Dima ran his fingers into Dan’s hair, splayed fingers cupping the back of Dan’s head, as if supporting a weight that was growing too heavy. His other hand back to Dan’s shoulder, and Dan couldn’t help but allow himself to relax a little. “Are you trying to seduce me?” He craned his neck, searching for the other’s face.

Dima gave a laugh. “Seduce’ is an interesting word ... what about ‘arouse?’”
“Why?”

“I think you could use some relaxation ... You’re tense and exhausted, you probably haven’t slept much, and you don’t seem to respond to much else.”

“Aye,” Dan huffed with dry laughter that was lacking in humour, and took a deep breath. “What would you be like, if your lover of twelve years, after more shit than ‘normal’ people can imagine, turned into a raging madman. Twelve years, including two and a half years apart with torture and prison and mock execution. And after that, more love and lust than you can shake a goddamned stick at, sleeping every night curled around and close. And that lover beats you into a pulp and almost kills you when he loses it, because his ex-wife sends you a pic of your two year old daughter you knew nothing about, because the bitch blackmailed you into fucking her as a convenient sperm donor, when you came to beg her to deliver a last message to your lover before he was executed. And now he goes round as a killing machine, refusing to even look at you, let alone touch you, because he never gave you a fucking chance, and because he believes you committed the greatest betrayal against him - while in reality you were fucking used by a fucking cunt, who’d be pissing herself with laughter if she knew what’s going on now.” Dan let out a breath he didn’t have spare. “So, what would you be like? Guess you’d be tense as well, aye?” He didn’t give a flying fuck that he’d spilled the beans, because he couldn’t hold that shit in anymore. He should have called Maggie, or Jean, should have talked, should have ...

Dima moved against him, body to body, one hand on Dan’s chest, the other still on the shoulder. “Let go. Don’t think about it.” His lips suddenly connecting to Dan’s neck, who huffed at first, then almost jerked when Dima’s lips opened to bare teeth. The little bite gentle, tender, a slow, sucking half-kiss,

moving up the muscle towards Dan's ear, "let it go, just for a little while. Doesn't help if you break under that strain. That helps nobody ..." hands moving across Dan's chest, firm, almost like a massage of his pecs, and Dima's voice became husky. "... won't help you sort the situation out. That kind of mess needs a clear, rested mind."

Dan's head came up, looking at the other. "And what's it to you?" Not quite there yet, not quite ready to lie down and bare his throat. He'd been fucked up too badly since that letter arrived.

"You might be saving my life," said Dima, not looking at Dan. "You got me out of that hole, you gave me back most of my dignity, and I get the feeling you're a decent guy."

"Forget about the first," Dan's voice sounded rough, "the second's up to you, but I go with the third as a good reason." He lowered himself down to the ground on the blankets, forcing some of the tension out.

Dima smiled down at him, got on top, over Dan on his hands and knees. Kissing his throat again, teeth scraping against stubble, and he sat down on Dan's groin, shifting his weight back on top of Dan as he lowered his head again to suck on the beginning of a shoulder. "Relax. I won't run away ... yet." A crooked grin, teeth tracing Dan's jawbone now, breath touching Dan's cheek.

"No need to ... run." It had been too long, over a month, and Dan was only now starting to realise how pent up it all was, the need to be touched, aroused, to be close. Most of all to Vadim, but anyone else would do. Anyone with an ounce of compassion. "I'd let you go anyway. Just a matter of ... time. Safety." Dan moved his head to the side, the jacket in the way, jumper, shirt, all that damned fabric.

"That's good to hear," said Dima. "Had that feeling, but I like to hear it." Only now realizing he'd craved reassurance, too. Hands moving to Dan's shoulders to push and then pull off the jacket, keeping it close as something that might serve as a pillow later. Teeth and lips alternating, on Dan's throat now, the soft flesh between throat and chin, while his hands unbuttoned the shirt, opening it to the navel, then pulling it off, too. No reaction to the scars even though he could see them, must have felt them, not even a dry comment about the operation or the skill of the surgeons that had kept Dan alive. "Relax," he murmured again, "let it go. We store our memories in our bodies. Breathe and feel what I'm doing ..."

Dan shivered, had to be the cold that suddenly hit his skin, while his chest rose and fell with every breath, taut skin and scars across his abs fluttering with the air being pulled into his lungs. "You're a damn sight different to my surgeon mate." Murmured, but it felt good, fuck, yes, and he hadn't realised how starved he was. Hands forming into fists, as if they didn't know if he should touch or not.

"I'm no better than average," Dima said, grinning, lips moving to Dan's chest, to his left nipple, again teeth, gentle, then opening to scrape over the muscle. Kneading the flesh for a moment, breathing against it. "I'll take off your boots, now," he announced, went down towards Dan's feet and opened the

laces, working swiftly, then carefully pulled the feet free. No haste in that, only consideration as if Dan had a hidden wound that he didn't want to touch or open.

Dan felt almost ridiculous, so passive, just letting it all happen, where Mad Dog would have quipped and joked, would have taken and given and not just accepted. Breathing heavier, his eyes still open, goosebumps on his skin from the cold.

Dima set the boots aside, before he came back up, eyes for a moment on the scars, but again, no reaction, instead went back to Dan's pecs, exploring the muscles, stroking, biting and kneading, handling the body with all the care and skill of a man who knew how the perfect machine worked and was fitted together. "Trust me with this ..."

"Trust you with ... what?" Dan's voice had turned husky, and he lifted his head, trying to meet those mottled eyes.

"I don't know ... there's still something holding you back." Dima touched Dan's closed fist to illustrate, then moved further down, to Dan's abs, where he did the same, teeth tracing the ridges of muscle, while Dan drew in a shuddering breath, consciously relaxing, forcing his fists to uncurl and some of the tension to dissipate.

Dima closed his eyes, trusting his intuition, while his hands caressed Dan's flanks. He opened the belt, then the buttons, pulling the BDUs down, and then over his feet, undressing Dan completely, socks and all, despite the chill, until Dan lay there for inspection, no insecurities, at least not that, a ghost of a smile crossing his face. "Afraid I'm not a spring chicken, but I guess you've seen worse bodies ...?"

"Much worse. And spraying their blood into my face." Dima came back up, grinned, pulled one of the blankets closer, next to Dan's hand, who got the hint and pulled it across himself, losing his grip on the blanket when Dima took his cock between his lips. No teeth this time, just the sucking, gentle, sensuous, no deep throating, no fucking, just teasing the head and taking him in.

"Shit." Breathed out, Dan managed to pull on the blanket once more, until it formed a tent over both of them. His hand moved, touched the greying head. Just a touch, no more, equally careful. "Is this a mercy fuck?" Something soft in his voice, perhaps gently amused. Feeling an odd sense of trust towards this unknown Russian, and more of the tension was leaving his body.

Dima stopped for a moment, came back up to look Dan straight in the eyes. "Touch me, that should answer that question." Pulling the t-shirt over his head, then straightening, the blanket falling off when he braced his knees, opening his own belt, his arousal visible in Dan's washed out BDUs. "And contrary to what people think, too much compassion doesn't actually help in my line of work."

"Makes sense." A smile started to grow on Dan's face, which turned into something entirely different at the sight of the cock in front of him. Reaching to push down the trousers, his hand touched corresponding hardness to his own, making Dima's eyes light up and open his lips. "Keep that thought, though, I like to repay in kind." The grin that settled on Dan's features was warm, and yet

mirrored his arousal. "I'm afraid I'm quite keen on cocksucking and haven't had it for a while."

Dima licked his lips, swallowed, speechless for a long moment, then went back down to nuzzle Dan's cock. "Won't ... swallow. Can't risk that. Okay?"

"Okay." Dan nodded, feeling at ease. "No problem." Pulling the blanket across them once more as Dima took Dan's cock again, allowing some saliva to run down the shaft, to smooth things for his hand that began to pump Dan. Slow, intense, skilled strokes, the hand more than the mouth, which concentrated on the tip, exploring it with his tongue, sliding into the slit and then around the crown. Eyes closed, small groans escaping when he breathed beneath the blankets, air warming, legs open, and half-dressed.

Dan's eyes closed at last, his hand loosely on Dima's head, sliding off to the shoulder, still connecting. More passive and more relaxed than he had been for a long time, even before the disaster. It had never been his strength to just accept and enjoy, but something about this man made him lie back and allow the lust to rise and pool. Breath quickening, the muscles in his thighs tensed under the strain of ever increasing heat.

Dima took him deeper to only pull back against the suction in his mouth, pushed deep, then slowly moved back, sucking hard, his shoulder under Dan's hand shifting, moving with every motion, body tough and powerful, and the man clearly enjoying sucking Dan's cock. His arousal noticeable in the shudders going through his body, and the sounds he made, wet sucking noises that alternated with moans. Going faster, harsher, needy and hungry, then managed to get Dan's cock into his throat.

That did it for Dan, had been so close, those noises one of the sexiest things he'd ever heard, used to Vadim's usual silence. The suction and heat, the closeness increased all of a sudden, and he pushed against Dima's head to warn him. Dima did pull back, almost reluctantly, and Dan tensed, taut, body rigid, before he let out a groan, deeply felt and freeing itself from the depths of his chest, as he came with relief. Dima felt him come against his chest, hand continuing to milk Dan, his head resting on Dan's stomach, kissing the scars there, then looked up, and lay down at Dan's side, his bare chest against Dan's, hard cock against his hip. Looking at him attentively, until Dan turned his head after a while of allowing himself to come down. He smiled when he opened his eyes.

"Guess it's your turn now." Reaching out of the blankets, Dan felt for his shirt to wipe them down.

Dima grinned. "You told me to keep that thought, which ... makes me a bit desperate." He rolled over on his back, looking at Dan, who quickly wiped the cum off. Dima stroked himself, slowly, almost matter-of-factly, if the lust hadn't been written so clearly across his features. "I didn't have anybody sucking me off in ... forever ..."

"Best make it worthwhile, then, aye?" The old gleam was back in Dan's eyes, the glimpse of Mad Dog, and he rolled over onto all fours, took hold of his own BDUs on the other man, and pulled them down, making him lift his hips, until

they went below the knees and down to the ankles. Not bothering with undressing him fully, he straddled one thigh, then got the blanket over both of them once more. Bending down, Dan lightly slapped Dima's hand off his cock, who gave a laugh at that, to take hold himself, fingers curling around the hard flesh, perfect pressure, while his tongue and lips explored the head. Teeth scraping lightly, adding to the sensations, as he took in more and more of the head, sucking for a moment, making Dima squirm with pleasure and need. Dan suddenly came back up and grinned down at the other man who was beginning to zone out, and didn't grasp what Dan was murmuring. It didn't make sense, but then Dan lowered his head once more, and steadily, without letting up, took the cock down his throat. All the way, eyes closing with concentration, knowing how to fight against the gagging reflex, and how to add pressure when he went down, and how to suck hard and demanding, when going back up again.

Dima gave a desperate sound, a long, deep groan, tensed up, pushing his hips up in a reflex, every muscle strung taut as he gave after just a few of these motions, unable to warn or say anything, just swept away by the sensation, and Dan swallowed, as always, the old reflex. Sucked hard, sucked the other dry, then slowly came back up the still hard cock, felt it twitch between his lips, as he cleaned it with leisurely swipes of his tongue, finally letting go of the head, after a last swipe across the slit. Palms on Dima's thighs, one on each, he looked down at him, grinning like the proverbial cat. "Just a shame you were so quick, eh?" Teasing in the gloom of the blankets beneath the torch light.

Dima breathed hard, meeting Dan's gaze, then gave a smile, contented and flushed. "Didn't ... expect that. If you ... give me a bit to recover ..." He pulled the pillow closer and lay there, shuddering every now and then, then reached for Dan's hand to pull him down, and Dan followed. "Shit ... I really didn't expect that."

"I have to ask the question, then, what *did* you expect?"

"Not that skill." Dima exhaled slowly, eyes closing again. "It's ... usually hand jobs or what do you call it, body against body, for me ... last guy that tried to blow me couldn't get me off. Poor bastard was getting flustered." Dima smiled, pulling Dan closer, offering his shoulder to lie on, and the offer was taken up. Too gladly, but the sex had made Dan mellow and relaxed, at last. Could feel how damn exhausted he was. The last month had been more strain than he'd tried to acknowledge. He was scrabbling around for his jacket, pulled it close and found his fags and lighter.

"Hasn't happened to me since my first blow job." Dan chuckled, "couldn't get Vadim off, but the next time we met I taught myself by trussing him up and holding a knife to his balls. Guess I've been going strong ever since." He winked and held a cigarette out to Dima, before lighting both.

Dima laughed. "Vadim probably enjoyed that - a lot."

"You *do* know him." Dan glanced across to the other with a twitch of his lips.

Dima lay smoking for a while in silence, inhaling the nicotine and feeling the heaviness and relaxation, despite the chill, and that strange trust - not captive

and jailer, not by a long shot. He reached for his t-shirt to keep warmer, while Dan threw the second blanket over them, the chill of the ground kept off with the sleeping bag beneath them.

Dima settled in again, stretched out. "And to think that in that hellhole, you found each other and Captain Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada was fucking with a turkey, that's a good irony. I like that. I appreciate that kind of humour."

"Yeah ..." Dan drew out the word while blowing the last of his smoke towards the ceiling. "There were times in my life when I could have pissed myself with laughter about that." Wryly, Dan pulled a grimace and stubbed out his fag. "Anyway, the real irony must have been right in front of your nose. Did you ever notice your Captain turning up with really good kit? Western stuff? Including medicine and medical supplies? And did he claim he got it from a turkey?"

"Yes, he did." Dima laughed. "Only the turkey was still alive. I thought he got it from raids or maybe some killing on the side. There were times in the south when I had to raid trucks with the others to get medical supplies - can you believe they shipped a lot of our supplies in glass containers? While everybody else used plastic and foil? Glass!" He shook his head.

"Aye, but on the other hand, *my* country sent me out to train and organise the Mujas, all hush-hush, to fight against the big bad USSR in the cold war, and it seems now that I indirectly trained up a fucking bunch of fucking 'holy warriors'. How is that for stupid?"

"It's short-sighted in the extreme ... and helped to plunge that place into chaos." Dima shook his head. "That was your job. It's the people giving the orders that shouldn't be able to sleep at night. Or humans are truly just wolves. But there was a lot of generosity, too. Vadim gave me quite a bit of his stuff, every time I got him for a direct blood transfusion. I figured he'd be clean, and he's got a very common blood type. Plus, he could take it. Some guys just cannot deal with seeing their own blood, but Vadim never gave me any trouble. I sometimes called him my walking blood bank." Dima laughed and shook his head, and even Dan couldn't help but chuckle. Strange, and oddly soothing, to hear about Vadim from a time long gone.

"Somehow," Dima continued, "that was a different kind of war. Maybe I was more innocent. I don't know. It wore me down. The whole thing. The insanity. The good people that broke and the bad people that remained bad. The guys that died under my hands. Once, I had to get out and look for a guy who'd got a direct hit from a mortar. There wasn't anything left. Not enough for a two hundred shipment ... that's what we called the coffins. We ... I put what was left in an ammo box. No kidding. There wasn't enough left. Not even for a second ammo box. Just ... evaporated. Bodies turned to nothing. And I thought what kind of pain is that, when your whole body gets turned into that in the blink of an eye? I spoke to a man who answered me a question I was always thinking about - how long does it take you to feel the pain when you're shot? Answer: five seconds. Where do I know that from? Easy. An artillery officer was checking the time, counting, to calculate the distance of the enemy's

fire positions. He was counting when he felt the impact, thought it was a stone, but it had taken a chunk out of his shoulder ... quite the romantic wound, only that he lost his arm from an infection in the hospital. He was counting, and it's exactly five seconds. So I thought the poor ammo-box kid can't have felt any pain, because he didn't live for five seconds. But I'm not sure." Dima almost forced himself to stop speaking, shaking his head, trying to dam the flow of words.

"Hey," Dan said softly and turned onto his side, propped himself up on his elbow, to look down at the other man. "I can give you that answer. From experience." Odd, how a stranger had become so familiar in no time. What had happened to him, was it nostalgia of old battle horses, or were they just so fucked up from everything they had seen, and done, that comradeship came easy - because it was necessary for survival and sanity? "When this happened," pointing to his abs, "and the shrapnel tore me apart, I felt nothing. I had no strength, and all of a sudden, I lay on my back. Couldn't move my hand," he lifted his left hand, the scarred one, "because it was stapled to my guts, but I felt nothing. Couldn't hear the noise, the shouting, the friend above me. Nothing. I became unconscious before the pain ever hit." A white lie, towards the end, but he only dimly remembered there was pain before he blacked out, just that last moment, and that it had been unspeakable, but what it was really like, his brain had cut out of his memory. "He wouldn't have felt the pain, trust me. There would have been nothing left to feel it with." He smiled a little.

Dima nodded, taking the scarred hand into his. "I always expected I'd get shot, but it never happened. I was out there in the fire, dragging bodies to safety or cover or even both and fixed them best I could. And I always felt that pressure ... it's the pressure of waiting. There's a bullet for you, and you know it, but you don't know when. Only that. But it didn't happen, and this is my last war. If the bullet doesn't get me here, I will never know what it's like and the pressure will never come down. Do you understand what I mean?"

Dan closed his fingers around the other man's - stranger's - but not anymore. Understanding that could only exist between men who'd seen the same. "I do understand. It never got me either, and I've got away so often, ending up like a scrap heap of scars, that I wonder if I'm being kept together with rubber bands and spit."

"But it's a solid enough design." Dima touched the scars briefly, just acknowledging them.

"It still functions." Dan smiled crookedly, "but to seek that bloody bullet, that is bullshit. You want to die, Dima? Seems to me you take the stuff you've done too seriously for that, and that you're a damn good medic. A bullet would cut that short, aye?"

"Not seeking it. I'm expecting it. I was scared of dying, until I told myself that if I ... if I keep in my head that we'll all die, if I keep death in my mind, that means I wouldn't be so surprised when it happens. And after that, it's almost ... waiting for it. And I do wonder if that's the sane thing to do."

“Doesn’t sound quite sane to me, even though it’s not crazy either.” Dan pointed vaguely with his chin behind him. “That mate of mine, Maurice, he’s as mad as a hatter, but they tell me all medics and surgeons are.”

Dima grinned. “I tell you what’s insane: I figured, after this, I’d go home and finish my studies at university. Become a proper surgeon, or a doctor, or a vet, delivering cow babies.”

“Cow babies! Sounds like just the perfect thing for you, after all the bloody battlefield work.” Dan grinned, taking the piss. “I bet you’d have a field day.”

“You’re the second guy after Vadim calling me a damned peasant from the Urals. Yes, it’s true. I’m from a village that isn’t even on any kind of map. And, yes, we can read in the Urals.”

Still grinning, Dan rolled back over, “I bet it isn’t as small as the village that I come from, in the Scottish Highlands. I’m a peasant through and through.” Stretching his toes and relaxing once more. “By the way, been thinking, and I found the solution to you being here and getting out intact. I’ll tell Maurice about you, and he can pick you up tomorrow night. That way you’re in the safety of the French embassy before Vadim even returns, and he will take care of you. He’s mad, but a good guy.”

“Embassy. Doesn’t get safer than that. And beyond that ... I’m not even sure I want to think that far. Will they send me home? What happens then?”

“I have no idea. Maybe, if you don’t want to go home, you could apply for asylum. Britain takes anyone, Vadim’s a fine example.” Dan winked, and it hardly hurt at all to say the name. “Or you could stay a while, work as a nurse, and pick up the limbs that Maurice drops.”

“Question is, can I work? And what to do with my time. My life. If I’m not going back to university. I don’t know.”

“Sorry, but I don’t know either. Just a thought and just a start. Got to start somewhere, aye?”

“I ... I’ll think about it. I don’t really have much family concerns left, but I’m not getting younger, and ... the way Russia has changed ...” Dima frowned. “I’m not sure I understand what’s going on anymore, whether this is just a transition, the start of something new, or just chaos and madness.”

“Can’t tell you, but the way the world’s going at the moment, its focus won’t be on Russia.” Dan shrugged. “I didn’t keep up with Mother R, because Vadim refuses to even just speak Russian, most of the time, and seemed happy he was adopted by ...” He trailed off, this really was getting too painful.

Dima nodded. “That must be bad for him ... he always believed in the people, at least, and I always took him for a true believer, which ... well, you didn’t speak about politics that carelessly. Not in those days. I’ll need to talk to Vadim, but later. Maybe I can get him to talk.” He winked. “Worked with you. Now ... will you stay here for a bit longer and rest up, or are you leaving again?”

“I think I just stay.” Dan turned his head and glanced at the other. “If you don’t mind? Been a while ... and I could do with ...” Damn, he sounded like a

sap, so he just grinned crookedly. He missed Vadim, missed the touch, missed everything, but perhaps at this moment, he missed contact most of all.

Dima nodded and reached down to pull up his trousers, closing the buttons and the belt, and shed the boots after that. He stretched out and looked at Dan. "Yeah, in terms of heat, a human body is the next best thing to a boiler ..." He ran his fingers along Dan's jaw line, then rested his head against Dan's. "It's a bit strange for me, I tended not to stay around till the next morning ... but there's no need – no point – in leaving here. That's almost relaxing."

"Besides, you could claim that I forced you, because I locked you up."

"Yeah, I'm an abused prisoner – that's absolutely clear."

Dan grinned and shuffled back onto his side, head cushioned on his biceps. "Just kick me in the nuts, by the way, if I forget that you are you and start all the stuff that I'd do with Vadim - before he turned into an insufferable asshole and raging madman, aye?"

"Depends what that is ...?"

"Well ..." Dan exhaled noisily, "that would usually be snuggling up in spooning style, and shagging in slow-mo from behind, when waking up with a hard-on."

"You can have the spooning, but I don't get anything out of getting fucked. I tried it a few times, but it's just painful. Apart from messy, and usually not too safe. I stopped trying that."

"Well ..." Dan realised he was starting to repeat himself, "it's safe if you stick to just one, who sticks to just one, too. And the rest with condom." He shrugged, "you asked, so I answered." Grinning, "and messy is relative. Granted, shitting cum isn't my favourite hobby and Vadim's neither, but he likes getting fucked and that suits me just fine. I'm not into it myself that much, just sometimes, when the situation is right ..." And involves strangling or fake abuse, or ... but Dan figured it really wasn't the best idea to tell that to a medic, or anyone else for that matter. "Whatever turns you on, right?"

Dima nodded. "I'm the last guy in the world to say something's wrong. Well, who knows, maybe I'm relaxed enough in the morning to take it." Giving Dan a wicked, teasing grin. "As they say, at night all cats are grey, body is body, and if I turn you on, that's nice."

"We'll see," Dan grinned, "I don't mind." And he was actually far more tired than he should have been, but the few hours he'd got during the day had been anything but refreshing. "Spooning, then? With a stranger?"

"Maybe you'll tell me your name tomorrow," Dima said and rolled over onto his side. "Then we're not strangers anymore."

"I haven't yet?"

"No. Except for 'Dan'. But you only know my first name, too."

"Oh fuck." Dan moved closer, until his front touched the other's back, and it almost hurt like fuck, but it hurt so good, this make-believe, and especially when Dima reached behind to place a hand on his hip. He inhaled slowly, the back of the head before his eyes was grey, not blond, but the body felt good in his arms.

"I am Daniel Ewan McFadyen. Scottish. Ex-SAS, ex-bodyguard, still a merc."

"Nice meeting you." Dima patted Dan's hip. "I'll tell you the rest of my name over breakfast."

"Aye," Dan yawned, now that the tension of weeks had been drained temporarily like puss from a wound, he was rapidly drifting off. "That you do."

* * *

A few hours later, in the early hours of the morning, the bunker was pitch dark with the torch switched off. Dan half-woke, comfortable in the warmth of another body. Skin to cloth, the solid feel of muscle and bone beneath his hands and against his chest, groin and legs, he was shifting to get even closer. Murmuring something without forming words, he felt relaxed and content, reality forgotten. Shifting his hips again, mere increments, until his cock slipped in the crevice between thighs, and despite the cloth it felt so damn good, like it had always done, every morning when he woke wrapped around Vadim.

Dima noticed the shift - he'd slept light due to the presence of another body that disturbed him, at the same time it was damned nice to have somebody close for longer than it took to overcome the tiredness after comedown. Faintly remembering who it was - Dan, SAS, heartbroken Brit who clearly, in every breath and every thought, missed Dima's old comrade and superior: Vadim. A man who had never appeared as being made for romance or love and least of all with another man. He leaned into the touch, the insistent but gentle pressure. He moved his hand in between their bodies, touching the thigh, balls, the hard cock, offering his hand without speaking.

Dan murmured something again, the words too slurred to make sense, as his mind remained in the make-belief for a while longer. Moving into the hand, at the same time his own slipped beneath the other's t-shirt, felt warm skin, and rested on the waist, without demand, pulling the hips closer, towards his cock.

It felt good, being touched and getting aroused. In the dark, no questions, it meant nothing, just arousal and an odd tenderness. Dima was wide awake, his free hand went to the belt, just to go skin on skin, to free his own cock. Opening the buttons one-handed while offering tightness and resistance to Dan's cock, stroking slowly in that slightly awkward position. A case of morning wood, but sex was sex was sex, and he liked this man - not just a mercy fuck even though that did play a role, it helped calm him down and maybe help with that pressure.

Dan's mind was waking more, the arousal stoked by the stroking hand, and he sensed the movements more than he noticed them, as the trousers were pushed down awkwardly, and Dima was forced to let go for a moment, to get the BDUs past his hips, while Dan's hand was pushing the t-shirt up, baring expanses of skin, before pressing in once more. Burying his face in the back of the other's neck, only then did he understand fully, when the scent was all wrong. No, all different, good still, but the body in his arms and against his

chest, and pressed into his cock, was not Vadim. “Uhm ...” was all he managed to murmur, as his senses struggled to form a coherent picture.

Dima felt the sudden confusion, the pause, and reached to find Dan’s hand, pressing it for a long moment to his abs, wanted the hand, the man, tensing his stomach muscles against the hand, and sliding it down to his hardening cock. Hoping Dan would get hold of it, read that he wanted him, even make himself believe that he was somebody else. Breath catching a bit in his throat.

Dan’s hand closed around Dima’s cock, his own trapped between their bodies. “I know you’re not him.” He murmured, the words remaining in the darkness of the room. Spoken, impossible to take back, and he wouldn’t want to.

“And ... I know you know,” murmured Dima, tensing at the touch of that strong hand. Cock hardening fully, very much what he wanted, and he smiled at the situation, that damned anticipation that he felt with every new lover, to an extent, but this wasn’t a faceless guy for a quick release. For once, he knew his name, his past, his lover. His own private war. He was aware that he was only a substitute, and compared to Vadim, he’d always lose out. He didn’t have that chiselled beauty, nor that ruthlessness.

“I still want you, though.”

“You convinced me,” Dima said dryly.

“Aye, but you told me you didn’t do fucking.” Rocking into the other, giving his cock more pressure, while stroking Dima’s in sync. Slow, unhurried, as if they had all the time in the world.

Dima paused for a long moment, and just the size of the cock in his hand gave him an even longer pause. “And you really like the fucking bit?” Thinking, what the hell was he doing. “If you ... do it safe and ... don’t go in too deep ...”

“Aye, I really do like it, but I don’t have to, you know.” Dan smiled in the back of Dima’s neck. The darkness impenetrable, but the smile was audible in his voice. “A handjob will be fine, and I don’t even know if I’ve got a condom in my wallet, or anything for lube ...” Not sure who he was trying to convince, especially since he was already trying to figure out what they *could* use safely.

“As long as you’re not acting like a battering ram,” Dima murmured and Dan chuckled.

“I’m usually a bit sexier than *that*.”

“I figured ...” Dima wouldn’t go out of his way to convince Dan, and knew he was being generous here. Had tried it a few times and it hadn’t been as good as the other stuff he did with men, and hygiene was an issue, always. Never mind the health risk. “No condoms here. Vadim didn’t take my kit when he brought me to that other place.”

“Okay, can you reach the torch?” Reluctantly letting go of Dima’s cock, Dan pulled his jacket close.

Dima let go, too, feeling around for the torch, and connecting soon with its cool metal. Switching it on, he shielded the light, handing it over to Dan, then slipped out of his trousers and rolled over onto his back, watching Dan rummage around through the many pockets of his thick winter parka.

Producing his wallet, Dan found a couple of condoms and grinned. Good thing he'd never got rid of them.

Dima was watching him, thinking that getting fucked was unpleasant, sometimes it started nice and got bad, mostly when they used too much force, and went in too deep and too fast, and he wasn't the guy who told them to stop, a matter of pride, he figured. None of those guys had ever mattered anyway, he just wouldn't see them again, or make sure that fucking was a clear 'no'. Why Dan, then? Maybe because he liked the man and because he believed Dan to be 'safe' - the kind of guy who took care of somebody else's prisoner wouldn't be the guy that fucked him painfully. And maybe because the whole thing was already extraordinary and easier than most other one night stands he'd had so far.

Dan was still looking through one of the last inside pockets, when he let out a small grunt of triumph, producing a miniature tube of KY. "Didn't even know I still had it." Sealed and unused, albeit battered. "Must have been in there since forever."

"Like a good boy scout, always prepared ... but you know what, I always have a pair of sterile plastic gloves on me ..."

"Don't ask me what that makes me think of ..." Dan smirked and pushed the jacket away, then turned the torch, so that there was light in the bunker, but no more than a dim glow. He tore the foil packet open, before rolling onto his side, smiling at Dima. Relaxed, as if he had known the other man for years, and not just a few hours. But Dima was a link to the past, to Vadim, Afghanistan and the mountains, and whatever was painful about it all, above else, whatever had been good remained in his memory, and somehow this man was part of that. "Best roll back over to your side." One hand on Dima's shoulder, the other holding the condom with care, "you don't want me to go too deep and it can't happen that way." And he'd only ever fucked Vadim like this, but somehow ... somehow, despite all the pledges to the contrary, it seemed right and good and fitting now.

Dima glanced at the condom as if checking it was still sealed, then did roll over, more self-conscious now in the light, but Dan was a sight to behold, and he wouldn't have minded looking at him for a while longer, that strong, dark-haired body. "Okay." Nervous, but hiding it well, a dozen thoughts racing through his mind. About pain, of course, but maybe he'd just been really unlucky? Many guys loved this. Most gay guys appeared to prefer taking it, which suited him fine, usually.

"I guess it's my turn now to tell you to relax, aye?" Dan chuckled low, and Dima gave a small laugh that indicated just how much Dan had hit the nail on the head. Dan's voice was soft, as one hand roamed across and down Dima's side, then to the front, finally taking the softening cock into his hand, stroking once more, which returned the cock to full hardness, and made Dima breathe faster.

"Besides, if you don't like it, just tell me and don't be as much of an idiot as I usually was, and suffer through it." Dan kept murmuring, arousal in his voice,

and a genuine warmth. This man made him feel comfortable, and he wasn't going to analyse it any further.

"Stop reading my mind," murmured Dima in Russian, but laughed.

"Guess we are just too similar." Dan grinned while rolling the condom one-handed onto his cock. Preferred sex without it, but hell, he wasn't going to argue the point, ever. He believed in risk on the battlefield, but not in bed. "It's not very clever to 'just take it', a friend and lover once said, and you know what? He was damn right." Scooting closer once more, the lube in his hand, twisting the cap off with his teeth. All the time stroking, in the same, unhurried pace.

"I'll ... let you know." Dima moved one knee up a bit, figuring it would be easier for Dan to reach his arse, "if I ... don't get anything out of it." Which was likely. A very tight muscle, not actually designed for this kind of thing, his own inexperience, Dan's size, and previous empirical data. "Thanks, by the way, for not fucking me when I was chained up." Needing to say anything, something nice.

Dan froze in mid motion, a moment of tension, "I would never, you understand, *never* rape anyone. Okay?" Murmured into Dima's ear, with too much intensity, but then the tension flowed out again, and the movements continued, as if nothing had ever happened.

"Okay." Dima didn't mention what Vadim had done. Not exactly rape, he'd been hard, Vadim, too, but he'd have preferred to be free, have his hands free, most of all.

Dan squeezed the lube into his hand, he coated his cock first, before it became warm enough to be worked between Dima's buttocks, slow, but deeper and deeper, until one finger slipped through the ring of muscle, without resistance, and Dima kept breathing evenly, to not allow any resistance to build up.

"And by the way, I have time." Dan smiled, "I won't flag that quickly." True to his word, he continued to stroke, while working the lube in slowly, now and again entering with one finger, eventually a second one.

Dima relaxed, allowed all that to happen, didn't mind the intrusion, but that wasn't the challenge. The challenge came with the size and the depth. Right now, it felt good, slow, considerate, loosening him up. "Yeah, I guess we used to rush it ..."

"That can be good, too, but not now." Dan replaced his hand and his fingers with his cock, guiding himself and rocking forward. Tiny movements, but not letting up, convincing, rather, than forcing the resistance to yield. He sounded a little strained, from holding himself back, when he let out a breathless laugh, "I do some kinky shit at times, but I wouldn't just ask anyone to strangle me while fucking me raw."

Dima laughed, that sudden laugh betraying his tension. "Asphyxiation is ... a major turn on for the body ... God had a laugh when he built that feature. I mean, you get hanged and you have a hard-on?"

Dan chuckled, while stroking a little faster, and Dima pressed back, like he'd get rid of waste, his body slowly accepting the intruder, fat head, the stretching

noticeable, a slight feeling of unease, but Dan managed to enter, slowly, ever so slowly. "Sounds like ... you have some great sex ..." Dima knew he was just talking to talk, communicating while talking about something completely different.

"Aye, and I'm not doing too badly right now." Dan's voice sounded husky, as he entered further, forcing himself to hold back. For some reason it was of paramount importance that this man was going to enjoy the fuck, and from what he gathered, it would be the first time he'd like it.

"Thanks. Not too bad ... on this end, either ... Talking about kinky ... most ... irresponsible thing I've ever done was sex under the influence ... that's the upside of being a medic. You know exactly which substance triggers which button."

"And what did you take?" Dan pressed the words out, as his cock was finally in, as far as it could, without being too deep. The angle prevented the penetration to go any further, but he shifted slightly, before pulling back out, only half-way, to try and hit the right spots. His hand moved down the shaft of Dima's rock-hard cock in synch with his own sliding back into the body. A slow rhythm, perfectly aligned.

"Any... ah." Dima went rigid, the sound made it impossible to determine what had just happened, whether it was pain or pleasure, overstimulation or just something too right. His muscles tightened, and he suddenly appeared helpless, responding to something. "Do ..." Not making sense.

"Aye." Dan grinned, "I do." That was it, and he'd keep this up, even if it cost him his sanity. Rubbing his face against the back of Dima's neck, who moved without intention, just moving with him, against him. Dan's skin started to gleam with a sheen of sweat, while he kept the angle exactly as before, kept the strokes, too, and continued the rhythm, while Dima lost all control, all will to resist, all thought. The same pace, for a long time, making Dan's balls ache and his body tremble with the sheer effort of keeping himself back to give as much as he could, and yet he got a damn lot out of it. The helplessness of Dima's body, the sounds and the harsh breathing. The scent of fresh sweat and the shudders beneath his hands. Speeding up when he heard Dima whimper, and Dan closed his eyes, concentrating on the lust that had been burning for too long, and the way he felt his cock being gripped in the tight heat, as he moved faster, with more intensity, the grip on Dima's cock strong and demanding now, slicked with precum.

Dima couldn't decide whether to press into the hand or back against the cock, never mind that decision had never before occurred to him, always the hand. The stimulation getting too intense to bear much longer, feeling like his whole body was no longer in his control, arousal and reflexes and instincts taking over, and the need growing out of all proportion. Building and building until his body tensed, nearly spasmed, orgasm so fierce it felt like a cramp, and he came, moaning, pleading, incoherent and unable to make any sense of his feelings, which seemed suddenly bared and raw and open and so fucking tender.

Only then did Dan let go of the control, concentrating on himself at last, on the feeling in his cock, his balls, with his hand, now, coated with Dima's cum, flat against the shuddering abs, and he sped up, as much as he needed to bring himself over the edge, cumming with a groan and a sensation of gratitude, tenderness, trust, and friendship, and a thousand other things, towards this man he hardly knew. He remembered to pull out carefully, and took the condom off, knotting it up to drop it to the ground, as he rolled over onto his back. His body drenched in sweat, but his hands still connected, urging the other to move with him, who responded without thinking, and offering his shoulder this time. Dima accepted the offer, moved up to him, sweaty body leaning against his. Dan said nothing, just lay and breathed and grinned from ear to ear.

"Well, I'm glad we tried," said Dima after he'd caught his breath, in a dry, understated tone as if he was being generous. He lifted his head to look at Dan, who grinned at him, teeth and all.

"Aye, it was okay." Drawing out the last word, "and you seemed to just about bear it, as well."

"Barely." Dima rested his head again, enjoying the scent of Dan's skin, the heat, the comedown. Who'd thought there was proper, good, wholesome sex to be found in a war zone? "How long can you stay?" He asked against Dan's neck.

Dan lifted his arm and peered at his watch. "Another hour. I have to be back at the time I'd return from shift, or Vadim might get suspicious. He doesn't know that I'm off for a few days." Searching one-handed for his fags, he pulled two out and lit both, before handing one over, which was placed between Dima's lips, and Dima rolled over on his back, one arm supporting his head. "So what's the plan?"

"Today I'll have a word with my surgeon mate. He'll pick you up tomorrow night at the latest." He had a plan, but he couldn't risk telling anyone about it.

"Okay. And I'll stick to the story." Dima gave a quick grin, hardly more than a flash. "I was thinking I could probably escape out of here, I'm pretty good at moving behind enemy lines, and in this damned country, everybody is an enemy ... at least of somebody else." He inhaled the nicotine deeply. "I just can't get locked up. Waiting is hell for me."

"If you escape, what then? I can leave the door open, no problem, but where's the point? The embassy won't lock you up, they'd probably send you back home, unless you find a good reason to stay." Blowing smoke to the ceiling. "Or are you too much like me and what you're doing now is all you've ever done, and you're actually addicted to this adrenaline shit, even though everybody tells you you're too fucking old and knackered?" Dan flashed a grin, but it wasn't entirely funny.

"The medical professions have plenty of adrenaline. I don't have to get shot at to be happy. It's enough to be able to bring somebody back from dying." Dima grinned. "It's just that Russia is not a great place to return to, at the moment. I have two good ... well, bad hands, I can make a living elsewhere. And what's the 'Motherland' anyway? I did the numbers - I've spend more time

away than in the country. But I'll need a job. There's no way I'm living off somebody else's mercy."

"In that case, what qualifications would you need to be able to work as a civilian medic? Or even a paramedic, or a nurse to start with. As a paramedic you'd race around a city, first line of defence. If you're lucky you can even get onto a motorbike. I saw that in London the last time I was there."

"No idea. I don't know how the system works." Dima grinned. "Motorbike? Beats rushing out of cover dodging bullets by a mile."

Dan stubbed his cigarette out. "You just need a reason why you ask for asylum ..."

"That's the problem. I wouldn't be Spetsnaz if I hadn't kept my head down, politically. On what grounds did they take Vadim in? Political prisoner?"

Dan slowly turned and craned his head to look at Dima. "Something like that. I just wouldn't recommend what happened before that. Besides, maybe you don't actually need asylum anymore, maybe just a working permission. I haven't kept up with the way the world's been going."

"Maybe I have to give some guy at some embassy a blowjob." Dima laughed. "Or bribe somebody. I don't know. I'll see it when it happens. I just don't want to go to prison and I don't want to be dependent on anybody. You're already helping a lot, and I'm already feeling a bit queasy about that. If it fails, I can always just escape and find some other way. That's what I'm trained to do. Common sense."

"Why would you go to prison?" Dan's brows rose, "no, don't answer that question. Depending on what that chetnik band of yours did, I rather not know. The less I know, the less they can ask me."

"That's best. I didn't fire the bullets, but ..." Dima shrugged and stopped.

"No. Don't." Dan pulled in a deep breath. "And I guess I have to leave soon. Besides, you're getting sticky."

Dima glanced down and reached over to wipe himself down somewhat, then decided hygiene was important and got up to wash, feeling very much that he'd been fucked, and began to eliminate the traces with a few handfuls of water, while Dan was dressing. "Whatever you're doing, Dan, be safe," he murmured as he was starting to dress. It was too cold to lie bared between the blankets. "It would be nice to see you again, even after I got picked up. Not just for blowjobs, maybe to have a tea and trade stories? And why does that sounds like I'm not meaning it ..."

"Well, are you meaning it?" Dan glanced up from lacing his boots.

"I had too many one-night-stands where I said something similar. I guess it's the routine that makes it sound fake." Dima frowned. "And this is not a 'oh, honey, but you were special' story, it's ... it's just that I actually like you."

"That's alright then, because if I've learned anything in my life, then it's that: mates and friends are damn important. Without them you're fucked up." Standing up, Dan's movements smoother now that he'd been lying in the warmth of their bodies. He shrugged into his jacket and stepped closer, standing face to face, and he grinned, switching to Russian. "Must be the Russianness,

but I like you, Dima WhosnameIstlldontknow, and I'd like to drink a tea with you, or a vodka. And talk, or have sex again." He held out his hand.

Dima took Dan's hand with both his. "Starov. Dimitri Starov. And I'm not officially here, because why should anybody help our brother nation, the Serbs, against the heathen ... whoever else lives here ..." Dima shook his head.

"Pleased to have met you, Dimitri Starov." In Russian, switching back to English, "does that mean you are as officially here as I was in Afghanistan?"

"It's how Russia works - they make it sound like they thought it was a good idea, but it was pretty much a marching order. Other people fight here just for fun; I've met several that work as perfectly civilian people, like painters and bricklayers, and they just get an AK from somewhere and go off to slaughter people. I don't understand this war, Dan. I really don't."

"I don't claim I understand any war, but this one ... I don't get it." Dan shook his head. "Maybe I have seen and done too much in my life. Maybe I am too old, or maybe I've become too soft. I don't know, but what I've seen here ..." He shut up and shook his head again. Then he simply leaned forward and kissed the other, germs be damned. Dima seemed genuinely surprised, kissing was clearly not part of his 'usual routine', but he didn't shy back, just seemed surprised, but not unwilling, as he placed a hand against Dan's neck to kiss him for two seconds longer, and reluctantly let him pull away.

"I leave the door open. It is up to you what you do, but I'd be happy if you didn't run. Maurice *will* pick you up, I guarantee you that."

Dima nodded. "I'll give it some serious thought. Take care."

"You too." Dan took his bergan and the torch, cast a last glance at the man in the shadows, and pulled the heavy door open, leaving it ajar, just as he'd promised. He believed in this man, and he didn't know why, but he knew he had to leave the decision to Dima.

November/December 1992, The Balkans

As long as Vadim was around, Dan spent the morning exactly as he would have normally, then went to phone Maurice in Belgrade centre. He was lucky, his mate was off duty early that day, and they met in a café near the French embassy, where Maurice downed his obligatory wine, or two, or three, and Dan, for once, stuck to strong coffee, black and brutal. He liked it the Serbian way.

He told Maurice all he needed to know, asking the man to collect the Russian, and after a few questions, as remarkably dry as the whole man, Maurice shrugged, lit another cigarette with the glowing butt of the one before, and nodded. He'd pick up 'the parcel' and make sure Dima would be taken good care of, while they were trying to figure out the paperwork.

It was getting towards the end of Vadim's dayshift time, when Dan headed back, hurrying to get to the camp before the other returned. Checking the vehicle park, he booked one of the Landrovers for later, and wished he had a legitimate reason to sign out a weapon, but the bastards had no duties for him that warranted the extra security, and he counted as a civilian - officially. Not that that stopped any of the goddamned natives on either side to pick up an AK and go slaughtering, just as Dima had mentioned. He'd simply have to be careful.

Dan packed his bergan with a few necessities, including – as always - his basic survival kit and his favourite knife, adding a stash of sandwiches and a couple of water bottles. A life on the line had taught him to be always prepared and never assume anything. He left the bergan in the vehicle and avoided Vadim in the room, pretending to head out with his team, only to sneak back in under the cover of darkness. Exchanging a few quiet words with the guards and making sure he didn't cross Vadim's path, he hid in the Lannie, with clear view of most of the camp.

He waited. Watching the dorms for a sign of Vadim, while staying hidden in the shadows. Wrapped up in his heaviest winter gear, he had to be patient once more.

Vadim's face was closed like a steel door, frowning darkly, hiding agitation as he headed out, carrying only a light pack. Away, towards where he'd hid Dima. He rushed, travelling as fast as possibly, worry and anger and most of all the feeling of time ticking away.

Dan followed, the lights of his vehicle off, picking his way in the darkness with nothing but the moonlight. Counting on Vadim's state of mind to lessen the man's alertness. He parked a distance away while Vadim went through the shelled building again, searching every little place where somebody could hide, eventually picked up two AKs and a bag of ammo, checked both rifles, but they were in working order. Checking for footprints, for anything that would allow

him to track Dima, but there was nothing, the ground was too frozen for boot prints, and not enough snow to help him.

Vadim still couldn't let it go, checked again, but eventually, he sat down, looking defeated, tired, and immensely worried. Dan had left his vehicle, moved closer to the building, and was watching while staying hidden. Breath misting in the freezing cold, he had to be careful, but seeing Vadim's face, the way he looked worried, not angry, he was glad he had taken the risk. Perhaps Vadim wasn't a completely unhinged madman. Not yet.

Vadim picked up the rifle again and headed up the hills, into the valley behind. Towards the 'farm', and Dan followed once more, had legged it back to the Lannie when Vadim started the engine, and was picking a neckbreaking path through the darkness.

Eventually, Vadim's Landrover pulled up in front of a secluded farm building. Frost had silvered the grass, and the dead guard dog with its entrails spilled out. Vadim pulled his gloves up and took the AK off his shoulder to enter the main building.

Dan, following in a distance, left his vehicle far enough away that his engine could not be heard. Making his way quietly towards the building. He'd seen Vadim enter, and he'd also noticed the weapons, while he couldn't make out the make in the darkness, he had no doubt it wasn't British issue, and no way in hell had Vadim signed a chit for any of them.

He carefully pushed the door open, but no sound from inside, Vadim was either waiting for him, or he had already moved through, but he counted on his instinct. That instinct told him the other man had no idea he was being followed.

Inside, carnage. The kitchen held two dead men, only winter and the fact that the building hadn't been heated had slowed down decomposition, but the stench of blood was everywhere. These men had died a messy death, one after the other, the method of killing was knife, deep, horrible wounds in vital organs, precise, cold-blooded stab wounds that betrayed the savage strength of somebody bent to wreak the most destruction. The jobs had been finished by cutting their throats to let them bleed out like pigs, to make sure nobody could save them.

It was the same image everywhere, carnage all over the building, when Dan crept through the rooms, never catching sight of Vadim. Up in the bedrooms, some had been murdered in their sleep. All of them dressed like chetniks, AKs and ammo all over the place, the bodies looked like from the set of a horror film, only it was far too real.

If Dan hadn't seen and done what he did, he'd be sick, but as it was, his stomach churned, but more from the shock that this was the work of his ... lover. A madman had done this. Someone unhinged and completely out of control, and that was Vadim? So much for his earlier hope.

He pressed himself against the wall, right on top of the stairs at the landing, when he heard a sound downstairs.

“Dima?” Vadim called, in Russian. “Are you here?” He was standing in the kitchen, hoping that Dima had made his way back, even if – and he admitted that – it didn’t make much sense. But if he’d been Dima, and needed assistance, food, water, maybe a phone, he’d come back here, probably lay low for a day or two, and then head out again. But no answer.

Dan was debating with himself, was it safe enough - without a weapon - to make it downstairs? Deciding against it. He strained to hear any movement from below, but all he could make out was one faint sound beneath a boot. Vadim was still as good as he had been in Afghanistan, but so was he, and he braced himself with a deep breath in the icy cold.

“Did that make you feel any better, Vadim?” He called out, into the darkness.

Dima? No. Dan. Of course Dan. Vadim moved towards the door, didn’t want to confront Dan, bad enough that Dan had managed to follow him here, and doubtlessly seen what he’d done. Dan didn’t have the stomach for this kind of thing, didn’t, for once, do what had to be done to make even a small difference in this fucked-up country. Better? Worse. Didn’t matter. Dima wasn’t here, but he needed to find him. Maybe the other place. Maybe they’d brought Dima there. If the chetniks were still around, that would mean killing. He left the house, made sure he couldn’t be seen from any of the windows, then sprinted towards the Landrover. He’d have to shake Dan off. He didn’t have time for this.

“Shit!” Dan ran down the stairs, almost tripping over, and only managed to catch himself in the last moment. Legging it back to his vehicle, he could see Vadim racing off in the distance, and forced himself to do what the fuck he needed them to do. He reached the Lannie in record time, revving the engine, light on this time, he sped after Vadim. Driving as much like a madman as the other. He was not going to let him get away, no way. Not this time. He should have done something earlier. Damned pride, and thrice damned hurt, but perhaps he could have prevented this pointless carnage in a place full of murder, rape and pain. It made Vadim no better than any of the others - because he had no orders to kill.

Vadim drove fast, shaken on his seat when the car bucked across the frozen ground. What the fuck did Dan want from him? Why here? Why now? He steadily climbed the next mountain, next valley, he knew there was another place where a bunch of chetniks ran their operations from, this one near a pass and just too conveniently placed close to a road. He couldn’t just drive in if he wanted to get them all. Remembering for a moment how he’d almost shot Dima when he’d found that other farm. Dan. Fuck. He didn’t want to talk, not now, not about that shit, he wanted to focus on what he could change and could deal with. Bastard!

Dan wouldn’t let up, he was following Vadim into territory he only knew from the maps. Racing through the night, he frowned when Vadim took the path towards the valley, but he had to catch Vadim, get some sense into him and stop this goddamned madness.

Vadim drove the car into a protected bit, not too far off the road, but deep enough to not be spotted, and jumped out, grabbing his weapons, ammo, and pack, while Dan arrived not too much later. Keeping his vehicle further away, on the other side and beneath a crop of trees. Vadim headed up, on foot, trying to reach the mountain top above the cluster of buildings. He'd need to scout the place, but the plan was to kill them before first light. All of them. Unless they had Dima.

But Dan had other plans, and he jumped out of the car, leaving the bergan behind, as he ran after Vadim. Groaning with each step up the mountain, each jarring of his knees, but he wasn't far behind.

Vadim turned while running, saw Dan fight up the mountain, and lengthened his stride, speeding up, lungs painfully filled with every breath due to the cold. It felt like needles in his chest, but he went on, making it to the top and the much steeper descent on the other side.

Dan was breathless, and his knees hurt like absolute fuck, but he got to the top with all the determination he'd ever possessed. "You stupid fuck!" He forced out, nearly nauseous with the exertion. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Vadim suddenly turned, breath misting around him, near the highest point of the mountain. A shocking mistake in Afghanistan, but here, the trees around him hid his silhouette, and he snarled. "What does it look like?"

Dan grimaced, hands clenched into fists in the thick gloves, "like a fucking madman on a killing rampage. Without *orders*!" Crossing the last few steps, he was shaking with anger, "like a murderer! Because you're no fucking better than them!"

"Fuck orders!" shouted Vadim. "Fuck your bloody fucking orders! Ordering me to fucking take this lying down what's happening here? No fucking way!"

"You're a fucking disgrace to any soldier!" Dan was shaking his fist, livid with rage by now. It all came out, everything that had built up in the last weeks. "You take this *personal* then, asshole? Didn't stop you committing the same shit in Afghanistan, did it? Didn't seem to take it personal then."

Vadim felt that impact, right to the core. Disgrace. He'd heard that so often, and he'd disbelieved it, until one day he'd accepted it because he couldn't fight it off any longer. It was easier to give in, he'd been worn out, and every effort to deny this – that he had given in – only pushed the bullet deeper. Dan snarling into his face, the accusations – that they had done the same thing, but no, this war was uglier, out of proportion, a seething, festering, self-destructive hatred that had nothing to do with the boneheadedness of the Pashtuns. He closed the distance to push Dan away, hands impacting against Dan's broad chest. "Fuck you."

Face distorted with anger, Dan fought the hands off, merely half-stumbling before he found his balance again. "No, fuck *you*, Russkie. Who the fuck suddenly turned you into the Avenger?" Pushing his own hands against Vadim's chest, bodyweight behind it. "Or is it because you wanted to kill *me* but didn't quite have the guts for it?"

“It’s the only fucking thing I can do to *change* anything,” hissed Vadim, voice sounding strangled with anger and other emotions, and he moved half a step further up. “Anything at-fucking-all. Do you think I want to sit on my hands and just wait it out? Like everybody else?”

“Do you think I want to, arsehole?” Dan pushed again, a violent shove, all his anger, frustration and hurt behind the movement. “You think you’re something *special*, and you think that none of the other guys isn’t going fucking insane with this? Who the fuck do you think you are? Wielder of life and fucking death?” He suddenly meant something very different, and Dan’s hand clenched into a fist. “Do you?” Yelling at Vadim, “do you decide on life and death?” The fist flew towards Vadim’s jaw.

Vadim evaded the blow with a sideways motion, hadn’t expected that it would come in so hard, had been a while since Dan had seriously tried to fuck him up. He grabbed Dan’s parka while he fell, pulling him with him, hitting the ground, and an elbow-punch found its way into Dan’s chest. Holding onto him was like fighting a bucking horse, powerful kicks and punches while they rolled and slid down the stony, frosty slope, punching and kicking and cursing.

One particularly violent kick from Dan, after Vadim’s fist had caught his jaw and his teeth rattled in his skull, and they tilted forward, sliding, bodies entwined, as they lost balance completely, toppling, rolling, one over the other, down a steep slope, slippery with loose stones that accelerated around them, noisily crashing downwards. They scrambled with arms and legs, trying to stop the fall, until they hit a plateau, coming down hard, when their bodies crashed onto the rock, Dan on top of Vadim.

Rattled, disoriented for a moment, hurting in every place, Dan managed to look around before Vadim got his bearings, neither of them moving. They hung over a steep drop, below a deep valley, and ... “Oh fuck!” Dan got out, spitting blood, as he stared down.

Vadim coughed, several stones had impacted on his ribs on the way down, and he was just glad it had stopped, even though Dan still had the front of his parka clutched in his fists. Appetite for the fight dulled by the pain, and Dan’s sudden incredulous expression. “What?” Twisting his head to be able to peer down to what Dan was staring at.

“Don’t move.” They were so close to the drop, a wrong movement could throw them over the edge, and the loose stones were still rolling down the rock face and towards the valley. “Look!” Dan pointed to what had to be a camp. And a prisoner camp at that. A goddamned fucking camp where there shouldn’t be one. Rows of metal shacks, hardly more than cages, search lights, guards, and what seemed like corrals. “Where the fuck are we?” Dan’s voice was breathless, as he held onto Vadim and the ground.

Vadim twisted his neck and then reached into his pocket, freeing the folded-up map, checking the area, squinting to make out the words. “Just north of here,” he murmured, indicating a spot. “The pass is here, that’s the road, that’s the car.”

Dan carefully rolled off Vadim, trying to keep his balance. "This is not supposed to be here." Holding his jaw, the bastard had got him at least a couple of times, and the pain blossomed. "They are emptying out Manjaca, and in Omarska ..." Dan never finished the sentence, when a search light suddenly moved up the side of the hill, blinding him, as it hit them full force.

"Run," said Vadim, and Dan was already getting to his feet. Somebody was probably already on the way, and possibly a bunch of snipers to boot. They weren't all incompetents, and Vadim moved away from the brink, feeling his body protest after the punches, his own fingers hurting, face, chest, fuck, he wasn't twenty anymore when he'd have hardly felt this.

First priority was to evade the light. Second was to get the fuck back into the 'safe zone', which meant back to camp. Nothing was truly safe in this fucking country. Vadim moved, ducked, climbed up to the peak, the rifle unwieldy across his back, then broke into a run, but he glanced to his shoulder before he did, checking on Dan, who was not far behind him. Comrade, above all, right now. "To the car."

Dan grunted an affirmative, knew it was all about being as fast as they could be. Detected. Detected while having detected what shouldn't be there. He had a fair idea how much their lives were worth right now, and he forced his body to comply. Once more, always another time, beaten-up body or not. Racing down the hill, stumbling a couple of times, when roots were in the way and the moon didn't get through the trees, but every time, despite the jarring pain, he went on, tried to run even faster, Vadim in front of him.

They were almost at the foot of the hill when a telltale sound cut through the air and an almighty explosion threw them both onto their backs. Vadim closer, the impact even harder, when the RPG hammered into Vadim's vehicle, leaving them scrabbling in the frozen forest dirt. The trees and leaves the only thing that had sheltered them from the worst of the blast. "Shit!" Dan yelled, deaf from the explosion, crawling on all fours towards Vadim, who just raised his head, looking angry more than shocked. Dan was yelling at him, but Vadim couldn't hear a thing.

"Key!" Dan shouted, fishing his own car key out of his pocket, pushing it into Vadim's gloved hand as he gestured down the road, towards his Landrover. "You're faster!" And he was already up again, his body complying to a mind that would never give up. Never.

Vadim glanced at the key in his hand, then jumped to his feet, hearing only the blood rush in his ears and the odd ring that told him his eardrums had filed a complaint. No way to hear shots now, or pursuers. He ran towards Dan's vehicle, briefly wondered how he'd explain that he'd 'lost' a car 'out there', jumped into the Landrover and started the machine, while Dan was close behind, running as fast as he could.

Vadim pushed the AK over towards Dan when he tore the passenger door open and threw himself inside. "Go! Go!" Dan yelled, and he took the automatic, turned on his seat to allow for maximum coverage of any pursuers.

Gas pedal met bottom. Vadim tore the car around, the wheels finding purchase on the frozen ground, loose stones flying everywhere when the Lannie jumped forward and broke through some undergrowth onto the frozen road. A wild turn, tyres gripping asphalt, Vadim saw, just in time, a convoy of two jeeps move towards them. Pursuers? He couldn't risk it. The car screeched into a bootlegger turn, away from the quickest way back to the camp, and into the opposite direction.

The next moment bullets hit the Landrover, and Dan ducked, cursing under his breath, at the same time yanking the window down. He hung far out of it, aiming at their pursuers, firing at the windshields, then at the lights. He hit one of them, and the vehicle veered to the side but kept going, while the second one gained ground.

Vadim leaned over to risk a glance down the mountain, where the road snaked up, but he didn't believe in that kind of stunt. They'd tumble down the mountain and then nothing. Too steep. He'd just have to drive really well. Accelerating like a madman with a death wish – the irony didn't escape him – he threw the car into the next turn, throwing Dan almost out of the seat and making aiming impossible. He raced up the mountain, deeper into enemy country, chasing around the narrow turns, hoping Dan would get a clear shot before they'd be too far gone, then, suddenly, the road forked, and Vadim took the one that didn't go straight into the enemy's stronghold – towards the next valley. He kept his head down while driving, glanced at Dan to see how he was faring.

Dan had managed to crawl between the seats and into the back, bracing himself against the side wall. His hearing was coming back and he yelled over the noise of the vehicle, "you know where the fuck you're going?" But then, the sharp next turn, and it almost doubled them up with their pursuers. Aiming in the car that jumped like crazy over the road was near impossible, but he fired a round of shots and shouted in triumph when the second car veered off and vanished with screeching tyres and howling brakes down the steep side of the mountain, while the other one gained ground again.

Vadim heard Dan shout, but couldn't make out the words, assumed it was some form of encouragement because he really didn't want to hear any bad news, especially as the other driver was determined and not half bad at driving himself. They could only stay on the road for the moment, covering ground as fast as possible, and Vadim could imagine that the others felt they were winning – they had them in their territory and knew where the road was going. He'd only had a brief look at the map, but his best bet was that if they followed it, they would eventually meet another road that would take them towards the camp. "We have to go straight through," Vadim shouted, still mostly deaf.

Dan had smashed the side window in the rear of the hard-top with his rifle butt, pieces of security glass flying everywhere. He didn't hear Vadim's answer, hanging half out of the window. His only chance to get those bastards, who kept criss-crossing behind them. The bullets were flying, but every time Vadim went around a bend in the hell-raising speed, he had a few seconds of clear

firing from the side. Smashing a bullet round into the vehicle, he pulled back in, shouting while digging more ammo out of Vadim's pack, "Whatever you're doing, I need a damn sharp bend to the right!"

Vadim nodded, narrowing his eyes to try and see the road before he went past it, and, indeed, a sharp right turn came up that made the tail of the car almost spin off the road. Vadim released the handbrake in the exact right moment and again kicked the pedal down. "At least we're back in the right direction," he shouted.

Dan didn't hear, was hanging out of the window with half of his body, legs hooked in the metal bars of the opposite seat. Firing a long broadside at the vehicle, he yelled in triumph when the damned bastards suddenly spun with screeching tyres, then raced forward, directionless, and into the rock face. Even Vadim saw the fireball when it exploded. "Fuck them!" Dan crawled back into the car, then pulled himself forward, until he was between the front seats. "How far to the camp?"

"Thirty miles is a guess." A huge distance in this territory. Vadim didn't slow down, instead used the time of grace that they had to increase their head start. He drove on in silence for a few minutes, while Dan busied himself with the weapons and kit. The car went up another mountain, and he stopped it, then stepped out to look around, while Dan finished sorting his bergan and Vadim's pack, having taken stock of their combined kit.

Vadim narrowed his eyes. "Shit."

"What?" Dan climbed out of the vehicle into the freezing cold. There was movement down there, quite clearly on the road below, cars driving with no headlights, Vadim could hear it now. "Roadblock."

"Fuck. Where's the map?" But Dan was already climbing back into the car, reaching for the torch in the glove compartment, studying the roads on the map. "Congratulations. There are no other roads back down."

"Nope. We either continue on foot, or ..." Vadim's eyes narrowed in thought. "We take them head on."

"And play decoy?" Dan's eyes narrowed as well, as he shielded the light of the torch away from the road.

"The road winds downhill, but towards them, it's pretty much straight. We could use it to distract them. Try and capture one of their cars, and just continue."

Dan nodded, "we got the AK, a pistol, and a couple knives. Seemed you carried enough ammo for an ambush. I got water, some food, and survival kit. I'm loading everything into the bergan and your shoulder pack, ready if we have to go on foot. You rig the car?" Unspoken, which one of them had more experience in what.

"No problem." Vadim sat down again, cutting some rope to fix the car's steering wheel and gas pedal and prepared everything, then nodded to Dan. "Okay. Let's drive this to where they can see us, crash it into the roadblock, and then flank them in the confusion. Maybe we can get one of their cars, otherwise we just leg it."

“Aye.” Dan was already strapped up. Every bit that was useful stripped out of the car, including the blanket that was kept in each of the camp’s Landrovers, and the shovel that he’d fixed across the bergan. Rifle left for Vadim, he had pocketed the pistol and some of the ammo, and they had a knife each. He’d never part with his favourite one anyway. “Ready.” Handing Vadim’s pack, ammo and the AK over. Unspoken understanding once more, and no time nor space for the anger that had brought them there. He got into the car and braced himself, glancing at Vadim. “Jumping out of the car ten yards before impact?”

Vadim gave him a long glance. “Yes. Don’t break anything.”

“Fuck you, too.” Dan huffed without malice.

“I mean it.” Vadim started the engine and checked that he’d stowed away his kit properly on his body, then started to roll, headlights on, now, to attract their attention - and hopefully blinding the bastards when he was heading straight at them. “Leg it towards that hill, unless we can get one of their cars. It’s fifty clicks, that’s not much.”

“Aye.” Dan looked straight on. “If I’m too slow, you got a second map in your kit.”

Vadim shuddered, jaw muscles tightening. “Say that again and I break something in your body.”

“You’re contradicting yourself. You just told me not to break anything.”

“I know.”

Dan stared ahead, one hand on the dashboard, the other on the door handle, bracing himself. “Whatever the fuck happens, if I don’t make it, I want you to get out and tell them about the shit here. You got it?” Dan finally glanced at the side, they had no more than a few mere seconds, the movement in front of them was getting frantic. “We’ll make it. If not, the other one carries on. Deal?”

Vadim nodded, didn’t trust his voice to speak, instead started the car, first down the winding roads, then straight onto the road towards the next mountain, and towards the roadblock. He fixed the rope to the steering wheel, placed the heavy stone on the pedal, then began the countdown. The headlights tore the silhouettes of chetniks out of the dark, and he could see them aim and fire, as he switched the headlights to highest intensity, hopefully blinding them, and opened the door to hit the ground. It fucking hurt, the frozen ground was unforgiving, and his kit bruised him in several places, but he had no other chance but to get to his feet as soon as he could, moving on while the Landrover crashed into the cars that served as roadblock, and the men behind fired while forced to jump out of the way. Vadim ran, two hundred yards to cover, running as fast as he could, then dove in between the trees where the forest began to thicken, AK out and ready to shoot if anybody followed them. Waiting for Dan.

But Dan didn’t arrive, not for a long time. Instead there were shouts, bullets being fired, a round or two of automatic fire, and voices yelling something Vadim could not understand. Then a scream, and cursing, while the firing started up again, and voices yelling with no logic nor order.

Silence, the firing stopped, then the sound of engines revving up and racing off.

Vadim waited, he couldn't make out anything, so he forced himself to stay down and wait. Dan's words stayed with him. One carries on. He blinked, realising his vision was blurred, not that he could see much, but his body felt locked, every joint frozen with worry and fear, stomach churning. He'd give everything to get up and check the area, but he listened and waited, but there were no sounds, no more shots. Slowly, he got to his feet, and walked back. He couldn't just leave Dan.

He had reached the area half-way, when a voice called out to him. Hushed, breathless, but audible in the silence of the freezing night. "You bastard. I knew you wouldn't do what I told you."

Vadim turned towards the voice, just staring in the direction. "You'd have done the same."

"You think so, eh?" It was obvious from the disembodied voice that Dan was jogging towards Vadim, whose silhouette was dimly visible in the moonlight, reflected by patches of frozen snow. Dan was getting closer in the typical slow-jog of anyone who was used to tabbing for endless miles with prohibiting weights on their back, just that by now, when he was getting close enough to be seen, his gait distinctly favoured one leg. "I didn't get out too well." Closer, still, until his face was near, one side smeared with something dark, could be dirt, could be blood, but he didn't seem to be in pain. "Had to take one of their vehicles to get them off my track, didn't fancy turning into a sieve." He suddenly flashed a grin, looking as feral as Vadim ever had, after the killing. "Fucking cunts made me run half of the way back, but they should be busy for a little while."

Vadim fell in stride with Dan, heading for the hill. At least nothing was broken. "We're in the right direction. Just up that mountain, and there's some kind of settlement behind there, where we should be able to find cover, and I'll look at your head. Don't like head wounds."

"It's just a damned scratch. Looks worse than it is." Dan was huffing with each step, in through the nose, out through the mouth. He was fit, could run forever, if only his goddamned knees weren't playing up. Still, he kept up, because he simply had to. Mind over matter. "Didn't land on my head, after all."

"Doesn't matter, I'll still have a look."

"You get on my nerves, Russkie." Dan grumped, then shut up, preserving his breath.

Vadim fell into an easy trot that he'd be able to maintain even up the mountain, staying on a dirt track, because he had no idea whether the area had been mined, but he chose to not tell Dan of his worries, because, truth be told, they'd be fucked if it was and it didn't matter if it wasn't. Up the mountain, always right at Dan's shoulder, making sure Dan could keep up. No question. He'd never leave him behind, just like any comrade.

They got to the highest point and Vadim frowned. "Bad news. There's not a single light on down there."

"Guess that means I should take over orientation." Dan shrugged, no accusation. "Unless you're right and there *used* to be a village." Getting the map out, Dan shielded the light of the torch from view, as he studied the area. "Shit."

"Shit - there was or Shit - we're lost?"

"Shit, there was." Dan looked up, "you'll never be lost with me around." Completely serious. "I made it across the mountains in the middle of the Afghan winter to get a hand job from you. I'll find my fucking way across Yugoslavia."

Vadim grinned. "True. Finding all those caves was damn good training ..."

Dan looked up for a moment, deadly intense, before he studied the map once more, shaking his head. "Can only mean one thing: it's been 'cleansed'. Suggest we get down there, hoping there'll be some ruins left to hide in, and no mass graves without burying." The frown between his brows proof to the gravity of his words. "They might not expect us down there, and they might not bother searching a place that's been destroyed." He shrugged, "worked in Afghanistan, and there's no way we can make it through the forest and across the next set of mountains in the darkness. At least not without having checked them first."

"Yes. We'd get out of the freezing wind for a few hours, too." Vadim looked around. "Check directions?"

Fishing with his gloved hand in his belt kit, Dan produced a compass, studying map and tool for a moment, before he nodded. "Straight down, preferably without ankle breaking."

"Or stepping onto a mine." Vadim shrugged, then straightened. "Fuck. Let's get moving."

"There's that, best you walk in front of me, aye?" Dan produced a fierce grin, before turning and starting to walk. The terrain was uneven, rocky, whenever they had to get through patches of forest it became softer, but equally treacherous. Now and then checking the compass, its face lighting up in the darkness, and he slightly adjusted the route. It was steep, though, and Dan's face set into a stoic mask after an hour of walking down, yet he never let up in speed.

Vadim did walk in front, letting Dan walk in his steps, fair was fair, even though Dan protested that he had just been taking the piss. Vadim forced himself not to think about it. Nor of the copious amounts of 'mine jokes' that Dima had been able to tell. Dima. Just where the fuck was the man? He moved on, adjusting his pace to Dan's, and covering a fair bit of distance in good time.

Eventually, Dan stopped again, listening into the silence, slowly turning his head as the sound of an owl hooting in the distance was heard. He finally shook his head, adjusted the woollen hat after another check of compass and map and pointed forward, slightly to the right. Just in case anyone was still in the village

and just in case they were wrong about it being destroyed, they couldn't afford any noise, least of all voices.

They walked on, more carefully now, hardly a sound, and the minutes stretched out in the darkness. Vadim moved forward, setting his feet carefully as they moved in a circle, protected. What the little light showed, however, made the situation awfully clear: several buildings had collapsed, some dark shadows were actually charred remains of roofs or beams, or smoke that had darkened the area above the windows. Vadim knelt down, watching. No light, no movement. Just dead silence.

Dan remained standing, leaning against a tree, his shadow merging with the trunk in the darkness. Nothing, and yet they couldn't be careful enough. He got Vadim's attention by making a small sound when he moved his foot, then nodded to him and made a gesture, indicating he was going to walk around the edge of the opening to get to the other side. Sliding the pistol into his hand, the sound of the safety taken off the only thing audible in the night, as he made his way along.

Vadim nodded and watched for any kind of movement that wasn't Dan, for any pair of eyes, the glint of a sight, anything. He assumed the place was literally dead, but he wouldn't bet his life on it.

About ten minutes later, Dan's voice was heard. Quiet, no names, indicating the coast was clear. He appeared from between a house and a burnt-down ruin, standing in the faint moonlight. A shadow amongst shadows.

"Nothing." Quietly, when Vadim came closer. "We can both take a guess what happened to the inhabitants." The frown was back, and with it the stoic expression in his face, which had turned into a mask that didn't show any feelings, not even anger. "Best find a place to hole up for the night, aye?"

Vadim nodded, didn't want to think that he might have been able to stop the men who'd done this and who would very likely go unpunished. "Ideally somewhere under a roof," he murmured. "Maybe there's food left. No idea how long we'll be on our feet, but I didn't bring any MREs."

"I got sandwiches and water. Some chocolate bars." Moving to the side, Dan went to check out the building to his right that seemed stable enough. It overlooked most of the open space and had windows to all sides. No dead corners, no blind traps. The windows were all broken, more or less, but at least the building gave some shelter from the icy wind. "Wouldn't touch any food, though, we have no idea how long it's been lying around."

"And they might have added some rat poison, just in case." Vadim shook his head and looked resigned. Because the other option was to get murderously angry. They moved carefully, watching, listening, pausing.

No need for the precautions, though, once they shone the torch around, it became clear the building had been ransacked. The furniture was smashed into pieces, duvets scattered and torn, scraps of fabric, torn books, papers, everywhere. "Damn unlucky." Dan murmured, "could do with a fire for warmth, but no fucking chance."

"No fire."

Dan made a huffing sound. "You think I'm a fucking novice, or what?"

"I just agreed."

"Okay."

Vadim looked around. It wasn't quite as bad as outside, but the houses that weren't burned were likely all in this state. "You get cosy upstairs, I check out the other buildings."

"No way, safer downstairs. I'll see if I can set up a shelter." Dan was taking the bergan off his back, began pulling out material that could be used for some kind of makeshift shelter, which would help them conserve as much body heat as possible. "I'll take the first guard, by the way." He stated, as Vadim was about to leave.

Vadim turned. "I won't argue," he answered, then vanished into the carcass of a settlement, checking houses and moving carefully. However, nobody seemed to have set up booby-traps, likely because they didn't assume anybody would come back, and that, in turn, was testament to the fate of the inhabitants. It was still eerie that there was no blood, no sign of violence apart from the smashed up houses, like there'd been a short, nasty rampage, and then they had moved on. Maybe the inhabitants were in that camp, or lying in a ditch somewhere.

He didn't find much - the whole settlement was thoroughly looted, and he didn't enter the burnt-out houses, which made this a short tour of maybe half an hour. When he came back, he was sure that they were the only living souls in that place and also that they couldn't stay here for very long. Just enough until light, gather strength, maybe sleep a little, and then move on.

Dan looked up at the noise, pistol at the ready, but he lowered it immediately when he realised it was Vadim. He had built a shelter in one corner from pieces of broken furniture, using torn-up bed linen to insulate from the cold. The blanket was out as well, lying at the ready, with the shredded pieces of duvets on the floor, having found strips of curtains to lay over them. All in all a 'cosy' place, which would help conserve as much warmth as possible. The food had been parcelled out into portions, and the water bottle was waiting as well. At least water wasn't a rare commodity.

Dan waited until Vadim had stepped inside before holding his hand out for the AK. If he was going to be on duty for the first couple of hours, he needed to be ready. "Have some food, water, rest."

Vadim handed the AK it over. "There's nothing left. No bodies, either." He sat down, hunched to preserve body heat. "Strange. I keep thinking, this country must have been beautiful," he murmured. "Before it decided to tear out its own guts." He took a deep draught of the water, had part of his ration, then lay down, watching Dan, who said nothing.

Dan popped something into his mouth which he'd had in his bare hand, then washed the pills down with water. They'd take a while to kick in, there wouldn't be any point in trying to sleep now. "Fucking dying for a fag." He muttered, had checked his stash, less than a packet.

Vadim inhaled deeply, tried half a smile, still somewhat amused at the pun of words. A running gag. He checked his watch. "Wake me in three."

"Greedy bastard. Meant to give you two, but I'm feeling generous tonight." Dan lifted the blanket from his bergan, which he'd settled into the corner, and sat down himself, leaning against his pack. Lifting the blanket, he indicated the space right next to him. "Don't be an idiot and lose body heat. It's fucking cold, I could do with some, too."

Vadim moved over to lie down right next to Dan, no questions asked. Remembered the icy, crisp air up in the mountains, the utter clarity. His body creating warmth on Dan's side, Dan warming his side. The closest they'd been for what felt like months. He began to relax, much easier to cling to that warmth and know he'd be secure. Whatever Dan had done. Whatever bitterness and anger still lurked. It was about surviving, soldiering, and he hoped not just that.

Tucking the blanket in around them, Dan watched Vadim fall asleep. Hadn't seen him that close for several weeks, and it fucking hurt, because he wanted to touch that face, feel the stubble beneath his fingers, how the jaw line went slack, and how the face turned from concentrated frown to something almost relaxed, but never quite. Not now, not here. Not since ... best not go there. He tore his eyes away, allowed himself a cigarette instead, and held onto the rifle in his gloved hands. Memories of the Gulf, of sharing a tiny cave with wounded soldiers, of heat and dust, and of seeing Vadim, knowing that very moment that whatever happened, there was no way he could ever get the other out of his body and mind.

And so he sat, waited in the silent night, occasionally checking his watch to stay awake, and letting his mind wander once more. Across the decades, across the countries and across the wars. His family, his friends, the sex he'd shared and the love he'd known. Lust and laughter, anger and jealousy, and a thousand other things, and he smiled in the end. If they got him this time, at least he had lived and he regretted nothing.

After a little more than three hours, dawn still far away, he woke Vadim with a gentle touch to his shoulder. "Hey, Russkie, time for me to turn into Sleeping Beauty."

Vadim stretched, tensed and stretched to wake up fully, and with regret shifted position, losing some of the warmth. He took the rifle and watched Dan settle in, suppressing a yawn. "Feel much better now," he murmured.

"Aye, hope the same goes for me." No sooner, though, had Dan burrowed into the vacated space, still warm from Vadim's body, that he began to drift off. He hadn't realised how tired he'd been, and kept underestimating the effect of those pain killers. He was asleep a couple of minutes later, but not before shifting closer, not realising what he was doing, and wrapping one arm around Vadim. Just like he would have done if

Vadim shifted the AK a little, freed his hand from the weapon, took the glove off for a moment and placed his hand on Dan's wild hair, careful to keep the touch light and not disturb him unnecessarily. What did it matter what had

happened? They were out in this war, alone, and whatever had happened had stayed behind. They'd still be caught by it, once they were back in camp, but not here, not right now. And how fucking insane that it mattered at all.

Dan slept undisturbed, until dawn was breaking, almost four hours later. Never stirring, not making a sound. Vadim moved his hand under the blanket to touch Dan's shoulder, and leaned in. "Good morning. We should break camp."

"Hm?" Dan sounded and looked bleary, disoriented, but no longer than perhaps a second, and he forced himself awake, realising the situation.

"Shit." Mumbled. "What time is it?"

"Almost half past seven. Figured we could use the sleep with what's ahead."

"Yeah, fuck. Exactly what I wanted to do in my old age." Dan rolled his eyes and stretched quickly, sitting up the next moment. He reached for his bergan to get to the water. His stomach made a loud noise and he grimaced, eating half a chocolate bar before washing it all down and holding the bottle out to Vadim.

Vadim took a couple of sips, then waved it off. "I'll pack. You wake up properly."

"Aye, need a dump." Dan got up, left Vadim who was already packing up the blanket, and stepped out of the building, taking a few pieces of scrap fabric with him. The ice cold air that hit him almost took his breath, but he moved on and across, towards one of the burnt-down ruins. He took barely a step inside, just enough to get out of the wind and the worst of the icy dampness, and swiftly went about his business. No2 first, then onto No1 once he'd cleaned up, and while he was pissing into a corner, he suddenly heard the sound of a vehicle in the distance. He froze, cursed his bladder, prostrate and whatever else that kept him from just stopping the flow, and couldn't help it, had to run out of the building, still pissing, but at least it stopped before he reached the other building. Tucking himself in, in record time. "Vadim!" Called out quietly. "Fuck, visitors!"

Vadim appeared in the doorway, bergan shouldered, AK ready, indicating with a gesture he'd understood. Trying to locate from where the sound came, and how to get away best. It was fairly likely that the chetniks had decided to check out possible places for them to hide once the first light had broken, and here they were. Question was, hide or fight?

Dan slipped into the building, saw Vadim had taken over the bergan this time, and he nodded, getting the shoulder pack instead. Indicating to the windows, the broken glass enabled them to hear the vehicle. Crouching down beside one of them, Dan had the pistol ready, whispering to Vadim. "Chances to hide? Fuck all. And we need weapons."

Vadim nodded and moved towards another window, then caught a glimpse of the car. He raised his hand, hid the thumb. Four men. All armed, all likely carrying some food and water, for a snack during the hunt. The car was even more interesting. He returned to Dan, crouched. "We should set a trap," he murmured close to Dan's ear. "Any ideas? I'm tempted to just shoot them once they get close enough."

“You sure who and what they are, though?” Eyes peeled on the vehicle outside, which had stopped, its doors opening. “Check for badges with a cross and the four ‘C’s’ or a Serbian eagle.” No more than a toneless murmur into Vadim’s ear.

Vadim nodded. Not that Bosniaks didn’t kill by accident. This fucking country had no uniforms, no rights and no wrongs. He moved again, closer, to get a good look at the men. Seemed like they were taking an interest in the mostly unscathed buildings, too. Just their luck.

The men were outside, talking, and while Dan strained to listen, he couldn’t make out any of the words. Not that he spoke the language, but he’d picked up enough expressions to get by, the language similar enough to Russian. It didn’t take more than a couple of minutes of talking and gesturing, before the fourth man went back into the 4x4 and the other three split up. When one of them walked past the window, the badge was visible, and Dan nodded to Vadim. Using sign language to indicate he was going to follow the one to the left. He only had a pistol and a knife, but if he used the firearms, he’d give the game away. The other two moved into roughly the same direction. Pointing to his pistol Dan shook his head, then let the knife slip into his hand and nodded. Another swift glance, then crawling along the wall and towards the door.

Vadim nodded, too, indicated he’d head out to the back, making sure nobody outside could see any motion. It would be a matter of time - and only short - until somebody checked out ‘their’ hiding hole, so he had to be quick. He dove out through a window, kept in cover, then, peering around a corner, saw one of the men enter a building. He ran after him, saw the man check out the building, and Vadim waited outside for him to return. When he did, a punch to the throat shut him up, and Vadim grabbed his head and broke his neck while dragging him inside. He stood there, breathing heavily. He remembered it had been easier, once. Or maybe his technique was fucked.

Dan had followed the second man’s movements, until he came close to the door. He watched the guy, his rag-tag mix of kit, mostly military, and the badge, told him what he needed to know. Simple. This time. Good and bad and black and white and what did it all matter. He had to take a life, like he’d done far too many times before. Had to do it to survive. Again. Afghan, Russian, Serb. Nothing was more important than his own life. That simple. Dan moved silently forward, grabbed the man from behind, and cut his throat. The body in his arms twitched and gurgled, while drowning in his own blood, but no other sounds. Like another man, a long time ago. Just that this time the blood was staining his clothes, before he could put the body down, pulling the man just inside the door.

Vadim moved to the next building, carefully stalking the third guy, who was checking out one of the ruins, and threw a stone through one of the broken windows. And, sure enough, the amateur soldier peered through the window. Vadim reached for the man’s rifle and pushed it violently back and up, making him stumble back and release the rifle. Turning it in his hands, Vadim fired

three successive shots, allowing the weapon to buck in his hands and the bullets to travel upwards, the final one tearing a good chunk out of the man's forehead.

Dan was outside, cleaning his hands on a patch of frozen grass not far away, when the rounds tore through the silence. Looking up, then hurried across to where the sounds came from, trusting Vadim had dealt with the men.

Vadim checked the body and stuffed what he could use into his own pockets, feeling the occasional shudder pass through the body that was still dying, then left the building, moving back towards Dan and the jeep, meeting Dan half-way.

"Sorted?" Dan asked, eyes quickly skimming over Vadim, checking for injuries.

Vadim gave a wordless 'all clear' hand signal, glancing around while thinking about the next steps. "We need to get moving," he murmured under his breath. "You okay?"

"Aye." Answering with a nod. "Got to hide them and strip what's useful." Dan glanced to where Vadim had come from. "Start with yours?" His hands were sticky, but he'd have to make do until they got to some water. "Damned bastard was more inconvenient" while moving towards the corpses. Never finishing the sentence.

"Stripped the last one, they travelled light," Vadim murmured, thinking, for a moment, what was damn inconvenient, but then swallowed it and pushed the banter away. They were still running for their lives and should keep focused. Jokes helped deal with the pressure, but he'd hate being taken out by a sniper because he'd preferred to crack a joke than look for the sun glinting off the scope.

Dan reached a corpse and bent down to take hold underneath the shoulders. "Seems as good a place to hide them as any." Gesturing with his chin to a building that still stood but was full of debris inside. "What's the rifle like? Any extra ammo?"

"AKs seem in good working order, enough ammo, unless you blast away like the Americans." Vadim gave a grin, helping to carry the corpse into the building.

"Good." Dan flashed a fierce grin of his own. "Mine had a shitty piece, as far as I could see, but haven't stripped him yet. Bastard is soaked and got me as well." He dumped the corpse and stretched. "Where's number two?"

"The other one's in the building over there. Should be not exactly obvious. Where's your guy?"

"Back at the building. I pulled him inside."

"Okay. That should be enough 'doing the honours'." Vadim straightened, prodded the dead man's shoulder with the tip of his boot. "Bastards should be missed within the day. And I assume there'll be plenty guys looking for them. Let's cover some ground. Pick up the AK on the way, too."

"Aye, and the guy who dropped them here could be back any minute." Dan made his way to the other building, where the corpse was partly hidden in the rubble. The rifle was on the ground, close to the door, and so was the ammo.

Slinging the weapon across his back, Dan stashed the ammo in his stained jacket, and some in his belt kit. "The pack's back in the first building, let's grab it and see what mine carried."

"Yes." Vadim went through his pockets, but everything was in order, just that near-compulsive last check when he was about to leave a location and move towards the next. "You take the lead, I cover."

Moving swiftly out of the building without another word, Dan hurried across the open space, but no sound disturbed the silence, nothing shattered the false peace. Only death and destruction seemed to bring such stillness, where no humans dwelled. He was soon back in the original building, while Vadim covered the door, and fleeced the corpse, whose coat was soaked with blood, but had kept the clothing beneath from getting stained. Dan grinned when he found some old fashioned webbing beneath the coat, and gestured to Vadim to help him strip the garment off so he could get to it. Pockets yielded nothing except for a map, but the webbing was a treasure trove. Whistling tonelessly when he found a stick of C4 and a handful of detonators, Dan slung the webbing across his back, then the AK once more, stashing the ammo in the more convenient pouches. "I take the shoulder bag and you the bergan?"

Vadim nodded and glanced at the body. "The things people carry." Frowning, he took the bergan and adjusted the straps to distribute the weight properly.

"Yeah, like me right now. I look like a fucking donkey." Dan flashed a grin, which made him dangerous and tinged with a hint of insanity. Dark skin, stubbled face, wild hair, together with the blood stains on his jacket.

"The most feral donkey in history." Vadim grinned back. "Let's leg it."

Putting the gloves back on, Dan pulled the chetnik's map out, as well as his own, comparing both of them, until he was confident that they did not differ. Using the compass, he pointed to the east. "There's a main road, but with a dirt track beside it. It leads roughly into the right direction. I suggest we take it, stay as much out of view as we can, while making time."

Vadim took the map and checked it, too. "I'd kill for a car," he murmured. "Should be able to cover the exposed area before noon, there's still some trees so we can do this. Once we're back in the hills, we should be safe enough."

"Aye. At least we got some sleep and are kitted out better than before." Dan walked fast, but he didn't fall into a sustainable trot before they hit the more stable terrain of the dirt track. They should be able to hear any incoming vehicle early enough to throw themselves into the ditch.

* * *

That same day, in the late evening, a vehicle was making its way along the fortifications of the camp. Driving slowly, like someone who had nothing to hide and all the time in the world. It didn't stop at the gates, though, instead moved on, until it came to a halt not too far away. Right next to the overgrown bunker.

The man who jumped out of the large 4x4 was short, wiry, wrapped in heavy winter gear with a woollen hat hiding his ears and nearly half of his face. A glowing cigarette hung from between thin lips in a face that sported more of a stubble than a man should who was dressed in such expensive kit.

Dima heard the car approach and looked up, fixing his gaze firmly on the door. He pushed the blanket apart that he'd wrapped around himself, and stood, unwilling to be 'found' sitting on the ground in a corner. The door was open, but he'd only left the bunker to shit and piss, and nothing else, spending the time reading, thinking, sleeping, and simply waiting.

"Merde!" The man muttered, loud enough to be heard inside, when he stumbled over a few loose bricks amongst the dead brambles. Puffing smoke, he was looking around, spotted the entrance, and instead of walking straight through, he moved to the side. "Dan sent me." He called out, his English heavily accented with French. "You in there?" Making his way towards the door and pushing it cautiously open, he never allowed himself to be a target.

Dima moved towards the door and pulled it fully open, staying mostly shielded by the door. "Come on in. My home is your home." He paused and grinned. "Metaphorically speaking."

Moving through after a careful glance, the man stepped inside. Casting a swift look around, then nodding at Dima. "Maurice." Inhaling deeply, he threw the butt to the floor while smoke curled out of his nostrils. "Dima?" Pulling the hat from his shaved head. Dark hair, dark eyes, a complexion as dark as Dan's, but entirely different. Aquiline nose and sharp cheekbones in a haggard face. So 'French' he made any proverb ring true.

"Nice meeting you. You're my date, then." Dima gave a nod as Maurice raised one brow, then lit another cigarette as Dima walked back to the kit Dan had brought him. "You're here to get me out, yes?" He began collecting what he could use, trained to leave no traces, stowing everything away. "Because I'm dying for something hot to drink."

"Oui. Dan asked me to." Maurice watched him and put his hat back on, the cigarette hanging between his lips. "Strange request." He shrugged, then stepped half-way through the door. "You're a medic, he said. And that you're good."

Dima packed the kit together, checked again that he hadn't left anything behind, nothing, not the foil pack of the condom, nor a food wrapper, and glanced up. "Special Forces medic," he said. "And you?"

"Spetsnaz. Oui. That's what he said." Maurice stepped aside and let Dima through, walking behind him. "I'm the doctor for the French security detail at the embassy in Belgrade." Leading Dima outside and to the vehicle.

"Nice job," commented Dima. "I assume that means proper pay and heating?"

Maurice huffed with dry amusement. The smoke, as always, curling in front of his face, "how well do you know Belgrade? The embassy is a massive art deco building. You would think we have heating."

"Sounds like heaven." Dima walked beside the Frenchman, studying him closely as if he was preparing to recognize the man for the rest of his life - one of those strange little habits that, in total, made it hard to move in polite society. "And access to proper resources?"

"What do you mean?" Holding the door open, Maurice waited for Dima to get inside the vehicle.

Dima got in, leaning over and opened the door on the other side. "What I mean is - embassy duty means you have all the medical equipment you need. Colour me envious. Most of my career, I had to improvise."

"So did I." Maurice shrugged, climbed in and threw the cigarette butt to the ground, starting the car at the same time. "It's cosy to have all the kit these days, but being out of the field can get boring." Glancing to the side, "you look as if you were still in it."

"I am. That means, I was." Dima turned to face Maurice. "What's going to happen now? Any idea?"

"Not sure." Maurice shrugged, driving towards the dirt track that would take them onto the road to Belgrade. "I take you to the embassy, sign you in as a long-lost ami of mine, feed you proper French coffee, croissants, and wine, and then you'll show me how good you actually are. After that we see if there's anything that can be done for a Russian in Serbia with medical skills."

Dima laughed. "First the wine, then the work? Okay." But he grew more serious, suddenly. "Where's Dan? Is he back in that camp of his? Any way to get in touch with him?" Get in *touch* was a euphemism if he'd ever heard one. Damn him, he'd liked too much what Dan had done to his body, and apart from that very obvious thing, he liked the man and wouldn't mind having that wine and coffee together with him.

"Hm?" Maurice had paid less attention than before, navigating a particularly tricky and icy part of the road. "Haven't seen Dan since yesterday, I guess you can contact him tomorrow, he should be in camp." The weather was turning worse and the clouds hung low and heavy, promising more snow. "You've known him for long?"

"We were both in Afghanistan," Dima said, leaning back in his seat. "He was fucking my superior officer. That's the only connection. The world is a small, strange place. And he found me and freed me from the place I was held a few days ago."

"He was ... what?" Maurice turned his head so sharply, the vehicle slipped for a second, before he had it back under control.

"That means you're not one of his friends in *that* sense." Dima winked.

"What sense?" Concentrating on the road this time, Maurice was taking them through the night. Mostly silent, except for the sound of shelling in the distance.

"Somehow, Dan scored himself a Spetsnaz captain, later major, good-looking bastard, if you go for tall, blond, and aloof. And I'd thought I was perceptive."

"Dan's gay?"

Dima felt a moment of hesitation, outing Dan to his friend was not a nice thing to do, but he'd thought Maurice knew, and it was too late to back-pedal. "Thank god I'm not bound by any confidentiality," he murmured. "Because I just fucked that one up."

"So, he is." Maurice flashed a nicotine stained grin, before reaching for his packet of Gauloises. In an afterthought, holding it out to Dima, who took a cigarette and the lighter, too, lighting his own and then Maurice's before returning the zippo. "Didn't tell me, but I never asked. Not the usual conversation when getting drunk in a bar." Maurice sped up when the road was getting better. "Anyway, why in the devil's name are you in the situation you're in?"

"I can only give you the official story ... I was sent here to help the Serbs and got kidnapped by somebody, then tied up and hidden away, where Dan found and freed me. It's embarrassing to end up as somebody's prisoner in my line of work. I wasn't even an active combatant ..."

"You better not be, or I won't be able to help you." The lights of Belgrade were coming into view in the distance. "If you've been involved in any of the shit, you're out. So you were better *not* involved in it, and just happen to be a victim caught up in it." Emphasising each word.

"I was." Dima lied without hesitation, holding onto the story as promised.

"And since you are obviously a victim, there might be some interest of the Serbian brotherhood in their Russian brothers to form a nice cosy brotherhood of brothers."

"Yeah, I found Yugoslavia incredibly cosy so far." Dima laughed and inhaled the smoke deeply. "Fucked up war, fucked-up country. What's your story? How did the French get involved in this? You are not a mercenary."

"No. Used to be in the legion." Moving down the road towards the town, Maurice elegantly avoided the first part of the question. "Just doing my job for France." He shrugged and fell silent.

"Right. The men without past. I understand." Dima fell silent as well, gazing out of the window. Still oddly thankful for the company and the fact he'd be able to drink something hot, the cold had crawled under his skin. If he was lucky, there was even a hot bath on the radar. Pure luxury.

And luxury it was, when they reached the embassy. Its splendour above and beyond anything else in that city, surpassing most others. Maurice told Dima to stay in the vehicle, while he filled in some forms and then asked Dima to come out, who's photo was taken for a guest file. They were finally done and the vehicle rolled through the gates and towards a car park, next to the building.

"I'm afraid you'll have to sleep in my apartment." Maurice parked the posh 4x4 and got out, waiting for Dima to catch up. "The sofa's not too bad, though, have fallen asleep on it quite a few times."

"No, I'll be fine. Don't worry. I've slept in some really bad places, and this ... this doesn't look like one of them." Gazing up, taking in the complete shift - an altogether different world. "Nice one. The French do it with style."

“You can call us a lot of things, but you can’t accuse us of not having style.” Maurice grinned, lighting yet another cigarette. Hardly five minutes between each. He led Dima through a side door that went up a staircase and towards a separate apartment. Spacious by all means, with a fire place in the main room, and a small kitchenette, with two doors leading off to bedroom and bathroom.

“You want to freshen up?” Maurice threw his hat over a stand in the miniature hallway, then peeled his gloves off. “You look like you need it. I brew us a coffee in the meantime.” Glancing at Dima while shrugging out of his thick jacket. “Or hot coffee first and bath afterwards?” Out of the winter boots as well, the man was as wiry out of the kit as he had looked at first glance. Dressed in black outdoor trousers and dark flannel shirt, the open collar revealed a glimpse of a smooth chest, while the stubble in his face was either artful or perpetual; Dima felt a stab of desire looking at him, might have been the isolation that had him focussed on sex, but the Frenchman was certainly interesting. Only how? Or even, whether?

“Now that’s a difficult question,” Dima said, setting down the bergan and taking off the jacket. “Can’t smell too good. That way’s the bathroom?” Pointing at one of the doors. “I could use a shave, too.” He ran a hand over his cheeks and chin.

“Not for my benefit, you don’t need to.” Maurice nodded towards the bathroom. “Kit’s in there. Disposable razors, the lot. Towel is fresh.” He was in the kitchenette, fiddling with a coffee grinder while the obligatory cigarette hang from between his lips.

“Thanks. I’ll have a soak first.” Dima headed into the bathroom, stripping the boots, vest, belt, trousers, underwear, every thread and every single piece of equipment off, even though it wasn’t much compared to active duty. He found a bathrobe that he assumed was Maurice’s and put that on, while the water ran hot and clear into the tub, steaming up the mirrors. A quick check unearthed razors and a well-stocked medicine cabinet that revealed that Maurice knew his painkillers and was a perfectionist in terms of kit to have around. Not a single ‘use by’ date run past, they were all good and ready to work their magic. The bathtub was filling up nicely, but he probably had some time for the coffee first. Padding outside, Dima headed for the kitchen.

The scent of freshly brewed coffee was overwhelming, even above the cigarette smell. Maurice was perched on a bar stool in the kitchenette, reading a paper at the breakfast bar, then looking up. “You’re not my size.” He commented laconically, before pointing to the pot of strong coffee. “Sugar? Milk?”

“Yes, both.” Dima sat down, prepared the coffee with a good shot of milk and two spoons of sugar when Maurice pushed over the condiments. “Yeah, the robe is a bit tight in the shoulders.” He grinned. “What’s in the news?” Taking a deep sip and closing his eyes with pleasure. The Frenchman made a perfect coffee, very strong, the kind of coffee that had been invented for nightshifts.

“Same old.” Maurice pushed the front-page towards Dima, before picking up his filter-less Gauloise and lighting another one. “Nothing a bottle of good Bordeaux won’t make more interesting.” With his mug empty, he stood up to reach for a bottle of wine out of a stash under the cupboards. “You didn’t tell me how Dan came across you?” he prompted while working on the cork.

“The guys who kidnapped me held me in a shelled school, and he happened to pick through the ruins and found me. I guess he might have seen them leave the building or found traces.” Another deep sip, and a disgusted look at the news. “Yeah, same old. It’s pointless to even try and understand this mess.” Dima listened, and the running bathtub sounded pretty full. “I better get into the tub ... you may bring the wine.”

“Oh, really? Guess I should be flattered.” Maurice rolled his eyes, but poured a couple of glasses anyway.

Taking the coffee with him, Dima went back into the bathroom, hung the robe over the heater, turned off the water, checked it with a foot and deemed it fucking damn hot, but just right to exorcise that chill from his bones. He slowly eased himself in, only pausing when the hot water had reached his balls, but then eased himself in fully and leaned back with a grateful sigh. He’d just submerged when there was a knock on the door that he’d left ajar.

“Come.” Dima didn’t move, just floated in the hot water, feeling his heart pulse with the dilution of the capillaries under the skin. He’d be red as a lobster when he got out, but the chill was leaving him, which was the whole point. Didn’t cover himself, that was pointless too, if this guy had been a legionnaire he’d seen cocks and balls and everything more than often enough. Especially as a medic.

“Your wine, Sir.” Maurice made an exaggerated bow and handed the glass of wine to Dima. “Is there anything else your lordship requires?” Flashing a grin as he sipped his own wine.

“Thank you,” murmured Dima. “Start to feel human again.” He took another sip, enjoying a different kind of warmth from a different angle, the relaxation and heat made him feel positively cosy. Even his fingers didn’t act up. “I don’t want to keep you away from work, if you have to do something else.”

“It’s half past eleven on a Wednesday night. Unless I get a phone call or the pager goes off, I’m a man without a life. You’re the best entertainment available, right now. Even the satellite telly is a pile of cow dung.” Sitting down on the loo seat, Maurice took a mouthful of wine. “What are you hoping to happen?”

“Happen?” Dima grinned. “For me, personally? I want to find a way out of this hellhole, get a life, a job, make it to old age, when, for a change, medical professionals have to look after *me*, no longer me doing that. Not quite sure how to get there, but I take every day as they come.” He finished the glass, put it down on the rim of the tub and reached for shower gel to wash himself, while Maurice grunted something, which sounded like agreement, took the empty glass and got up to refill both their glasses.

Dima suddenly realised that other people didn’t figure in his plans. No partner. No settling down with a family as other people did after the service.

There were still opportunities for sex, which was the main thing, but to spend the rest of his life alone? He washed his hair first, ducked under the water, and then used handfuls of shower gel to get the grime off his skin, watching the water in the tub take on a greyish colour.

"You hungry?" Maurice called out from the kitchenette.

"I could use a bite." Dima pulled the plug, then pushed himself out of the water, wiped it from his body with his hands, angled for the bathrobe, and stepped out in the same motion. "What's on offer?"

Maurice stood in the doorframe, with the refilled glasses in his hand, holding one out to Dima. He looked down to where a puddle was forming around Dima's feet, then back up again, raising one brow, but never said a word about the mess. "It's late, but the kitchen will still make sandwiches. Unless you want to brave my cooking skills. I got steaks, cheese, baguette."

"I wouldn't mind something warm," Dima reached for a towel and dried his neck, head, and legs, while the warmth had finally arrived in his body, and he felt relaxed and safe. There would be no late alarms, no sudden need to patch somebody up, no midnight raids. It was a small miracle, really, but he knew he'd miss all that if the peace lasted for too long. Conditioned like Pavlov's dog. And why did that dog never get a name? "It's hard to ruin steaks ..."

"Tell you what, you make them." Maurice flashed a rare grin, pushed the wine into Dima's hand once he had dried himself, and sauntered back to the kitchenette. "If you want anything on your feet, there are socks or flip-flops right behind the bedroom door." Calling out while gesticulating to the other door, before lighting another fag and raiding his fridge.

"Good point." Dima went the indicated way, opened the door and glanced around the room. Typically male bedroom, kept neat, but with no frills, large proper bed, and he assumed that Maurice didn't find it hard to make use of the second pillow - Maurice's charms even worked on him. A steel rack on the wall held a cross-country bike. Made sense, the corridor was a bit narrow for that. He slipped the flip flops on and headed back to the kitchen. "Nice bike."

"Merci." Maurice turned his head while cutting the baguette, cigarette as usual in the corner of his mouth. "I'm into triathlon."

"Figures." Explained Maurice's good legs and his wiry appearance. He looked like he had a lot of stamina, and kept fit after leaving the Legion. Dima checked the pan, and the nice dark red lumps of meat sat on a plate, bleeding gently. He remembered how he'd trained some cuts and especially some suturing on food like chicken breast and banana peels, and grinned. "Right. How do you like it?"

Maurice's brows shot up and his teeth went on show in a long, slow grin, before Dima added, deadpan, and enjoying it, "the meat?"

"Blue. Everything else is murder of a perfectly fine piece of meat."

"Yeah. I'll give it time to close the pores, at least." Dima grabbed a bottle of oil from the shelf, then let the pan get hot, checking every now and then with his hand hovering above, and massaged some of the oil into the steaks, before dropping them in the hot pan, turning after half a minute, and turning again,

until both sides had had about three minutes of heat. He took the pan off the hob to allow the meat to relax, while he cut up the baguette, taking the occasional sip of the wine. When the steaks had started bleeding again, he served them on two plates that Maurice had set next to the cooker, salt and black pepper grinders getting into action.

"Looks like you live alone," Dima stated, as they sat down to eat, the plate of cut-up baguette between them. Butter dish beside, and a wooden plate with a veritable selection of cheeses that Maurice had summoned from somewhere in the kitchen. "That because of the place, or are you like me? Never had the time to bother much with civilians?"

Maurice shrugged, while buttering a couple of slices of baguette with a thick layer. "I'm an anti-social bastard." Cutting into his steak, satisfied at the way the blood ran out of the meat, nodding at Dima with a very economic thumbs-up. "Always have been, always will be. Relationships are too much hassle."

"It's the job," Dima agreed, cutting his own meat, amused at the fact that both of them liked their meat pretty much still moving. Psychos. He devoured half the steak, then slowed down, because he didn't have to rush anywhere, and tried all the cheeses, ending up with a fairly salty one with blue veins that was just perfect with the meat. The bread tasted a bit flat on its own, but was good to clean the plate with.

Maurice, meanwhile, meticulously cleared his plate in an almost compulsive way. Piece of meat, neatly cut, piece of bread, starting at one end of the oval baguette slices, then piece of cheese, starting at the top of the cheese board and working his way clockwise along. Always in the same order, each bite washed down with red wine, which kept flowing freely between the two. His wine rack was stocked up well.

"What is the plan for tomorrow?" Dima asked.

"You wanted to call Dan. Otherwise, you can't leave the embassy, not yet. We're lucky they let you in without questions. I knew the guards would be dozy tonight, and since I happen to bring overnight guests somewhat regularly ..."

Dima grinned. "I keep getting into nicer prisons."

"If that's what you want to see this as? Feel free, but don't forget you're in France right now, and with what kind of papers? Don't think you could have walked through the front door."

"I was chained to a boiler for a few days, that screws up perceptions." Dima shook his head, amused, and smiling at Maurice to take the sting out in comparing his hospitality with Vadim's. Each of his successive jailers had been nicer, and wouldn't it be ironic if he could get sex from this guy as well? He emptied his wine glass, watching Maurice eat and drink, and remembered Dan, that damn nice sex, and was vaguely worried to not be in touch with Dan. He'd looked so unhappy and worried and plain disturbed. He should keep an eye on him. That kind of pressure could only blow up badly.

Maurice wasn't one for small talk, and they finished their meal in companionable silence, until they were both done and the wine had mellowed each man.

“Want to watch a film or head to bed?” Maurice broke the silence, the last bottle had only been started, plenty left.

“Watch a film, finish the wine, and then bed.” Dima could feel the alcohol build up, and stood. “Ah, damn. I don’t really have any clean clothes ... forgot to bring my suitcase.”

“We’ll find you something. You’re broader than I am, but I got sports kit that should fit.” Maurice stood up as well, clearing the table, the third or fourth cigarette between his lips, since he’d stopped eating. “Do you need anything tonight? Best look for it when I’m sober.”

“No, I’m alright. I can sleep naked.” Dima grinned. “Better than sleeping in one’s boots and all that.”

Maurice pointed with his chin towards the living room area, “the videos are over there. Pick one that you fancy. I’ve seen them all.”

The film shelf in the living room was sorted by genre, and in each one by title, in descending alphabetical order. Dima saw a lot of French films, but he wasn’t sure he was in the mood for artsy shots and deeply philosophical themes. A good selection of action flicks, plenty of British comedy, and there was a rich collection of porn. Amused that the Frenchman didn’t hide those, he checked out the covers. They featured women and men, threesomes seemed to be the common denominator, several guys on one woman the most common configuration in that one. Dima figured that Maurice likely had bonded the old-fashioned way, sharing a whore with half his platoon. He’d done that himself, half-drunk, being cheered on by comrades. A fairly gay thing to do, if he’d apply those terms. He shook his head - porn was probably not what Maurice was willing to watch, even though that remained an interesting option. If he’d make the first move, though, he’d have to do it in a way that Maurice wouldn’t kick him out next morning. He chose *Casablanca*, then looked at the running time and thought it would be too damn long, no way he’d be awake for that long. Back on the shelf with *Casablanca*, and he found something in the British comedy department. *Monty Python*. That should be safe.

“Found something?” Maurice called over, the cigarette smoke preceding the man, as he came into the living area. Bottle under his arm, freshly cleaned glasses in his hands.

“Good selection.” Dima was grinning, and stood, handing him the cassette.

“Which category?” Maurice’s brows went up again, looking at the video, while moving his full hands into Dima’s view. “You either take your glass or pop in the tape.”

“All of them.” Dima took the glasses off Maurice and placed them on the table, watching him switch on the TV and the video recorder. “Good taste.”

Working on getting the tape into the recorder, Maurice looked up from his kneeling position. “And that’s why I really can’t be bothered getting it messed up by a ‘relationship’. I take the sex when I get it, but there’s no ‘call you tomorrow’ in the morning.” He shrugged, blew smoke out of the corner of his mouth, and watched the video come to life. Taking the remote, he settled onto the large couch, which easily accommodated a fully grown man for sleeping.

“Same here. Just doesn’t fit into my life.” Never mind the fact that it was still illegal and there were a thousand ways to make his life harder if people guessed what he was doing with his hormones. “I don’t get attached.” And part of that was because Dima never wanted to get into the situation again where the guy who was bleeding out under his hands had, just the night before, come against him, so alive and panting, but for completely different reasons. Losing it while keeping somebody - anybody - alive, was no option. As long as he saw them as walking meat, he was safe and professional.

“The bedding is underneath, by the way. Won’t take a minute to set up.”

“Excellent.” Dima settled on the couch and poured them both more wine.

The film chosen was ‘the holy grail’ and even Maurice grinned and finally laughed, when the French threw a cow over the battlements to fend off King Arthur. Once again, he hardly talked, except for the occasional grunt, asking non-verbally if Dima wanted a refill, and towards the end of the film he was half asleep on the sofa. Empty glass in his hand, and the obligatory cigarette burning slowly in the corner of his mouth, before he remembered to stub it out. Dima every now and then glanced over, but apart from ‘accidental’ when he took the wine, nothing really happened. Still enough to make him wonder. It was like they’d both signalled their intentions, how they handled sex - very casual -, that nothing would mean anything the next morning - which was more than welcome -, and Dima felt he’d made his interest clear. Short of straightforward touching him, there was no way he could escalate further.

Maurice yawned when the end credits rolled down the screen. “Got to be up in ...” checking his watch, “five hours. Good thing I don’t sleep much.” His speech was hardly slurred.

“I can set up the bed by myself, you go get some shut-eye. Any chance I can work some tomorrow, too, or do I need some kind of security clearance?”

“I got to check all that, and find out how we get you a working permission. Dan told me what you do and what might be possible, and I promised I’d look into it. Shouldn’t be a problem - Russian in Serbia - while not quite brothers, it’s still friendly nation.”

“True.”

Maurice stood and stretched, the shirt riding above his navel as he did. As smooth as his chest, no glory trail to be seen, and Dima felt the urge to kiss there and bite, pull him closer, but did nothing, just stared at the bared flesh. “I’ll take the bathroom, then.” Maurice nodded, got bottle and glasses to clear the table, and switched TV and recorder off on the way. “Before I forget, any idea if Dan’s got day or night shift?”

“I guess day shift, he was on day shifts when he visited me, but that might have changed.”

“I see, you just got to try in the morning, then.”

“Yeah. And - have a good night, see you tomorrow.” Dima got off the sofa and, sure enough, found the bedding in a plastic bag stored underneath. He began to set up the bed, while the sound of water running was heard from the bathroom. Dima used one of the cushions as pillow, then shed the bathrobe

and slipped under the clean, fresh blanket, surrounded by a dark room, the LED lights of TV, video recorder and other technical equipment casting a minimum light into the room. He listened for Maurice moving about in the flat, until he went into the bedroom. He remembered that navel, the smooth flesh, stark contrast to Dan's enormous scars, and, thinking of Dan, he remembered how he'd been fucked, how he'd lost control and just enjoyed it. His hand went down under the blanket to stroke himself; not quite Dan's lips, but he thought of that image, how he'd taken him in one deep, hungry swallow, and he closed his eyes to fix that image there. Remembered how he'd brought him off and how he'd been in the morning, just that sensation, stretched and touched, skill and passion. Shit, he'd never thought he'd envy anybody, and he forced his mind to focus on the task at hand, using images, part from far away and long gone, others fresher and new. Stroking harder.

"You need a hand?" Maurice's dry voice was suddenly heard from the doorway, and when Dima opened his eyes, he saw him stand in the darkness. Nothing but a shadow, the red glow of the cigarette between his lips.

Dima cursed in Russian, his heart had jumped into his throat, he hadn't heard Maurice open the door. "Got ... two, but ..." He grimaced. "Wouldn't mind ... yours." Or was he mocking him? No. He was fairly sure Maurice was interested. Too fucking casual about it. Seemed his frequent guests included men.

The red glow moved away from the lips and into the hand, as Maurice stepped closer, stubbing the fag out in the ashtray on the table. "If you think we're all 'opportunity-gay' in the legion, you're probably damn right." His voice had dropped, making the heavy French accent roll smoothly. He was naked, his lean and wiry body illuminated by the LEDs.

"I'm pretty much ... properly gay." Another exchange that was setting down the rules, the lines that could or couldn't be crossed. "Maybe opportunity-heterosexual." Dima gave a short laugh.

Maurice grinned, teeth visible in the darkness, pulled the duvet off Dima and let it drop to the floor, before he sat down on the edge of the sofa, leaning over him. That close, Dima could see that Maurice was smooth almost everywhere. He wasn't a swimmer for nothing. He wanted to touch him, a sudden hunger that was made worse by the situation, that meeting of almost-strangers in a dark room, with both wanting the same thing.

"Just a hand, or ...?"

Dima reached up to touch Maurice's chest, slid down towards his abs, enjoying the smooth skin and the warmth of another human being. Alive, undamaged, easy and not complicated at all. "What do you like?" Wondering where the hell it would lead, he'd like to fuck this smooth body, but he'd suck him, too, or just rub against him, a hand was good, just that closeness, some manner of communication that meant something for the moment, and nothing next morning.

Maurice shrugged, still just leaning over Dima, not touching at all. "I'm pissed enough to say 'anything', because I've done everything, and I have no preferences. I'm an opportunist, and you seem to be an opportunity."

"I'm certainly that." Dima pushed himself up to pull Maurice closer, and whispered in his ear - even though they were alone and there was no need to whisper. "Can I fuck you?" He cleared his throat and ran his hands down Maurice's body, touching his cock, his balls, the smooth flesh turning him on more.

"If you're good? Oui." The pragmatic answer came without hesitation. "Are you good?"

Dima laughed. "Would I tell you if I was bad ...?"

"No." Maurice flashed a grin while reaching over and across Dima, bodies almost touching. "But if you are I'll kick your arse." He opened the drawer in the narrow table that stood beside the sofa. Finding a tube and a packet in the dark.

"Fair enough." Dima continued to touch the other, that lean, strong body, and murmured, "You could sit on me. Leaves you the work, but that's hard to screw up."

"Good thing I'm fit." Maurice scooted up. The sofa was broad enough for him to straddle Dima. He didn't say anything, unscrewed the lube and squeezed it into his hand. Leaning over Dima, his hand moving backwards, lubing himself up, and Dima watched, just keeping his erection with slow, leisurely strokes. Maurice opened the condom and rolled it down over Dima's cock, which made him inhale - weird, Maurice remained as casual as if he was dealing with a patient, even when Dima stroked him, playing with the other's cock, almost as casual, while Maurice slicked up Dima's cock with generous amounts of lube.

Moving upwards, Maurice stopped when he was poised over Dima's cock. "Guess it's up to me to make it good now."

"Yeah. You can kick your own arse if it's not good for you ..."

Letting out a throaty chuckle, Maurice took a deep breath, and, while guiding the cock with one hand and steadying himself with the other, he lowered himself down. Slowly, so slowly that his muscular thighs were rock hard.

Dima tensed, heat and pressure, his lips opened as he could only feel what happened, entering a dark silhouette of a man, a man he hardly knew, but that was what he usually got in terms of sex. Apart from the fucking, which was relatively rare. He remained totally still while Maurice took him in, using his strength and weight to impale himself, and the slow, focused movement made Dima groan slightly, touching those tensed thighs, that vibrated with control. "Fuck, yes," he murmured in Russian.

"Seems you don't complain." Maurice breathed out, sounding somewhat forced, as he rocked slightly. Small movements, until he was all the way down, sitting on Dima, with not a millimetre to spare. Clenching his muscles, tightening the already impossibly tight heat, as he rocked again. "Been ... awhile."

“Getting ... fucked, or sex?” Dima breathed, focusing on remaining still, stroking the other’s body instead, thighs, flanks, chest, nipples, trying to work out what Maurice liked, whether firm or gentle, teasing or rough.

“Having anything bigger than a finger up my arse.” Maurice let out a rusty, breathless laugh when he suddenly moved up, slowing down before the cock almost left him, and then slammed himself back down, with far too much speed and a groan of pain and unmistakably lust, taking Dima completely by surprise. Suddenly breathless, lust climbing when Maurice forced out “Merde!,” straightened up to change the angle, before he moved up again and did the same once more, then leaned forward, once more changing angle and speed. “Twist my nipples.” He murmured, nearly face to face, hunched over Dima’s body, and Dima reached up, taking hold of his nipples, twisting and pulling on them, feeling the man respond. “I like it rough when I do this.”

“No ... problem,” Dima murmured, bucking up, never mind his response sounded stupid in his own ears, of course it was no problem, only that Maurice was fully in control of the speed. Using his legs for leverage, he thrust up, in time with stimulating the other’s nipples.

Maurice took full advantage of having complete control. Fucking himself with increasing speed, bordering on viciousness, at the same time intent on getting Dima off. Never touching his own cock, and slapping Dima’s hand away when he tried to stroke him, Maurice was using his control that expertly, and with so much greed, Dima had no chance, but to follow the ride that would take him over the edge all too soon.

Dima tried to meet Maurice’s motions with equal force, but Maurice had all mechanical advantages, angle, position, there was little Dima could really do, and he tensed up after an especially fast motion, cumming with loud groans, holding onto Maurice’s hips and thrusting inside him. The orgasm searing through him and out of him, reducing him to a panting, boneless mess, feeling the sweat on his body, at his temples, roll down and soak into the blanket underneath.

Maurice moved off, the moment Dima had stopped thrusting. Scooted up Dima’s body, until his legs were spread wide, with knees on each side of a shoulder, his cock at Dima’s lips, expecting him to take it and to let Maurice fuck his mouth in retaliation for having had his arse.

Dima had hardly any time to think, Maurice set the speed and he didn’t argue any of it, instead opened his lips, the briefest of thoughts about hygiene and health, and all that, but truth was, he liked giving head, dangerous or not, and right now he didn’t care. Instead placed both hands in the small of Maurice’s back and pulled him closer, opened his lips for the cock to pass through, the heat and taste, precum a definite indicator of how much Maurice had enjoyed himself so far, and he took him deep, tightened his lips, sucking on the other’s cock as best he could while still breathless, struggling a bit, but he didn’t have to suck the Frenchman for long. Maurice was so far gone already, he tensed and cursed in French under his breath, all at the same time, as he came

with his hands in fists and his body rigid with sculpted muscle, as his cum shot down Dima's throat.

Dima swallowed in reflex, and he held on to the other man, stroking him while sucking the last drops out of him, part of him recoiling at the thought of all these STDs, Maurice's promiscuous sex life, but dirty sex was just plain better, and he hoped the surgeon was clean. Not that it made a difference now. He lay back, allowing the cock to slip out, breathless, satisfied, but his skin crawling with unease. Fuck. "Unexpected," he murmured and cleared his throat.

Maurice leaned over, still breathless, reaching for one of the many packets of fags that were lying around in the flat. He stayed on Dima as he lit not one, but two fags, just lowered to sit on Dima's groin, the condom still hanging off the spent cock. "You worried?" Offering one of the cigarettes. "I can show you my last test results. I'm a surgeon not a suicidal idiot."

Dima laughed, somewhat embarrassed, and hesitated to take a deep draught from the cigarette. "Hadn't ... thought you were. Just that knowing about all this shit can really screw up my enjoyment of cocksucking. Don't like to suck on plastic, though."

Maurice shrugged, "I don't like cocksucking. Full stop. Don't like licking pussies either. Told you, I'm an antisocial bastard."

"That's alright ..." Dima reached down to pluck the condom off and tied a knot in there, trying to remember whether there was anything close to the sofa where he could dump it. "Shit. You have any idea where I can put this?"

"Just dump it, I'll get rid of it in a minute." Maurice inhaled deeply, the smoke hardly visible in the dark.

Dima dropped it, running his hands lazily over the other man's body, enjoying the peace and quiet, the heat, the closeness, and noticed that Maurice just rested, without touching him much. That, too, was alright. Some men were affectionate, others withdrawn, others turned around and went straight to sleep. He, personally, liked to explore bodies some more, stroking and feeling, but he also knew the old rule that whatever happened, it didn't mean a thing the next morning. He wouldn't get invited into the bed and comradeship was the only thing he could expect here. Which was fine. The lines were drawn, the rules set down, they had both agreed to them.

Maurice finished his cigarette, and when both were done, he slowly got up and stretched, glancing at the clock on the video recorder. "Hardly worth going to sleep." He leaned forward and placed a kiss onto Dima's mouth. More than the pecks on the cheek of both their cultures, and less than passion, but it nevertheless felt affectionate and honest.

"Thanks, Dima." Maurice murmured, "let me know when you need a hand again."

"Or you." Dima grinned, tiredly. "Because I'm game."

"Perhaps we swap places next time."

"Sure, if you're any good ..."

Maurice laughed hoarsely and got off the sofa. Picking up the condom from the floor, he padded towards the bedroom via the kitchenette, and the sound of

the rubbish bin being opened was the last thing that was heard before the bedroom door closed behind him.

Dima lay in the dark a bit longer, then reached down to find the duvet, turned onto his side and closed his eyes. Life was, actually, pretty good, and Maurice wouldn't screw him over - it was good to have allies like him, and Dan, of course. Relaxing more deeply with every breath, he soon drifted off.

* * *

The next morning came too soon, but Maurice tried to be as quiet a possible, as he brewed a coffee that could wake the dead. Sitting down at the breakfast nook with his favourite French newspaper, chain-smoking and drinking his coffee black, which counted as breakfast. He was dressed in shorts, showered.

Dima woke, had a quick shower, and wore the bathrobe again. A superficial glance at the paper told him it was French, and that meant he could only get the gist of it. "Good morning."

"Morning," Maurice glanced up, nodded, then buried his nose in the papers again. Even less chatty in the mornings than usual.

Dima added milk and sugar to a mug, and filled it up with some coffee. "When are you off to work? Anything interesting in there?"

"In ten minutes, and only if you are interested in French politics." Maurice hardly looked up, then finished his third cup of coffee.

"Fair enough." Dima sat down and stared into his coffee, not a 'rise and shine' person himself, but he'd woken up and he wasn't the type to lounge about in bed much longer after waking. That was a bad habit.

Maurice got up and pushed the paper towards Dima, before heading wordlessly into the bedroom. He came back out in under five minutes, dressed and with the obligatory cigarette in his mouth. "Here's my pager number." He put a piece of paper in front of Dima's nose. "If anything's up, page me and I'll phone." He pointed to the cordless telephone in the living area. "Highly unlikely anyone other than I phones through the day." He pointed to the second number, "that's Dan's camp, it's the main number of the guard room. It functions as a switch board." Pointing to the third number, "and that's the embassy's main number, just in case."

"Right. Thanks. And what are you up to?"

Maurice shrugged. "I'm out some of the day, organising medical support. The Red Cross is short on surgeon teams and I got drafted in to help." He didn't look unhappy about it, on the contrary.

Dima gave a sigh. "If I'm lucky, they could use me to mop up the blood at least?" It made him itchy to just wait and just spend time, when there was work to do. Words like 'short on surgeons' were magic and stronger than coffee.

"You need a working permit first, no matter what. If you leave the embassy now, chances are I can't get you back in. They're used to me bringing guests, but they never stay more than a night. And they never return." Maurice tipped the ash from his fag into one of the many ashtrays. "There are clothes in the

bedroom, help yourself. The sports kit is in the left-hand side of the wardrobe, but something else might fit as well. I don't have secrets." He flashed a grin and inhaled, before clapping Dima's shoulder and making his way to the door.

"Good luck." Dima waited for the door to shut behind Maurice, then began to dig around for clothes, eventually finding a warm woollen jumper than fit him, slightly frayed around the edges, and he found the sports kit, most of all the bottoms. After he'd located the washing machine, he tossed his camo kit in there, had some baguette and cheese for breakfast, topped with another coffee.

He then called the number of the camp. He got through to the guard room, and when asking to speak Dan McFadyen, he was put on hold. For a rather long time.

"Who is speaking?" A different voice came finally on.

"Dmitri Starov." This didn't bode well. "I am a friend."

"I am afraid Mr McFadyen is not available. Where can we reach you when he becomes available?"

Dima gave him the phone number of the embassy, and added he was staying with "Mr Maurice," because, again, he had no idea what the Frenchman's last name was. "Maybe Mr Krasnorada is available instead?" Vadim would know where Dan was. Most likely.

The line went quiet again, but at least it didn't take as long as before. "I am afraid Mr Krasnorada is not available either. Can you tell us the nature of your enquiry?"

It felt as if they were holding him on the line while not giving out any information. That could mean a lot of things, including that he couldn't just call them, that nobody put anybody through who wasn't family, but did that make sense? "No. They are friends, and I want to know whether they are okay." Dima began to pace.

"I understand." Another pause, voices in the background. "When did you last see either Mr McFadyen or Mr Krasnorada?"

Oh shit. "A few weeks ago." The last thing he wanted was to have these guys on his arse because he was the last one to have seen both. "So you have no idea where they are?"

The about-turn was evident. "I see. I am afraid I cannot tell you about the whereabouts of either employee, except that they are not available right now." The case was closed, or there was another reason why the person refused to elaborate. "Good bye."

"And fuck you, too," said Dima, laconically, and put the receiver down. Fuck. Dan and Vadim were out there, somewhere. What if Vadim was hunting again and off to kill another band of chetniks, and Dan was tracking him? That was the solution, no other reason why both were gone. But what could he do, short of heading there too and searching the area for both of them?

He called Maurice's pager, felt the surgeon probably might have an angle to get more information.

The phone rang about three minutes later. "What's wrong? I'm in the middle of a meeting."

"I got the feeling Dan and Vadim are both gone."

"Merde." Just one word and the sound of inhaling deeply. "How do you know?"

Dima quickly summarized the non-conversation with the camp. "Well, they asked me when I'd seen them last. They wouldn't ask that if they knew. Do you have access to the place? Or can you get it?"

"Depends. You got anything to go from?"

"Hardly anything. I know where Vadim was active ... and Dan was tracking him. And I know what Vadim's doing, and it's ... not legal, by any stretch of the imagination. It's probably the right thing to do, but it's entirely wrong at the same time. Shit. He's fucked up, and I don't want to get him in trouble."

"If they are both out and no one knows where they are, then I guess your Vadim is in a hell of a lot more trouble than anything you could get him into." Maurice paused, the sound of smoking heard on the other end. "I'll drive to the camp when I am out of the meeting. Should be another hour or so. D'accord?"

"Okay. Keep me updated." And yes, I think Vadim is in trouble, Dima thought to himself. "Thanks. Bye." Nervous now, mostly because he had nothing to do but wait for his clothes to wash and dry, which didn't really occupy his mind. Instead, he cleared away his bed stuff and sat down in front of the TV. Finding CNN, he watched that for a while, staying right next to the phone.

Two hours passed and still no phone call. Two and a half hours later there was the sound of the key scraping in the lock and the door opening. "Dima?" It was Maurice.

"Yes?" Dima stood, the tumble dryer still had his camo - or rather, Dan's camo - and would probably take a while longer. "Do you have anything?"

Maurice nodded, closing the door. "They don't have a clue where they are." Throwing his keys onto the breakfast bar, he frowned. "Wouldn't say that I lied, but let's just say I got them to tell me what was up. Neither has returned to duty this morning, and they haven't been seen by anyone since last night, when Vadim returned from shift. As for Dan, he hasn't been seen since he came back from visiting me in the afternoon. That means no one has any idea where they've been for a whole night and all of today." Lighting a cigarette, his frown deepened. "I also got out of them that there has been an influx of movement beyond the 'safe zone', but they don't know why."

"Sounds like they both went straight into 'enemy country' and stirred the hornet's nest while standing right in the middle of it. Shit. And we have no way to locate them. I'm not worried for Vadim, he's good at operating behind enemy lines. He's good. Dan must be good, too. But why the fuck do they risk that? What for?"

"Look, I haven't got a clue. You tell *me*. I've been seeing Dan quite a few times in the bar. Drinking, chatting, occasionally playing chess. I wasn't even aware he was gay. I really don't know him that well." Maurice shrugged. "Had never heard of Vadim. *You* tell me why the hell they would go into enemy territory. Dan didn't strike me as a reckless idiot."

“Okay, the story is pretty short. Dan and Vadim are ... a couple. Of sorts. Have been together for ages and all that. Vadim was my superior officer in Afghanistan. He’s Spetsnaz. Unfortunately, he’s also moving around and ... taking justice into his own hands. I can only imagine Dan followed him to hold him back.”

“Of sorts?” Maurice shook his head. “What that’s supposed to mean? Dan certainly never mentioned Vadim.”

“With me, he mentioned him all the time, but things haven’t been going well between them, lately. From what I could piece together.”

Maurice was shrugging out of his jacket, “so you think Vadim went off on a rampage, trying to do single-handedly what the entire UN isn’t allowed to do, and Dan followed, because ... he tried to sort their relationship?”

“Exactly. Vadim’s doing what he thinks is right. And he has a fairly convincing case, unless you’re sane and a civilian and believe in justice by trial.”

Maurice shook his head, “what is he, a self appointed judge and jury? Anyway, if they got caught there wouldn’t be any additional movement, so that means they must still be on the run ... I just don’t understand why they aren’t returning to the camp. Unless ... they can’t.”

“Maybe they’re cut off - and just try to outrun the chetniks and find a way to break through the lines. Shit.”

“In that case, where would one start to look? And last but not least, what on earth are we going to do? Except wait, because let’s face it, there is nothing we - nor anyone else - can do. Certainly not legally, and anything else is suicide.”

“If I knew where I could start looking ...” Dima shook his head. Re-join the chetniks that were hunting Vadim and Dan was out of the question, too dangerous that they didn’t believe him if he told them some lies, and too dangerous that Vadim or Dan would kill him. “Vadim’s a comrade.” And Dan was a friend. Of sorts.

“I was in the legion for too many years not to understand, and I believe we have both seen too many men die, but if you went out there, the chances are, you’d die, too, and that would help no one.” Maurice reached for another cigarette when the first one had burnt down. “Are you willing, though, to tell them when you last saw Dan and Vadim, and what your suspicions are?”

“Vadim ... took me prisoner and kept me in a boiler room in some building for a few days. He tried to keep me from getting into trouble. Must have been five or six days ago. Last time I saw him was three days ago, just before Dan found me and took me to the bunker. If I tell them where and how I met them, that would put me in a bad position. They’d assume I’m a chetnik.”

Maurice nodded. “Merde.” Muttered, inhaling deeply. “You’re out, then. Guess I have to lie. Don’t know about Vadim, but saw Dan yesterday afternoon, he could have told me about his troubles.”

“My bet is that Dan is where Vadim is. Or at least close.”

“And that is somewhere we haven’t got a clue about, but is probably right in the middle of enemy territory.” Maurice picked the jacket up again and shrugged back into it. “From what I can tell about Dan, he survived in Afghanistan. If

anyone's going to get out of there, it's him." Picking the keys up as well, along with woollen hat and gloves. "And what about Vadim?"

"Spetsnaz major. He's good. Fucked up, but good. But you can bait bears if you use plenty of dogs ..."

"Not if the bears are experienced enough." Jacket zipped up, Maurice nodded to Dima. "I'm off to the camp again. Will see what I can do by telling them all 'I' know. The best bet for you is to stay here, I'll be back as soon as possible."

"Okay." Dima forced himself to relax and calm, but he'd have given a lot to be able to do something. Anything. "I'll wait."

Maurice nodded and was out of the door.

November/December 1992, The Balkans

Dan and Vadim hardly exchanged more than a couple of words for about an hour, conserving their strength, as they continued the half walk half jog that allowed them to do good time. Keeping them warm in the freezing cold without exhausting them. Except ... but Dan refused to acknowledge how his knees were bothering him after an hour, and how the right knee was turning into agony during the second hour. He had some painkillers left, that would have to do.

Vadim kept back a little, every now and then turning to check. He didn't like running with his back to the open valley. Allowing Dan to set the pace, knowing Dan tended to be slower. However, when he studied Dan's movements, he could clearly see that the other favoured his good leg. Shit. That, too. "Give me the bag," he said, breath still steady.

"No." Dan turned his head, continuing the pace. Not breathless either, just as fit, but the goddamned pain was there. Nothing he couldn't ignore. "No fucking need."

"Donkey alright," murmured Vadim, just audible.

"Fuck you." But without the venom, "I'm ..." Dan was about to add 'fine' or some other bullshit, when he suddenly stopped, straining to listen. He was certain he'd heard a sound, but nothing like an engine, more like ... music? "What the fuck?" He murmured, glancing at Vadim.

Vadim paused, crouched to be less of a silhouette against the sky, breathing deeply, but also glad to rest for a bit. He frowned, not quite sure what he was hearing. Or rather, what it signified. "I think it's coming from three o'clock."

Dan threw the bag onto the ground and got the rifle at the ready, before moving down into the ditch, pressed against the frozen ground, peering onto the main road, while Vadim took position between some bushes, covered, rifle ready and aiming at the road.

The sound was approaching, and Dan closed his eyes to concentrate. No doubt. Music. Who the fuck would be crazy enough in this hellhole to drive around with music blaring out? And why ... he suddenly waved to Vadim to come closer. "Fuck, I recognise this!"

"What is it? Folk song?"

Dan nodded, straining once more to be absolutely sure. "Some crazy fucker is blaring out 'On the Far Bank of the Pliva River', or however they call it. They changed the lyrics, but I don't get more than a few words. Doesn't matter, all that counts is that this is the new *Bosnian* national anthem."

"Is it just?" Vadim took the finger off the trigger. "What now? Will you sing 'We Will Rock You' or 'God Save The Queen' so they don't put a dozen holes in us when they see us?"

“That’s the fucking problem, isn’t it? Shit.” Dan looked towards the approaching sound, then back at Vadim and his eyes flashed. “We need to stop them first, or they might not hear our melodious singing, aye?” Looking around, he pointed to the pile of dead wood in the ditch. “How long to get this onto the road?”

“Not long until you’re in shooting distance. We might already be.” Vadim cursed. “Would be nice to hitch a ride, but this ...” is too risky, he thought, frowning. Where was a white flag – or a British flag – if one needed it. “Could fire a few shots in the air and hope they investigate before firing back.”

“Let’s try that, then. What have we got to lose?” Their lives, hell, but Dan trusted they’d be able to kill before getting killed, if they had to. “And we could win a vehicle, either way.” He shrugged, took his position again, and peered over the edge of the road. The music was getting so loud, he wondered if those crazy bastards had a megaphone strapped to their car.

Vadim sighed, but aimed at a cloud in a trajectory that wouldn’t cause the bullet to drop down on anybody’s head, and fired two pairs of two shots, but remained in cover.

Dan followed suit, a short burst later, and the vehicle that came racing along slowed down, the music still blaring. It was so loud, the ground was reverberating around them. Dan let lose another couple of shots, and the vehicle stopped. Pick-up truck. What else. Couldn’t see anyone on the back, but that meant nothing. Dan stayed where he was, kept the two guys in check that jumped out of the front, rifles at the ready, and he shouted at the top of his lungs, in his best drill sergeant voice, “Don’t shoot! We’re British!” Adding, for good measure, and despite the contrary, “We’re English!”

Vadim just hoped that his looks wouldn’t cause them to think he was just dressed up British, and let Dan have the lead. He’d dealt with insurgents and all kinds of irregulars. Watching as some guys got off the vehicle, thinking, for a long moment, they might have been wrong and these guys might be Serbs or whatever, who had merely tried to appear Bosnian so they could round up the rest and shoot them somewhere. That was when he told himself he was getting hysterical or paranoid, or both. He raised his rifle and stood up, absolutely hating to put himself at the mercy of these guys.

Dan saw what Vadim was doing, and he got up, hands in the air, rifle on show. “Don’t shoot!” Thankfully the music was being switched off and the two guys didn’t shoot, looking at them with facial expressions that instilled everything but trust. One of them was big, older, he’d been in the driver’s seat, holding what seemed an AK, and the other was tall and thin, a young man, hardly more than a kid, but his rifle was rather different, at first glance the long barrel was prominent.

Dan made his way out of the ditch, struggling for a moment, when he threatened to slide back down on the icy ground that slushed vegetation into slippery pulp, when the thin guy said something to the bigger one, who called out towards the back of the truck, and Dan understood only a couple of words. “Come” and “English”.

The next moment three heads lifted from the pick up, one of them a teenage girl, and another a boy who could be hardly more than sixteen or seventeen, but it was difficult to tell in a land where everyone had eyes as age-old as that of mothers who'd seen their son and daughters dying. The third seemed an old man, too frail to be fighting, and yet he held a rifle, aiming at them.

The young guy jumped off the truck, holding a rifle trained onto Dan and Vadim, when he addressed them in English. Accented, but better than expected. "Who are you? Why are you here?"

"British mercenaries," said Vadim, lowering his weapon very carefully and slinging it back over his shoulder. "We got lost. Undercover. You understand?" He tried a smile, tried to fit the pieces together, instead noticed the Dragunov sniper rifle in the lanky kid's arms and was stabbed by a moment of envy. He really, really liked that rifle. A fucking life-saver.

Dan looked from one to the other, nodding.

"We met some chetniks down the road." Vadim pointed at the village. "They didn't make it."

"Prove it." The boy demanded, but Dan shook his head, laughing without humour.

"How? Unless you want to drive back there, there's no way to prove that the kit we stole from them wasn't ours in the first place."

"And they don't wear dog tags that we could have taken as trophies," Vadim added.

The boy frowned and Dan exchanged a glance with Vadim. "Your English is good." The kid pointed at Dan.

"That's because I am fucking British." Moving his hand to his jacket pocket when he suddenly had a thought, Dan stalled, made a placating gesture when rifles were getting too twitchy. "Hang on, just want to show you something." They nodded, the kid said something to the big guy, and Dan pulled out both his map and a couple of chocolate bars. British chocolate bars, Cadbury's dairy milk, couldn't get any more British than that. The kid's eyes almost popped out of his head at the sight. "See?" Dan held the front of the map up, printed in English, "and these chocolate bars, where would you get them here?"

The kid talked rapidly with the big guy, the lanky one added a few words as well, and Dan didn't understand anything, they were talking so fast.

"Okay." The kid finally said and the other two nodded. "We believe you." He was still staring at the chocolate bars and Dan smiled.

"Want them?"

Vadim gave a laugh, typical of Dan to make friends that easily, over a piece of sweets, as Dan generously handed out his chocolate, and even the girl came down from the truck. The rifle seemed far too large for her small frame.

"Can you take us a bit down that road?" Vadim asked. One of them had to remain focused. He pointed at the map. "We need to get back to camp." We shouldn't be here, he thought, but didn't want to tell them that. He didn't want to appear as somebody who'd prefer to sit on their hands and do nothing about the slaughter. Because, in his case, that simply wasn't true.

The big guy nodded, and the lanky one opened his mouth for the first time. "We go town." Pointing along the road. "Come. Come."

Dan looked at Vadim and nodded. The town they were referring to was fairly small and closer to camp. He pointed it out on the map, especially the bridge that connected the town with the hilly forests that stretched all the way down to camp. On the other side of the river.

"Aye, and thanks."

Vadim nodded. "That works for us." He moved to get their kit, slapping Dan's shoulder when he passed him, and loaded himself with both his own and Dan's kit. From the town, it shouldn't be difficult. The terrain was rugged, but unless something had happened to that bridge, it was all within limits, even if he counted in Dan's fucked knees.

Dan climbed into the back of the truck, where the old man nodded at him and the girl just looked, looked with huge dark eyes, and then the boy jumped inside as well.

"I'm Stjepan." The youth flashed a grin at Dan and Vadim, showing off his weapon, like other kids would show off their new walkman. "This is Sanya and over there is Uncle Bocic."

"Dan." Dan smiled a little, "and this is ..." hesitating for a moment, realising that a Russian name wouldn't instil much confidence, "everyone calls my friend Rocky." Flashing a quick glance at Vadim, who nodded, stoic, but understanding. He was reasonably confident they wouldn't peg him by his accent. It took more skill at a language to place other non-native speakers.

Stjepan laughed, even though his eyes were never touched by any of these emotions. The music suddenly came on again. Earth shattering loud, but very different to what it had been before. Dan sat up, couldn't believe his ears and turned towards the driver cab. The big guy was looking at him, thumbs up, and grinning from ear to ear, as Jimi Hendrix blared out of what was, indeed, a megaphone strapped to the vehicle.

"All Along the Watchtower"? Are you lot completely fucking bonkers?" Dan asked no one in particular, when the pick-up started, and he had to dive for something to hold onto, as the car shot forward with screeching tyres.

Vadim shook his head, for moment felt a chill when he remembered the stuff they'd pulled off dead turkeys in Afghanistan. Rock music, like this. Probably the same group or singer, even. He had never cared much for it, but the younger recruits had loved it. He shifted to cover the area behind them, figuring that was the most likely angle of attack.

Yet nothing happened, despite the insanity of playing music that loud, there were no attacks, no one on the road. Racing at top speed towards the town, the girl was drinking from a coke bottle. She offered some to Dan and 'Rocky', who declined. Dan, however, took a sip, the sugar and caffeine kick was a godsend, and then offered his precious cigarettes. The only one who declined was the girl, and despite Stjepan's age, Dan was the last one to argue the kid shouldn't smoke. Existing in a hell like this? Where father had turned against son and neighbours tortured neighbours? He'd hardly die from nicotine induced cancer.

Wedge into the corner behind the cab, Dan let his eyes wander along the hill tops, scanning for anything out of the ordinary, but nothing. Nothing at all, until they came closer to the town, and suddenly there was smoke. Dan prodded Vadim, pointing wordlessly to the signs of fire. Vadim shifted, narrowing his eyes as he peered into the distance. But it was a silent tableau - no way that they could hear anything, not against the music, when they turned a corner and it all became clear from one second to the next.

“Fuck!” Dan yelled, “are you fucking *insane*?” Staring at the kids, but there was no emotion in their faces, neither in the old man’s. Completely stoic, as if they were already dead, or as if the roadblock, the armoured vehicles in the distance and the goddamned shelling that was bombarding the goddamned town that was *goddamned* under fucking *siege* was the most normal thing in the world. “Get down! Get the fuck down!” Dan threw himself flat onto the ground, as the pick-up truck raced towards the roadblock.

Vadim contemplated getting out right now, but figured they’d be dead anyway, unless they were incredibly lucky or the old guy knew something they didn’t. He pulled in his head, braced, knew he didn’t stand a chance of getting out unscathed at this speed. Heading for a direct collision, mind razor sharp and numbed at the same time as adrenaline kicked in. “Fucking bastards,” he shouted, as if that changed anything.

Dan kept his head down, felt limbs close by, unable to figure out if it was Vadim or any of the others, as he clung to the side of the pick-up. Jimi Hendrix’s guitar was screaming in his ears, the truck speeding along, dangerously veering from side to side, and he counted the seconds before the impact.

It was harsh, and painful. Smashing through the barriers, as bullets went flying, not any longer sure what were guitar riffs and what were fired rounds, the truck lost control, racing in a diagonal line towards a shelled-out building. Lifting his head, only enough to peer over the edge, Dan shouted “Fuck!” They were speeding towards a couple of burnt out cars, and there was no way the driver was still in control, if alive. But he couldn’t jump out, he found his leg grabbed by the teenage girl, clinging to him as to life itself.

Vadim gritted his teeth, knew he had to do something, absolutely anything, and acted without thinking much. Sticking his head out entirely too far, he smashed through the separating window with his pistol and knocked out as much of the shards as possible, then reached in, stretching as far as he could to get to the wheel, steadying it, while at the same time using it to pull himself through the window that was never meant to allow passage to a large-framed guy in winter clothes. Hissing as he noticed he’d cut himself, but managed to get most of his body into the driver’s cabin, kicking to get his legs in because he couldn’t reach the brakes from his position, while the vehicle continued to race, because the dead guys’ leg was on it. Vadim pulled the handbrake with all his strength, causing a grinding, screeching sound deep in the engine.

“You fucking lunatic!” Dan forced out, but he knew just as well, that Vadim’s crazy stunt was the only chance they had not to get turned into a mess

of splintered bones and torn flesh. The truck was veering from side to side, the movements getting more extreme, and it hit the second of the burnt-out cars, the impact enough to make it lose balance. It had slowed down enough to topple over, almost in slow-motion, sliding along the frozen ground on its side, the bottom of the vehicle towards the attackers on the hill, and Vadim was tossed against some of the remaining shards, twisted and turned and bit back a scream – pain, confusion, whatever, he couldn't allow that to affect him.

Dan held onto the railing, as he yelled to the others in the back, "Get out! Get the fuck out!" But the girl didn't react, clinging to both of his legs now, making it impossible to move while the old man was thrown out, and Stjepan jumped, immediately rolling behind cover.

Vadim managed to carefully squeeze free – not into the cabin but through the cabin out of the window, and fell to the ground, in pain, rolling over and readying the rifle. Hoping he wasn't cut up badly, not that the adrenaline would allow him to feel anything much right now. He was in cover, protected by the car, then shouted, "Sitrep?"

No answer, while Dan pulled the girl up and out of the way, propelling her into safety behind the same rubble that the boy had jumped behind. Finally able to move. He looked around himself and found the old man on the ground, blood coating the white hair, his eyes wide open, staring at nothing. "One dead." He jumped out, ensured he took everything with him, while Hendrix kept singing and playing. Why wouldn't that goddamned music stop? "Kids alive." Staying behind cover of the truck, he crawled towards Vadim, and his hand descended onto the other. Heavy. Warm. "You?"

Vadim nodded. "Might need patching up." He glanced up. "Let's go. Out of the fucking kill zone."

"Aye." Dan nodded, "but first ...". He moved towards the cab, before Vadim could protest, reaching inside and switching the damned radio off. Only then realising that the lanky kid was still alive. Holding his arm and moaning in pain. "Shit." Calling towards Vadim. "Help me to get him out."

Vadim got to his feet, then noticed blood running down the insides of his camo – predictably. He'd cut himself somewhere in the waist area, left side. Fuck. "I'll get the door, we'll lift him out together." He climbed the side of the car, wrenched the door open, expected a bullet for his misplaced bravery, but none came. He helped Dan lift the kid out, like they'd rehearsed the motions a hundred times, one holding when the other let go. Vadim tensed when the exertion hurt, making the cut open and gape, and he just hoped that no shit had entered the wound. How clean had the glass been? And how deep had it gone?

They were quick, functioning like a well oiled machine. They got the kid behind the barriers, Dan carrying the sniper rifle across his back, when he finally took a moment to look up and around. Stjepan was beckoning to them from the gaping door of what looked like a former department store. Now bombed and shelled, burnt in several areas, but the writing above the now boarded up windows still spoke of the delights of consumerism inside. If only. Dan nodded to Vadim and they hurried inside, leaving the worst of the danger behind them.

It took only a second after they'd laid the lad down in a corner, before Dan drew up to his full height, yelling at Stjepan, "what the fuck were you thinking? You fucking idiots! Fucking damned stupid killers, you ..." Finding himself presented with half a dozen rifles, safety off, pointing at both him and Vadim.

"Shshshsh, Dan, easy." Vadim raised his hands and thought, how ironic, getting shot now would be really funny. "Easy." Squinting into the dark, trying to make out who might be in charge – not fucking easy when nobody wore uniforms or any kind of tassel. "We're British mercs. We got lost. We mean you no harm." Raising his arms, he could feel another trickle of blood run down his side. Gaping again.

"Shit." Dan frowned, but raised his hands as well. "You listening? We're not your damned enemies and we sure as fuck didn't mean to get into this bloody situation." Looking at Stjepan with such intensity, that the boy turned to the others and spoke to them, rapidly. Dan hardly understood a word, but the body language was non-threatening, and there was eye contact. The guys finally lowered their weapons, nodding slightly, even though there was no way they trusted the two strangers. Too obvious in their faces, but who was to blame them.

Stjepan came closer, nodding. "It's okay, they believe you, but they ask what you are doing here." Dan glanced at Vadim, nodded slightly, saying without words that he was going to deal with it. And he did, telling the kid what he needed to know, all the parts of the tale that were true but did not discriminate them. He saw from the corner of his eyes that a couple of women were dealing with the lanky kid's arm which appeared to be broken or shot. Stjepan relayed the tale to the others and the wariness gradually vanished from the faces, until they nodded at Dan.

"You got to answer *me* a question now." Dan was still just as pissed off. "Why the fuck didn't you tell us? Taking us *into* a besieged town? You are a fucking bunch of bastards!"

Stjepan shrugged, proceeded to take a pouch of tobacco from his jacket pocket, rolling a cigarette. "We need help."

"Really? And what the fuck do you think we can do?" But Dan didn't wait to hear the answer, when he caught something in the corner of his eyes. Vadim. His jacket. Vadim ... and blood running down into the BDU's. "Fuck!" he left the kid and turned to the other.

Vadim gave a pained smile. "Yeah. Fuck." Now that the adrenaline was beginning to turn stale, the pain came in. It wasn't too bad, he kept telling himself, couldn't be bad, or he'd be losing more blood. Probably looked worse than it was. "I'll be okay. Just help me to patch that up, will you?" He moved away from the door, put the bergan down. "Light. You have to check whether there's any fibre or other shit in the wounds. And whether it's deep. I can't tell."

"You don't need to tell me." Dan sounded gruff, hiding the concern. "I survived a few years in the fucking mountains, remember?"

"Yeah. Just ..." Covering that I'm nervous, Vadim thought. Stick to the rule book, do what's drilled in.

Looking around, Dan noticed an old fashioned full length dressing mirror that must have been in one of the changing rooms once. It tilted and was only half shattered. Going to retrieve it, he manoeuvred Vadim into a corner, close to a shot window, the mirror in tow. "Don't tell me about windows and danger. We need fucking light, you said so yourself." Positioning the mirror so that the daylight reflected at maximum impact, illuminating as much as it could in a fairly large spot.

Vadim stripped out of jacket, vest, shirt, undershirt, baring his upper body to the cold. Checking himself by slightly twisting and prodding at the cuts, before Dan slapped his hands away, which made him huff with laughter.

Vadim figured the belt had prevented him from getting cut up more, but there were several deep scratches along his side, a darkening mark on his ribs – but he could still breathe deeply, so didn't think any bones were broken, just some more or less serious bruising. The most worrying thing was a deep gash in his side, the source of most of the blood. Keeping his back covered, not allowing anybody to see the scars. The alphabet looked too Russian. "Just clean it and sew it up if it's deep. I got bandages." Reaching for his pocket.

"So do I. You just fucking sit still and stop moving." Dan frowned, the best way to keep himself from worrying. Worrying about what? Vadim catching an infection? Vadim catching a cold? Vadim hurting? Vadim getting shot, or Vadim ... shit. Always Vadim, but he'd known that all along. Crouching down beside the other, he took his gloves off to check the wound. "I need something strong. Alcohol."

Vadim nodded towards his shoulder bag. "There's a flask of vodka. As always. Never leave the house without it." Voice slightly strained.

"Aye. One of the few things you damned Russkies ever did right."

"Careful," Vadim murmured. "Don't need a lynching on top of this ..." Glancing over to the Bosniaks.

"Shit. Yeah." Dan murmured, then rummaged in the bag, pulling out the flask. "You know as much as I do that this will hurt like fuck. Then again it could be worse. I could have to suture it."

Vadim grinned. "Will hurt like a *bad* fuck. Good fucks hurt in a good way."

"Kinky bastard." Dan growled, but there was something in his voice that was everything but annoyed. Caring. Damn. Fishing in his own pockets for a pack of tissues, Dan leaned close and poured the vodka along the cut, making Vadim tense, hiss and groan. Dan caught the overspill with a tissue, wiping the blood away. Cleaning and sterilising in one go.

"Bad news. It *is* worse and I have to stitch it." Dan looked up, dark eyes in pale ones. No joke, no banter. "I'll be quick. It's not the first time I've done it."

"Yeah. I figured. Just make sure there's no broken glass in there. Fuck. Where's Dima when you need him?" He shook his head. "He'd tell me to shut the fuck up and stop mewling."

Looking up, Dan's eyes were once more on Vadim. Needle and thread in his hand from his own first aid belt kit, his eyes as serious as before, and his voice calm. "He's in the French embassy."

“What?” Vadim looked up, meeting Dan’s eyes with intensity that might be anger or pain. “You took him? Fuck. And I thought ...”

“Aye.” No more. Not the hundreds of words that needed to be said. Just Dan’s eyes and a look that met Vadim’s. No point in hiding.

“Okay.” Vadim suddenly gave a nod, all that stuff made sense. Dan had followed him, found Dima, brought him away. Played him. He grinned sharply. Dan rarely fooled him, but he’d fooled him about Dima. And Dima, the bastard, had obviously taken the opportunity, and likely fooled Dan into believing he was an innocent, a tourist in this war. Clever bastard. “That’s one thing off my mind.” Leaving fifteen or so others.

“For now. Unless your friend doesn’t stick to the little lie I concocted.” Dan shrugged, finally took his eyes off Vadim’s face. “Now sit still and stop mewling.”

Vadim gave an involuntary laugh, but held still, watching Dan suture him, the needle threading in and out of his flesh, left and right of the gaping cut. Fast, efficient, clearly not the first time he’d done that. Vadim held his breath to make things as easy for Dan as possible, forced himself to take the pain, just accept it, watching the stitching with clinical interest, jaw muscles tight and teeth grinding.

“Done.” Snipping the thread off, Dan reached for the sterile bandages, pressing a large pad onto the wound, gesturing for Vadim to take over the pressure, and he did, noticing his hand was cold and sweaty, but steady. “Not as good as a surgeon, but it’s not that I haven’t scarred you before.” Matter-of-factly, while unrolling an elastic bandage to hold the pad firmly into place.

“First time you close the cuts, though.” Vadim gave a small smile. He’d like to rest, but if he interpreted the sounds outside correctly, the war there objected to him having some painkillers and a nap.

Dan looked up again, stopped for a moment what he was doing. “Aye. But it seems we’re not very good at closing wounds.”

“And I’m better at dishing them out than taking them,” Vadim murmured, face dark. “I’m such a nutbox.”

“I don’t argue that point.” Finishing off bandaging Vadim’s waist, Dan tied the ends securely. “But there’s a fucking war out there, and if I’m not mistaken, we’ll be minced meat in this place in, ah, a day or so? Happy prospect, eh?” Fishing in his jacket pockets, he pulled out his painkillers. “Here. They should work. Take two.”

Vadim frowned, glancing down at Dan’s knee. “I’ll be alright. Makes me sleepy, I don’t like that.”

Dan shrugged and ignored the glance, took a couple of painkillers himself, washing them down with a mouthful of water from his bergan, while Vadim stood, slipping back into his clothes. He was getting fucking cold and sharing warmth with Dan wasn’t an option. “Urban warfare. My favourite,” he murmured, listening to the sounds outside.

“Best get the intel, then.” Dan stood up as well, scratching the stubble that was irritating him already. “Hey!” Calling out to Stjepan, “you wanted help? You better tell us what the fuck’s been going on here.”

The kid reluctantly moved towards Dan, nervously rolling another cigarette, the rifle slung across his back. “Didn’t do it deliberately.”

“Oh, really?” Dan snorted.

“No!” Frowning, one hand smoothing the frazzled ponytail in his dark hair, “didn’t know you were on that road, but ... we need everyone we can get.”

“To do what? Die?”

“No ...” Stjepan looked around him, furtively, before hardly meeting Dan’s eyes. “This is my home town.” Quietly.

“And that means exactly *what* to us?”

“That you’d be just a fucked without us, somewhere on the road, than you are here?” The kid lifted his chin defiantly.

Dan shrugged, “at least we wouldn’t be sitting ducks.”

“Whatever.” Turning away, Stjepan lit his cigarette. “But we wouldn’t be, if they didn’t hold the bridge.”

“What?”

Vadim nodded. “The bridge. If they can shut it down, they might be safe. At least, killing them would be a hell of a lot more inconvenient – until summer, of course.”

Dan’s head whipped around, he hadn’t expected Vadim to stand behind him. Where had his senses gone?

Vadim frowned and looked at the kid. “Is that it?”

Stjepan nodded, but then stalled. “Almost.” Truth dragged out like the smoke from his cigarette. “They say we won’t hold out any longer than another day, unless a miracle happens. But we can’t cross that bridge, anyone who tries gets shot down.”

“Fuck.” Dan let out, heartfelt. “Frying pan into the fire.”

“It’s a kill zone, from what I’ve seen on the way in,” said Vadim, anger carefully guarded. “Wasn’t much, didn’t have the time to get a feel for the place.” His lips tightened. “I need to borrow that rifle. The Dragunov.” He pointed to the kid with the broken arm. “And we might have to hold out till nightfall. But we can deal with that bridge. The C4 you have should be enough to blast it away.” He looked at Dan. “Fancy some dirty spec ops stuff that’s against the rules of engagement, deep in enemy territory?”

Dan lifted his head, thinking, judging, already going through all the options available to them. When he met Vadim’s gaze a slow and utterly dangerous smile was spreading across his face. “What do you think I’ve been doing most of my life?”

“Hm. Wait. Maybe dirty spec ops stuff that’s against the rules of engagement and deep in enemy territory?”

The kid seemed confused, when Dan laughed, but Dan waved him off to get the sniper rifle for Vadim, explaining how ‘Rocky’ had been a sniper, back in the days, and how this really was the best idea of them all.

“Right.” Dan sat down in a corner, shielded away from the rest of the men and women. There were more people than they’d first thought.

Vadim started to clean the Dragunov. Just like the AK, the Dragunov was a fairly forgiving weapon, sturdy as hell and reliable to boot, but he had no idea through whose hands the rifle had passed and he was giving it a good clean, taking it apart and wiping it all down, scraping away dirt and grime like in the old days. Calmed his mind, cleared it, made life look simple, mechanical.

“Been thinking about this shit.” Dan was spreading out some of the food. All they had left was a handful of sandwiches, and the precious water. “I’d like to kill the whole fucking lot of those for getting us in this situation, but that won’t do. Second best plan is, what do those bastards outside expect the least?”

“A counter-attack?” Vadim glanced up while his fingers connected the first part to the second, a gentle, soft, tender click announced that the Dragunov responded to his care. “My guess is, they have a sniper or two. I can probably deal with the bastard. If you don’t have artillery or air support, get a good sniper to take out the enemy sniper. I can do that. Not rocket science, just a waiting game.”

“Aye.” Dan grinned, as feral as in the days of Mad Dog and his suicide operations. “They don’t seem to have the heavy guns out, either. I saw armoured vehicles and RPGs. There’s shelling going on and possibly some light tanks from what I can make out. Nothing serious, eh?” He laughed, entirely humourless. Handing a sandwich to Vadim, who placed it on a thigh and continued putting the rifle back together. “Nothing I haven’t dealt with before.” In Afghanistan. On the ‘other’ side. “If we draw their attention to this bit ...” Dan made a swift sweeping gesture in the grime on the floor, a defence line, the front of the town, a hundred yards away from where they were, “they’ll be forced to take their focus off the bridge, and voila, Bob’s yer Uncle.”

“And how, short of calling in the cavalry, are you going to do that? I mean, sending the poor bastards out to attract the sniper so I can spot him is not one of the options ...”

“Good old Molotovs.” Dan smirked, biting into his own sandwich, which tasted like cardboard. “Remember the 70s? All those damned hippie protestors? Throw a Molotov at a vehicle, and if you feel really lucky, add some soap powder to it, and it’ll stick, drawing out any rat. They open the hatch and *wham* you splatter their fucking brains like you splattered those villagers’, back in the mountains.” Glancing around himself. “Let’s face it, there doesn’t seem to be anything worth saving in this place. So, burn the front,” making dots along the line he’d drawn with a finger, “here, here and here, will get them really confused and worried.” He was chewing for a moment, before his eyes lit up, even more feral than before, “and the fucking idiot with his music? How much, you think, would those bastards appreciate a dose of ear-drum splitting Hendrix? Mighty confusion, aye? While we operate under cover of the noise.”

Vadim grinned. “Beats flanking them and killing their guards and as many as possible in the dead of the night until somebody wakes up and we end up lynched. Not by much, mind you, but at least we won’t be cold.”

Dan snarled, his grin was so nasty it hardly resembled a human emotion. "And in the meantime? We get the survivors across the bridge. Leaving plenty of time for us to head over ourselves and then blow the bridge up." Shoving the rest of the sandwich into his mouth, his last words were mumbled. "What do you think? Now they just have to buy it."

"I'm game. I don't mind taking the survivors with me on the way out. If they join us, cool, if not, nothing we can do. We can't force these guys. Fuck, we likely can't even protect them once we got them out. Or what do we do with the poor fuckers?"

"What we do with them? That's not the question, because we need them." Dan washed his food down with a couple of mouthfuls from the precious water. "You never had to work with a bunch of ragtag, unorganised individuals before, did you? It was all orders, conform, duty for you, but we can't send out cannon fodder this time, we haven't got any. We have to convince these people here, because we *need* them. This is not a one-man show, not even a two-man one. We can't do it alone, as much as that might irk."

"Oh fuck," groaned Vadim. "Okay. Okay. You've done this job, and yes, I've tried to bring some skills to a bunch of goat herders, but that was the Afghan secret police, and those guys ... were a different kettle of fish. And besides, I didn't like that part of the job very much." Another piece of the Dragunov clicked into place, and Vadim checked it, making sure everything was in the best order possible, all moving parts smooth and well-greased. "I just won't let this place kill me. Whatever it takes."

"That's my intention as well." Dan grinned, "so, we are clear, I convince them and you stand behind me, running the show together, aye? I can't do it without you, I'm not a fucking sniper, never was, just a good shot." Dan shook his head, "and you got the discipline, while I got ..." he flashed another feral grin, "something like 'creative chaos'." He was repacking his bergan, glancing over to Stjepan, who sat crouched beside the teenage girl. His sister? Who knew, but whatever had happened to that girl, Dan was wondering if her eyes could be anymore dead even if she lay buried beneath the ground.

Vadim merely glanced at the girl – it just wouldn't do to think of his Anya, or go all soft and mushy and fatherly, because, yes, fuck, *father* was a word that bit too fucking deep right now. "You convinced me."

"Aye, now we just got to convince them ..." and with that Dan stood up and walked over to the kids, followed by Vadim who felt his wound. It would get a lot worse before it got better, but he was, above all, operational.

Stjepan looked up when Dan stopped in front of him. "We have a plan."

The kid frowned, "Yeah? To get us all out?"

"Yeah." Dan echoed, "it was you who thought 'we need help' was a fucking good excuse to get us into this shit. Why the hell did you even go back? This is insanity." Making a sweeping gesture towards the outside.

"Our families are still here." Stjepan pushed his lower lip out, to all intents and purposes sulking, and looking no older than the sixteen or seventeen that he was. "At least what's still left of them."

Dan glanced at Vadim for a moment, who gave the smallest of nods. "Okay, and how many people are still here? In all?"

"About a hundred?" Stjepan shrugged. "Most of them are elderly or kids. Everyone else has been fighting, was shot, or was pulled out before the chetniks came."

"Where are they hiding?" Dan looked around, couldn't see any of those Stjepan described.

"In the cellars. This town is old, despite the buildings here. It's middle ages in the centre, and most of the buildings have cellars that are connected."

"Are they now ...?" Dan glanced at Vadim again, a small smile spreading across his face when an idea came to him. "So, that means you can move around the town without having to surface?"

"Not all of it." Stjepan shook his head. "The buildings at the waterfront are destroyed, no exit there. Some parts, though, yes. It's a bit like rats in a tunnel." He shrugged, fishing for his tobacco.

"Rats in a tunnel." Vadim gave a grin. "Best piece of news I've heard all day. Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" He looked at Dan, who smirked back at him.

"Vietnam, eh? Buildings, not jungle."

"Exactly. Urban combat with tunnels. I love it already. And that's why they didn't take the city yet. They're not risking losses. I think ... I'm dying for a proper tour of this place."

"Sounds like a good idea, right after I've explained our plan."

"Plan?" Stjepan got up slowly, lighting his thin stick of a cigarette, while Sanya remained sitting on the ground, pretty much as before. Her facial expression never changing.

"Aye. What's the last thing those bastards out there expect?"

Stjepan shrugged, "no idea?"

"Attack, of course. They think this place is just about to fall, and you know this is true as well as they do. How much longer can you hold out? What about your ammo, food, water, the wounded?"

"We would have taken them out, but we can't!" Stjepan frowned, reacting as defensively as if Dan had accused him of anything. "The chetniks have the bridge under control. Day and night, everyone who tried to cross it got shot, and those who tried to swim to the other side, never made it. The currents are too strong."

"Aye, but they haven't destroyed the bridge, right? Even though they could. If they can snipe anyone who's on it, they can shell the whole construction."

"They need it."

Dan grinned, and it was a truly frightening smile. "Exactly. That's why we have to get their attention away from the bridge."

"But how?"

"As I said, by attacking them from the front."

"You are insane!" Stjepan looked at Dan as if he'd sprouted a second head.

"Maybe, but ... Rocky and I here, are both ex-SAS. We're the best chance you've got, and if you don't take it, you'll be dead by morning, together with everyone in those cellars, once the town has been taken. Or do you really think the chetniks are going to take them to a safe place?"

Stjepan said nothing, but his facial expression spoke volumes, looking across to the teenage girl for a long moment. Finally shaking his head.

"Right." Dan nodded. "Now that we understand each other, you got to convince the others. In the meantime we'll figure out the details of the plan."

"What details?"

"You think we just go out there and shoot at their goddamned tanks? Hardly." Dan let out a sound, close to a laughter but none of the humour. "Just trust me, We've got it all sorted."

"Okay." Stjepan nodded once. "I'll talk to them." He was off within the next moment, over to a group of men.

Dan turned to look at Vadim, lowering his voice, as he grinned wryly. "Guess I better come up with the plan now, aye?"

Vadim gave a smile. "A map would be good. A tour, too. We should have the afternoon and evening for the decisions, plans, and preparation." Glancing around again. "I'm in the right mind to draw them in and slaughter them in the tunnels."

"That's suicidal." Dan frowned, then scratched the stubble on his jaw. It itched, and it was more than just a beard shadow after a day and night. "Then again, it might be a last resort."

"Yeah. If we can't make it out."

Dan walked back to their bergan, sitting down and waiting for Vadim. "We have to disable their tanks first. Fortunately they are shitty little things, nothing like ours, and no way they are airtight, so drawing them out with smoke and fire should work." He gestured behind him, outside to the wrecks in the street. "How much petrol you think is left in those? There seemed to be quite a few and not all were burnt out." Flashing a grin, "and I'd wager there's some soap or washing powder still flying around, same for bottles ... and rags should be in plenty supply."

"Yeah. And we can move around looking for that stuff without drawing the sniper's fire. Unless you want me to try and locate him and shoot him while you gather the ingredients."

"You think it's only one? I don't. Still, damn, getting to the cars means we'd have to be moving in daylight. If you could ..." Dan pondered, didn't finish the sentence while drawing idly with his fingers in the dust on the ground. "My plan is to get everyone who's fit enough to gather the supplies, using those cellar systems. If there are about a hundred people left, they can't be all too young or too old to siphon petrol, find soap powder, gather bottles, fill them, and stuff them with rags, ready to be thrown when we've drawn the tanks close. But we need a distraction for our movements ..." Dan sucked on his teeth. "Of course, we'd have to rig up good old Jimi, from as high as possible, directing the sound at them. There must be some sort of equipment left in this place that isn't shot

to pieces. Speakers, anything. This was a department store, after all. That should bloody well distract and confuse those bastards.”

“Yes. And they can’t cover all the town. I don’t think it’s a dozen snipers – their priority is the bridge, obviously, and if they can take pot-shots at people moving through the streets too close, excellent. I’d love to see a muzzle flash so I can pinpoint at least one of them.”

“That’s sorted, then. I draw one of them out, you kill him. Easy.” Dan let out a huff, but he was deadly serious. “That should worry them, make them even more ready to send all they have when we attack.” A slow grin began to spread. “We need light. If we burnt down the corner buildings, encouraging the fire to spread along the front row, but keeping the second one free ... that should give us enough time to confuse them completely, and enough light for you to shoot them like rats when they get out of their smoking tanks in blind panic. I’ve seen it before, it worked with you lot, why not with them.”

“Yeah. Reduced visibility and the slow movements. Tanks in cities – bad idea.” Vadim grinned. “I can do that. No big deal.”

“I bet once they start dropping they’ll get their artillery all the way to the front, leaving the bridge alone, and the people can leave under cover of darkness. Their town burning in the front, while we cover up any suspicious sounds with the music. That tape must still be in the truck.”

“Yeah. Let’s get it when it’s dark. We can rig the front row buildings with petrol and gas and whatever they have. To keep the fire where we want it. Determine which area we’re going to burn to the ground.”

Dan nodded. “Seems you have more experience in that. I leave the buildings to you. In the meantime ...” he pondered a moment, “I got to rig the bridge with the C4. If we don’t blow it up after we’re all across we won’t make it very far. Just trying to figure out the best time. I need light, but so does the sniper.” But of course, that was it, “unless we combine those two. Thoughts?”

Vadim frowned. “Draw their fire and kill them. So you ... stand a chance with that bridge.” He rubbed his face. “They’ll likely notice some activity here, means the snipers will be watching. But I need them to fire so I can take them out. We need something that draws their fire.”

“Here in the front or near the bridge?”

“Depends where the snipers were active before. I’d need their pattern. Hey, Stjepan!” He stood and walked over to the youth, who turned towards him and away from an ever growing group of men. “Tell me everything about the snipers on the other side. How many did they kill? Where? What time of day? Can you show me?”

“Not sure, but ...” Stjepan looked over at Dan, who remained sitting in the corner, going through the plan, step by step. They only had one chance to get out, and a handful of untrained people to execute the plan.

“Won’t you tell us your plan first? Ivo can show you,” pointing to a man who seemed to be in his twenties and who nodded at Vadim. “He speaks English, too, but most of the men said they won’t do anything that crazy unless

they know what exactly your plan is. How are you going to attack them? That sounds completely insane.”

“Ever heard the term disproportionate warfare? We’ll do that. Guerrilla tactics, if you like. We’ll build a trap and hurt them. When they move in to crush us, we’ll hurt them more, confuse them, and get you people out. But first, I need to deal with the snipers. And that means, I need to know where they are. To do that, you need to show me their work.”

“Okay ...” Stjepan looked more intimidated than convinced, when Dan came sauntering over.

“Rocky is right, and you better do what he tells you. If he says he needs to see the sniper’s activities, then he does.” Dan smiled, back to easy-going, friendly Mad Dog. Soothing frayed nerves and knitting a troop together, like he had done, back in another country and life. “In the meantime, I explain my plan in detail. I do it once, because we are running out of time, but then I need to get everyone to gather here, who is capable of moving around. Everyone, you get me? Except for those who are too old and infirm, or too young, or wounded. We’ll only make it if we all pull together. Is that clear?” He was still smiling, but there was no room for debate. “We got to start *now*, so I suggest Ivo goes out with Vadim, who then deals with the snipers, while we start with what I’ve just explained.” He looked from one of the men to the other. Drawn faces, hardened, no hope in their eyes. “Any questions?” Silence, until a voice piped up from the ground. A girl’s voice.

“Yes. I ... I do.”

Dan turned towards the teenage girl, Sanya, nodding to her with a smile, as she stood up. Still no expression in her face. “Go right ahead.”

“Can I help killing them?”

Dan glanced at Vadim for a second, because he had suddenly lost his voice, and no idea what to answer. The way she said it, the way those dead eyes looked at him, that way spoke too much of what had happened to her and he felt his throat constrict.

Vadim looked at her, and the thought of Anoushka was there, but only for a moment. They should have killed her when they’d done whatever they’d done. He didn’t even want to speculate. Vadim gave her a nod. “You will help killing them. Every little thing we do will help defeat them. It’s clockwork. Every piece helps move another piece. If the machine works and we can do that, we will win. And survive. We will hurt them, and we’ll kill several of them, but most of all,” he gave a grin, “we will make them very, very afraid.”

She nodded with absolute seriousness. “Good.” Then she crouched back down on the floor, leaning against the wall.

The atmosphere had somehow changed, because the young man, Ivo, stepped forward without being prompted again. “Show you.” He said to Vadim, while the others turned to Dan, who started to explain exactly what their plan was, with Stjepan translating.

Vadim gave Dan a long glance and a wave, picked up the Dragunov, then followed the young man. It was as he’d assumed. Moving carefully through

tunnels, with Ivo pointing out where some of the victims lay in the snow, blood sprays visible that had frosted over and, most crucially, bullet holes in walls and pavement. Something of a map formed in Vadim's head.

He took position in one of the houses, perching in a window close to where two of the victims had been felled, and scanned the enemy position through his own sniper scope. He was relatively sure what area they were roughly in. Two snipers, if he wasn't wrong, with overlapping areas that they covered – the entry and middle of the town, and he assumed one was considerably higher than the other, judging from the angle that his shots came in. Both snipers had to be in touch to coordinate – probably by radio – or there might be a conflict of which of them would shoot if something went on in their respective kill zones. That factor was hard to determine, and guesswork alone, but he assumed the one on higher ground was an old hand, always going for the perfect shot, while the other was brasher, probably younger, and less well-trained, less disciplined, because it was him that had made a lot more holes into the pavement and walls than in people. Maybe the brash sniper was younger, had to prove himself – too eager to show his worth, his shooting was more machismo than military. The old hand needed to go first, the other one could be made to make a mistake.

Vadim nodded to Ivo. "We're going back."

"Are you not shooting?"

"Pointless. Won't be able to see them. They need to shoot first. But that's just a waiting game. It all happens here." Vadim tapped his temple. "Like chess playing, you know?"

Dan, in the meantime, had managed to convince the assembled men of his plan, and they'd gone out to gather everyone who was able bodied enough to help carry out what needed to be done. When Vadim returned, there were about fifty people in the back of the department store, getting divided up by ability into groups. Dan was sending the first ones off to scour the remaining houses, ruins and cellars for anything soapy, preferably washing powder, and to find bottles and rags as well. A group remained, including Sanya and Stjepan, who were willing to do the far more dangerous task of siphoning the petrol from the car wrecks.

"Found out what you were looking for?" Dan turned towards Vadim, a couple of lads standing close to him.

"I'm considering whether I kill the bitches or try to just cripple them." Vadim glanced around. "One of them is good. The other's just a good shot." He began to walk, thinking, expecting Dan to follow him, and he did, after signalling to the lads to wait a moment for him. "The young guy operates the front of the town, that way." Vadim pointed. "If we get one of the mannequins through the tunnel into this house, that window, and open the shutters, it will be irresistible to him. He'll shoot. If I'm in the house there," he pointed again. "I can locate the muzzle flash and see him take out the mannequin. I'll shoot him once he moves ... even if he's just going for a piss or a hot tea. I'm thinking I could shoot him in the legs. That could upset the old guy, further up the mountain, and he'll try to snipe me. Now, if we rig a sniping position and

fake a muzzle flash ... or something, like a glint he can see, he'll try to shoot me, and I'll be able to locate him, and take out that bastard, too. It's not ... very sophisticated, but the best I can come up with, right now."

"It sounds like a brilliant plan to me." Dan grinned, waving Stjepan over. "Time to get it in place straight away, because we can't siphon the petrol before you haven't at least taken out the closest sniper." Turning to the kid, he explained to him what Vadim needed, a dummy, dressed up, and taken to the house Vadim had indicated. Stjepan nodded, and waved to another couple of guys to help him.

"You take Rocky with you, and set everything up, while I get those two clever clogs over there," Dan pointed at the two lads, "to rig up the speaker system. They claim they know how to do it and that they know where to find usable batteries."

"Of course – in the cars." Vadim tipped his head in a mock salute and Dan grinned. "Operation Sniper Duel has a 'go', then." He gave a laugh and nodded towards the kids. "And now we'll kill a man who thinks himself a god."

Vadim knew about the god complex of snipers – he'd done it often enough. This was a young god that still got very excited when pulling the trigger. He helped the kids carry part off the mannequin to the house, watched them dress it, as he peered through the shutters. The angle was right, he was sure.

"Okay. When you open the shutter, do it from here." Vadim kept against the wall, indicating a very careful motion to push the shutters apart, with a discarded broom stick. "Don't expose yourselves. Not even for a second. The shutter movement will wake him up – if he sees anything that looks human – any shape, he'll fire. You guys got watches? Check the time. And give me thirty minutes before you do anything. Okay?"

They nodded eagerly, showed him their watches, and he made sure they actually ran, and found an encouraging, 'fatherly' smile somewhere, knowing they trusted him to take out the death from afar. There was something grim about it, though. These kids had grown old before their time, and what should have been a kid's game was now war. "Good. After the shot, stay exactly where you are, I'll pick you up and we return together."

Vadim then headed off, out of the building, through the backyard, found a window that had never had any shutters. He pulled two tables close, ignored the devastation inside, and lay flat on the tables, legs spread, rifle against his cheek, peering through the scope. Waiting. Breathing. Twenty minutes gone. Reaching with his mind to the young man he'd kill, trying to prompt him to move. Scanning the mountain opposite, where, somewhere in the snow, in the undergrowth, the sniper had to be, alert, waiting for his shot.

He breathed, slow and steady, damned cold. Twenty-seven. He blinked, forced himself to focus, but he covered the whole area. Twenty-eight. Vadim smiled to himself to relax, imagined he was a tree, with roots reaching for the stone beneath, taking root in the hill, deeper and deeper, imagined his breath flow.

A shot rang out, the flash almost directly opposite. Vadim peered through the scope. And a second shot, from the same location. He saw him, saw something move. He'd likely been covered under a white plane or something that blended into the snow, but here he was, the shape of a man, head, shoulders, rifle. Vadim's eyes narrowed, but he continued to watch, saw the enemy move, raise the rifle – likely a Dragunov in these parts – and get up. Damned difficult shot, but Vadim's finger touched the trigger now, found the point, then, calm, collected and deeply focused, he tapped the trigger, twice. His vision blurred, he didn't have a spotter to confirm the kill, didn't matter, because the snow showed the man in stark contrast, still moving, squirming, blood gushing around the snow. Likely screaming, but Vadim could only imagine the scream. Too well. Thigh wound. Godhood had ended.

He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them to check the mountain, maybe the old guy lost his composure now. Nothing. No movement. Instead, people came rushing up the mountain. Three. Vadim gave a grim laugh, and picked them out like deer, the snow offered very little protection. First one received one of the cleanest head shots Vadim had ever achieved, the next one rushed for cover and was hit somewhere in the chest, the third dove for cover behind a tree, and Vadim could imagine the pure terror that had to course through the chetnik's veins. He reloaded, adjusted the rifle just a little, getting a better feeling, and placed a bullet at the guy's feet, right next to the tree. The man lost his courage, went for a mad dash, and was struck down like lightning by the next shot.

Meanwhile, Dan had sent the kids off to scour the department store, and anywhere else they could think of, looking for cables, speakers, and electrical equipment. He'd been adamant that they were not to venture outside, but stay within the cellar system. He had only been drawing up plans and positions for about twenty minutes, when they returned, arms full with car batteries, rolls of cables and everything else he could have dreamed of. "Where the fuck did you find that?"

The lads were looking at him with undisguised pride at their resourcefulness. "Milan's uncle had garage." They even produced a soldering iron and Dan began to grin like a lunatic once more. Just what he'd needed.

"In that case, I let you get on with it. You know what we need, loudspeakers. I'll get the megaphone and the cassette player from the car, plus the tape, when Rocky's dealt with the snipers." It was hard at first to remember the false name, but became easier with every step towards the attack. Easier, but also more anxious, as he kept listening for sound of shots outside, and heard them, waited, trusting Vadim's skills. He'd seen those skills in action, on the other side, now they would work for their own.

The lads scampered off again, hastily talking to each other, and Dan wondered for just a moment if they were friends, or brothers, cousins, or maybe simply two of the last few survivors.

Vadim, upstairs, heard another shot, and the wall next to him had grown a hole. He rolled off the tables, which made his fresh wound protest, and he

cursed. The old hand. A friendly tap, just to keep him on his toes. The other sniper had shown him he knew from where he'd shot, but couldn't get him from that angle. Good. Vadim gave a short laugh. "Damn, comrade. I'd love to play with you. Guess I will."

Dan finished his work, drawing out the positions, when the first scouring-hunters were coming back. Some laden with bottles, others carrying bundles of rags, and yet others brought remains of broken-up furniture. The second group, armed with bowls, bottles and tubing, was eager to go out to the car wrecks, but Dan held them back. Explaining they were not going to venture out before Rocky had returned and declared the area as safe as possible. He, however, was not listening to his own advice, and when the two lads returned, carrying every speaker they had been able to find in the short space, he explained to them where he needed the music system to be set up. After telling the others they'd need a lot more burning material, he flashed a grin when he told them he'd be outside for a second.

No one reacted, because he was at the doorframe before anyone cottoned on. The truck was close, all he needed to do was crawl or sprint to it without getting shot. Easy. Shit. No more than a couple of steps, but he knew the score. Still, if he waited it might be too late, darkness would come soon, and he could possibly help draw out whoever Vadim still needed. He got onto his knees, then further down, and belly-crawled across the frozen ground. His jacket as nondescript as the ground, concrete and dust, debris and dirt, and he'd just have to trust.

Vadim was about to pack the rifle, when he saw something move down below. What the fuck? He cursed, tried to get a better look at what was moving, thought it was somebody crawling. Fuck. He took the rifle, raced upstairs, looking for a window that faced the right direction. Breathless with tension, he knocked the glass out of one, only to find his vision blocked by the roof. Fuck. Stay down, he thought. Get the fuck away. Hoping he'd seen this wrong and it wasn't Dan. His plan gone to hell with this. Fuck. Fuck! He climbed out of the window, moved onto the roof, exposing himself, yes, what the fuck, down on his belly, gazing out, saw something move up on that hill, and had hardly lined up the rifle when he snapped a quick shot, to draw the sniper's attention if he was unlucky, or wound him, if he was lucky, but at least draw him away from Dan.

A shot rang out, a roof tile exploded at the same time, next to Vadim's shoulder, and Vadim moved the muzzle, a fraction of a degree, and shot, almost blind. Awaiting the impact any moment, imagined a headshot like a quick burn and then darkness. He didn't breathe, awaited his death, tried to see the other man, vision blurred with stress and sweat running in his eyes. Nothing. No burn. No darkness. No exploding tiles. Then, he made out the rifle, and behind it, the slumped form of a man. Not shooting. He didn't move, didn't squirm, didn't fire anymore.

Vadim rolled over onto his back, slid down a little, hoped that he hadn't been wrong, but the stress came in full force. He moved a little to the side,

peered again, located the man, and shot him once more. No movement. Corpse. "Fuck me," he muttered. "That was ... lucky."

Dan had heard the shots and remained absolutely still. When nothing more happened he moved again. Still nothing. Not a sound, and he increased his speed, feeling the perceived safety like a dram of whisky warming his belly. He was at the truck, squeezed through the window, and ripped out everything that he needed. Using the all-tool he always wore in his belt kit, he got the stereo out, pocketed the tape, and proceeded to unscrew the megaphone, while sweating in the cold. It took no more than five to ten minutes before he crawled back out again. Crouching, waiting, but nothing happened, and he legged the two steps across the pavement and back inside, laden with everything he needed.

Vadim, dizzy with rage, climbed back into the room, down the stairs, so angry he felt his pulse painfully in the cut in his side, and he ran down, moving like during an exercise when every step, everything was timed. Rushed out and into the other house, up the stairs to get to the kids, who stared at him when he suddenly appeared. "He's dead. Let's go." Only then did he see the mannequin, cleanly executed in head and torso, plastic twisted in the summer dress she wore. Realized it must have scared the kids shitless to see the mannequin being shot like that and toppled, the force kicking the figure over a yard back and to the ground. "Let's go!" he repeated, sharper, and drove them before him as he stormed back, seething with rage.

Dan had made it inside, handing the treasures over to one of the lads. The kid vanished with everything they needed, and Dan turned to his bergan, fishing for one of his few remaining fags.

Vadim came back in, seeing Dan in the corner, starting to smoke. He mustered enough control to hand the Dragunov to one of the kids, wordlessly, then crossed the distance to Dan, who was looking at him, smiling, but Vadim was in so much anger he didn't know what he was doing. He wanted to attack Dan, punch him, kick him, make sure he was alright, instead, he pushed him towards the wall with both hands against his shoulders, and Dan was far too taken by surprise to react in time. Losing the cigarette out of the corner of his mouth, as he was pinned effectively against the wall. "You stupid bastard!" Vadim shouted at him, switching into Russian. "You bastard almost got me fucking killed! Is that your solution to the problem? Getting me offed?"

"What?" Eyes wide, Dan stared at him, uncomprehending. Not even getting at first that Vadim had switched to Russian and that a couple of the men across the room had looked up.

"Moving? In his fucking kill zone? I wasn't ready for the shot. I wasn't fucking ready, and you move right into his area, you stupid fuck. Bastard almost got both of us, if I hadn't drawn his fire. The shot was this close. Closer than you are now." Vadim was staring right in Dan's eyes, seething with rage. And Dan stared back. Dark eyes transfixed in those pale ones.

Dan didn't move. Didn't shout. Didn't fight, just moistened his suddenly dry lips. "Don't speak Russian." Quietly. No more. Immobile. Wanted to say a lot

more ... and couldn't. Too sick in the stomach. He couldn't even find a quip. No 'but it worked', and neither rage to counter the fury.

Vadim slowly closed his eyes and hung his head, defeated by the calm, that sick feeling to his stomach, touching Dan and being so fucking angry and scared, as the fear suddenly overwhelmed the anger, and he shuddered, feeling cold.

"You want to hit me again?" Dan murmured, still not moving. "You want to get it out of your system this time? You want to punish me for ..." he hesitated, closing his eyes, not giving a fuck where they were, who was there, and what the hell had happened. And he finally said it, because it could have been too late already. "... for a betrayal I never committed?"

Katya. Dan. Dan and Katya. Vadim wanted to move away and keep touching Dan, wanted to claw into him, wanted to be held, wanted to break his neck and just rest his head against Dan's shoulder. "Don't ... not ... not now. You did it. You both just did it. You were ... fucking my wife while they broke my mind. Katya always had to have my men ..." He swallowed, shaking his head. "But you ... why did you do that?"

No movement. "Because she blackmailed me." Facts, how pitiful they sounded in the grey light of day. "The price to pay for delivery." Breathed in, eyes still closed, "the story. Your father." So much more to say, but when it came down to it, what else was there? "She needed a sperm donor. There and then. And I had come begging for a favour." The hardest thing he'd ever done in his life, but *that*, that was classified information. Finally a movement. One shoulder shrugged, when Dan's eyes opened and he whispered, "fucking Krasnoradas and just taking what they want. Aye?"

Vadim coiled back like hit in the face, staggering, the sparse words suggested the story, and the last thing a punch to the gut. Rape. What he'd done, what Katya had done, what they'd both done. To Dan. He stood there, breathless, wordless, unable to absorb the shock, mind just blank with fear and nausea, and he noticed he was shaking. Bonkers, going insane. He shook his head, tried to force himself back towards a place he could deal with, felt helpless like he'd just awoken from a nightmare. One of the bad ones.

Dan was looking at him. Silent for a long time, until that shoulder shrugged once more. "It doesn't matter. Not now." He wanted to say 'you never gave me a chance', but he didn't. All that had been done had been done, and everything that needed to be said had been said. Accusations were pointless. "All that matters is to survive." Still just looking at Vadim, Dan offered a small smile. "And I'm sorry. I guess I was too fucking cocky out there. Not used to working as a team."

Vadim nodded, dumbstruck, inhaled deeply, then managed to think clearly enough to sit down in the corner, reach for one of the water bottles, and drink. Trying to wash away the taste of stale adrenaline and bitter fear. "Just ... stick to the plan next time," he murmured, voice raw.

Dan nodded, the spell broken when Vadim moved away and he stooped down, looking for his fag that had rolled to the side. Relighting what was left, he inhaled deeply. "Time for the troops to siphon the petrol?"

"Yeah." Vadim looked at the other people, who regarded him with more hostility now. And wasn't that ironic. "Wounded the first sniper, killed three guys that were trying to help him. I doubt he'll live, unless they get him out. Thigh wound. Looked nasty. The other one is dead."

Dan nodded again. "Damn good work. I get them to get going now." But Stjepan stopped him before he reached the group.

"What's wrong?" Stjepan glanced at Vadim. "Problems? Did he speak Russian? We don't understand, thought you were English?"

"We are." Dan didn't even twitch at the lie. Neither of them was, technically. "It's a long story, and we really don't have time for that. Just ... we have a lot of history. Many years." Turning his head to glance at Vadim, still in the corner, Dan managed a small smile to calm the kid and the rest of them. "We saved each other's lives, just that out there, a few minutes ago, he saved mine, because I was a dumbfuck."

Stjepan's brows creased, the last word didn't seem to make sense, but Dan just slapped his shoulder. "Don't worry. All that counts is that he's killed both snipers and a few of the others, so we can go out and continue. Let's get as much petrol as we can, but be careful. Doesn't mean they haven't got anyone else who could blast you to kingdom come." Nodding towards the outside, "besides, the last thing you want is for them to get an idea of what we are planning, right?"

Stjepan nodded. "I understand." Even though he didn't look as if he did, but it was of no consequence as long as he did what needed to be done.

"Off with you, then. I'll rig the bridge in the meantime."

Vadim raised a hand. "Dan. Wait till it gets dark. Or rather..." glancing out of the window. "Darker than this. If they have a decent shot or two, they can still take you out, and I ..." am shaking. "I'll cover you. But wait."

Dan turned back, regarding Vadim for a moment. "I've done scarier shit than this." Looking through the window, nailed shut, with several gaps in places, but he always stayed just that step within cover. Force of habit. "If it is too dark I can't do it. I need to get into the foundations below, or it won't get destroyed." Shaking his head, "I have one stick of C4, if it isn't just right it does fuck all." He turned back to Vadim, regarding him for another moment. "What do you suggest instead? Rigging the buildings for burning? You can do that without me. Checking the sound system? The lads are working on it, and we can't work on the Molotovs before the others return."

Vadim nodded, hands closed into fists, because he didn't trust them to be steady. Which was scary. He wasn't sure he could shoot now, and he knew he had to pull it together. Dan did it with his fucked legs all the time, so why couldn't he? "I'll have a look at the buildings. Got an idea for the layout. There's some wood around, broken-up furniture. It should burn well. If I take that ... that first shooting position, I should cover you when you do the

bridge.” He slowly got to his feet again, jaw muscles tense. “Coming down,” he murmured. “Getting there. Just ... needed five.”

Dan looked behind him, but everyone seemed to be busy. Then back at Vadim, and it finally dawned on him what he was actually looking at. “Got a moment spare?”

“Sure. Not going anywhere.”

“Good.” Walking a couple of steps away, Dan looked behind him, expecting Vadim to follow, as he picked his way through the rubble into the next room, smaller than the first, and then another, which led to what he’d been looking for. Back in the far corner were what had been changing rooms, and he steered towards the furthest one, which luckily still had most of its door. Holding it open for Vadim.

Vadim walked through, hands still clenched, tension around his shoulders, neck, back, and he moved against the wall, looking at Dan. Expecting anything. More nasty revelations, a full blown attack, a heart-to-heart talk, as English-speakers called it.

Dan closed the door behind them, the stall was small, just enough space for two large men to turn. Facing Vadim, he looked at him for a moment. “There’s something I really fucking missed in the last weeks.” Cocking his head, he let out a small huff. “In fact, it’s two things, but I really don’t think it’s the time and place for my usual favourite.”

Vadim raised his head, looked at him squarely, but calm, on the outside at least, lips moving into a small smile as he gazed at Dan, who stepped closer, resting a hand on his shoulder, then another. Pressing in, a mirror image of earlier, and yet nothing like it. “But somehow ...” Dan’s voice had dropped, “I think I missed this even more. Must be getting old.” He let his head move forward, until his lips touched Vadim’s, and his own opened, inviting in return.

Vadim’s hands moved to Dan’s waist, pulled him closer, lips opening as well, hands flat against Dan’s back, inviting the taste and smell. Dan. Had missed him too much, despite the anger that had kept him away, that had even kept the need and lust away. “I ...” pulling his lips away a bit, breaking the kiss, “can’t see ... can’t see you die, okay? Don’t take any more needless risks. I can’t see it. Don’t make me.”

“I can’t not take *any* risks, though.” Murmured, Dan smiled, so close, Vadim’s face was a blur before his eyes. “But I give you my word I won’t die. Just won’t. Okay?” Kissing once more, didn’t matter that they were scratchy and stubbly, hadn’t changed their clothing for too many hours and the only water that touched them had gone down their throat. Didn’t matter. Just Vadim. Too long, but it was all good now. Had to be. After all, the truth was an old acquaintance of his. “Just promise the same.”

“You fool.” Tender, and Vadim took the back of Dan’s head and pressed him in, hugged him tight and reassuring, breathing deeply and relaxing in that hug. “We’ll go on R&R after this. Talk ... talk about things. Only if you want.”

"Depends on where we're going and how much talking you want to subject me to." Dan chuckled, burying his face for a moment in Vadim's neck. "I'm inclined, right now, to let you choose the destination."

"Somewhere without snow, and with as little people as possible," Vadim murmured and kissed Dan's neck, throat, running his fingers through that long hair. "Sorry for ... being such a bastard, lately."

"That must be the understatement of the year." Dan figured he could either make things as grave as they really were, or take the piss with that stone dry humour of his. No point, right now, to prod at wounds. Dima. Katya. Betrayal and accusations. And when it came down to it, he would never throw the first stone, he certainly wasn't going to turn into a self-righteous prick. "I figure it's because my daughter is prettier than your daughter." It was the first thing that came to his mind and as crazy as it was, he just said it. Tentatively grinning at Vadim. The irreverent squaddie lurking beyond the surface, and Mad Dog just about to stick his head back through.

Vadim slapped Dan's shoulder and moved away. "Babies are always cute - and ... I haven't seen Anoushka in a long while."

"Well, I will never see mine." Dan readjusted his jacket.

Vadim studied him. "Do you want to? And - why not?"

"Because she'd cry 'rape' if I did." Noticed too late what he'd said, Dan countered immediately with a shrug. It still hurt, like fuck it did, but hell, there was no time, and he was glad for it. Better to fight for survival than dwell on the shit. "Anyway, don't want to think about it now. Take me on R&R, aye? Back to where we were before, or a similar place. Sea, sky, sun, and sex 24/7. Deal?"

Vadim nodded, thought what the fuck had Katya done to Dan, seemed she'd covered all her bases. That was very much like her, actually, she'd fight tooth and nail if Dan would try to claim the child. Or just his rights as ... father. The thought still made him reel, but he found it less alien, less painful than before. Or maybe he was just numb from his 'duel'. "Make that 12/7 - getting old."

Dan let out a short laugh. "Okay, I let you off, but only if you agree to 16/7. Eight hours of sleep should be plenty."

"You're driving a hard bargain. But yeah, eight hours should be enough ... and we can take the sex slow, I suppose."

Shifting towards the door, Dan knew they had to get out there. The rumblings of the shelling would start soon, and if they were right, the chetniks would try and take the town that night. And succeed, no doubt. Unless they attacked first. "Last kiss before the 'fun' starts?"

"Aye." Vadim moved in to kiss him again, and this was one of their old kisses, tender, lips open, leisurely, with just enough longing to show through, but tenderness above all. Complete ease, and Vadim broke into a grin. "Let's go, before they see their heroes are gay."

"That would *not* be a good idea. You do remember the whole thing about this shit here?" Dan winked, "five hundred years ago? Turks and all that? Bosniaks, chetniks, Muslims, Christians, genocide, and what have you? Those out there might belong to the 'let's stone those gay bastards' faction." He

flashed a nasty grin, without a trace of humour. "But I'm still going to save their arses, because that girl, Sanya, well ..." he trailed off and shrugged. "Let's just say, I've done worse for less reasons."

Vadim laughed. "Aye. Funny, really. Dima had some good words for why he was with the Serb brothers, but if the tables were turned and they'd slaughter Serbian civilians ..." He frowned. "I don't understand this war, Dan. That's really the main problem. I don't see the point. Why they are doing this, and the way they are doing this, and why nobody does anything ..." Again, he ran his hand through Dan's hair. "But doing this here ... is very satisfying."

"What, the hair ruffling?" Dan grinned, "and for the records, I don't understand this shit either. It's like they were looking for an excuse to take up in arms. 'My lands. No, mine, originally yours. No, ours.' Five hundred years, used as an excuse for slaughter? Bullshit." He shrugged, "I think I stick to the hair ruffling. At least I get that."

"Sometimes history is just an excuse for incompetence at getting along with each other." Vadim kissed Dan's brow. "You know, it's childish to stick to grudges in the middle of all this, aye?"

"Frankly," Dan smiled, taking any sting out before it appeared, "I don't think you quite have the right to hold any grudge, except for ..." he shrugged, "right or not, who the fuck cares, aye? We just need to get out of here alive."

"I meant, generally." Vadim gave him a long glance and smiled. "Let's go and get them. Bastards don't stand a chance in hell."

"No," Dan laughed, walking out of the stall, "not a chance at all, and if no one has ever told you that you are a fucking maniac then something's wrong." Dan fished for another of his precious cigarettes.

"The word they used was 'hero', Dan. Which comes down to the same thing, I guess."

"Aye, and most heroes are dead. Damn lucky I was never a hero, right?"

"The Yanks and the Baroness might call you that."

Dan pulled a face between a wry grin and something indecipherable. "Anyway, it'll get dark in about an hour. I go check the rigging of the sound system. You going to set up the 'torches'?"

"Aye. Will do."

They parted when they got back to the main ground floor room, and Dan climbed up the stairs to check on the lads who'd been working tirelessly. They proudly showed off the system with speakers against every open window, carefully placed so the opponents wouldn't have seen the moment. They urged Dan to try the rigging, and he was amazed to hear 'Foxy Lady' on the lowest setting, ready to get blasted across the land. Confident that this part of the plan was working out well, he returned to the ground floor, where the second group was beginning to trickle back in.

Vadim ventured out to inspect the buildings, and, with the help of some of the men, prepared the houses on the other side of the village to be burnt - gathering broken furniture, duvets, firewood, carpets, and other stuff on big piles, setting everything up so they could burst into flames within minutes.

There had been no sniper activity, he was assured, when he kept looking back towards where the chetniks camped, and they regarded him as a hero, not knowing that it was a whim of fate that it wasn't him who'd done the sniping on the other side.

Dan was setting the remaining volunteers to work, making them measure petrol and soap powder, filling the bottles and stuffing a rag into the bottle as wick. Once he was content that all was working the way it should, he rounded up the men who carried weapons, checking over the amount of ammo they had. Telling them to be prepared, and to check and re-check their weapons while making themselves acquainted with the plan he'd drawn out, and which was relayed to every man and woman.

He was getting kitted out, when Vadim returned. "Everything sorted?" Dan looked up while strapping his belt kit on, and moving the weapon over his shoulder, the C4 and the detonators safely stashed in his jacket pockets.

Vadim nodded and was about to wind a rag around his head to hide his pale hair and part of his features. "Aye. When do we start?"

"I need you right now. Have to get the explosives onto the bridge. Thank fuck it's a fairly modern steel construction. Gives me something to climb on, aye?" Dan grinned, "thought you could keep the uglies from me, if need be, but I sure as fuck hope no one sees me doing my acrobatic tricks, or the surprise effect is shot to shit."

"It's madness, Dan, you know that."

"Yes, I know." No grin, for once he was serious, but the next moment Dan was back to being the irreverent bastard. "But who else could do it? And how else could it be done? Seems that today is the time for some 'heroic' bullshit after all."

Vadim nodded, numb, mute, because the only thing he could say was 'I'll go insane if you die', and he lowered his gaze, forcing himself to breathe, focused on the dull throbbing pain from the cut in his side. Dan was still alive. He'd made it. He would make it. And he couldn't distract Dan with the dark flood of fear that welled up inside again.

"Okay, that's settled then." Dan nodded, flashed another grin that he didn't feel, but fuck, he'd gone through worse shit. "I get someone to lead us through the underground. Now we just have to hope that they take the bait that we'll throw to them, so that my brilliant plan is going to work and they focus all of their artillery and heavy fire on the front of the town." He waved over to Stjepan, who sorted a guide for them. "Good thing their tanks are shit, aye?" Dan glanced at Vadim as they descended into the first cellar to get across town towards the riverbank. "The Molotovs should get them out of their tin cans like rats being smoked out of a box."

"Aye. And the town should limit visibility and movability." But even then, taking on a tank was madness.

They were walking for about fifteen minutes, Dan and Vadim taking turns marking the way with chalk they'd found earlier, and Dan was carefully taking note of the time. They reached a door that would lead them outside and right to

the banks. All they had to do now was hope the night was falling swiftly, and no one expected movement right where they were. It was impossible to cross the river, the waters had taken too many lives and the swell was treacherous, so they might not be watched. Carefully and silently creeping outside, their guide had the order to wait for them, Dan glanced at Vadim and nodded. Wherever he chose to take position to check out the bridge, Dan would trust in him and his ability as a sniper.

Vadim gave a hand sign, 'all clear', then looked around for a good sniping position to cover the bridge, setting up the old friend Dragunov in one of the buildings, pulled away from the window, so the rifle's outline wouldn't betray him. He settled, careful not to disturb the wound, but whatever he did, any motion hurt. At least he could hope that two snipers was all they'd had.

Belly-crawling towards the bridge, Dan remembered all those attempts of his to get the Mujas to do the same. No, they'd always refused, rather let themselves get shot than letting themselves get 'humiliated' by crawling in the dust. He did, though, and found nothing humiliating about slithering through the frozen mud and across the icy ground. Trying not to think of how many chetniks might be out to spot him, instead trusting on his outfit, dirty camo, thrown together, and soiled by their escape and their fights. And relying on Vadim, once more on Vadim.

Vadim spotted Dan's movements when he got out into the open. The crawling man in his crosshairs, he couldn't help but think that on the other side, another man might be seeing the exact same thing – crosshairs and all – and that one finger was all that separated this precious, vulnerable body from death. He let the sights trail up, towards the dark where the chetniks were, trying to spot any movement, any reflection, any cigarette being lit and giving a position away. Every now and then checking on Dan's progress.

Dan made it to the foundation of the bridge without any worrying sounds, nor movement from anywhere. Sweating, despite the cold, adrenaline coursed through every part of his body and mind, like a man on speed.

"Well done," murmured Vadim, seeing Dan at least partially in cover now from the bridge, but at the same time more exposed than ever, because the bridge would be protected, if there was any sniper left. Dan was in his kill zone, and Vadim knew exactly that any sniper worth his salt couldn't possibly miss this shot.

Dan had to ignore the fear and the knowledge that any second he could be spotted. Entirely possible they still had snipers covering the bridge, but he had to pretend that it wasn't the case, or he'd shit himself. Literally.

Climbing up the steel girders, he gritted his teeth and ignored the pain as much as a possible sniper. In fact, if he wasn't doing right now what he did, he'd probably piss himself with laughter at how much he was ignoring. Still, he made it halfway up, trying to judge if he had to climb anymore, when he froze, clinging to a girder, listening to a noise he couldn't categorise.

Vadim saw movement. Damn. Staring through the scope, he saw people move about, and they seemed to prepare to get going. Which meant they had

no idea that Dan was where he was. He forced himself to breathe, watching the vague motions that seemed to have a purpose. But they weren't moving yet. The assault wasn't happening, and he would only guess if he'd shoot now.

Out there, Dan forced himself to breathe and to remain absolutely still, until the noise ceased, and he checked his watch, fingers stiff and aching from clinging to the frozen metal. Gloves or not, his body felt its years, and he cursed himself more than he cursed those damned chetniks. If only someone back in camp, or anywhere else, actually gave a shit. But no time to think about that, he had to get one level higher. Forcing himself to climb once more, he reached the most promising place for the explosives, right beneath the surface of the bridge. Hidden from view from the top, but visible to anyone from the side, he concentrated on getting the C4 pliable in this goddamned cold. Forced to take his gloves off to knead the plastic explosive, he used his thigh muscles to stay safely on the metal, freezing his bollocks off on the icy steel in more than just the proverbial sense. Finally able to fix the plastic explosives into place, he set the detonator, checking the radio control device that he'd taken from the dead chetnik. Confident everything was set up perfectly, he glanced towards Vadim's direction.

He'd made it so far, now he 'just' had to make it back.

Vadim kept his eyes on Dan, because the chetniks clearly had something else on their minds, and he allowed himself to watch Dan work on the charge, high above the freezing cold water. Then back to where the chetniks were getting ready to move. He wanted to kill every single one of them. Anger, hatred, but above all, protectiveness tightening his throat.

Dan gathered all his wits about him once more, concentrating and focussing on nothing but the stealthiest descend he could manage. Moving slowly, using mostly his upper body strength. At long last making it down to the ground, he once again lowered himself onto his belly, crawling back the same way he'd come.

Vadim trailed his movements for as long as he dared, scope then moving back to the chetniks, then back to Dan, who moved with utmost caution, skilful, slowly, controlled, every movement where it had to be. Vadim swallowed, but forced himself to concentrate, just in case something went wrong, but nothing did. For once, it was either luck, or the fact Vadim really had killed their only two snipers, or the chetniks were just too damned busy organising their final attack to take the town.

Dan made it back to the door, which their guide opened, and for a while, he remained on the ground inside the building, head against the closed door, and just breathing, eyes closed. This shit had got more to him than it would have, ten years ago. Suddenly it was about more than just his measly little life. It was about his lover, his family, his friends ... damned be the baggage of a fulfilled life.

Vadim came down the stairs once Dan had vanished from his view, and he leaned the Dragunov into the corner, then offered Dan a hand, pulling him up

to stand. "Get up." Vadim opened his parka and placed it around Dan's shoulders. "They are getting ready. So should we."

Thankful for the additional warmth, Dan nodded. "Give me a sec." Looking for the water bottle on his belt kit, he fiddled in his coat pocket for the pain killers, and swallowed a handful. Not giving a shit for once, what Vadim saw or not. "Best get running, then. Took us fifteen minutes to get here, bet we can cut it down by half."

Vadim glanced at the water bottle. Not happy about seeing that, but he'd always known that Dan's legs were giving him trouble. He just hoped they wouldn't give out in this war. After that – they'd need to think about how to fix this problem. "Sure. You lead." He slapped Dan on the shoulder, because he didn't want anybody to see an embrace or a kiss, and he needed to stay focused in any case.

Nodding, Dan took a deep breath and glanced at their guide, who was already moving forward. Falling into a jog, they made it through rooms, upstairs, downstairs, all by the light of torches, and as fast as they could. The painkillers were not working yet, but the adrenaline was, and at some stage, while crawling through a tunnel of rubble, Dan gave the parka back to Vadim. "You'll need it. I'll be moving about."

"I don't stand a chance resisting, now, do I?"

Dan smiled, shook his head, before they picked up pace again.

Vadim slipped back into the parka; he wanted to give Dan warmth, but again, cuddling was not what their charges expected. Damn them. And then it struck him that keeping up appearances – something that he'd always wanted, and therefore always made him feel weird and exposed when Dan blew their cover or too clearly showed they were gay – that he didn't want to do this anymore. He wanted to be able to do what he pleased. Even, no, especially before heading off into battle.

They were back in the main room of the destroyed department store in under ten minutes, and the atmosphere that greeted them was one of fear.

Dan frowned, waved Stjepan over, explaining to him that he had successfully set the charge, and that the young, the old and the infirm, and anyone else who couldn't or wouldn't fight, were supposed to gather in the cellars. They should stay close to the river bank, waiting for the chetniks' movement, and cross the bridge once the guards had been drawn away from the bridge towards the attack in the front, gaining a headstart to the fighters.

Dan got to the bergan and their kit, strapping it onto himself, while Vadim did the same, before he gathered everyone around him, once more going over the plan. They had to wait until the moment the chetniks attacked, and not a second before that. The two lads were then to fire up the deafening music that would disorient the attackers, while masking any movement on the ground. That was when those volunteers who had signed up for the dangerous mission, were to hurry to the designated buildings and set them alight, thus providing illumination. The rest, the most courageous of them all, were to throw Molotov cocktails onto the advancing tanks, to force the crews out of them once the fire

stuck to the metal and smoked them like kipper. Vadim, their sniper, was to pick the escaping men out in the light of the burning buildings. Meanwhile, everyone with a rifle and ammo would fight out in the front, to draw the chetniks away from the bridge, so that the young and infirm could leave the town. Finally, once the fighting was over and they had all crossed the bridge, Dan would destroy the construction and render pursuit impossible.

It was madness, and at the same time the soundest plan that might actually work. The two snipers' deaths would have made the chetniks angry, worried, or maybe extra careful. In any case, it wouldn't be easy, and they could only hope that the bastards took the bait of the crazy attack: in their anger, their bravado, or in their fear.

Vadim went through his pockets again, checked the rifle, but it was clean and functional. "Right. Everybody in position." He looked at Dan for a long moment and smiled. "Let's crush the bastards."

Dan stood in front of him, rifle in his hands, adrenaline pooling in his guts, then rushing through his body, and he smiled back, taking one step closer, until he could hold Vadim by his shoulders, and lean in for a 'brotherly' kiss on each cheek. "I love you." Murmured when his left cheek touched Vadim's. "Whatever happens." His right touched, and then his left again. "I'll always love you." Vadim looked positively stricken, dumbfounded, unable to respond, yet there was a nod, with lips pressed together, and jaw muscles taut.

Dan stepped back, turned towards the assembled men and few women, boys and girls, and nodded.

"And now, we wait. As Rocky said, everyone to their positions. The signal is the music, and there is no way you'll miss that." Gesturing to the two kids who had their orders, and who immediately ran upstairs.

"I'll be in position." Vadim left the building, struggling with the emotion, fuck, Dan kissing him like that had shaken him, deeply. He'd needed that touch, that oath, that everything, but couldn't have responded any other way. Not in Russian, not in English. Couldn't have just held on to him for a moment longer. He wanted to hold him, fuck him, be fucked, he wanted to rest at Dan's shoulder after sex and think nothing but that they were both alive. Fuck the war, fuck the past, fuck the money. He found himself a good position again and peered over at the chetniks. Yes. They were rolling. Time for the final battle.

Downstairs, Dan was leaning against the wall, looking outside through the carcass of a once grand doorway. He was smoking a cigarette, carefully shielded from view, eyes peeled on the movement. Any time now, any time ... and there it was, the telltale sound of a shell before impact, followed by the first explosion.

"Now!" He shouted, even though knowing the kids on the top floor couldn't hear him, but the others did, and as promised, the very next second there was an almighty noise. Guitar riffs screamed through the ruined building, from the top of the roof and screeching across the freezing night. The first riffs of 'All Along the Watchtower' were belted out through dozens of loudspeakers, fixed all along the roof and the destroyed windows of the top floor.

Dan grinned fiercely, sucked in a deep lungful of smoke, before he threw the half-smoked cigarette onto the floor, discarded as much as the last sane thought, before the old junky got hit with the full force of his drug again. Danger. Action. And the ultimate fight for survival, this time with the most unlikely allies.

Waiting for the moment when Hendrix's voice cut in between the fanatical guitar, he yelled at the top of his lungs, "Move! Move!" Gesturing for the first section of his ragged troop to make their way towards the buildings, and to set them on fire, while he waved at the row of men and boys, including Stjepan and Sanya, who were holding the bottles, filled with petrol and soap powder. Bags, makeshift hold-alls and improvised bandoliers held their ammo of additional Molotovs.

Dan glanced outside, could sense more than see the confusion. The tanks seemed to slow their approach, before gathering speed again. He couldn't hear anything above the noise of voice, guitar, drums and howling riffs, but he moved to stand in front of 'his men', the fierce grin back on his face, shouting at them so they'd hear his words. "I'll cover you!" And so would the few remaining others who had rifles. He could see the fear in their faces, and at the same time their determination. Make it or die. He'd been there too many times before, and when he could feel the vibrations through the frozen ground, he knew the tanks were there and the moment had come, the attack began.

Dan could see from the corners of his eyes how the brightness outside from the fire was growing, and he knew it was time.

"Now!" He yelled, and grabbed the one Molotov he'd kept for himself, lighting it as he turned. Knew that no matter what, he had to take the first step, and he threw himself outside, rifle in one hand, Molotov in the other. A shadow, coming out of the building, lobbing the burning fuel straight onto the first tank, before he raised the AK and fired a round, while throwing himself to the side and into relative safety.

That was their plan. Out, aim, throw, getting into cover to arm again, and once more.

He could hear the voices behind him, shouting, screaming at the top of their lungs, to give themselves and each other courage, as they piled out, following his example, covered by automatic fire, as much as anyone could cover those moving, soft targets.

Light. Fire. Unsteady light. Vadim had to force himself to hold fire until the tank crews exposed themselves, and they did, once the first tank was burning, the hatch opened and the enemy started to pile out. Vadim let them, allowed the first guy to set his feet down before he shot him in the head. The second came out; reload, hit. Slumping to the ground with a good part of his skull missing, he was just a human-shaped piece of darkness in the flickering light from the fire. The next one came out, yet another hit. He fired with all the precision he'd ever trained to have, calm, steady, fire, reload, every bullet hitting true, while the tension in his body grew, like he was expecting a miss, or another catastrophe.

He pulled the trigger, and hit another one who had made it to a corner and had been about to fire, blindly. Downing him, too. And what a satisfaction it was.

On the ground, Dan couldn't look out for anyone, just hoped the screams he heard were not of his troops, but that of the chetniks. Seeing the tank crews get out of the burning vehicles, engulfed in flames and black smoke, he noticed them getting picked out one after the other, while corpses began to pile up along the length of the front of buildings. The flames were still rising, consuming everything in their way and burning with impossible heat; thawing the ground and turning the night into an inferno of death.

The whole madness of this insane war of brother against brother culminated in the burning town, where flames were moving with ferocious appetite. Jumping out of control, as much as the chetnik attack had lost any semblance of order, scattered by a plan that brought together impossible resources, to fight a battle against every damned odd.

Dan was shooting at an approaching group of soldiers, watching the bullets hit flesh, and he felt nothing. Nothing, just like he never had, even though this time, for the first time, he felt responsible for 'his' troops, unlike the Mujas. But for the lives he took? Nothing. Couldn't afford this luxury, just as Vadim couldn't, who kept picking out every movement and each enemy.

Finally there were no more tanks nor soldiers coming, and Dan pulled back inside the building that was nothing but a crumbling ruin now, close to collapse. "Back!" he kept yelling, trying to get the surviving fighters' attention. "Cellars! Into the cellars! Get to the bridge!"

Vadim took a few moments, precious time passed, but he couldn't spot any more enemies, which was either really good news, or the most dangerous stage. He lifted the rifle, slung it across his back and got the decrepit old AK out. Close quarters with a sniper rifle just didn't happen. Carefully moving from building to building, the air was an inferno of heat and smoke, biting like acid into his lungs. He was careful not to offer a silhouette or any kind of target, another moment when killing the enemy snipers first had paid off.

The fire had spread, creeping towards the edges of the department store, and still the music was howling, guitar riffs tearing into the night and its dark sky, illuminated red, orange and yellow, as if hell had become manifest on earth. The heat was becoming unbearable, and yet Dan stayed, waited, no way he'd leave before Vadim was back, and he yelled for any survivors to get their arses into gear and into the cellars, while he checked whatever he could reach, encountering enemies, and thinking nothing, absolutely nothing again, as he cleared his way in close quarters. Knife, when the rifle was too far a range. AK, when they moved in the distance, until not much was left. They'd taken out most, and he moved once more back into the building, which creaked with heat and distortion. "Vadim!" Yelling into the smoke, coughing, before he managed to get his jumper in front of his mouth and nose. "Vadim!"

Vadim headed back, giving up cover to run at full force, dashing, only hoping nobody saw him nor took time for an aimed shot. Moving like a rabbit, cutting corners where he could, dashing this way and that, painfully aware of

how exposed he was. Every sudden motion pulled on the sutured wound, the threads that held it together felt like they were tightening and digging deeper into his flesh. In truth, though, he knew it was the strain he put on the wound that made it try to re-open or tear, and he didn't want to imagine the swollen bleeding mess under the bandages. Heading back to the department store when he heard his name. "Coming!" he shouted, going straight towards the voice, coughing when he swallowed smoke. "Get moving!"

Dan nodded, awash with relief, but no oxygen left to answer, and he reached out for the shape in the thickening smoke, catching hold of Vadim's arm, and holding onto. If they lost track of each other now, it would be fatal.

Making his way as fast as he could downstairs, to the cellars, fighting for air, coughing, only slowing for a second to glance at Vadim when they'd hit the cellars, the first chalk sign in front of them, and the smoke above. The music was dulled down there, but even so, Dan could hear how it was getting distorted, and soon it would stop, when the flames had taken over this building as well. "You alright?" Breathless.

Vadim leaned against the wall, coughing hard, but nodded, pressing Dan's hand in what he hoped was a reassuring gesture. Wiping tears off his face, he nodded again. "You?"

Dan nodded as well, clinging to Vadim's hand for another moment. "No injuries. How's yours?"

"Only hurts when I cough." Vadim grinned, listening and tried to suppress the coughing.

"Then don't cough!" Flashing an irreverent grin, but the concern too obvious, Dan pulled on Vadim's hand. "We have to get going, they should be across the bridge by now, and if we don't blow the fucking thing up, there's nothing stopping any surviving bastards to pursue all of them. Aye?"

"Aye." Vadim kept his breathing shallow to not trigger another bout of coughing, and followed, holding the AK in his free hand. Moving as fast as possibly, trusting Dan to lead him, who was pulling Vadim behind him.

"I promise you I'll spoil you head to toe when we get back, if you hurry up."

"Just spend some time on my middle when we get back unscathed."

"Which middle." Breathing was easier now. Two aging men, determined to survive against all odds, injuries, knackered, or not. "You mean your cock?" Dan cast a glance to the side, grinning, as he made his way across one cellar and towards another door. The chalk signs leading a way, without fail, towards the river.

"Both middles. If you must ask." Vadim gave a grin, following, hearing thankfully nothing up front nor behind, nor, for that matter, above.

"I'll happily take care of your rear middle, when I've ... " grinning, Dan pushed the last door open, which led the back out into the ice cold air, "recovered myself. Not a spring chicken either."

"Yeah. I can see where you're coming from." Breathing more deeply now, the smoke acrid in his lungs, but the cold air was damn nice. Vadim glanced around, trying to get his bearings.

“Over there.” Dan pointed to the bridge, a shape of black in the night. He could just about make out movement on top of the bridge, but no sound. Whoever it was, they were careful. “Best cross the damned thing and hit the detonator.” Getting moving again, falling into a trot that favoured his good leg, Dan kept glancing at Vadim, keeping pace, even during the steep climb towards the bridgehead.

Vadim followed on his heels, almost literally. Climbing, the cold hitting the stress hitting the adrenaline hitting the pain, one blow after the next, and he had to fight the dread as it welled up, almost worse now that the main battle was over. As if they couldn’t possibly hope to make it. Had he ever felt like that before? Had that Spetsnaz captain felt this way? He couldn’t remember.

But Dan kept climbing up the steep path, and he kept moving, and kept looking at Vadim, waiting, urging, walking beside him, before him. One more step, just another, until they made it onto the main bridge, and found the road clear. No one behind as far as they could make out, and no one in front anymore. “Come on.” Dan was breathless, heading towards the other side, the wild waters gurgling in the steep gorge below.

Vadim kept his eyes on Dan and moved forward, and upward, and finally breaking into a trot across the bridge, hoping that everybody else had already made it, the plan had worked flawlessly up to now. “Getting there ... almost done,” he murmured. “And then you’ll have the doc look at your knees.”

Dan glanced to the side, grimacing. “Yeah, yeah, if you get yourself stitched up properly, I will.”

“Because I won’t carry you there.” Not the way my side fucking hurts, Vadim thought, but bit back the complaining.

“Very funny, asshole.” They’d made it, reached the other side, and Dan grinned at Vadim, teeth and all.

Glancing quickly over his shoulder, Vadim crouched down behind an outcrop of rock, resting, if only for a few seconds. “Blow the bitch up, then let’s go home.”

“Okay, even though ‘home’ is relative. Any idea how far to the camp?”

“Not a clue. Would have to check the map and compass ...”

But what did it matter right now, all that *did* matter was the radio controller in his pocket, and Dan took it out, checking the device. Nodding to himself when everything seemed fine. “Right, then, you better duck.” Vadim rested with his back against the rocks, keeping his head down.

Moving behind an outcrop, Dan counted from three to one and hit the button. Waited. Counted the ten seconds of safety delay, and ...

Nothing.

“Fuck!”

“Detonator fucked?” Vadim glanced to the side. “Any other way how it can be blown up?”

“Aye, shit. There was a second one, manual, but it means getting across, sticking it in and setting it manually then run back.” Once again with heartfelt frustration, Dan hissed, “Fuck!”

Vadim glanced over the bridge. "Listen, Dan, I'll do it. I'm the faster runner. I know where the package is. You just ... lie here in wait and make sure they won't take pot-shots at me, yes?"

"No, you can fucking forget it! I know what I'm doing. I set it, remember? No fucking way." Holding onto Vadim's arm. "Besides, I'm not a sniper, never was, I'd be crap. No, I go."

"Dan." Vadim covered Dan's hand on his arm with his hand. "With your legs? Whoever does it needs to be fast. I'm faster than you, easily. Shit." Taking the sniper rifle off, he pushed it into Dan's hand. "There. You know the Dragunov. It's a good rifle. Easy to shoot, reasonably accurate ..." Fishing for the remaining bullets and pressing them into Dan's hand. "Need to be quick. They'll soon get the fact everybody's out of their rabbit holes."

"I can't do it." Dan looked at Vadim. "Don't ..." But emotions meant nothing, and all that counted were facts. Reality. Sense. "Don't get caught." Dan murmured, before he took a quick breath, fished the detonator out of his jacket pocket and handed it over, then grabbed the Dragunov, fingering blindly to check the bullets. "I got you." Heart hammering, feeling sick for the first time in his life. Not fear, no, worse. Worry for another, which tried to make him scream 'no!' and to shit himself, or to vomit, but he merely nodded, got into position on the freezing ground, on his belly, gloves off to sense the trigger, aiming. "I got you. Be fast."

Vadim smiled, moved in close, already steeling himself for the run of his life, and quickly kissed Dan on the cheeks, left, right, as he looked up. "You'll make it up to me," Vadim murmured, feeling apprehensive, but the detonator in his hand was a good feeling.

"I will. Whatever happens." Dan managed to bring out, sweating despite the cold, but his hands were steady and his body descended into a calm he did not feel.

"Just cover me. Don't watch me, watch them." With that, Vadim dropped the AK and his webbing, the parka, everything that could slow him down now, then he set off, running in fast, easy bounds that nevertheless hurt his side, almost crossing the bridge, well beyond the middle, then rushed over the railing, as fast as possible, using every skill and every reflex drilled into him when he'd been beasted on a million assault courses throughout his life. He located the package and the faulty detonator, then stuck the manual into the cold, resisting mass of C4. Inconspicuous, and yet powerful enough to not only blow him, but this whole structure into smithereens.

Vadim was hanging across, low down, about to set the timer, when a hand grabbed him from behind, a voice shouted, and cold steel was pressed against his head, as he was pushed down, down, onto his knees. The man kept shouting at him, in a language Vadim did not understand, but he did not need to get the words, their meaning clearly focused in the muzzle against his head.

Vadim switched to Russian, hoping the chetniks understood the language. "There's a bomb," he brought out, trying to sound exasperated and angry,

certainly not caught in the act, but the man didn't listen, wouldn't, no matter which language he spoke. Too rattled, possibly wounded, and out of his mind.

Vadim's fingers were reaching for the timer, but not quite getting there. He'd set it to five seconds. He knew that was too short to get away. But the objective meant everything, and he had nothing to lose, not right now.

A few hundred yards away, Dan was lying utterly immobile, thoughts frozen, even the fear had ceased, because it was too overwhelming to deal with. The horror. The utter terror to see the worst he could imagine: Vadim. On his knees. Muzzle against his head, and an enemy behind him. The Dragunov. The scope. Darkness and flickering lights in the distance. No night sight, no sniper experience, and Dan's blood ran cold, freezing everything that remained, even his heartbeat. Finger on the trigger, moving the scope a fraction. One chance, just one, and if he didn't get the bastard right into the head he'd still have time enough to kill Vadim in reflex. Praying to gods. Anything. Anything and everything he'd never believed in, just ... please.

He pulled the trigger.

A crack. A shot. For a moment Vadim wondered whether it was wrong that men couldn't hear the bullet that killed them, then, he recognized the Dragunov's bark, and he moved. Moved to be a bad target, then heard the clutter of the AK, which, thank whichever god of war was being merciful, didn't spray him with bullets. Good, solid, reliable AK, and he stretched, setting the timer, quickly, fingers cold and sweaty, slippery with stress. Thirty seconds. He could hear shouts from the distance, saw the boots on the ground twitch as the man died, and he turned on his boot heel, and legged it. He ran so fast he didn't have time to breathe, in huge, bounding, powerful movements, pushing more with strength and determination than natural speed. Adrenaline so severe he didn't feel his side.

Dan had several shapes in the rifle's scope and he pulled the trigger into the moving shadows. Again and again, until he ran out of ammo, only then looking up and seeing Vadim running. He wanted to shout out his name, got onto his knees, tried to stand up, but too late, when an almighty explosion rocked the ground and tore the steel construction apart. Fire, blast wave, pushing into Vadim's back, so close to the other side, but not close enough.

The impact took Vadim's breath first, he jumped to cover more distance, the horror of shrapnel all too real, then losing his footing, sailing through the air and hitting the side of the mountain with his full weight. His vision blurred, pulled together into what seemed a tunnel, then came the pain, and it came full force, a grinding, twisting, merciless pain in his side. Vadim didn't move, couldn't breathe for several long moments, then reached out with a hand to push himself up, but he could have tried to lift a car. Too heavy, too much strength, he hardly managed to place the arm into position. Fuck. Pain. He could move his foot, barely, but the pain was bad.

"Vadim!" Dan yelled, slung the rifle over his shoulder and ran down the embankment, towards. Too steep, and he lost his footing, slipping, and crashing down. Falling, falling, trying to scabble for anything to stop the descent, but

when his knee impacted on the frozen ground, he screamed in pain. Didn't matter, though, needed to find Vadim, had to know ... and he was there. Lying still. Dan crawled across, blinded from the flash of the explosion and mostly deaf, hands scrabbling on Vadim's clothes. "Vadim!" Touching, frantic and out of his mind.

Vadim nodded, reached for Dan's chest, managed to focus on him. Thought fuck, Dan looked pale. "Okay. I'm ... okay."

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" Dan's hands were almost tearing on Vadim's clothes, skin, anything he could reach. "Don't you ever fucking make me do this again!" Rattled, like never before in his life.

"Not ... planning ... anything ... like ... that." Vadim knew he had to get up, had to move, and tried, they still had a long distance to cover, the villagers. He turned, and there was a nauseating ripping feeling in his side. He groaned, feeling more blood run down. "There ... that was the stitches ... Help me up."

"Shit." Struggling out of his jacket, Dan pressed it against Vadim's side. "I get yours. Up ... there." Damn, and the riverbank was steep, but they had to get going, and he couldn't stop touching Vadim. Offering help, when he could hardly walk himself, the knee stiffening up already, but nothing was more important than getting out of there. "Take my shoulder, step by step. We'll make it, aye? Nothing's broken?"

Vadim looked up, then clenched his teeth, jaw muscles tight. He needed to get up there. Seemed impossible from down here, but he did, small, laboured half-steps, Dan providing most of his support, and Vadim hated having to use it, but truth was, he wouldn't have managed alone. "Bones ... all in place. It's ... the soft bits ... I'm worried about."

"We'll get that sorted when we are back. Just don't bleed like a damned pig, aye?" Breathless, each word pressed out between clenched teeth, they made tiny step after tiny step, clinging to frozen grass and crawling upwards. Dan almost broke down when they finally reached the top. The clothes were still there in a bundle, weapon, too, and the bridge was gone. A gaping hole where it had been. "Come on ... get dressed." Dan got out, didn't try to get onto his feet, just crawled over to his bergan, rummaging frantically for anything he could use to bandage Vadim's wound. "It'll be dawn soon, and I haven't got a fucking clue what's on this road."

Vadim steadied himself against the rocks, just so, because he wasn't sure he could get up again if he lay down. Locating his kit, he struggled with the webbing, the parka, and the two rifles and got kitted up again. They'd have to go on. Somehow. Maybe the pain would leave at some point. At the moment, he was dizzy with pain and stress, and possibly blood loss. "No problem."

"No. No problem." Dan turned around, his jacket soaked with Vadim's blood, and he shook his head, then bent down and pulled his jumper over his head. "Here. Use that. Haven't got a fucking useful thing in that damned bergan." Bundled up, inside out, it made a tight compress. Handing it over, Dan got into his jacket, bergan, AK, then squinted his eyes into the darkness ahead.

Vadim knotted the whole thing in place, just covering the wound, knowing his body was begging for rest and food and water, but there was nothing he could do, but keep going. He'd been through worse. Right? Right. He'd survived, having been tortured and beaten within an inch of his life. Granted, he'd been more than ten years younger. Tightening the compress as much as he could, using the webbing to keep everything in place. No use giving in now. He'd come too close with that muzzle against his head. "Good shooting," he murmured.

"Fucking goddamned luck and not a damned fucking thing else!" Dan burst out, before getting himself under control. "Take my shoulder as support, we'll keep going. Bound to hit something at some point." Realising that if he didn't get Vadim to move right now, he might never move again, and that was absolutely no option.

Vadim looked up, smiling. "We did ... that before. Back in that hell of mountains. I fucking hate mountains." But he began to move, dazed enough that Dan had to guide him.

"Aye, and I remember it. You saved my life back then, seems you've made it a habit of yours." Trudging on, the limp pronounced, Dan had given up trying to bend that knee, stiff as a damned rod, and if he glanced down, he could see the swelling, hardly fitting into the dirty BDUs. Didn't matter. He had to move, not only his own life depended on it, but Vadim's. And that was what mattered, more than anything else.

And so they walked, the town's survivors too far advanced, they never met anyone. Step for step, two shattered men, stubbly, dirty, blood smeared and smoke blackened, weary and dead on their feet, with a couple of hours of sleep in the last forty-eight, and yet they kept moving. Despite the pain and against the exhaustion.

One man supporting the other. One foot after the other, until the night turned into dawn.

November/December 1992, the Balkans

It was still freezing cold and Dan could feel the chill to the very core of his body. Too exhausted, though, to worry about hypothermia. Just walking, one limping step after the other, his arm around Vadim, who was leaning against him, arm pressing onto the wound in his side.

The night was turning towards dawn, but both men were too weary to glance up, just kept moving. On and on, and if they had to crawl, they'd do that as well. Thirsty and hungry, exhausted and in too much pain to notice the sound of a vehicle in the distance.

But then something registered, and Vadim stopped, listening to the sound of a car – jeep, he assumed. Shit. He only hoped that this wasn't chetnik cavalry. "Off the road," he said, bone-weary, but not quite ready to give up.

"Fuck." Dan pressed out, too tired to move his lips much. But he didn't argue, knew too well that what separated a mere man from a special forces soldier: was to never give up. "How the fuck ..." but he was already moving, hobbling, while yet still looking out for Vadim, trying to help him towards and down the side of the road, even though he could hardly keep balance.

Vadim grimaced, but truth was, the wound had worn him down badly, mentally as well as physically. Wouldn't have been an issue ten years ago. Fuck. He managed to get down and lie flat in the ditch, peering at the road. AK ready to fire, just in case, while Dan was still trying to get down and didn't manage with that stiffened knee. Pressing himself against the steep embankment instead. Glancing down at Vadim, Dan grimaced. The vehicle was getting close, he could feel the vibrations, and when he looked up, he saw it coming towards them.

A Landrover. Camouflaged. Military vehicle. Goddamned motherfucking UNPROFOR.

"Vadim!" Dan shouted, trying to get back up the ditch in time, but there was no way he could make it, lifting his rifle into the air instead, firing a round to garner attention. Hoping it wouldn't be answered with fire instead. "Hey!" The vehicle was coming to a halt. "Over here!"

Vadim pushed himself up and helped Dan up the ditch, while every strain pulled with teeth at Vadim's wound. Their side. Kind of. He grimaced again, holding his side, and tried to stand on his own two feet. Securing the AK, he slung it over his shoulder, studying the people in the car with impassiveness.

A couple of soldiers were jumping out of the vehicle, and Dan was flooded with relief when he saw the flags on their uniforms. British. Goddamnedmotherfucking Brits. "You been looking for us?" he grinned at the men, who were looking at them with undisguised curiosity.

"Dan McFadyen and Vadim Krasnorada?" One of the men asked and Dan nodded.

“Aye, the same. Get us the fuck out of here, will you? Vadim’s injured, and my knee’s fucked.” Vadim just nodded to that. Too tired to feel much relief. Too tired to feel much of anything.

The man was pointing at the weapons, raising a brow. “I believe we take those with us, won’t we?”

“Yes. They won’t be missed.” Vadim unslung the AK and then the Dragunov, holding them in both hands, while Dan did the same with his AK, while moving towards the car. “How did you know where to look?”

“We got alerted that you were missing when neither of you appeared for your shift. Yesterday morning, we were contacted by someone from the outside, who was able to give us additional information on where you might have been seen last. We found a burnt-out vehicle, and I have just been told that another wreck was located.” The man raised his brow again while the other soldier took the weapons and secured them, then both of them helping first Vadim and then Dan into the back of the long wheel base Lannie. The benches were hard, but a hell of a lot better than stumbling along the road. “You will have to answer a bunch of questions, you are aware of that? The loss of vehicles, acquisition of weapons and a few other things.”

Dan grinned tiredly, “Aye, but you haven’t answered Vadim’s question yet.” Leaning against the back, he looked with relief at the water bottle that was handed to him, another to Vadim. “How did you know where to look?”

That brow went up again, as the soldier laconically answered, “Any organisation that isn’t able to tap into underground sources is worth shit.”

Dan grinned, tipped his head back and emptied a good portion of the bottle. “In that case, got any first aid on board?” The vehicle was setting into motion, slowly turning on the narrow road.

Vadim opened the bottle and drank, shifting on the bench to find a position that was the most comfortable. They’d get debriefed to hell, but right now, he was too tired to care. They’d be safe, and they might even get away with it. The guy who wasn’t driving joined them on the bench, holding up the first aid kit. “I’ll have a look. You’re worse off?” Nodding to Vadim.

Vadim shrugged. “Dan’s knee, my side, but my wound’s open. Glass cuts.”

“I’m alright. Nothing first aid can do anyway.” Dan shrugged.

The guy made a gesture to encourage Vadim to show him, and Vadim lifted the jumper and shirt, wincing at the dried blood that had encrusted the cloth, ripping off, when it was moved. Very carefully, the soldier uncovered the wound, and Vadim just watched him, as he recovered and bandaged everything again, sterile this time.

Dan had his eyes closed, the now empty bottle between his hands, seemingly asleep, when he suddenly opened his eyes when the soldier was done. “Got anything to eat with you?”

“Couple of Mars bars.”

“Can I have one? Bloody starving.”

The man flashed a grin and pulled two large chocolate bars out of a bergan, offering one each. "I know you're going to get grilled to hell, but I'm curious, what the fuck have you been up to since you vanished?"

Dan grinned and shook his head, hardly managing to tear the wrapper off the bar with his frozen fingers. "Just some car crash, RGPs, close encounter with fatal results, and finally getting about a hundred civilians out of a besieged town, while decimating a large group of chetniks and their armoured vehicles in the process, and sadly having to burn the town partially down to the ground and blow a bridge to smithereens."

"Don't mention the snipers," said Vadim, tearing the wrapper between teeth and hand. "Or Jimi Hendrix."

"Oh aye, Jimi, don't forget him."

"What?" The soldier asked incredulously.

Dan shrugged, biting half the chocolate bar off in one go, "nothing special."

Vadim gave a grin and let the sugar in the bar hit his bloodstream. It was really too sweet and too much of it, and it would only make him hungrier in the end, but for the moment, this hit the right spot.

The soldier turned his attention to Dan. "Any wounds I should have a look at?"

"No, I'm alright. Just fucked my knee." He shrugged and gave a tired grin. "Just wake me when it's time to get ripped a second one, aye?" Dan closed his eyes and leaned his head against Vadim's shoulder, no weight behind it, just careful.

"Alright. Should be half an hour, forty-five minutes, back to camp. If you're lucky you get treatment and maybe food and even hot water and soap, before they start the ripping."

"No sleep?" Dan yawned.

"You should be so lucky."

"Damn." But Dan grinned and kept his eyes closed. Didn't matter, they were alive, and that was all that counted. Vadim breathed laughter, leaned his head against Dan's and lifted a hand to touch Dan's cheek, holding it while for the first time in what felt like ages, properly resting. "I love you," he murmured in Russian, under his breath, and Dan smiled, said nothing, but turned his head and placed a kiss onto Vadim's cheek. He never bothered to check the soldier's reaction, but there was no gasp of shock, so maybe he hadn't seen or didn't care, or was too mortified react audibly.

Whatever the case, they were moving on at a comfortable speed for a while, when Dan felt the vehicle slow down. "What's up?" Blinking bleary-eyed. "Trouble?"

"Doesn't seem so." The soldier was immediately alert, peering out of the car, his weapon at the ready. Defence, yes. Attack, no. "There's a whole trek of people. Seems to be refugees."

"People?" Dan was suddenly awake, even though his body didn't want to move. "Let me see. Could be the townsfolk."

Vadim rubbed his eyes, then frowned, staring out of the car. "If it's them, they made pretty good progress," he murmured.

When the people came into view, they didn't seem familiar, maybe it was the different scenery, the different light, different situation. But then Vadim spotted Stjepan, and murmured. "Yes, it's them. Up there. The kid."

"Shit, yes." Dan grinned like a lunatic, "and the girl there, what's her name ... Sanya, it's her. They made it!" His grin couldn't get any bigger. "Stop the car, will you?" And despite the soldier's frown, he got the driver to stop when they had pulled up alongside the two kids.

"Hey!" Dan called out and a few faces turned. "You made it. Where are you heading to?"

Stjepan smiled, holding his hand out and into the vehicle, towards Dan first, then Vadim, while being watched with hawk-eyes by the soldiers. "Refugee camp." He squeezed the girl's shoulder, and Sanya showed the first tentative ghost of a smile ever.

"I'm glad you made it." Dan murmured, "I really am."

She glanced at Vadim and her smile grew a little before it died again. "You hurt?"

Vadim smiled at her. "Just a scratch."

"That is good." She nodded a little before her face closed up again.

Vadim was amazed that she could care about somebody else in her situation, and he desperately wanted to help, to do something. Leaving them to their own devices didn't feel right. But then, Stjepan had done a good job keeping her together, and that gave him a little hope. Human resourcefulness. He had nothing that he could give away, no money, nothing that would help them.

"Do you know anything about the boys who rigged the stereo?" Dan asked.

Stjepan gestured with his thumb towards the front. "Yes, they are over there. We didn't have all that many losses. Not as bad as usual ..."

The soldier was motioning to Dan that it was time to move on.

"Okay." Dan nodded. "Wish you good luck, okay? You'll make it."

Vadim smiled at them, hoped it looked natural and less strained than it felt. And just hoping they were safe now and would remain so. And maybe one day even put their lives back together.

"Yes. Yes, we'll be alright." Stjepan placed his hand on Sanya's shoulder again, and he nodded. "We'll make it. Better catch up now, though."

"Yes, you better." Dan smiled, feeling woefully inadequate, as if they were deserting those kids when they should have picked them up, put them into a home and a school and let them be what they should be: kids. Not soldiers. Not survivors, but there was fuck-all he could do.

"Thank you." Stjepan called out, when the Landrover had already started to move, rolling away from them. "We wouldn't be alive without you!" Shouting after the Dan and Vadim, who kept looking out, hands waving.

Eventually, Vadim turned back – straightening because his side still fucking hurt too much to stay twisted like that for long. "I need ..." Pausing, realizing

he'd spoken what he'd been thinking. Need to get in touch with my kids. Sanya and Stjepan reminded him too much of the children he'd left behind.

"Need what?" Dan leaned once more against the side of the vehicle, fishing in his pockets for a last cigarette, but it was hard to do anything with those cold fingers.

"A shower, sleep, food. Not sure in that order." Vadim didn't want to mention his family, not with the Katya issue in the room. He didn't want to remind Dan, didn't want to start a quarrel, he wasn't even quite ready to face the fact that burning bridges had probably been a mistake. Not staying in touch. It had started with trying to get away from them so he didn't miss them, just moved away until that old life had faded and lost power, but then he had been ashamed and didn't want them to see what he had become. Maybe, just maybe, they could find a way that wasn't too painful?

"Aye, couldn't agree more, but you heard what we've just been told." Dan grinned tiredly at the soldier opposite to them, "we won't get a chance to sleep." Finally finding his squashed cigarette pack, he just about managed to fish out a last, crumpled fag, and lighted the sad excuse for a nicotine fix. "Never mind, I'll probably fall asleep during the grilling anyway."

"Catch a nap right now, hm?" Vadim placed his arm around Dan's shoulder to pull him close again and make him lean against his shoulder, closing his eyes now, too. They'd done good. However this little odyssey had started, in the end, it was mostly a victory.

"Okay." Dan smiled, smoking with closed eyes, until the fag almost fell out from between his lips, and ended beneath the boot of the soldier who said nothing, and just extinguished it.

* * *

"We're almost back."

The soldier's voice pulled Dan back out of his slumber, and hell, it was hard to open his eyes. Feeling each and every of his years, and a body that had been on the line for almost all of them. Ten years ago he would have bounced back, but there wasn't any margin left, this time.

Nodding, Dan turned his head to Vadim, murmuring into his ear, "and what the fuck's our story?"

Vadim gently touched his head to Dan's, speaking Russian, if reluctant. "Simple. I headed out because a civvie contact told me about that camp. And I wanted to verify it. I'll still get a bollocking, but it's not 'criminal insanity' anymore."

"Okay." Dan smiled, so tired his brain took twice as long to digest everything, but at least his Russian didn't fail him. "And I followed you because of partnership problems. Wanted to have a chat with you, get it out into the open, make or break time. That'll get me a bollocking, too, for unprofessionalism, but at least it's a reason." Adding, even quieter, "it's not even far off the truth." If at all.

Vadim reached over and took Dan's hand. "Sounds believable to me." Make or break. That fucking close again.

"Aye," Dan switched to English, "it is, except for the black and white." Too cryptic. "Don't forget, whatever we did, it was in self-defence. Otherwise we'd get into deep shit." Dan squeezed Vadim's hand, smiling, as he pulled back a little to look at him, once more talking Russian. "You can't get rid of me that easily, but we do have to have a chat about your tendency of violence. Hit first, talk later." He pulled a toothy grin, as much as he managed in his exhausted state. Ignoring the soldier who was loudly clearing his throat.

Vadim huffed laughter, then looked at the soldier. "Excuse me," he murmured, voice slightly slurred with the exhaustion. "Haven't had much chance to talk, lately."

"It's okay." The man nodded, studiously avoiding to look at the combined hands, though, and the heads touching. "I'm just not ... used to this." Making a sweeping gesture as he grimaced a smile.

"Yeah. I can imagine. But indulge us. We've been through a lot, and pretending to be straight isn't that easy right now," Vadim said.

"Okay." Repeated, then offering, "been in shit once, myself. I understand."

Vadim didn't pursue this further, even though he saw a million openings - but he didn't have the perseverance right now, nor the belligerence. And he was only mildly astonished that he didn't feel any shame or darkness, but maybe those were numbed by the tiredness as well. Instead he gave the man something of a tired smile and a nod, acknowledging.

Dan just grinned and closed his eyes again, just glad he didn't have to let go of Vadim's hand. Too tired to comment, too bone weary and, yes, unspeakably glad to be alive. Simple pleasure, and the most profound of all.

They stopped for a moment when making their way through the guard post, and finally they were back in camp. Dan took a deep breath and braced himself to get up, his swollen knee stiff and unbendable. "Best get out, aye? Need some help?"

"I'm okay." Vadim pulled, then pushed himself up. "Come on." He climbed off the vehicle, then offered Dan a hand. "Lean on my shoulder." He saw others gathering, small groups. People were curious, of course, and the camp grapevine was ever faithful. They didn't make a huge show out of it, but they were watching.

He didn't have to help Dan, because a medic came already running, a couple of nurses on his heels. Unfortunately, the CO was right behind them. "You need a stretcher?" The doc was calling out, but Dan shook his head.

"No, just a fucked knee. Someone lend me a hand?" Not yet letting go of Vadim, though. "I'm not the one who needs stitching up."

The CO stepped close - jaw tight and eyes narrow, giving both a once over that showed resentment rather than concern, thought Vadim. Coolly, like he'd had a lot of time to put together the sentences, he said: "Krasnorada and McFadyen grace us again with their presence. How considerate."

“Aye, Sir, and if you’d seen the blaze and heard the explosions, you could have had the pleasure of getting a glimpse of us last night.” Dan just about managed to get to the ground, letting out a groan when he landed. Too tired and too deadly exhausted to give a fuck. Except for Vadim, looking out for him, but the medic was already taking over, ignoring the CO, while asking Vadim where he was injured.

Vadim pointed at his side and was made to sit down, the doc examining the wound right there and then.

The CO looked at Vadim, not a muscle in his face moving as he saw the wound being uncovered and the medic’s glance towards him. Then back to Dan, who was leaning heavily against the vehicle.

“Preliminary report. There were a lot of inquiries, and I need answers right now. What happened?”

“I followed Vadim, two nights ago, because of ...” deliberately hesitating, “problems in our partnership. I wanted to clarify things once and for all.”

To the CO’s credit, he didn’t blink. It was the most open secret in the camp, but the CO must have long decided that it was none of his business, not unless those two men had another bust-up in the open. Very much the ‘I don’t want to know’ approach to gay mercenaries.

Dan paused, just as deliberate, “oh, and sorry for the vehicle, if we hadn’t shot mine off to hell we wouldn’t be here, alive.” Dan shifted, while a nurse was checking him out, moving arms, prodding ribs, but he was fine until she got to the knee and he yelped, getting himself under control, though. “We made it to an abandoned village, seemed to have been forcefully emptied. Killed a couple of guys in self defence, kitted ourselves out, you’ll find the weapons were handed over to the guys who picked us up.” He didn’t move when his trouser leg was cut off, displaying a grotesquely swollen knee. Since the CO was obviously expecting him to go on, so he did.

“We found transport on the way, turned out they were Bosniaks, but the crazy bastards took us right into a besieged town. We just about made it into one of the buildings during the attack. Realised that we’d never survive another night, not with the strategic importance of the bridge, and the way the town was crumbling. Not many able fighters left. So we came up with a completely fucked-up plan for an attack, and won. It was all defence, though. Of course.” He shrugged, “simple as that. Molotovs and shabby tanks don’t go well together, and Vadim here, he’s a sniper par excellence. We got a Dragunov off one of the wounded guys, burnt down some buildings for light and distraction, got them to pull all their resources to the front where we attacked, and killed the chetniks like goddamned rats. Meanwhile, the old, young, and infirm of the town made it across the bridge. The remaining fighters followed in the end, and we blew the bridge up, which we had rigged up earlier. Vadim, here, had to get the manual detonator in.” Deliberately avoiding the mention of Jimi Hendrix. Too weird was too weird. “You know the rest. We are alive, got picked up, and really are sorry for those vehicles of yours, but ...” glancing at where they were working on Vadim, getting him ready to be taken inside and properly stitched

up, “but not for the rest, aye?” Adding, because he was still the irreverent bastard, “and you’ll be pleased to know we sorted out partnership problems.”

The CO looked at Vadim, then stepped closer to Dan, speaking so quietly that only Dan heard it. “There are reasons why most professional armies do not run the risk of admitting women into combat roles,” he stated, as if making an observation about some long bygone battle, and Dan blinked, once. Slowly, dangerously, and he was about to ask what the fuck he’d meant with that and if he was seeing any women around there, when the CO turned, wisely, and glanced at Vadim. The medic was just pulling up a syringe with some clear liquid, doubtlessly painkillers. “Krasnorada?”

“He’s right. That’s what happened.”

The medic cleaned a spot of skin with some alcohol and gauze.

“No. Why did you leave camp?”

“I heard a rumour from ... a contact. About ...” Vadim hissed when the needle went into his biceps, and then gave a suppressed groan when the analgesic took that grinding, twisting pain away. Something to shoot a wounded horse up with. “A camp. A concentration camp. Like they use.” Vadim let his head fall back, finding it hard to focus. “Down the road, up that mountain. I can show it on the map.”

“Another camp?” The CO purses his lips, then decided that he wouldn’t get anything else out of Vadim, instead returned his attention to Dan. “Can you show me the location on the map?”

“Aye.” Dan’s eyes were still narrowed, if the exhaustion hadn’t taken over, his anger would explode any second. “If you get one, because I can’t fucking walk ... Sir.” Hissed, but the tiredness took the worst sting away, and he resented that.

The CO extended a hand and one of the men handed him a map. The officer, then, undaunted, stepped closer, folding the map out to display the general area where Dan and Vadim had been.

Dan needed a moment to concentrate, the squiggly lines were blurring one into the other, but he found his bearings after a moment, following the map with a finger until he stopped at the spot where the RPG had hit Vadim’s vehicle. “There. We were on top of the hill and if you look down here ...” pointing westward, “there it was. And that’s why the fuckers were so adamant to kill us. We’d seen something they sure as fuck didn’t want anyone to see.”

“I’ll have that investigated.”

The medic cleared his throat. “I’m taking Krasnorada now, Sir.” He received a curt nod, while the nurses helped Vadim get on the stretcher. The medic stepped to Dan and had a closer look at the knee. “I want an x-ray of that,” he murmured. “And you’re not walking. Nowhere.”

“Trust me,” Dan grimaced, “I’d rather not.” He stood and waited, leaning against the vehicle and watching Vadim being taken away. “But, just in case, you think you got some of those happy shots for me?”

The medic looked at him. “Hm. Maybe you deserve a small mercy.” Not even glancing at the CO, but the words clear enough. “This is bad, McFadyen.”

“I will see you after you’ve cleaned up and had some rest. And I will hear the full story. Dismissed.” The CO turned around, heading back to where he’d come from.

The medic prepared another syringe, tapped the bubble out and, very carefully, administered the shot into the swollen knee, while Dan breathed very, very quickly and shallow through his nose. “Don’t move. I want you in the hospital as fast as possible.”

“I didn’t mean to shot it into my fucking knee!” Grimacing, but soon he could feel ... nothing, and he stopped complaining. “Hospital? That’s bloody miles away.” Dan frowned, imploring the medic, “can’t you just patch me up for now and let me have some scrubbing, food, water, and rest and not even necessarily in that order, before you ship me off to the hospital? I’m fucking falling over in a second. Been out there forty-eight hours or thereabouts.” And he missed Vadim, needed some time with him, just to sleep and hold, without anyone shooting at them.

The medic frowned. “Okay. I’ll bandage this to give it some stability, you’ll keep it cool, foot up, and if I see that foot touch the ground - or anything else - for a moment, I’ll have you medevacced. This knee looks like it’s coming apart, and if you want to ever use your leg again, I’d rather not take the slightest risk. Do you get me?”

“Aye.” Dan frowned. “I get you, okay? Just slap something on that lets me have a shower. I stink like a skunk and I’d really like to wash the shit off my hands that probably came from a few bodies.”

The medic sent a nurse to fetch crutches, then set to work right away, stabilising the leg, then stood up, gathering his stuff. “Right. Off you go. I’ll check on you. Your partner should be stitched up by now, I’ll have him delivered to your room.”

“Cheers.” Dan smiled, didn’t take more than a couple of minutes before the nurse came back with crutches. “Guess we can manage the rest ourselves.”

“I’ll call the hospital and I’ll see you once you’ve rested - and reported.” The medic watched Dan make a couple of measly attempts at moving with the crutches, but turned away when Dan got the hang out of it within a few steps.

Hobbling over to their accommodation building, Dan had rarely been so glad to be back in that place. He got inside, and onto a chair, starting to peel himself out of the soiled and torn, as well as cut-off clothing, which could only be burnt. The absence of pain was utterly luxurious, if only someone could carry him to the showers now.

But he managed on his own, and with a towel around his hips, shower gel dangling from his hand and on both crutches, he made his way half asleep across the hallway to the washing area, where he stood for an eternity under the hot spray. Leaning against the tiled wall and simply enjoying the heat and being clean.

Just a little later, Vadim was led back to the hut, sporting a stark white bandage around his waist. Still incoherent from the painkiller, but cleaned up a bit as if one of the nurses had had mercy on the man - or considered all the dirt

to be a problem. He had a blanket over his shoulders and they got him to sit down on the bed, took off the boots and helped him get into bed. They should be in the sick station, both of them, but maybe the medic had acknowledged that they'd get more peace and quiet and sleep in their own quarters.

Still dripping wet, Dan made his way back, finding a stack of sandwiches in front of the room, and fresh water bottles. Laboriously getting inside, food and all, he smiled when he saw Vadim on the bed. "Hey, Russkie, glad to see you. Hungry?"

Vadim moved his head and looked at him, blue eyes glazed. "Not sure. Don't feel ... a thing." Thinking, very carefully, through the fog in his head. "Maybe. I should be."

"Aye, and don't tell me you're still wearing something, hm? Are you?" Hopping over on one leg, Dan somehow managed to get the sandwiches and the water step by step across. Finally flopping onto the bed himself. Still damp, but he really couldn't be bothered. The blankets would do the trick.

Vadim looked down at himself. "Yeah. Trousers. What's left of them. But no socks." Smiling wearily, welcoming Dan when he lay down next to him. "Tomorrow. Yes?"

"No. First, we'll get rid of your trousers, because you'll be uncomfortable otherwise, and then you'll eat at least a couple of sandwiches, okay?" Adding, while already working on the fly, "for me?" Pulling every string, but hell, they'd both not eaten for too long, and those painkillers seemed to have a remarkable effect on Vadim. "And then we sleep. Sounds like bliss, right?" Pulling on the trousers to get them off.

Vadim managed to muster enough focus to lift his hips and help with getting undressed, but was clumsy, and only with supreme willpower managed to get the trousers and pants off. Underneath, at least, he was fairly clean. "Just ... water." He murmured, reaching for the bottle, and managed to drink something, but spilled almost as much. "Fuck," he said without passion or conviction. "Whatever they put in me, I ..." Trailing off.

"... am in a very happy place." Dan chuckled tiredly, and gave up trying to feed Vadim with anything.

"Aye." Belated.

Taking hold of the blankets, both on the one bed, it would have to do for now, as long as he didn't touch Vadim's bad side. Tucking both of them in, he stuffed his face with a handful of sandwiches, while watching Vadim, eyes closed, expression growing evermore slack, before he found a comfortable position. As much touching and as close to Vadim as possible without hurting, and within seconds, Dan fell asleep.

* * *

Dan had no idea how long he had slept, when a low-level sensation of dulled ache began to invade his senses. On top of that an irritating itch from a three-day stubble, and the mild feeling that he needed to piss. Most of all, though, he

became slowly aware of the absence of danger. Muted voices from outside, the warmth of blankets and a comfortable room, even though there was little space where he lay, until he was awake enough for the realisation that he was not alone. The bulk of heat beside him felt good under his hand, and before he could try to move closer, he remembered. Everything. With growing clarity, including Vadim's injury. He breathed in deeply and stayed where he was. Not moving was the best idea right now, anyway.

Opening his eyes, though, but it was fairly dark in the room, the only light coming through the window from the outside lighting of the camp. Watching Vadim's profile for a while, he smiled. Simply content to be alive, safe, and most of all, to be with Vadim - without anger, hurt and accusations between them.

Eventually, Vadim awoke. No start, no slow drifting, just awake from one moment to the next. He must have slept well, he felt rested, unlike in those nights when the dreams haunted him and made him wake leaden and tired, and without hope. Feeling Dan close, he turned his head to regard him. "How long have you been watching me?"

"No idea." Dan smiled, "but I'm gagging for a fag, so I guess it must have been a while." Letting his hand stroke along the good side of Vadim's chest, then down the arm. Relishing in the simple pleasure of touch. "How do you feel?"

"Pretty good. My side hurts a bit, but as long as I take it easy, it should be okay. What about you?"

"A thousand times better than in the morning. Except for that damned beard." Dan chuckled quietly. "But I can't be arsed to get up and shave. It's too comfortable here, and I'd be surprised if they left us in peace till the morning."

"What time is it?" Vadim reached over to touch the stubble and felt the tightness in his side. The painkiller was wearing off. "Feel like I've slept twelve hours straight." He leaned over to kiss Dan, one of those small, gentle kisses that were more about being alright than ravenous desire.

"No idea, hang on ..." Slowly rolling over with a grunt, Dan fished for his watch, eyeing the wardrobe where he kept his fags, but getting up was too much effort, even for a nicotine addict like him. "After seven. We *did* sleep something like ten hours." Reaching to rasp his fingertips over Vadim's stubble, less pronounced than his own, he grinned. "I could help you shave, if you help me in return? It's not that we haven't done that before ..."

"There are days when I wish we shaved electric and that electric shaves were actually any good," Vadim murmured, but grinned. "Okay. Give me a second. Just mustering my resolve." Reaching for the edge of the bed, he pulled himself up to put less strain on his side, but it still hurt, and rather badly. "Where's that medic with his horse tranquilizer ..."

"Wait ..." Dan put a hand onto Vadim's shoulder, "I could ask for some pills. Besides, we need food. If I hobbled out, you could get mentally ready for a sponge bath and shave near the sink." He grinned, "or we just stay here a little while longer and I hold you for a bit, because it's so fucking good to be able to do that."

Vadim turned and smiled warmly. "You're not walking with that leg, Dan. I'll do that. And maybe they'll leave us in peace for a while longer, but I get the feeling the CO will want to talk to us soon and I'd rather be shaved and dressed sharply when he does." Reaching over again to cup Dan's cheek. "If I'm wrong, we can still 'cuddle' until they come and get us."

Dan sighed and frowned, everything but happy about that. "Don't you think they'd have already got us if they wanted to talk to us tonight?" Sitting up in the bed, he muttered. "You're running away."

Vadim was about to get dressed, but paused at that. Had he misread Dan? It happened, still did, sometimes. Always focused on duty, especially during the last weeks. He didn't feel like he was running. He'd focused on the basic needs first. Food, medicine. "I'm not."

"You sure? Because I've lost the ability to know lately." Dan pulled in a deep breath and shrugged. "Never mind. Blame the painkillers, lack of sweets, not enough nicotine, and too much Hendrix. I just wanted ..." he trailed off and shrugged again, grimacing this time. "Needy bitch, eh?"

Vadim shook his head. "Not at all." Kneeling down beside the bed, because that way he didn't have to bend his torso. "Just ... thought fix the pain and hunger first." The 'first' sounded ominous in his own ears, and he grinned. "But if you want to talk first, I'll just get my arse into bed again and we talk."

Dan narrowed his eyes, then kneaded his brows in a concentrated, unwittingly comical fashion. "Damn. That would make me a bimbo." Frowning with an almighty crease between his eyes. "No, it's alright. My beard itches, I'm famished and the sandwiches are dried out, and I need a fag. Just as long as you get your arse back here as soon as possible, aye?"

"I won't be long." Vadim reached for his trousers, then noticed their state and got up to find fresh clothes in the locker. Underwear, new clean camo, clean, dry socks. He moved carefully and deliberately, but the wound was well padded and the bandage tight enough to help a bit. He slipped into trainers and a grey t-shirt. "Anything you want before I get food, water and painkillers? If they don't shoot me up like that again, I'll likely even find my way back."

"Ha, ha, very funny." Dan sat on the bed, blankets off, looking for the crutches. "Just get me a flask of coffee, and make sure it's not the usual stewed shit." Finding the crutches that leaned against the bed, Dan got up, on one leg, standing in all his bearded, naked glory. "Bugger, I should call Maurice."

Vadim watched him, and didn't want to go, instead wanted to help Dan get sorted. The knee looked horrible, swollen and discoloured. It had never looked anything like that before. "I'll go get the stuff. Shaving kit, too. Phone calls are down the list, though, let's fix ourselves first."

"And leave Dima without any idea what the hell happened to ... us?" Hopping over to the wardrobe, Dan found the fags first, before taking out a pair of shorts. Hopping back again, he sat down, got a cigarette and lit it, then put the shorts on. First things first.

"Point taken. I'll be back in fifteen." Vadim headed out, hurried over to the medical facilities, where he managed, barely, to fend off the medic on late duty,

who insisted that he'd come back later so he could have a look at how the wound looked, and managed to get painkillers off him – again having to promise he'd bring Dan over as soon as possible, as everything was set up the next morning to get Dan to a hospital for x-rays. He then managed to get a tray of food from the mess, as well as coffee and water, and brought all that back in just over fifteen minutes. "Hey Dan, breakfast."

Dan was still sitting on the bed, blanket over his shoulders, smoking his third cigarette in a row. "Hey," grinning, "interesting time for 'breakfast'."

"First meal after waking up is breakfast in my book." Vadim pulled a box with kit closer, to double as a table, and put the food and drinks down. Fishing the painkillers from his pocket, he added them to the ensemble. "Doctor says two of those with food for you." He sat down next to Dan and ran his hand through Dan's hair, who looked up, smiling.

"Feel already better, but would be much more so if we could get the beds back to how we had them before I got that damned letter. No idea how either of us is going to move it. Perhaps if we shuffle together?"

"Yeah, that should work. Get rid of the kit in between, and all that. I can try when you make that phone call. And ... let Dima know I'm pleased he's okay."

"Will do." Dan reached for a sandwich, the cold meat sliced thickly, and the cheese generous as well. He poured a couple of mugs of coffee with his free hand, then remembered the fag still between his lips and he grinned, getting rid of it. "Not just a needy bitch, a greedy bastard as well."

"It's been two days from hell." Vadim reached for the coffee, which had the right temperature and seemed suitable to take the rust off any kind of kit.

"You could say so, but seems it was also the best two days in a long time. After all, we got back, are more or less in one piece minus the odd injury, spotted an illegal camp, helped save a bunch of people, burnt down a town, and got back together. That's not too bad in my books." Speaking with his mouth full, Dan devoured the sandwiches, washing the bites down every so often with some coffee. "And I liked your story of why you got out there in the first place. Will stick to it. Hopefully we'll get out of this with a major bollocking but without too much trouble."

Vadim grinned. "Good story, eh? I bet he doesn't imagine in his wildest dreams that I could still lie in that state. Ageing faggot and all that."

Dan burst into laughter, almost spraying breadcrumbs across the makeshift table. "Damn right."

Vadim finished one of his sandwiches and felt nearly human after emptying the first mug of coffee, too. "I won't tell him who my contact is, and I guess he won't ask. And if he does, fuck him. It makes the most sense."

"After all, you could always tell him you only know your contact's fake name, would have been too dangerous for your contact otherwise."

"Well, if he asks me what kind of contact, I'll tell him it's a native I have sex with. And obviously I wouldn't ask his name."

Dan huffed a laugh then pulled the blanket closer around him, settling back after finishing off a large pile of food. Coffee in his hand, Dan grinned. "You want to ask me anything about Dima?"

"Actually, everything. You followed me, and that is how you found him ... and then?"

"Then I took him to a safer place. One that couldn't collapse." Dan raised his brows over the cup of coffee. "I figured that no one ever looks at anything close by, and so I used the bunker near the camp." He shrugged, "at first I kept him there, for a night, but with blankets, food, torch, all the necessities. And no shackles ...," raising his brows once more, "didn't know you were *quite* such a kinky bastard." Dan chuckled lightly to take the sting out of his words. "Anyway, when I went back the next day I had come up with an idea to get him into the French embassy to safety, and Maurice, surgeon mate of mine, was going to pick him up. I left the door open, told Dima whatever happened someone would come in the morning. That was the night when I followed you, and obviously, it wasn't I who picked him up, but Maurice must have done it."

"I tied him up to protect him, weird as that sounds. I didn't want to kill him accidentally when I ... went out to fight the bastards. I was trying to find a better solution, but I had no idea what I could do so I kept him like that. So ... what do you think of him?"

"He's a good guy who ended up with some real arseholes for some fucked up reasons."

Vadim laughed. "That about nails it. Damn. Tell him I'm sorry when you talk to him?"

"Why don't you talk to him yourself? He's your former comrade, I've only known him for a couple of days." Unwilling to mention anything else.

"True. But I'm thinking I'll let him cool off for a while." Vadim had another sandwich, and poured himself more coffee. "That whole thing, between us ..." Trailing off to invite Dan to talk first.

"Between us, as in you and I?" Dan put the empty mug down.

"Yeah. You and I." Vadim watched him, intently. "And, I guess, Katya."

"*Don't!*" Dan's reaction was sharp. "Don't mention that bitch's name." He shook his head vehemently. "I don't mind you mentioning Kisa, though. Can't hate the kid, not her fault, and fuck, does she look like me. Not a blond and blue-eyed Krasnorada, aye?"

Vadim gave a sigh and ran his hands over his face. "She's still my ex-wife and Anya's and Nikolai's mother. And that of ... of Kisa. I don't want you to ..." disgrace that, was the thought he had, but it was that painful, uncomfortable feeling of two people hating each other that he still cared about.

"She's a fucking selfish bitch who blackmailed me to do something when I was fucking vulnerable and that was so fucking painful at the time, that it still haunts me. And then the fucking gall to tell me I'm a fucking sperm donor with no fucking right to ever see the 'product'. I had hoped it would never happen, that I wasn't fertile or what-the-fuck, but she's here now. I have a daughter, because I was used." Dan shrugged, agitated, but trying to keep himself in

control. "Fine, so I was used, get over it, McFadyen, but then you come along and beat the shit out of me, not even giving me a chance to explain what the fuck had really happened. Just *expecting* that I had betrayed you. So, no, Vadim, stuff it. I Do. Not. Want. To. Talk. About. This. Bitch. Ever. Again. Did I make myself clear?" Reaching for his cigarettes, Dan's hands were everything but steady.

"Okay. I won't mention her." It seemed callous even by Katya's standards, if this was true, and Vadim's head spun from the information, and Dan's clear anguish. Letting the uncomfortable silence drag on, with no idea what to do now. "What's the plan? How do we ... deal with this?"

Dan shrugged, his hand visibly shaking as he lit the fag, calming, though, when he inhaled and blew out the smoke. "I guess we don't. You just try and never again not give me a chance, and I ..." he shrugged again, his most frequent gesture in this conversation. "I set up a trust for Kisa. The bitch is not to touch it, it's for Kisa's education or for whatever else she might need the money for when she's eighteen. I hope she'll turn out cleverer than her ..." pausing, inhaling deeply, deeply, before finally settling on a word, "biological" but then he stopped.

"Two things. Don't call her 'bitch' in my presence. Call her what you will when I'm not around, but don't make me listen to you ranting about her. I owe her that much. Second, if you think you'd have been too stupid for higher education, think again. You have a good mind, Dan. You weren't so fucking sexy if you hadn't."

"Ranting? Fuck you." Dan shook his head and kept the burning fag between his lips, snatching the crutches to get up.

"Yes, she deserves being called that, but ... try and understand me? I was married to that woman. We have two children. She always made sure I'd be secure. Like a good comrade, or a sister, or a good friend."

"Aye, I understand you." Hopping on the crutches to the wardrobe, pulling out training bottoms and sweatshirt. "I always try to fucking understand you, but I guess I don't. Guess you're just too goddamned complicated and I'm just too bloody simple. So do me a favour, and ... whatever." Dan hopped back with the clothes under his arm.

"Okay. That's 'fuck off' then." Vadim remained sitting, rubbed his face again.

"No, it's not." Dan turned round, too fast, losing balance and falling back onto the bed. "It's about asking the same fucking question in return. Try to understand *me*? Or have you never considered that I might need to be understood, because I am too fucking happy all the fucking time? Because I'm old Dan, and old Dan didn't go through all the shit you went through, and what old Dan did go through, old Dan's happily dealing with, because he's just a happy-go-lucky Scottish peasant git anyway?"

"I'm sorry. I ..." Vadim gave a pained smile. "Guess I just thought you were so much stronger than I am."

"I don't know, Vadim. I don't know what 'strength' even is. Who is stronger? No fucking idea. We're different, but stronger? I don't know. All I *do* know is that this ... this thing fucking *hurt*! And shit, why the fuck do I have to even say it? Fucking damned hate having to admit to this shit."

Vadim reached over and took hold of Dan's neck, pulling him close, moving close enough to kiss him. "And all I know is that I can't lose you. I need you. You keep me together. You keep me going."

"That's a big fucking lot of responsibility, isn't it?" Dan's dark eyes were vulnerable, "you need me, or you love me. Which one is it? And is there room for understanding *me* as well?"

"It's both, Dan. Not either or." Vadim touched his face to Dan's. "And I'll try harder, understanding you."

"It's usually not that difficult." Dan murmured, cigarette forgotten in his hand, burnt down to the filter, but reluctant to move, even though he didn't know what else to say.

Vadim moved to touch his lips to Dan's, tilting his head with his hand, urging him to open up and pressed in harder, needed that feeling now, that want and need. The fact there was the desire that had been the basis of everything, much before any feelings or thoughts had become important, complicating it all. "I missed you, Dan. Everything."

"Then why the fuck do you throw it away that easily?" Murmured, lips open and against Vadim's. Always willing, forever responding. Not much that could stop the need of many years.

"I was just ... hurt ..."

"Yeah, welcome to my world."

Vadim pushed Dan back to lie on the bed, moved carefully on top, making sure he didn't touch Dan's leg, even fleetingly, and kept kissing, hands running over Dan's body. "But ... doesn't matter."

"No?" Dan's brows both shot up. "What *does* matter, then?"

"Guess." Vadim grinned, hand going to Dan's groin. "I guess we're forbidden any strenuous activity ... but what about a non-strenuous blowjob?"

"And how are you going to manage with your stitched-up side?" Dan frowned, "don't want you to hurt yourself, even though I'd be the last man on earth to say 'no' to a blowjob from you."

Vadim grinned. "I'll be alright. And since anything else appears to be out ..." He moved back, kissing his way down to Dan's groin, until he knelt on the floor, shoulders keeping Dan's knees open. Needed to show how much he wanted, and wanted to make Dan feel good. He took Dan's cock, which appeared barely interested right now, but he was determined to change that. And change it did, perhaps not as quickly as it might have, ten years ago, or in a different situation, but the interest was there, without fail.

Dan reached for Vadim's head briefly, touching the short hair, before lying back down again and closing his eyes. A luxury, right now, and it was about much more than 'just' a blowjob.

Vadim took him deep once he was fully hard, forcing his throat to accept the intrusion, bringing it all the way. His eyes closed, he concentrated on nothing but the heat and holding his breath, both hands resting on the bed and steadying himself as he brought his head down, and up, and down again, slow, controlled, but as deep as he could.

Rewarded by sounds that grew ever more urgent, and Dan's body, shuddering beneath him. Thighs muscles trembling, as if Dan was under a great strain, and his breath coming in ever more desperate gasps. It was not quick, nor fast, but when he finally came, he arched up from the bed, and Vadim's name was on Dan's lips. A strangled sound, and an orgasm that took him with abandon.

Vadim bore down against the arching body, allowed the cum to shoot down his throat, swallowing purely by reflex, and then, when Dan had relaxed and fallen back, slowly pulled back, cleaning the cock and sucking on it some more. Licking it while it was still hard, then rested his head on Dan's hip, pulling the discarded blanket closer so Dan wouldn't be cold. "You okay?"

"Shit, yeah." Dan breathed out, grinning with closed eyes, fingers reaching to stroke Vadim's short hair. "But isn't it your turn now?"

"Don't worry about me. I'd rather not have an orgasm with that wound if I can help it."

"Okay, I let you off this time."

Vadim grinned and climbed back on the bed to lie next to Dan, moving close enough to hold him and again touching head to head, the blanket over them. They were silent for a very long time, their breathing in sync, just lying and relaxing, until Dan asked in a quiet voice, "if you ever go to ... Hungary, would you ... would you look at Kisa for me and would you take some photos?" He opened his eyes, heads still touching, and he smiled tentatively.

"You've thought about this a lot, hm? The trust, the photos ..."

"It's ... well, it's ..." hesitating, if he weren't so weathered, the heat that Dan suddenly felt in his face would show on his cheeks. "I never expected this, but ... I guess she is ..." stammering almost, because damn, this was hard, it was completely unknown territory. "Guess she is ... a part of me? One that's not fucked up. That lives on when I'm long dead, that will hopefully one day fall in love in a nice little place with a nice little partner and lead a nice little life. One that has never killed, and shit, if I believed in anything, I'd pray for this: one that never *will* kill, and then wonder one day, what it said about her that she couldn't feel remorse for any of the lives she'd taken. Perhaps I just hope that ... and I know how fucking stupid I sound now, but, well, that maybe she can be all that is *good* in my legacy, and none of the crap."

Vadim smiled fondly and pressed Dan closer for a long, heartfelt moment. "Sounds like you do feel remorse, though. Or at least assume you're guilty in some way."

"I don't know, don't quite understand what it is, but the kids in the town ... and then my brother and his family, even the guys in Glasgow ... I look at those civilians and I think shit, if only they knew what I've really done, and how

I did it, and that I did what I did without any emotions. It was and is a job, and I still take a life if I need to. I mean, we just did, out there, and yet, fuck, what does that make me? Not really something I want to think about, certainly not from the point of view of a civilian." Dan smiled wryly. "I guess it's best that Kisa will never know me. At least she'll never find out, and neither can I fuck it up with her."

"I've thought similar things about my kids. That they were somehow something ... I've done right." Vadim kissed him again. "I'll have a look at her. I should ... check on Anya and Nikolai, too."

"Aye, and you do know that it's almost December, and what that means?"

"What's the exact date?"

"Today? Not sure, the twenty-seventh or something. But surely, you must know what December means? You were home for Christmas at least sometimes while your children were young, weren't you?"

"Yes, of course. Christmas. I thought you meant your birthday in two days."

"That?" Dan frowned, "forget that, not important. I never remember it anyway and I've never celebrated it, or can you imagine a birthday cake up in the mountains, with a bunch of Mijas singing 'happy birthday'? No, I'm more interested in Christmas. Don't know, it's just strangely special, after all."

"I think our Christmas parties in the Soviet Army were a hell of a lot nicer than the deal you got. And we could try to get time off, especially since you are out of action with that knee anyway. Book a place that has snow ... some log cabin. A fireplace."

"Snow?" Dan grinned. "I thought you hated snow." He chuckled for a moment. "You really think so? Somewhere that doesn't have anyone shooting at us? Damn, sounds like a fine idea to me, I'd just have to find a Christmas present somewhere and fuck, that'll be the cruncher."

"I'd be happy with a Christmas blowjob and a pair of socks." Vadim laughed. "I don't understand why people think socks are a crap present. Those people were never on the last pair when doing some hardcore tabbing."

Dan laughed out loud. "You can have a blowjob anytime, Christmas or not, and I still know which are your favourite socks, boots, and even your damned underwear size. I think you're onto something here ... we could go to Austria, it's just round the corner. A week, just you and I, lots of food, and if my knee weren't so fucked, some skiing. Sledding might have to do."

"Deal." Vadim grinned. "Salzburg, then, I heard it's good. I'll head out and book, okay?" He pushed himself up again. "Seriously, Dan, I want to go on holiday after this. We fucking deserve it."

"But you won't get snowy alpine huts in Salzburg. You'd have to look for something in Tyrol." Dan grinned, poking into Vadim's good hip. "Not that I care, though, as long as it means we are away from everything. I don't even mind self catering. Right now I just can't stand the thought of being in a hotel and lots of people around me. Silence, snow, Alps, sound like bloody bliss to me."

"In short: mountains. Okay."

“Aye ... I seem to kind of like them.” Grinning, Dan sat up as well. “I’d even tag around with you for a couple of days so you can see the ‘cultural sights’, if I get the rest in a solitary hut after that.”

“What about getting shaved and grab another bite in the Mess? Should I help you get dressed?”

Stretching, Dan scratched the thick stubble in his face that began resembled a beard far too closely. “Help me shave. I like that.”

Vadim grinned. “I’ll do that. Let me get a bowl with hot water and a bunch of clean towels.” Giving Dan a shave and then Dan shaving him, life seemed alright for a while again.

The CO was, according to rumour, too busy to get the detailed briefing now, and Vadim hoped he did something about that camp, but the info probably had to filter back up the ranks again. So, after the shaving, they sat in the Mess and had food, at their own leisure, with some of Dan’s mates checking whether he was okay and Dan explaining, that no, he hadn’t been shot in the leg, and the rumour that had spread around camp was false. Holding his mug of coffee, Vadim reflected that Dan didn’t seem to have any lovers in this camp – at least not so far. They were all mates.

They went back to bed after Dan had called Maurice, getting Dima onto the line as well, and staying far longer than intended, to explain what had happened. Twenty minutes later, he hobbled back into the room, to grab another shower, determined to help Vadim shower as well, no matter what anyone might think about two men showering together. They managed somehow to push the two beds close again, and not all that much later, they were both asleep. Resting uneventfully until the early morning.

* * *

They got ready with plenty of time, hoping to spend it mostly in the Mess over breakfast, but the CO had different plans and they barely managed to get a fry-up down their necks - at least Dan did - before they had to go off to get grilled properly for a couple of hours. Finally, the medic came to the office, insisting that he would have to check Vadim’s wound and that Dan had to get ready for the hospital. For the first time ever, Dan was actually glad to have to go to a hospital.

He was taken in a military ambulance, just as white as all the other vehicles, and examined thoroughly. Too thoroughly for his taste, including shots of some nasty looking liquid into his knee before scans and x-rays, but finally he was done. Sitting in the waiting room while gagging for a fag, he was called inside at last.

X-rays of his knee – a ghostly outline of bones against dark – were on display against the backlit white boxes adorning the doctor’s office. The man was relatively young, dark hair combed back, and the white lab coat hung from his shoulders in a way that suggested profound weariness. “Mr McFadyen?

Please, have a seat.” He cast another long glance at the x-rays, as if making absolutely sure.

“Aye, thanks.” Hobbling to the chair, fairly clumsy on those crutches, Dan glanced up at the x-rays, unable to read much into it, other than that it was a mess of black and white. “Everything okay?”

“May I ask for how long have you experienced discomfort in that leg?”

“I had a bit of surgery some years back, but it was fine after that. It’s only recently been painful. For about half a year or so.”

“Did the colleagues tell you to take it easy with the leg, or did they tell you, you were as good as new? In the latter case, you have the grounds for a lawsuit.”

“No, they ... I was in a military hospital and was meant to get a desk job after that. But I refused and left. Did ... I, well, I still functioned and did a HALO jump as well as a thousand other things. I’m something like a PMC, but not quite as private.”

“That explains what I’ve seen. High strain after that first operation? Sustained for years? I hope you at least cut back on the marathons.” The doctor sat down and leaned forward. “To be honest, you will have to undergo surgery again. Back then, techniques weren’t as advanced, and we wouldn’t make some mistakes anymore that were state of the art back then.”

“What do you mean? Just some surgery and I can continue my job? And what would the surgery entail?”

“You should have taken that desk job, Mr McFadyen. The only thing that we can do now from a medical perspective is a full knee replacement. In other words, an artificial knee, which will at least allow you movement with little discomfort, and retain the mobility of your leg.”

“What?” Dan sat up, ramrod straight. “No way! I can’t let you do that. Or are you telling me that they are so good these days that I’ll be as good as new and can continue my job for a while longer?”

The doctor shook his head. “The artificial knee is not as good as a natural one, not nearly. Placing it into your leg is not a small operation. It’s ... a rather serious and long operation.”

“You have to understand, doctor, that my job is all I am and all I know. If I have to retire, that’s it. I’d *retire*, and I’m only in my early forties.”

“I do understand.” The doctor’s air of weariness only deepened. “And I wish I could tell you anything else, Mr McFadyen. But you already got more out of your body than you should have. Your knee is coming *apart* at this stage. The problems you are having now will get worse, and there is only so much painkillers can do ... and I’m assuming you already used painkillers to keep going?”

“Yes.” Dan conceded, and yet was not ready to give up. “Can you not help me keep going a little longer? Just a few months ... until I have sorted my affairs. I bought a farm in New Zealand, it’s dilapidated, but work is going on, while I keep doing my job here.”

“I’m afraid not. I’m sorry.”

Dan leaned forward, meeting the doctor close up. "Isn't there anything? Just for a while. I promise, I'll do what you tell me I have to do, when it's time, when I have everything sorted."

The doctor gave a sigh. "You are gambling away your long-term health. Your knee may hold up a little longer – but I'm expecting months rather than years – the swelling might come down, it might all settle back to before it was that made it flare up like that. I assume, using the right drugs and a lot of rest, you might be able to hold out for a few months, but that's ethically a very grey area, and I absolutely and totally don't recommend it."

"But you are not saying that it is impossible?" Dan brushed some errand strands of grey-streaked hair from his eyes as he looked up. "Doctor ... please? Anything? I need to get my life in order first."

The doctor closed his eyes, seemingly defeated. "I'm saying that by accepting long-term consequences, you might go on without the proper treatment for a few months."

"I do accept this. I have to." Dan smiled with relief. "I've always accepted consequences in my life. If anything, then that. And what can be worse than having an artificial knee? If I keep going for a few months, I can at least sort my life." He nodded, sitting straight. "So, then, what do I need to do right now, and is there anything I can take for the pain?"

"The knee will have to rest a lot. The swelling has to come down by itself, and I'll prescribe you something to give it some support. You may grow dependent on the drugs, and they are likely to interfere with your concentration and suitability to do certain types of work. The best thing will be a lot of rest, and absolutely no strain. And we'll have to carefully monitor the status of your knee. I'm not happy with that Mr McFadyen, and I ask you do to whatever you need to have done before retiring as soon as possible. I might be mistaken about the military profession, but you're gambling with your life and that of your colleagues."

"I would never do that. I give you my word, doctor, if I feel my ability to function is jeopardised, I will immediately stop and 'retire', as you put it." Dan took hold of the crutches and got up. "Thank you. And ... you are bound to silence, aren't you?"

The doctor looked gloomily at the images of Dan's knee shot from various angles. "Yes, of course. Full confidentiality."

"Thank you." Dan smiled, ignoring the disapproval, and hobbled out of the room, where he was taken in by a nurse who strapped up his knee and prepared painkillers, as well as sorting what would be necessary to help the knee recuperate - as much as it could, before he was driven back to camp.

* * *

When Dan returned to camp he was as cheerful as ever. The doctor's words carefully stashed away to be ignored. A large pack of painkillers in his pockets, he hobbled straight to the phones to try and organise a cabin on short notice.

After an hour of what seemed like endless phone calls, he had achieved the impossible. A family had had to cancel their booking for a cabin up in the Tyrolean Alps, and they could have it for a couple of weeks if they wanted. He was looking for Vadim to tell him the good news, a triumphant grin on his face as he hobbled across camp, starting to get the hang of the crutches.

Vadim was just cleaning all the pairs of boots, shining them, and going through their combined kit for holes and pieces that needed to be replaced. Ever conscientious. Looking up and then getting up when Dan struggled with the door, helping him through. "What's the news?"

"I got us a cabin. Hail me, the victorious hero of more phone calls than I ever want to do in my life again." Dan let himself fall down onto the bed. The way they'd straddled up his knee made it all the more awkward.

"Hail, thee, great white cabin hunter." Vadim put the other boot down, checking if he had done the whole lot. Indeed. Stowing the kit away. "Out on the next plane, then?"

"Not quite. We got it over Christmas and New Year, because a family had to cancel. We should get a plane for the week before Christmas. Makes it something like three weeks. Gives us enough time to heal and go see everyone we might need to see, aye? I'm sure we'll get the time off. We are completely useless right now anyway."

"Three weeks. That's ... let's see ... Jean? Your family. Maybe ..." Shit. *My* family. *Our* family. Vadim's brow darkened. He should talk to Katya. He really should. Or maybe let it settle. But it wouldn't hurt to hear both sides of that particular story.

"I meant ..." Dan sighed, shook his head once and rubbed over his face with the heel of his hand. Vigorously, as if to get rid of cobwebs. "I meant people around here, Dima, Maurice." Tilting his head, "Duncan and Mhairi invited us, but it hasn't been long since we were visited them." And how was he going to deal with the other family? Vadim's. Not his. Just a sperm donor.

Vadim frowned. "Hungary is a risk. But an old friend left me something. He's dead. Szandor. A ... fencer."

Dan swallowed and nodded, looking down at his fucked hand. "I met him."

"You did? Of course. He was alive then. Shit."

"Aye, he was in the training hall. They ... they were fencing." Lifting his head to look at Vadim. "What did he die of?"

Vadim wanted to say 'the gay disease', but it seemed wrong, callous, and fuck, Szandor had meant much to him. "AIDS."

"Shit." Dan frowned, "reminds me how fucking lucky we've been."

"Yes. He was ..." Vadim inhaled deeply. "You know that, don't you? That he was my lover, during the Olympics."

"That was him?" Dan sat up straighter, fishing for a cigarette but then remembered how much Vadim disliked the smoke in the room he slept in. "Good choice, even though I didn't take all that much notice on the day."

Vadim smiled fondly, remembering what had been enclosed in the will. "He left me his weapons. Just what am I going to do with an old-fashioned Toledo

blade? I can't even wield it properly. And customs will look at me funny. I have no place to hang it and storage ... these things shouldn't get boxed away and forgotten."

"Of course you've got space. *We* have space. Just store the weapons until we're ready to move to Kiwiland." Dan smiled a little. Just thinking of the few days in Hungary was painful, but what was it again about festering wounds? "I also saw your ... daughter."

"Anoushka." Vadim rubbed his face. "She looks a lot like me, yes?"

"Aye, she did." Dan remembered how shocked he'd been to see her, every bit reminding him of Vadim. Dan looked away, and towards his kit where he'd safely stored the photos.

Vadim followed the gaze. "Show her to me again."

"You sure?"

"I only caught a glimpse the first time." Vadim looked Dan in the face. "Come on."

Yes, before you hit me like a rabid dog, but Dan discarded the thought. Done and over. Past. "Okay." He leaned across, rummaged one-handed in the pile of kit. Knowing all too well where it was, he found the pictures in their shredded envelope within a second. "Here." Handing them over. He'd looked at them many times, but would never admit he'd memorised them.

Vadim studied the shots for a long time. Katya's way to have children. Undoubtedly, she was cute. A very cute toddler, and very much like Dan, somehow, eyes and hair and maybe features, even if they were yet too soft and unfinished to say. "Congratulations," he murmured, trying to keep the tone light. "I mean it."

"You think so?" Really wanting a cigarette now, Dan was studying Vadim very closely. "But it doesn't mean anything. You know I'll never meet her." He took hold of one of the photos, looking at it. "You got to do it in my stead." Not taking his eyes off the photo for a long while. "Would you?" Finally looking up and at Vadim.

"I'll do that when I pick up the swords." Vadim reached over and touched Dan's shoulder. "You go to Jean, I'll handle Katya."

"Won't work. Jean's not in France." Dan shrugged, "how long did you want to ..." see your family, "go to Hungary?"

"Just a weekend. Flying in, meeting, one night in a hotel, out the next morning."

"I'll come with you. Didn't see anything of Budapest. I could ... well, do some sightseeing." And he'd always been ever so interested in cultural heritage. "As long as you'll sleep in the hotel with me."

"Okay. Sample the local men, eh?"

"Ha ha. Let's just stick to food and drink." The cigarette pack had somehow found its way into Dan's hand. "Can't say Hungary is my favourite place to go to, so don't try your luck." He carefully put the pictures back into the envelope.

Vadim closed the distance, then kissed Dan's neck. "Okay. Budapest. Where else?"

“Don’t know. What about we see how we’re healing up and decide when we’re off?” The envelope went back between his kit and Dan turned his head to look at Vadim, a comically pained expression in his face. “And if I don’t get a cigarette soon I might just die before we get a chance for R&R.”

“Addict.” Vadim stood to stow away the boots and the rest of their kit. “Go on, then.” Only too glad that they could banter about it, the lightness was back, they were comfortable with each other again.

“Cheers!” The relief was genuine, and soon enough the smell of cigarette smoke filled the room as Dan lay back on the bed. Smoking with his eyes closed, the crutches beside him, and very intently not thinking of some things and thinking of others instead. Smiling, because his world was back in order.

December 1992, Hungary

At the time of the plane touching down at Budapest airport, Dan was dying for a fag and increasingly silent. The banter had stopped a while ago, and he was holding onto the beer in the miniature glass, while looking out of the window, across Vadim. The knee continued to be bandaged and he still had to use a crutch, thus sitting at the aisle to stretch out his leg. He’d been popping peanuts and studiously avoided to think.

The weather was glorious, just like it had been when he’d visited Hungary for the first time. ‘Visited’, not quite the right word. He’d been a desperate man, almost three years ago. A man who’d been ready to beg and had in return made a deal with the devil. Just that the result wasn’t his burning soul, but a child he’d never meet. Hell would have been easier, at least he didn’t believe in that shit.

“You ever been here?” Dan finally broke his silence as the plane rolled towards its parking space.

“No. Not planning to stay for long, either.” Vadim wasn’t quite sure about his emotions in this case. Anger and determination, that was what it seemed like, a touch of nervousness, and curiosity. All together a mix that was pretty hard to keep apart or analyse. Regret, definitely, that he hadn’t been in touch earlier, hadn’t said his goodbyes to Szandor.

Dan nodded, crumpling the empty packet of peanuts in his hand. “I assume you’ve planned when to see ... your family?” He’d never asked, had simply assumed Vadim had somehow contacted his ex-wife to arrange the meeting.

“Yes. In the evening.”

“And I assume you’ll meet them where they live?”

“They are living in Szandor’s house. He left it to them. Apparently, it was renovated and Katya is running it, renting parts of it out and so on. Suits her.” Vadim inhaled deeply. “Not looking forward to this ...”

“I can imagine.” Reaching across to squeeze Vadim’s hand. “I know where the house is. We could walk there this afternoon, just have a look around. Then you know where to go in the evening.”

“Okay.” Vadim was holding Dan’s hand in both his. “Damn. I wish ... I don’t know.” Wish Szandor was still alive? Yes. Or wish this wasn’t so complicated. “Guess you would have liked him. I suppose he was on the ‘camp’ side, but that wasn’t how I saw him.”

Dan smiled. “Aye, but it’s too late now. We just have to concentrate on the living.” The plane had come to a halt and the passengers were starting to look for their bags in the overhead holds. “Let’s just get this done and over with. Think of the cabin in the *snony mountains*.” He flashed a grin to keep this as light-hearted as possible.

Vadim groaned. “As long as the heating is working ...” He grabbed his bag, helped Dan to get the smaller backpack on and waited for him to get hold of the crutch, and they headed for customs and immigration. A while later, they dropped off their belongings in the hotel, where Vadim had a quick shower and got dressed again, casual but expensive, checking himself in the mirror. “It’s fairly close. Fifteen minutes on foot.”

“Make it twenty with that bloody crutch of mine.” Dan was coming out of the bathroom, towelling his hair dry. The swelling had subsided somewhat, but the knee still didn’t look right. “Want me to wear anything specific?” He hadn’t packed his bag, as usual.

“Anything in the suitcase will do. I like the cashmere jumper ...” Vadim sat down in the stuffed chair and watched Dan get dressed, who dutifully got into what Vadim suggested. Life was so much easier that way.

“Then again, I guess I’ll get a taxi. Twenty minutes in that weather ...”

“Cheers, and in the meantime I’ll quickly check with reception if something I’m waiting for has arrived.” Hair still damp, but dressed and shaved, Dan got hold of the crutch to make his way downstairs.

“Oh?” Vadim let him go, though, and while Dan was downstairs, he ordered a taxi for ‘in fifteen minutes’, and also called Katya, telling her he’d just arrived and they’d meet in two hours, as planned.

Dan was back in five minutes, carrying a large envelope in his hand. “I knew I could count on him.”

“What is it?”

Dan smiled when he closed the door behind him. “Here.” Handing the envelope over to Vadim. “Can you give this to ...” the bitch “Kisa’s mother. Duncan set up the trust for me. I’ll be paying in monthly until she is eighteen, or until she will need it, or ... until I’m dead. Whatever comes first. It’s for her education, stuff like that. Duncan didn’t ask too many questions, but I guess I’ll eventually have to tell him.” Sitting down to take the weight off his knee, “face to face, preferably.”

“True. Shit. She’s Duncan’s niece.” Vadim looked at the papers without actually seeing anything. “I’m sure she’ll have everything she needs. Katya wouldn’t ...” treat her own daughter badly. But it was Dan’s daughter, too.

“I know.” Agreeing with this, if anything at all. “But the kid might need something one day, and money is all I can give her. Let’s face it, even if I were not forbidden from having contact, what would I be? An uncle? A father?” Dan

snorted without humour, "I'm not father material. I'd fuck her up. She's got the chance, maybe, to be what's good. I'm not going to bring what's bad into the equation."

Shit. This seemed like the beginning of some very complex wrangling. Vadim wished Katya had just grabbed some guy off the street that night. Any guy but his guy. "I'll tell her. You sure you don't want to come along, officially?"

"That would really not be a good idea." Dan was still smiling, but the smile did not touch his eyes. "I'll just have a good meal and will look for a pub, bar, whatever they call it here. I'll be back before midnight, aye?"

"Okay. If you do find a native, leave me some." Vadim grinned and leaned over to kiss Dan.

Dan laughed shortly. "I will."

"Let's have a look at the area. The taxi should be waiting."

Dan got up, and they were soon in the taxi, heading once more towards the building Dan had been to before. He felt suddenly as if a great weight crushed down on him, until he turned his head and saw Vadim, reaching for his hand to press it almost painfully. "It's different this time." Murmured, "you're here now," and he smiled.

Vadim pressed his hand, too, then looked at the building where the driver stopped. He told him they'd look for a while, in fact Vadim wanted to give Dan a chance to decide whether and when he'd seen enough. The building was in excellent shape, bright, restored, spotless. Vadim had known that Szandor hadn't been exactly poor, he'd never struck him as one who was economically disadvantaged, but being faced with the reality of it was something different.

"We could walk into the city centre. It's not far from here." Dan offered, "I was in a hotel, that ... anyway, it was very close. No need to have the taxi waiting." Getting out of the car, Vadim paid, and Dan stood and looked around. Breathing in the ice cold air, and taking in the building. "It certainly has improved." Half-turning towards Vadim, who placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Lead the way. It's my first time here."

"Don't really want to get too close to the building. Someone might think we are loitering." Vadim's closeness made it easier, reminded him that this was not about death and it was not three years ago. It was about life, rather. "I never explored the ground, shall we have a walk around?"

Vadim nodded and remained close, following Dan and taking the area in. It reminded him much of Szandor – just imagining him living here. Somehow old-fashioned but open, friendly, and very attractive.

There was a small piece of woods, more like wild parkland, and voices came from the area, not far away. A narrow, pleasingly wended path lead towards the crop of trees. "It's rather nice here." Dan admitted. "Guess it's a good place to grow up in, aye?"

"Yes. Decent part of town, seems friendly enough ..." There were kids playing in the woods, with one boy holding the hand of a walking toddler, and Vadim recognized both immediately, while Dan hadn't quite caught on. The

other kids weren't his, no Anoushka – well, she was probably getting too old for those games – but there was Nikolai, and the toddler, that was Kisa. The kitten. Vadim stood, watching, silent, studying the boy who seemed self-absorbed and not withdrawn at all now.

Dan finally got it when the kid turned. Dark hair whipping wildly around her face, she was laughing, and almost toppling over when she tried to run, over-excited. The boy held her, security, care, and an obvious tenderness for a kid ten years younger than him and looking everything but him.

“Oh shit.” Dan whispered, hands almost shaking when he patted his stylish outdoor jacket for cigarettes. “It’s ... it’s ...” and he couldn’t say it. Too unreal when confronted with the living proof.

Vadim reached over and touched Dan’s arm. Of course Nikolai wouldn’t recognize him, to his eyes, they were just boring adults, probably. And he felt strangely reluctant to talk to him. Why tear him out of his games and caring for his sister? Less pain this way. “She is very much you.”

“That must be ... a bugger.” Dan tried to grin, but faltered. “She’ll be making her mother’s life hell.”

“Guess she brought it upon herself.”

“Yeah, fuck. You could say that.” Tearing his eyes away from those kids, Dan glanced at Vadim, tried a smile. That one went better. “Well, are we kind of related now?”

“Not legally. I don’t even think there’s a word for that ‘relation’.” Vadim studied Nikolai for a long moment, but didn’t want to attract attention. Eyeing young boys was not exactly something he wanted to be seen doing, even if it was completely innocent.

“Aye, it’s too fucked up to have a name.” Dan lit a cigarette, before putting his hand back into the pocket. The kids were wrapped up warmly, but he wasn’t wearing gloves. “Best we leave.” A long, last glance at the toddler, who was running full force into the older boy, laughing and squealing as she did, and screaming with delight when he picked her up and swung her around, playing ‘plane’. “I hope she’ll have a good life. She looks like she might take it by the horns.” With that Dan turned away.

Vadim reached over, touching Dan’s arm again. It hurt. It hurt that neither of them could just walk into the kids’ lives, and that was probably for the best.

“Come on.” Dan smiled, a brave effort. “We’re both fucked up. At least we’re not fucking up others, aye?”

Walking back on the path they had come, they took a walk along the back of the house, before they headed into town. Even though Dan was slower, he was okay, the painkillers doing their job, and the knee was still holding together. They had enough time for an ice-cream and cake and coffee in a café, before Vadim eventually had to head back, and Dan went further into the centre of town, looking for a restaurant that served local food and beer.

* * *

Vadim had decided against flowers, he didn't want to send the wrong message. He'd discarded the thought of keeping it civil, like a potted plant. He had decided against a book – he hadn't read anything recently, therefore he was in no position to recommend a book, and he wouldn't have trusted anybody else's recommendation. Not with Katya. Like in fencing, everything came down to the moment when the blades lowered after the salute and the distance was no longer neutral.

He rang the door bell, then calmly climbed the stairs, aware of everything, the paint, the high ceilings, the fine plasterwork, the ordered, clean touch. The door opened once he arrived on her landing.

Katya looked lethal. Still. Very straight, shoulders squared, facing him full on. If she'd slid down one foot to begin claiming his space on the piste, he wouldn't have been surprised. Her hair short, accentuating her jaw line, features not sagging. She'd kept well, like no time had passed at all, but she was wearing her hair in a new cut, and had applied a little makeup. The dark blue jumper made her look pale and icy, and she wasn't wearing any jewellery, not even a watch. Trousers, no skirt, she liked the freedom to move her legs, to run if she had to, to charge, if she had to, no doubt.

"Vadim. How nice." She sounded like he was a neighbour who'd come round semi-unexpectedly. Katya opened the door further, allowed him to pass through, bidding him to follow into the living room.

The flat had a good view over the roofs of the old city. The leather couches were new, everything was meticulously clean, ordered, like she liked it. Nothing of the children. She'd decided to face him alone.

"How was the flight?"

Vadim leaned back, regarding her, as she sat there, opposite on the single-seater. Hands in her lap, betraying the tension of a coiled cobra. "It's the war that bothers us – transportation is no big issue."

"The war?" Then she opened her lips, understanding. "You're not talking about the mess in the Balkans?"

"No." He inhaled, then focused on taking things slowly. The way she was anticipating, she was in the defensive. As the attacker, he could take his time. And he was reasonably sure that she had nothing to strike back at him. "The Balkans are going to hell. That's not a war. Not like I know it." He leaned back, rested his arms on the back of the sofa. Knowing what message his body language sent. "You used me to find Dan."

"I knew he would be in the same location as you."

"Yes, well, he got the photos. Now all I'm wondering is whether you achieved your aim – whether we have to acknowledge you scoring a point, or not. From the way it felt, it sure looked like an attack."

Katya's brow darkened. "You think?"

"Did you or did you not tell him to never get in touch to see whether he's a father or not?" Vadim leaned forward now.

"Vadim, I ..."

“Did you?” Vadim’s voice was cold. “I was, as you remember, rotting in a KGB prison while these things transpired, so I want the story from you.”

The cobra swayed. He could see her shift in her seat, coiled. Not sure from where the attack had gone. He’d caught her off guard, even though he’d been sure he’d sent a message with his body language. No embrace, no kisses, no gifts. It should have clued her in that he wasn’t here to congratulate her on her fine children. Three, not two.

“Katya, just tell me the truth.” He leaned back, using his body to lie to her. He’d learned a thing or two in interrogation and during his time working with the Afghans. If he could deal with boneheaded Pashtuns that flew into a rage when they felt their honour impinged, he could deal with her. “Did you tell him to never be in touch? Because she would be your child, not his? Right?” He’d also learned that saying ‘yes’ for somebody being interrogated was always easier than saying ‘no’.

“Yes.”

Gotcha. Vadim nodded at that, leaning back some more. “I thought so.” Inviting now her counterattack, blade lowered, but he could easily block her even so. Offering her an opening didn’t mean it was a real opening.

“There was really just one thing I wanted from him.” She stood. “Do you understand?”

“I understand. Now, between us, that was love. Even though I was never the man you’d wanted me to be.”

She turned around, ready to strike, and Vadim raised a hand, vaguely touched that she moved to defend him. His image. The man she’d married versus the man that now sat in front of her.

“But I am Anoushka’s father. And even though I ... found it very hard to be in touch, she’s still somewhere there, in the background. Something of me, outside of me. Are those her awards? Fencing?” He pointed at the sideboard.

Katya nodded. “Lefthanders have it easier.”

Vadim smiled fleetingly. “Yeah. As I said. When we made her, that was love. Whatever I feel, and however it turned out, but I loved you then, and I loved you as my wife, and then, later, as somebody very close to me. You and her, and Nikolai. Now, Nikolai, he was certainly also conceived in love. Sasha loved you, you had a crush on him, and so did I. Love, lust, the whole complicated thing. And it’s good that something of Sasha survives. Your memory, mine, and his son, whom I love like my own. Even though, again, I’m nowhere near the father he deserves. But I know you’re doing a great job bringing them up. They’ll be good people, Katya.”

“What are you aiming for, Vadim?”

“For your ungarded left hip, Mrs Lefthander, as always. You defend too high, sometimes. Kisa. You made Dan give you Kisa. You used him. Now, to an outsider, it looks like you’ve always used your men to get the children you wanted.”

She bared her teeth, getting angry. “You ...”

"I said, to an outsider." Raising his voice, speaking loud and sharply. "Hear me out."

Snarling, she pulled back, staring at him, guarded now, realising how much she was in the defensive and trying to find her rhythm back.

"But I know that's not true. Because I know what I felt and what Sasha felt and what you felt. Now, Kisa. She's a completely different case. You never used Anoushka against me. Granted, Sasha didn't live long enough, but why ..." Vadim had to swallow, the anger was constricting his throat. "Why the *fuck* are you using Kisa, from the night she began to fucking now, all the way, to hurt her father? Because you know that men aren't made from fucking stone." He'd never cursed in front of her, cursing wasn't like him, and he could see her being unpleasantly surprised at his coarseness, the vulgarity. Soldier. "You know exactly what I felt, or Sasha felt. Sasha begged me to let you go, and I would have. I would have let you go, and my daughter, so you could be happy. Why the fuck do you try to break Dan? Is there a last axe you have to grind with me? Because you know that he'd be there, with me, fucking hurting because of what you did. Why, Katya? You can't even see him suffer. Is it enough to imagine him in pain? For what?"

"He ruined you."

"You could think he got me into prison. Truth is, I got myself there. And he got me out of it. He'd been keeping me together, Katya. He's keeping me sane. He's there when I wake up screaming at night. He's there to guard my back against the savages down in the Balkans. The Gulf. And wherever else we go. We're soldiers, still. Mercenaries. We put our skin out there, our hearts, minds, whatever we are, and we already go through so much shit. My mind's broken, and Dan's body is starting to come apart, and all we want is to gracefully retire and make it out alive, and then you use his child to hurt my partner? The man I depend on for my sanity? That's low, Katya. That's off target, and you know it. And I know it, because you've never done anything this ignoble and downright wretched before. I know. I know you're made from steel and bone, and I've always respected you. But hurting Dan like that? Kicking a man who has never done you any harm? Not a nice thing to do, Katya." He looked at her, and she was pale, taut, angry, shocked.

He waited, breathing, knew he'd let his anger out, too much of it, likely. Truth was, somebody had had to say it. "I said my piece." Inhaling deeply. "I'm sorry this meeting didn't go as you wanted. I truly am."

He stood, and closed the jacket.

"Do you not want to see the children?"

Vadim shook his head. "I'm dying to, but I can't. I'd be looking at them while Dan looks at the photographs? No way." He glanced around. "Where's Szandor's sword?"

"In the kitchen. The rest ... is there, too."

"Thank you." He found the kitchen, where, wrapped up, the unmistakable shape of the sword rested on the table, next to it, a neatly packed box. Vadim opened it, saw it was photos and documents. He took both, placed the envelope

Dan had given him where the box had been, then, without looking back, left the flat. On the next landing in the corridor, he felt a wave of nausea and regret, but it had been the right thing.

If she thought she could hurt Dan, now, he could hurt her back. She'd given him the weapons for it, too.

She got a taste of her own medicine.

* * *

Vadim went back to the hotel. He had no idea where Dan was, and simply assumed Dan would come back eventually. He changed, had a long, hot shower, then decided he was too angry and did his isometrics, pushups, exercising in the hotel room until he was sweaty and tired. He had another shower, took his time with a shave, then watched TV in the bathrobe, lying on the bed. The sword and the box untouched next to him.

It wasn't long after, barely ten, when the door opened and Dan slipped inside. He stopped, a look of surprise on his face, which immediately turned into a smile. "Didn't expect you back, yet." He was carrying a bottle of Hungarian red wine under his free arm.

Vadim switched the TV off and sat up in bed. "And I thought you'd learn Hungarian in a few hours and bring back two young, Hungarian hunks to share."

"Nah, sorry, I wasn't at my best tonight." Dan closed the door and leaned the crutch into a corner, holding up the wine. "But I got some plonk, will that do?" Sitting down on the bed. "How ... did it go?"

Vadim made a non-committal gesture. "We had a bit of a fight, but I won."

Dan cocked his head, said nothing for a moment, fiddling with the bottle instead, to get the seal off. "Should I ask about what?"

"About a matter of character, the past, what we thought of each other, what it all means." Vadim shrugged. "I gave her something to think about. Somebody had to do it."

"Okay." Dan nodded, looked around the room and spotted the minibar, which – he discovered after rummaging around – held a corkscrew. "Did you see your kids?" Kid. Strictly speaking, or should he say 'did you see *the* kids'?

"No. Apart from seeing Kisa and Nikolai when we saw them, outside."

"Okay." Dan nodded again, found a couple of glasses and poured the wine, all the way to the brim, despite knowing better. Holding one out to Vadim, who took it.

"Thanks."

"I don't know what to say and I don't know if I should ask." A small smile quirked one corner of Dan's lips. "Doesn't happen often, aye?"

"It's okay. It really is. I told her that I know what her game is with you and that I disapprove. Then I walked out. But I left the envelope."

“Game?” Dan took a sip. His eyes betrayed his surprise. He’d forever be shit at poker. “What game is she playing with me?” And if she was, how could he break the bitch’s neck without hurting the kid? Unlikely.

“She’s working hard to hurt you. Probably me. I’m not quite sure which of us two is collateral in this.”

“I’m going to fucking kill her if she hurts you!” That came out, hissed, before Dan managed to engage his brain, and he stuck his nose into the wine. Shit.

Vadim moved over to place a hand on his shoulder. “I just told her I know what she’s playing. I hope she has the good grace to change her game now that I’ve called it. Maybe. Maybe not. But I refuse to see my kids when you can’t see yours, and that’s a promise.”

Dan shook his head. “No, Vadim, that’s crap. You hold them hostage for the shit the bitch is pulling. It’s not their fault, aye? Nor Kisa’s.” Drinking the wine down as if it was water.

“Like she holds Kisa hostage.” Vadim shook his head. “I’m not going to pretend with her. She changes her game, then I will. I’m done being manipulated. I let her live her life, right? Why the fuck does she have to interfere with ours?”

“And what good would it do if she let me see Kisa? What would I tell the kid who I was? A nice uncle?” Dan shook his head, “no. Leave the kid with her. Whatever the fuck her game is, however much she hates me, I figure one thing she’ll do right, and that’s bringing the kid up.” Couldn’t bring himself to call Kisa ‘his daughter’. Surreal, far too surreal.

“Yes. She’ll do that.” Vadim tried to not sound too weary. Dan had a point. They had no room in their lives to be fathers. And yet, maybe Katya would come round to do the decent thing. “Well. And I got a sword now.”

“A sword?” Brows raised, Dan poured himself more wine. “I thought you already had one anyway.” Wagging his brows in a feeble attempt to make a saucy joke.

“Not a historical blade.” Vadim pointed at the wrapped package. “He wanted me to have this. He won it in a competition, I think. Or somebody gave it to him as a present. I don’t know the story behind the blade. And that’s strange, because he wanted me to have it, and I guess it was important ... but I don’t know why. What went on in his head that he wanted me to have it, and have this, of all the things ...”

“He? You mean Szandor? I met him ... very briefly.”

“You said. Shit. He must have been ill then.” Vadim shook his head. “Makes me feel a bit guilty. Getting this and having no idea why.”

“Didn’t it come with some explanation or paper?” Dan looked around the room, before settling his eyes on Vadim.

“Haven’t opened the box yet. Didn’t want to do it alone.”

“Maybe it’s the blade he used when you two met?” Offering a smile, “some folks are that sentimental, you know.” Oh so inconspicuously playing with the

chain round his neck that held the bullet. He'd been wearing it again since they'd survived the 'adventure'.

Vadim smiled. "He didn't run around with a historical blade." He reached for the packet, pulled it onto his lap, and began to tear the wrapping, freeing the steel. It was slightly oiled, well kept, a blade that had been used for fighting, no doubt, not just to show off with. The basket intricate, darkened steel, with silver wire and etchings.

"It's beautiful." Dan sipped his wine, watching. "Like you." Fuck, and where had that stuff suddenly come from?

Vadim smiled. "Interesting theory."

"Well, I don't know. I don't know this Szandor. I saw him for a couple of minutes – you were his lover. So I guess you should know better."

"Yeah, but what you said. Maybe he thought the blade was me, that simple." Vadim wrapped it up again and placed it on the chair near the bed. "You would have liked him. Maybe not as a lover – too camp – but an honourable man. I remember ... he had a sword bag for his training swords ... and sheaths for them. And I remember something was written on one of the sheaths: 'Never draw me in anger, never sheathe me in dishonour.'" He shook his head. "And I thought, fuck, how archaic. How fucking archaic ... how ... eighteenth century."

"We should have had something like that." Dan shook his head. "on our knives, rifles, pistols, garrottes. But we didn't."

"You think it would have made a difference? I'm not sure. Modern war doesn't allow for honour. All you can strive for is decency. And I guess this was about duelling, and duelling was always different from war. But I thought, this Olympian athlete, he really believed in the old archaic gentleman duel. Not modern at all. Not about winning. About doing it *right*."

"And what's different, then, to heading out into a desert to save a bunch of yanks you can't stand in the first place? You think that's not trying to do it *right*?"

"That was because I love you, Dan. I've done a few right things. Some good." Vadim opened the box, apprehensive of what he'd find, and felt something heavy shift inside, between the papers. Reaching for that, he realized what it was before his fingers had even touched it. "Oh fuck."

"What is it?"

Vadim got hold of the ribbon and pulled the medal free. That did it, his eyes suddenly began to water. Silver. Men's Fencing.

Dan looked at Vadim, then the medal, and he smiled. Putting the wine down, to reach out gently. "He really was in love with you at some time, aye?" Softly.

"Fuck." Vadim closed his fist around the medal, feeling it cool and heavy in his hand, as he fought the emotion. A punch to the guts. A powerful impact. "He knew how ... fucking disappointed I was. Back then. Oh fuck."

Dan said nothing, just let his hand rest on Vadim's shoulder and waited, offered. A presence, like he'd always be there, no matter what. As long as no wedge of hatred was ever pushed between them again.

Vadim tried a smile, and breathed, relaxed, accepting the gift, the thought. Both gifts. "I should ... find his grave. Tomorrow. We have time before we have to be at the airport."

"Aye, and for now, would you mind if I get you out of your clothes and wrapped myself around you? It's medicinal, you know? For your stitches ... and my knee ... and, I guess, all the rest of us."

Vadim reached over to Dan's hair, taking a handful and kissing him. "Let me put the box away, and get out of the bathrobe." That he did, and not much later they lay under the covers, side by side, touching, caressing, until Vadim rolled over to sleep on the side, and Dan right behind him, spooning.

December 1992, Austria

Dan had been glued to the window, half-way leaning across Vadim's lap, marvelling at the picture-postcard perfect beauty of the Austrian Alps. The weather had remained glorious, and during the descent into Innsbruck airport, they could not have wished for more of a view. Glittering snow, a brilliant sky, and the mountains a breathtaking back-drop. Nothing like Afghanistan, and yet something about the majesty, which pulled on Dan's heart, settling a strange ache, which was good and welcome.

They explored the capital of Tyrol for a couple of days, getting the necessary supplies and a winter-equipped 4x4, before driving through thick snow into the mountains.

The cabin was luxurious, the brochure had not promised too much. Allowing space and comfort, and all the mod cons that they could have wished for, including a generator – just in case. At the same time there was a rustic feel about it, everything wood and warm colours, and Dan felt at home immediately.

They settled in straight away, enjoying the first night – Christmas Eve - in front of the fire. Listening to the crackling of the burning wood, while enjoying a glass of 'plonk' as Dan called it. The night was silent, every sound of the surrounding nature muffled by the gentle snow fall, and if they did not know better, they would have believed the old adage of Peace on Earth.

February 1993, The Balkans

“Hey, Dan!” One of the soldiers came running across the compound, waving to get Dan’s attention, but the thick hat with its fur-lined ear flaps that he wore was muffling the sound. It was so cold, misting breath cut through words and speech, freezing every thought.

“Huh?” Dan finally caught on when his team mate slapped his shoulder and pointed across. “What’s up?” Calling out towards the guy. Damn, he had been looking forward to a hot shower after his shift, a *very* hot shower, and a snooze, preferably with Vadim, for a special kind of heating up. But shit, he couldn’t just ignore the guy.

“Phone call for you.”

“Alright, coming.” Dan nodded and waved, moving into a trot to keep warm. Concentrating on not favouring his leg too obviously, he couldn’t be seen doing that or he’d be asked too many obnoxious questions.

A short while later he was in the post room, in one of the semi-private phone booths. “Aye?” Expecting his brother or perhaps Maggie.

“Dan? Is that ... you?” Crackling phone line, sounding like it would give up any minute.

“Aye.” Dan listened for another heartbeat, then ... “Jean? Shit, is that you? Jean!”

“Thank fuck ... Listen ... line’s shit. I can hardly ...stand you.”

“Where the fuck are you?” Dan nearly shouted into the phone.

“...Africa. South Africa. We’re out in the bush. I’ll tell you later ... just ... good to hear you. I tried ... but you’re ... to get hold of than the fucking ... President of ... States.”

“I was busy with some fucking bastards who tried to fucking kill us.” Dan laughed down the phone. “It’s been bloody ages, how are you?”

“I’m good. Happily ... married. Listen ... I need to see you, okay? Can we just ... meet at some point? I’m done here in ... weeks, I can be wherever afterwards.”

“When?” Bugger, the line was breaking up badly. “Can hardly understand you. When are you free?”

“... weeks. Got that? Four weeks. I’m free then. Where should we ...?”

Four weeks, damn, where did that get him to? Dan was frantically trying to remember his schedule and when he was due R&R. “Five weeks. Make it five. On R&R, then.” And Vadim? Dan couldn’t remember, not quite. “What about Italy?” The only place he could think of and that wasn’t Hungary and neither too far away. Right across the Adriatic Sea.

“Five. Okay. What about Rome? Have a ... in Tuscany, that’s close.”

“Rome, yes. Call me again when you have a fucking line that works!” Dan laughed.

“Difficult enough to ... you.” Jean gave a chuckle. “Fuck you too. I’ll ... touch. Hear you soon!”

“Aye! Till then.” Dan was grinning like a fool when he put the receiver down. Still whistling while making his way back to the accommodation block and towards their room.

Vadim was sitting near the oven, keeping warm, polishing boots and sorting through kit. “What’s up?”

“You wouldn’t believe who just called.” Pulling the hat off his head, Dan started to peel himself out of the many layers of clothing. “Our very own Frenchman. And I don’t mean the one with a rod up his arse.” Grinning.

“I’d never have expected Beauvais to call you ... could only be Jean.”

“Yeah, I know, I’m only good for a punch-up and a quick shag.” Dan put on an exaggerated expression of woe. “But of course you’re right, it’s the elusive Honeymooner. He’s in South Africa, somewhere in the bush.” He was in his jumper, when sitting down to take off his boots. Was easier that way these days but he wouldn’t admit to that. “We’re going to meet in Rome in five weeks.”

“We or ‘we?’” Vadim gave the boot he was working on a critical glance against the light, then brushed it some more.

“Hm?” Dan looked up, quizzically.

“Just wondering whether you want to meet him alone.”

“I hadn’t even thought about that. Why?” Dan shrugged, put the second boot down. “Like you and Hooch?”

“Probably not exactly like Hooch and me.” Vadim kept brushing the boot.

“What do you mean?” Dan leaned back in his chair and searched for a fag while wiggling his toes in the thick socks.

“Things are far more emotional between you and Jean. He has a serious crush on you, Dan. No surprise that Jean is far more attracted to you than to me.”

“You’re crazy.” Dan gave a short laugh. “Crush? That’s just bonkers.” He lit his cigarette. “Besides, it doesn’t matter.” Dan shrugged, “makes no difference anymore.”

“Why not?”

“He’s *married*, huh?”

“And? He wants guys. Correction: He wants you.”

“Bullshit. Don’t you remember the stuff about forsaking all others? It’s different now. He’s married, and that’s that. End of story. Besides, what’s all that crush stuff about? He’s just a friend.”

“Ah. And you believe that?”

“Aye, of course I do.” Dan’s brows had moved up to the hairline. Blowing smoke away from Vadim.

“Fifty quid says Jean doesn’t believe it either.”

“What?” Dan stared at Vadim as if he had talked in Mandarin. “Fifty quid what?”

“I’m betting fifty quid that it won’t be just friends.”

“Bullshit.” Dan snorted, “and I’m betting a hundred that it *is*.” Looking for the ashtray.

“Okay. I accept the challenge.”

“But we won’t get to the heart of the matter if you do come with me, aye?”

“I think it depends. I could spend the time somewhere near Rome and leave you guys alone.”

“That sounds really weird and fucking awkward.” Dan found the ashtray, pulled it close and executed his cigarette butt in a brutal way. “Why don’t you just come along or we forget about it altogether?”

“Okay.” Vadim glanced at the cigarette butt and about how Dan ground it to pieces. “It will be good to see the Frenchman again.”

“That’s alright then.” Dan grinned, back to his sure footing. “Let’s organise the trip and forget about the bullshit of crushes and stuff.” He got up, walked over to Vadim and ran a hand over the short-shorn hair, before stripping completely to take a shower.

March 1993, Rome

Dan stood in front of the airport building, glancing up at the bright sky through dark shades. Bergan over his shoulder, he was travelling light. Dressed in appropriate spring gear, the thick jacket he had to wear back in the Balkans was stuffed on top of the bergan. Waving a taxi down, he managed with a few words of Italian he’d heard or read somewhere, and a lot of gesticulating, to get the driver to take him to the hotel Jean had mentioned. Right in the centre of Rome.

The setting breathed a deteriorating grandiosity, much like a formerly great hotel that was clinging on to the vestiges of a much more glorious past, and the pricing was steep, but not outrageous. Situated in a side-alley, surrounded by red and pale red and orange houses that reflected the light warmly, the Italian staff treated Dan with relaxed courtesy and informed him that “Signore Leclerc” was in the hotel restaurant.

Dan went to his room first, getting rid of his bag and to take a quick shower, washing off the flight. He was back out in no time, hair still damp, dressed in fresh clothes. He’d managed to grab a combination of sand coloured trousers and black shirt that didn’t clash – even without Vadim’s help. Making his way to the restaurant, he was looking around for the telltale blond head.

Jean was sitting alone at a table, just getting served coffee in a tiny porcelain cup that couldn’t hold more than a quarter of a sip, and he tossed it down, pulling a face of enjoyment and shock, then leaned back and pulled a cigarette from the pack next to him at the table.

Dan walked closer, keeping in Jean’s back, while grinning like a fool. He didn’t say anything until he was close enough to place a hand on the deeply tanned neck. “Holy fuck, you had too much time sunning yourself.”

Jean looked around, no soldier's reaction, no tension nor whirling around. "Dan. Fuck." He stood, turning. "Sit down. Are you hungry? I just had something, but ... be my guest." He was tanned, no burn visible, hair paler than Dan remembered, which had also affected his eyebrows and lashes.

"You look good." Dan grinned, ignoring the rest. "Not like someone who's actually *worked* in South Africa." Sitting down, these days sitting had taken on a different quality. One that took the weight off his knee.

Jean grinned. "It's not easy working down there ... the place is too relaxed for my own good." He waved the waiter over and nodded at Dan, encouraging him to order.

"How have you been otherwise?" Dan didn't feel like concentrating on the menu, memorised the first thing he recognised, and put the menu down, looking at Jean. Shit, the guy looked good. So fucking good, all he wanted was to drag him upstairs and tear the kit off him. "Had a great honeymoon? Haven't heard from you in ages."

"Réunion? It's a dream. I'm not sure there's a more beautiful place in the world. Long flight, but once you get there ... it's great." Jean offered Dan a cigarette from his pack and pushed the lighter over. "Yeah, it's all going well, I have been fairly happy ... did this job mostly to do somebody a favour." He grinned. "What about you?"

"Well, nothing interesting, really." Lighting his fag, Dan sat back in the comfy chair. A bit low for a man his size, but positively luxurious. "I gained a two year old daughter by Vadim's ex-wife, and Vadim almost killed me for it. Then, together with Vadim, who was still hating my guts, found a camp that wasn't supposed to exist, saved a town and nearly died, but made up, blew a bridge into smithereens and sniped some bastards, before ending up in tatters. Both of us." He shrugged, "as I said, nothing out of the ordinary."

"Daughter?" Jean looked shocked. "What happened?"

Dan raised his brows. Typical Jean would pick out this snippet and none of the others. "Fucking ex-wife of a fucking bitch blackmailed me three years ago. Vadim was about to be executed, and I needed her to convince Vadim's father to deliver a coded message. To let him know I was alive." Dan shrugged, made a good show of not caring, while it looked very different inside. "I was a convenient sperm donor." He dragged in some smoke. "Didn't know I had a daughter until last October."

"A daughter with ... oh fuck. Not sure I should ask. Should I?"

"Aye. Vadim's ex-wife."

"Okay." Jean seemed unsure what else to say, then reached over the table and took Dan's hand. "You going to order some food? Otherwise, we could hit a nightclub, or maybe go up to my room?"

"Isn't it a bit early for a nightclub?"

Jean shrugged, then nodded. "Well, until we've found a good one ..."

Dan started to grin again, much more easy going this time. "By the way, before you wonder, my daughter is bloody good looking. For a kid, I guess." Dan leaned closer and winked, "she looks like me, aye?"

"If she's anything like you, she'll become a ball crusher and heart breaker."

Dan laughed, "leave the heartbreaker out, but I don't mind the ball crusher." A waiter appeared and Dan extracted his hand from under Jean's, ordering what he'd remembered from the menu. "It's been how long?" When the waiter had left.

"Eleven months and a week and a day ... or two days." Jean smiled. "Felt longer."

"Shit, almost a year." Dan shook his head. "A lot happened, but somehow ... you haven't changed." You're just looking about ten times better than I remember. "Guess I turned into a wrinkly old git, though." He flashed a grin.

Jean pulled on his cigarette. "No. Hardly a hair different. Nothing's changed. Just ... should have been in touch earlier."

"That's alright, you're a married man now, and I was ... well, kind of busy with assorted shit."

"That, too."

The waiter brought Dan's drink, then the food, while Jean watched him eat. "What are you planning for Rome? I was thinking: clubbing, wine, food, relax. Been here six hours, but I already love this city."

"I have no idea." Dan mopped up some balsamic vinegar with a piece of mozzarella cheese. "Can I just tag along? Vadim was meant to come with me, but he got the offer for a triple glory-shift."

"What's that?"

Dan flashed a grin. "They were desperate for a team leader and offered Vadim triple pay if he stayed on a few days longer, even though he'd been booked on R&R."

"Oh nice. Is he coming later?"

"Aye, he'll be here on Tuesday." Finishing off his plate, Dan emptied the wine as well. Pointing at empty glass and plate. "What would you say about taking your old mate to a place that's less dry?"

"Bar? I'm afraid there is no swimming pool here ..."

Dan laughed. "That'll do. Let's go, then?" He stood, looking down at Jean. "And how is Solange, by the way? And before I forget it, have you heard anything from Beauvais?"

"Solange is having a shooting somewhere. A bit different from my kind of shooting. From Thierry, nothing, but I haven't been home a lot. You seemed to get along really well."

"Yeah, and next time you can go for the black eye and nearly broken nose yourself." Dan laughed.

"And I thought you like to play rough ..." Jean waved the waiter over and took everything on his room bill. "I'll get the jacket from upstairs ... want to come?"

"Sure. I'll have to grab my own as well." Dan followed Jean up the stairs, trying hard to suppress a slight limp.

Faded carpet led them all the way up to the third storey, where Jean began to fiddle with the keys, and then he unlocked the door to room 306. "Come on in."

Dan stepped inside, steering straight towards a chair in a corner. "Not bad either."

Jean grinned, closing the door, then leaned against it, back pressed against the door, knees somewhat bent and apart, regarding Dan for several long moments. "What are you in the mood for?"

"Going into town, aye?" Dan sat down, stretching out his long legs. "Was your own suggestion." He grinned up at Jean.

Jean paused, then, still grinning, and moved away from the door. "Just need a change of clothes. Hope you don't mind?" Already baring his chest, just as tanned as his face and neck; muscles and tendons shifting under the smooth skin as he moved. Wearing not even the wifebeater he'd famously worn in the Gulf.

Dan tensed, pushing himself against the chair and swallowed. Fuck. He wasn't saint material. "You seem to have had too much time for sunning on your hands." Forcing himself to look away, he was laboriously searching his shirt for his packet of fags instead.

Jean turned, slipping out of his trousers, bending down, then straightening as he stepped out of them, then underwear and socks. Naked, and tanned without a line there. He'd had a lot of time tanning himself in the nude, too. "Can be a good place for a vacation," he stated, not hurrying to get dressed again.

Dan looked up and his hand got stuck in his pocket, touching the cigarettes but forgetting to pull them out. "Shit." Breathed out, catching himself when he finally managed to take his eyes off Jean once more. "Seems so. Did you go to a Nudist beach or what?"

"Just a secluded beach." Jean grinned. "Seems you appreciate the view?" Moving closer.

"Yeah." But Dan wasn't looking. Leaning forward instead and rubbing his bad knee. "Didn't you want to go out?"

Jean moved even closer, his leg touching Dan's knee. "You okay? You didn't get shot in a bad place or something?"

"Shit!" Again, this time with more feeling. Desperation, almost. "You're married, Jean, you forgot that?" Looking up and fucking hell, what he was confronted with should require a license. Too deadly. "*Married*, aye?"

"I don't forget anything." Jean raised his hand slightly, and sure enough, the ring still sat there. "Is that the only reason you're not looking at me?"

"I'm ... looking." Dan swallowed hard. "Damn." Shaking his head.

Jean crouched, placing his hands on Dan's knees. "Is it because you met her?"

"It's different." If it hadn't been so real and difficult, Dan's expression of despair would have been comical. "She's ... she's so fucking *trusting*, and damn ... I *like* her, and it's not ..." Shrugging with defeat. "Fuck."

“Just tell me what you’re taking away from her if you sleep with me now, Dan.” Jean tried to meet Dan’s gaze.

“I don’t know.” Throat suddenly dry, Dan stared at Jean like a snake at its charmer. “But I would feel like a lying shit when I meet her next. You’re supposed to be hers, and she believes it.” Moving his head a fraction closer. “She has no idea ...?”

“No. She has no idea.” Jean reached for Dan’s face. “Leave any guilt to me, okay?”

“And what would that make me?” Dan frowned, while wanting nothing but to lean into the touch.

“Don’t know ... You’re my friend, Dan. You and Vadim share ... lovers, so why are you hesitating? I don’t get it.”

“Because I’ve never had sex with anyone who was married and whose ...” A twitch in his face, and then, “oh shit.” Vadim. Married.

“You sure? Because if they are not wearing the ring, you can’t tell. Guess how many I had who, next morning, would get the ring out of their purse and put it on? Definitely a couple there.”

“No, not sure.” Dan grimaced, “Vadim was married. With kids.”

“There’s your precedent. So, what’s the problem?”

“I’ll lose a hundred quid?” The grimace was back, and Dan’s hands wanted to move to that glowing, tanned skin on their own.

Jean blinked, then laughed. “I can give you the money back. I made a killing in South Africa.”

“Very funny.” Dan pulled a face, but that damned laughter was too infectious. “Vadim was betting fifty quid we’d have sex and I offered him a hundred because I didn’t believe we would. Thought we’d just be friends now.” Mates. Nothing else. Carefully avoiding any of the other things that Vadim had said. That would be too weird.

“You bet against sex with me?” Jean was laughing hard now. “Fuck. I call that self-defeating strategy.”

“You’re a fucking cocky bastard, you know that?” The corners of Dan’s lips twitched, making his righteous anger seem less convincing. “I was damn set to do the *right* thing, aye? And that after not having seen you for almost a goddamned motherfucking year!” Dan glared at Jean, “and if you laugh any harder now, I’ll have to cut you to size, Frenchie. Married or not.”

Jean raised a hand and stepped back, fighting hard for control. “Alright ... okay.” Moving back just a little more, he kept grinning. “What’s the plan? Sex now or after we come back? Or in a nice location somewhere in the city?”

“You are giving me such a bloody come-on and then you ask me if I want to wait? You must be fucking kidding me.” Dan groaned and shook his head. He should have just forgotten all about this marriage thing. Would have saved him a lot of trouble.

“Just making sure.” Jean stepped closer again, opening his arms, still grinning, but Dan merely looked at him and did exactly ... nothing. Nothing but giving himself the time to have a really, *really* good look. Only his voice betrayed

how he was affected. "You sure you don't want to get fucked?" A man had to try.

Jean shook his head. "No. I'll call you if that ever changes, okay?"

"Yeah, alright." A wicked grin suddenly jumped into Dan's face. Sharp, toothy and all. "There's a phone over there." Pointing across the room.

"Thierry clearly loved it, Vadim does, too, but I don't. Not even very curious, honest."

"You sure?" Dan kept grinning, even broader if possible, as he pushed himself off the chair. Taking a couple of steps towards Jean. "Really sure?" Another step and ... standing so close their bodies almost touched. "Absolutely, totally and completely sure?" A sudden, small movement, enough to push against Jean, towards the bed.

Jean nodded, emphatically, and got on the bed, stretching out. "If I see you get lube I'll be out the door ..." he warned, still grinning and motioning Dan to get closer.

"I thought you'd locked it."

"No, it's still open. But closed. No room service at this hour."

Baring his teeth in the mother of all grins, Dan suddenly moved, fast, and was on the bed in the next second, straddling Jean. Looking down, the grin vanished, as if a light had been switched off. Suddenly serious. "Really thought it was over when you married." Quieter, face down, hands on either side of Jean's head.

Jean lifted his upper body to meet Dan, kissing him on the lips. "No way. You got Vadim and I got Solange, but no way."

"Shit ..." one last time, heartfelt, and Dan was all over Jean. Lowered to kiss, balancing on his thighs, both hands finally connecting with that glorious, tanned skin. Touching, open-mouthed kissing, the hunger increased with each moment. Hadn't realised how much he'd missed this. Missed Jean.

Jean pulled him close, pushed one knee between Dan's legs, and returned the kiss, then managed to roll over, getting Dan below, hardly breaking the kiss or the touches, starting to undress him.

Dan never stopped touching Jean, too hungry. He'd held back and now the lust was there in full force, but Jean smiled at him, running his fingers over Dan's face, through his hair. Taking it slow where Dan, once skin touched skin, wanted to come, surprised at the slowness, but he went with it. Jean's body clearly needing Dan, but he was held back by something, as if he didn't want to rush it, instead caressing and kissing, while Dan eventually closed his eyes and the urgency went away. Yet the lust and arousal remained as Jean kept shifting weight and positions, sometimes on top, sometimes lying face to face on their sides.

Dan opened his eyes when they lay pressed together. Breaking the kiss, he looked straight into blue eyes, blurry from being so close. "You missed me?" Murmured.

"Was going mental," Jean answered. "Tried everything to make it easier, but hell ... it just wouldn't work ..."

Dan lifted his hand, caressing the face before him, felt a strange tender ache where he'd never felt it before. "I'm just too irresistible, aye?" Barely more than a whisper, as his hips rocked closer, creating friction against their trapped cocks.

"I never tried ... that resisting thing." Jean smiled, moaning, moving against Dan, too, breath going faster. "You're just ... special."

"Me?" A short, breathless laugh, Dan took hold of Jean's hip, to increase the intensity.

"You. Who else?" Jean rolled his eyes, but was holding Dan tight, breath turning to panting. "Who the fuck else ... don't have ... that many ... gay special ... friends ..."

"So ..." with a swift movement, Dan rolled them over, until he came on top. Thrusting his hips down, using strength and need. "Guess you ... didn't have anyone ... else?" Down again, twisting his hips, making Jean arch and groan, move against him as much as he could.

"Just ... Whores. No...body special."

"Men?" Breathless, Dan sped up, the friction intoxicating. Not getting there, not by a long stretch, but relishing every moment of heat, strength and lust.

Jean's eyes opened, he bared his teeth in a half-grin. "A couple ... drunk, you know?"

"Yeah ... damn good excuse."

"They certainly thought so ..."

Dan mirrored Jean's grin, suddenly lifted to sit, straddling Jean once more, scooting up the body. Jean's cock touched his cleft, and the grin was still there when Dan looked down, breathlessly murmuring, "if you had lube ... and you didn't run away ... you could fuck me."

"Nightstand. Condoms, there, too. Yeah, I planned this." Jean nodded over to the nightstand.

"Bastard." Dan let out a laugh, leaning across to get the items. "And I thought I'd be sweeping you off your feet with that." The condom was rolled over Jean's cock, swiftly, lube, cool, coating and plenty, when Dan raised one brow, flashed a grin, lifted and turned around. Back facing Jean. He leant forward, presenting his arse, neatly shaved, and spread his knees further. Pushing his lubed finger through the ring, loosening his muscle, fucking himself.

"Shit!" Jean muttered, staring, the need growing frantic. He tried to wiggle free to get back onto his knees and fuck Dan in that position. "You tease ..."

But Dan half-turned and swatted Jean's hands away, adding a slap on the chest when he still tried to move. "That's my show." Using his thighs to keep Jean from turning, he lowered down once more, adding a second finger. Pushing in, with a mix of recklessness and lust. Dan rested his forehead on Jean's shins, and used his second hand to stroke Jean's sheathed cock leisurely, while fucking himself faster.

Jean groaned. "Mercy? Please? I was just ... taking it slow because I missed you ... no need to torture me, right?"

"You want to be those fingers?" Dan's husky laughter was all too audible. "What about a third? I could do with yours ... your cock can come later."

"Fuck, Dan ..." Jean reached up, took some of the lube and warmed it briefly, legs still immobilized by Dan's strength and weight. He pushed two fingers into Dan's arse, mimicking the way Dan had fucked himself, same speed, then working from there, shifting as he added a third one, which caught Dan by surprise. Head pressed down, arse lifted high, knees opening and sliding away from trapping Jean's legs, allowing more access as his eyes closed and his arms spread. Hands sliding along the bed sheets, Jean's cock neglected, fingers twisting into the fabric when the third finger was deeply embedded. He moaned, suddenly wanting more, needing more. Needing to be filled. Stretched. Centred. It had been a while.

Jean fucked him with three fingers, moving them against each other, trying to find the spot and sticking with it, teasing Dan with near-misses and then rewarding him with more intense stimulation, causing Dan to shudder, and to zone out further and further.

"There are ... things ... that are much better real than wanking," Jean murmured, when Dan pushed back, demanding. "Like this ..." Jean's free hand moved towards Dan's cock, slowly pumping him in time with the movements from his other hand, trying to get Dan off by fingerfucking, the other hand just assisting with it, not driving. "Not something ... I could imagine ... in such detail."

Dan was too far gone to comment, or to even realise what was going on, except for a groaned out "more!" as he craned his head back into his neck, panting. Muscles coiling beneath smoothly tanned and scarred skin, body wiry taut.

Jean sped up, had to use more force, shifted the angle, giving Dan more, more brutal, faster, pumping his cock hard, himself reckless with need, using the strength of his shoulder and arm to give Dan more. He wished he had a dildo or something, maybe something larger, longer than fingers, but maybe ... next time. He grinned at that thought.

With a groan Dan's body shuddered, tried to push back and into those fingers. On the edge, mind gone, body still demanding more, but his voice hardly functioned. "More!" Barely audible amongst the sounds he was making and the loud breaths.

Jean barely managed to move enough to add a fourth finger, moving on instinct rather than what he thought Dan wanted, but at the same time felt that desperate need and wanted to give Dan whatever he desired.

That did it, it was enough to send Dan over the edge. Filled, stretched, taken again, and centred with that hand on his cock. Yet everything different, another man, and still the same, and he came with a shout, lifting off Jean's legs, to crash back down, shuddering.

Jean lay back, running both hands across Dan's heated flushed skin, stroking and caressing, allowing him to calm, and most of all take his fill and enjoy the fact that Dan was finally *here*, with him, and what a difference that made.

Eventually, Dan moved, until he lay side by side with Jean. "Sorry." Quietly, with a grin that was too sated and relaxed.

"Sorry what?" Jean turned to face him, smiling. "Sorry you enjoyed yourself?"

"Yeah" Dan smiled, giving his face an entirely innocent look, despite twisted scar and all. "Sorry for not having got you off yet."

"That's fine, don't worry." Jean moved to kiss him. "Bullshit, don't think that's your priority ... we have all night, as long as you have ..."

"Not going anywhere, unless you want to wine and dine me."

"Yeah, later ..."

Dan grinned, his hand blindly reaching for Jean's cock, still sheathed. "You can fuck me, if you want." It would be uncomfortable, but he didn't care right now.

"Or you suck me off ... if you have enough breath left?"

"If you promise to take me out to some pasta and red wine? Of course!" Dan winked, got up with some exaggerated groans and protests of creaky joints, and onto his knees. Flat palms lightly pressing onto Jean's abs. "Lay back and think of La Nation." With that he lowered his head, rolled the condom back off and threw it behind him, before taking the first taste with his tongue, non-verbally protesting about the rubber taste.

"Prefer ... thinking of you," Jean groaned, watching him, hypnotized – another thing that was much better than the memory or his imagination. Fingers going down to caress Dan's shoulders, when Dan began in earnest. Using every skill and every trick in the book of a self-professed cocksucker who loved nothing more but the taste, the scent, the feel of the hard flesh invading his throat, while his tongue and teeth played with the shaft, crown and slit, then all the way back down again. In ever increasing intensity, and never with less than utmost concentration.

Jean's body tensed, gradually, every muscle coming out in stark relief as he began to lose it. Not wanting any control, instead moaning and groaning just as loud as he pleased, getting so desperate he almost burst into laughter, realizing how fucking needy he was and that Dan was merciless at teasing him. The pressure becoming laughter, which didn't prevent him from getting incredibly close, until Dan managed to reach behind himself, enough lube still behind his legs to coat a finger, and when he sucked down hard, all the way to the base, he pushed the slick finger deep into Jean's arse, his throat constricting around the intrusion.

Jean came with a suppressed shout, finger and throat, the kind of stimulation that didn't leave him a chance. Relieved when the pressure went off, shuddering and squirming, then he relaxed. Enjoying the come down, which he shared with Dan lying close, arm thrown across Jean's chest, breathing in the scent of sex and male. And friend.

"Cigarette?" Jean murmured eventually.

"Insatiable." Dan chuckled, but rolled off the bed and onto his feet. Knee buckling for a split second, before he had himself under control and forced

some balance. "Guess you want me to light it, too?" Sitting back down, he flicked the Zippo, grinning.

"Perfect service." Jean took the cigarette between his lips, where it hung precariously, until he got enough control to move closer to the lighter. "Not sure I have the energy left to go clubbing. Give me a little."

"I'm not really the right age group for clubbing anyway." Dan flashed a grin, lit both their fags and settled back after a quick clean-up with the sheets. "Just take me out to a restaurant, ply me with pasta and wine, then stick your fist up my arse and I'm anybody's." He laughed.

"Whole ... fist?" Jean coughed in surprise. "Shit. And I was getting worried about the stretch."

"Perhaps there are some things that you don't know about me, after all." Dan stretched out, leisurely smoking his fag. "Once upon a time ..." he trailed off, chuckling.

"I'm freaked out by the size of a cock, and you ..."

"I've done that about a handful of times in my life." Dan shrugged, "and it takes a bloody long time. So, you wouldn't have got far."

"Handful?" Jean couldn't help but laugh, still moving to cuddle and stroke and kiss. "Sorry, nice pun ..."

"Yeah, yeah, you just take the piss and see where it gets you." Dan grinned. "But apart from that, tell me about those guys that 'happened' when you were drunk."

"Whores. I paid them. It was ... easier?" Jean kept looking at Dan. "No strings. Just ... wanted to try whether it works with just men. Not ... friends, nobody I have any kind of connection with. It does. I wanted to work out how 'gay' I am. Guess the proof of the pudding is the eating."

"And does that bother you?" Dan blew the smoke to the ceiling.

"I got off." Jean grinned. "That's the main goal, right? I mean, they were rent guys."

"The gay thing, you idiot." Dan laughed, "since you've enjoyed the pudding ..."

"Well, that's not breaking news for you, is it?" Jean made an 'innocent' face. "Just wanted to know whether I can have sex with a guy that's not you. I can. That means ..." He stopped himself, frowned. "Means ... it means I can get off with other guys. But I prefer you."

Dan was laughing harder, the concentrated frown tickled his fancy. "I would have thought you'd realised that when you fucked Vadim and Beauvais."

"Yeah, them. But you were in the room, too, so that's different."

Stubbing the cigarette out, Dan propped himself up on his elbow, laughter turning into a smile. "Solange ..." But then he shut up, figuring it would be a damn stupid thing to mention the once-male.

"What about her?"

"Nothing." Reaching out to let his hand slide from Jean's shoulder to his neck, resting there. "Just a fleeting thought, of no consequence." Leaning

forward, he captured Jean's lips with his, murmuring, "of far less consequence than this right now."

Jean grinned, returning the kiss, playful as he always was. "Don't feel guilty. Just don't think about it."

Dan whispered, when he parted his lips, "got to get my hundred quid's worth ..."

Jean gave another laugh, until the kissing stopped that, turning tender and heartfelt, slow, deliberate, taste mingling. They were sated enough to do nothing but touch and kiss, almost lazily moving and re-acquainting with each other's body and taste for a long time, until eventually, Dan rolled onto his back, head turned to grin at Jean. "What about that wining and dining?"

"Cool. I'll take you to the L'Archetto – it's near a touristy spot, but a friend recommended it highly. Said the pasta is great, pizza less so. Let's get ready. But I need a shower first."

Jean headed straight to the showers, then came out naked, but mostly dry. He got into casual but stylish jeans and a tight, expensive t-shirt that traced the lines of his upper body well. Stuffing the wallet into his pocket, he looked at Dan, who'd just come out of the bathroom, still towelling his hair. "Ready when you are."

Dan almost did a double-take as he grinned from ear to ear. "Are you out on the pull? Or looking for some more hustlers?"

"You think I'm dressed to pull?" Jean laughed. "Try live with a model and try to not get given lots of branded clothes. Good luck."

"In a couple of sizes too small?" Dan smirked, before getting back into his old clothes.

"It's the current fashion, apparently."

Dan stood, lifted his arms, as if presenting himself. "Do you want me to change? Beside you, I must look like something the cat dragged in, but I guess I should be used to that by now."

"No, you're fine. Want that pasta or not? It's a fairly intimate little place, no place to show off. Too small."

"Sure." Dan plucked the shades from his pocket and was good to go. "You really are certain about not looking for company, though?" Still grinning broadly as they descended the stairs towards the hotel lobby.

Jean turned his head. "Addicted to threesomes, are we?"

"Not really." Dan simultaneously slipped his shades on and stepped into the blinding sun, "but I have to take my chances while I can."

"That a yes?" Jean grinned. "No idea how you go about finding male hookers around here. I suppose the hotel staff could help, if we need it."

He headed outside and led Dan towards the Fontana di Trevi, as he explained, where locals and tourists were both sitting, talking, taking photographs. Pointing towards a small alley close to it, and then to an unassuming, even shabby front that could have belonged to the dingiest of bars. They were surprised to find a small, whitewashed restaurant inside. The few tables upstairs were occupied, but there was a cellar, too, and down there it was

cool and pleasant, with an Italian waiter just now making fun of a gaggle of Japanese tourists.

“So, tell me,” Dan asked when they had been seated, shades now on the table top, “how long are you going to stay in South Africa? And anything lined up after that?” He was stretching out his leg, as inconspicuously as possible rubbing his knee to ease the stiffness.

“Maybe a couple months, two, three ... depending how things go. I got nothing lined up, so I could spend the winter working on my little house. Lots of stuff needs doing, it’s a never-ending work in progress. Sometimes I wonder why I started it at all.”

Dan nodded, “I feel your pain, even though the farm is progressing nicely, according to the latest photos we got. Really have to fly over again to check on things.” He shrugged, “but with the Balkans being everything but rosy so far, Kiwiland was the least of my worries.”

“Balkans? I’m staying away from it. Too close to home, in too many ways.” Jean plucked the menu up from a plastic stand and flicked it open. “Plenty of spaghetti ... look at that, spaghetti with vodka cream sauce. Fuck. And I thought it was all about tomatoes ...”

“I’ll have whatever has the most cream and cheese in. Can’t have me keel over with exhaustion aye? I’m already close to starvation.”

“I try the vodka one. I’m curious.”

The waiter spoke rudimentary English, almost comically rudimental, and the food was indeed excellent – huge portions that went rather cheap in the end, even including wine it was hard to spend a fortune in this place, with a great chocolate cake for Dan and strong coffee for both of them. Afterwards, they wandered the streets of Rome, stopped at an ice-cream parlour near the Pantheon that offered at least seventy different flavours, then, by following a long circle route, they got back to the hotel, where they somehow ended up in Jean’s room.

* * *

The next three days were spent exploring Rome the way Dan liked: restaurants, cafes, bars, lots of spring sunshine and very little cultural exploits, except for the people with whom they interacted. No museums and not many ruins, and Dan enjoyed himself tremendously with Jean as company. Ending – predictably, together in bed or any other convenient place, such as a dark alley late at night, which was Jean’s idea. Taking advantage as much and as often, and as intense, as they could. As Dan kept pointing out, he had to get his hundred quid’s worth, a comment that never failed to make Jean laugh.

Jean was in one of his sunniest moods, obviously happy and content with his life, his work, his home, his adventures, and most of all his wife. There seemingly was no darkness about the blond legionnaire, careless, young, and sometimes ridiculously exuberant, which was quite different to spending time with Vadim.

They both went to the airport on the fourth day, and Dan greeted Vadim with a face-splitting grin and a bundle of pound notes, which he held out without a word. Exactly one-hundred.

Vadim took the money, glanced at Jean, who started to laugh, and then back at Dan. "Safe bet. That was almost too easy." And that was that.

"Yeah, damn, guess I should have known." Dan shrugged, pushed his shades into position and pulled Vadim into an embrace which could be construed as an intimate friendship one. Vey Italian, and very intense. The embrace of Jean and Vadim less intense, but still tight, friendly, with Jean murmuring something into Vadim's ear that made him smile, unexpectedly.

They took Vadim back to the hotel, where Dan had made a point of tidying up the double room he'd been occupying on his own, making space for Vadim's kit, and they even managed to get out and about – sightseeing, this time with some added culture, before indulging in pasta and wine, and ending up – equally predictably – together in bed. According to Dan it would have been unfair if Jean was left out, who would have had to sulk in his room, alone, and they had to make sure he was thoroughly tired out by the time he left to head back to his own bed. Which he was, even though it turned out to be – probably just as predictably – Dan who was the most thoroughly fucked, sucked, stroked, used and tended-to one. A fact he mock-submitted to, and ended up sprawled across the bed, fast asleep, before Jean had even left.

Just then, another weird kiss happened, again of Jean's devising, and Vadim couldn't help but thoroughly enjoy it, this display of tenderness and trust. With Dan asleep, that was just something between them. "Why?" murmured Vadim.

Jean grinned, tiredly. "Just so. Stop thinking about it." Kissing him again, and then getting out of the bed, dressing in his t-shirt and shorts, rest of his clothes over one arm, when he left. Vadim didn't hold him back - Jean didn't seem to expect him to.

Early next morning, Jean's flight left for France.

* * *

They stayed a couple of days longer, with Dan happily doing his rounds in the local outside swimming pool and gym, an awfully exclusive place which he used thoroughly in those hours while Vadim was indulging heavily in 'the cultural crap' as Dan called it mockingly. And while Vadim explored the thousands of years of history and beauty, Dan sunned himself and worked out, until they met in the early afternoon in a cafe, both content with their day's exploits, and both sated, with different focus.

They decided to travel through the country after that, to spend their nearly three weeks of R&R in Tuscany and surrounding areas. Before they headed off the next morning with a rented car, Dan was sitting in their room on one of the two chairs, the telephone on the table. Smoking a cigarette, he was deeply in thoughts.

Vadim returned from the bathroom after a spot of shaving and grooming, towel wrapped around his hips. "What's wrong?"

"Not wrong, just wondering." Dan looked up, stubbing the cigarette out in the ashtray. "Do you think I should phone Duncan?"

"Sure, why not. I'm sure he'd like a regular catch-up."

"Aye, he's been asking me when we come for a visit. Told him on next R&R most likely." Running a hand through his wild hair, Dan stretched out his legs, eyes on Vadim. "I just wonder ... should I tell him about Kisa? In a way I think he's got a right to know. He helped me set up the trust – without asking questions – and she is, after all, his niece. On the other hand, he'll never see her, so where is the point?"

"Are you going for the all-out story or a sanitised version? It's a blood relation, but ... not easy." Vadim leaned against the wall.

"No one will get the all-out story." Dan frowned, "just as little or as much as no one will ever get *our* complete story."

"What do you want? What's your gut feeling?"

"I am not sure, even though somehow I think that he'd want to know. Remember when he asked me to tell him about my life and then he asked us to tell him about ours? I think he wants to know who I am, who *we* are."

Vadim nodded. "Then tell him. It'll explain the trust, and much else. Depending on how he takes it, you can add more. Having a child in a country far away. That shouldn't shock him too much."

"I don't want to lie either, though. Any idea how I can come up with a sanitised version that is still the truth?"

"What about - it just happened? You were ... both ... mourning. Afterwards, you felt guilty or something, both you and her, and that has spoilt the whole thing and turned it bitter."

"I don't feel guilty." Dan shook his head, the frown deepening. "That's the last thing I want him to think." Running the hand through his hair again, "Fuck."

"What about ... she met some other guy who doesn't like you or want you around?"

Dan heaved a sigh. "Don't know, doesn't feel right either. Maybe I just pick up the phone and wing it?"

"Or that." Vadim smiled and stepped closer, placing a hand on Dan's shoulder, gently massaging the tight muscle underneath.

"Alright, then." Dan moved his head for a moment, so that he touched Vadim, before reaching for the phone. "Here goes nothing."

Vadim sat down on the bed, watching, being there, hoping that his presence wouldn't make things more difficult. "Give him greetings, and to his wife and kids."

"Aye." Dan smiled at him, then dialled the number and waited for the ring tone. Partly hoping that no one was home, and mostly cursing himself for those cowardly thoughts. His brother had to know, but how was he going to tell him ... he'd just have to go with the flow.

“Hello?” It was Mhairi’s voice on the phone.

“Hi Mhairi,” Dan smiled at the phone, concentrating. “How are you?” Exchanging a few pleasantries and telling her where they were, how nice Rome was, that they should visit, too, and that Vadim was sending his best wishes, looking forward to the next visit when they were on R&R again, and so on and so forth. Eventually, after a few minutes, during which she gave a quick update on the family, including the boys, Dan asked if he could talk to Duncan and she laughed, because she had expected him to ask anyway, pleasantly surprised that he had chatted with her for a while. She sent her best wishes back to Vadim and went off to get Duncan.

“Well, that wasn’t so bad for starters.” Dan murmured towards Vadim, hand over the receiver.

Vadim grinned. “No, sounded pretty natural.”

Before Dan could say anything else, his brother picked up the phone. “What a rare honour!” Duncan laughed into the phone, mocking, “what do you want me to do for you?”

“Hey!” protesting, Dan grinned, “just because I phone you doesn’t mean I have a job for you to do. What happened to me, your brother, phoning you, to say ‘hello?’”

“What happened? The fact that you never do that?”

Dan could hear the amusement in his brother’s voice. “Damn, do I have to say ‘gotcha’, now?”

“Possibly, depends on if you want me to do something or not.”

“I don’t actually.” Dan fished for a cigarette, glancing at Vadim, before concentrating once more on the conversation. “But do you remember the last job I asked you to do?”

“Which of the many ...” Duncan groused, before he added, “the trust? Aye, why? You never told me what it was for ...”

“And you never asked.” Dan quickly slipped in.

“I figured you’d tell me if you felt you should.”

“Aye, thanks for that.” Smiling, Dan lit the fag. “That’s why I should tell you what it was for, or rather for whom.”

“Go on.” Duncan seemed to settle in, while Dan glanced at Vadim again. He took a deep breath, trying to figure out how best to breach the subject and decided to just barge ahead. He wasn’t born for diplomacy and would just fuck things up if he tried.

“It’s for my daughter.” Dropping the bomb.

“Your *what?*”

“My daughter. Your niece.”

“My *what?*”

The incredulity in Duncan’s voice almost made Dan laughed, but he bit his lip. While it felt hysterically funny it wasn’t funny at all.

“Your niece. Kisa. She is two and a half years old.” Ignoring the sounds Duncan was making, Dan kept ploughing on. “She is the child of Vadim’s ex-wife and ... well, obviously, me.” Dan cringed, even forgetting to smoke his

cigarette. Looking across at Vadim as if searching for help, when the sounds from Duncan became louder.

“What?”

“Girl. Kisa. Two and a half. Lives in Hungary. Born to one Katya Krasnorada. Your niece.” Dan took another deep breath, averted his eyes from Vadim and added, with a vibrating intensity in his voice. “I was the sperm donor.”

“You *what*?”

“Oh hell, Duncan, can you say anything other than ‘what?’”

“No.” Came the voice from the other end of the phone. “I can’t. Holy shit.” Swearing, it always caught Dan out when his brother did that. Reserved for special occasions, and no doubt this was one of them. “But you’re gay.”

“Aye.” Dan sighed. “That I am.”

“And what do you mean with ‘sperm donor’? Artificial insemination? And for the ex-wife of your partner?” The incredulity in Duncan’s voice was growing again. ‘Partner’ was the most natural part of the whole thing, it seemed, the only bit where he didn’t appear to stumble in disbelief.

“I know.” Dan groaned.

“You know *what*?”

“For fuck’s sake, Duncan,” Dan raised his voice, “anymore ‘what’ and I am going to bloody well scream!”

“I’ll *bloody well* join you then, won’t I? Because your whole *bloody* story makes no *bloody* sense, does it? Or what would it sound to you if I told you anything that farfetched?”

“I’d tell you to fuck off and spin your fairy tales somewhere else?” Dan deflated, shoulder sagging and he exhaled, looking forlorn at the cigarette that had burnt down to the filter, forgotten between his fingers.

“Aye. Exactly.”

For a younger brother, Dan felt, Duncan clearly had the upper hand right now, if not always – and with ease. But he said nothing.

“And that’s why I think you should start from scratch again.” Duncan continued, “or would a simple interrogation be easier?”

“Guess so.” Dan looked at Vadim, facial expression pained and he shrugged.

“Right, then. When did it all happen?”

“A bit over three years ago.”

“Where?”

“In Hungary.”

“Why? And don’t come back to me with that ‘sperm donor’ thing. I do remember, from what you and Vadim told me, that three years ago Vadim was imprisoned. Your story doesn’t make sense.”

“But it’s the truth. Just not ... in the way you imagine.”

“Then tell me. Tell me how I should imagine gaining a niece without knowing about it, from a brother who is gay.”

“Just because I’m gay doesn’t mean I don’t function.” Quickly adding, “with women.”

"I get that, now tell me how it really was. Or I'll hound you with that question until your last days."

"You have a sadistic streak, Duncan, you know that?"

"Takes one to know one."

Dan visibly jerked. "Ouch."

A pause, before Duncan conceded, voice softer than before, "I'm sorry, Dan, I'm just ... it's hard to digest, aye? Give me a chance, give *us* a chance, we're your family and thus hers, too. I think we deserve to know the how and why, don't you?"

"Aye." Dan answered quietly, eyes on Vadim. Looking, intensely, when he took a fortifying breath. "I tell you the how and why, then."

Vadim stood, placed a hand on Dan's shoulder, but just for a moment. He didn't want to hear it. If Dan remained this brutally honest, he really didn't. He headed into the bathroom and closed the door to get dressed. A little later, without stopping to listen, he left the hotel room.

"I went to Hungary to see Vadim's ex-wife. I needed her to convince Vadim's father to deliver a coded message. Before ... before the execution." Dan was looking out of the window but didn't see anything. Not even the brilliant sunshine. "Vadim didn't even know that I was still alive. I figured they would have told him they got me, killed me, anything, really, to break him." Which they did, in the end, but except for a shudder, invisible to his brother at the other end of the phone, Dan didn't allow himself to let anything on. "Thing is, though, Vadim's ex-wife ... well, guess you could say she blames me for everything. The fact that Vadim was imprisoned in the first place, and probably for her well-laid plans not working out. I messed it all up, didn't I?" Dan trailed off, pausing long enough for his brother to interject.

"Did she tell you that?"

"Aye. And somehow, with a part of me, I can't blame her. The other part ... three years ago, knowing that Vadim would be executed, I wasn't in a state to deal with her ..." hatred, "attitude."

"Then why ..."

Dan interrupted immediately, "... did she want me as a sperm donor? Not sure." He shrugged, "revenge? Taking something from me that Vadim would never have? I have no idea. It was all too twisted to make sense to me back then. I guess she just wanted another child. She told me that an artificial insemination had failed, I guess I was simply convenient."

"I don't understand how she got you to comply, though." Duncan's voice was soft and Dan sensed the warmth, without noticing it consciously.

"Blackmail. That simple." When Duncan gasped, Dan continued, "remember, I needed her to do something for me. Convince Vadim's father to give him the coded message when they allowed him to visit his son before ..." the execution. He'd said it too many times, and he couldn't say it another one. The dread was coming back up, like bile, like something rotten that he'd eaten and that would never quite digest. Remembering what it had felt like, the utter desperation and the pain. It was all over now. All over ... and yet every time

Vadim screamed in the night it got him right back there. But he refused to acknowledge it.

He'd been silent for too long, and Duncan asked quietly, "and in return she wanted you to donate for a child?"

"Aye. Just ... it wasn't a sample."

It took a moment for Duncan to settle in, but when he seemed to understand what his brother was implying, a softly exhaled, "oh god, Dan!" came through the phone.

"I told you, I can function with women." Dan murmured, shaking his head. "I didn't know that it was successful until a few months ago. She sent me photos and a letter, telling me I had a daughter." He paused, adding, "funny, that, because she'd told me I wasn't allowed to contact her if it was successful, and that she'd claim I'd raped her, if I did."

"Oh my Holy God!" Duncan exclaimed, and before Dan could react, Duncan's voice became intense, and so full of feeling, Dan wasn't sure how to decipher it. Anger? Sorrow? Understanding? "Dan, I wish you were here and not just at the other end of a phone. I really would like to see you, talk to you, ply you with whisky and for Mhairi to feed you with her cooking. And give you a goddamned big hug!"

Dan smiled, touched by the sentiment. "It's alright, even though I can always do with the whisky and the food." And the rest, if he was honest. "I'm okay now."

"Now?"

"Well ... we were in the Balkans when the photos arrived. Vadim ... I'd never told him."

"Oh goodness, and how did he react?" The emotion was audible through the phone.

"Badly." Dan smiled wryly, to no one. "Let's just say, it was a rough time." Some things, he figured, should remain classified. There was no need for his brother to know.

"And now?"

"He's alright, now. He understands that I didn't ..." did what? "Betray him." What a silly little word for such a heartbreaking pain. "We even went to Hungary together, and he had a word with his ex-wife. He delivered the trust that you set up for me. Oh, and I saw Kisa, but of course she had no idea who I was."

"What is she like?"

"Beautiful." Dan smiled. "Looks a lot better than I do."

"That's easy." Duncan chuckled warmly.

"You bastard." Thankful for the light-hearted diversion, Dan smiled.

"Well, she *is* a few years younger than you, aye?"

"And has no scars. I know, I know."

"I didn't mean that." The warmth seemed to have become part of Duncan's voice now.

"I know." Dan answered softly.

“Are you going to fight?” Duncan asked after a pause.

“For what?”

“To see your daughter.”

“No.” Dan shook his head, looking at his scarred hand. “I was thinking about that, and talked to Vadim. What good would it do? The whole thing is a great big mess, and you don’t know that woman, she’s ... fearsome?” The sound at the other end indicated that Duncan thought something very different about her. Very much less flattering. “She’d fight back, and while I might have a chance, would I really want to fight the notion that I raped her?” Too close, and he had to push the thought away. “Besides, don’t you think that the one who’d suffer most in a legal and emotional battle like this would be Kisa?”

“Aye,” Duncan conceded, “I guess you are right.”

“I am, and you know it.” Dan smiled ruefully. “Besides, what would I tell her who I am? An uncle? A stranger who happened to look like her? A sperm donor? You know as much as I do, that I am not like you. I’m not father material, and least of all with the job we do.”

Duncan didn’t say anything for a while, just the faint sound of the grandfather clock ticking away in the hallway, where the phone stood, and his barely audible breathing. “But you would like to?” At last, hardly more than a soft murmur.

Dan didn’t ask what that was. He knew it, knew what Duncan meant and remained unspoken. Hanging his head, he closed his eyes, remembering the little girl that had laughed as she ran into her much older brother. The photos of the kid with the impish smile, and the miracle that that was his *daughter*. The one thing that would never be spoiled, and the one thing that was everything but destruction. “Aye.” At last, softly, while exhaling a breath he hadn’t realised he was holding. “I would. But it’s better that way.”

“Have I ever told you that you are a damn fine man and that I am proud to have you as my brother?” Duncan’s voice carried all his feelings. Despite distance and phone, Dan could just see his smile.

“I ... don’t know?” Forced to clear his throat, Dan quickly wiped his eyes and cleared his throat once more. Trying to get rid of the big lump in his throat. “But it only proves that you are insane.” Steering into the safety zone of banter.

“That’s alright, then, because you’re no better.”

“I guess you have a point.” Taking another deep breath, Dan smiled, running a hand through his hair. He felt as if something inside had lifted, and by sharing, the load had become lighter.

“Those pictures ...” Duncan asked, “you think you could send us a copy? We might never meet her, but it would be good to see a photo of our niece, at least.”

“Sure, I’ll make a photocopy, there must be a shop around here. It’s Rome, after all.” Not realising he had admitted to carrying them around, and Duncan did not comment, either.

“You think we should tell our sons that they have a cousin?”

“Not sure, to be honest, it’s not likely they’ll ever meet her, and how would you explain the whole story?”

“I guess you are right, I’ll only tell Mhairi, then. And, I’m looking forward to the pictures. I really am.”

“I’ll make sure they go out to you before we head back to the Balkans.”

“Thank you.” Duncan’s smile was audible. “Dan, you take care of yourself, will you?”

“Aye, always.”

“And of Vadim.”

“That as well.”

“And ...”

“Duncan!” Dan let out a huff of soft laughter, “you are my little brother, don’t forget that. So stop treating me as if you were my dad.”

“Sorry, habit. What with the boys and the animals ...”

“In which order?”

“That’s enough!” Duncan laughed, then trailed off, to finish, “take care, brother. I am looking forward to your next R&R.”

“Aye, until then.”

Dan smiled a little when he put the phone down. Sitting in the chair for a long, long time, without moving.

Eventually, the door opened, and Vadim arrived, carrying a white plastic bag. “What about ‘gelato?’” he asked, almost comic in trying to mimic the Italian sounds, and it made Dan grin. He put the bag down and opened it, revealing two huge cups with ice-cream. “I got several different flavours.” Finding the plastic spoons in the bag. “Did it go well?”

“Aye.” Nodding, Dan rolled his shoulders and stretched his legs. He’d been sitting in that chair for too long. Still, dessert was more important. “Very well. He asked if they could get a copy of the photos. We need to find a shop before heading off.”

“The hotel should have a photocopier.”

Dan smiled a little, leaning across to look at the haul. “Did you get chocolate and vanilla?”

“And strawberry. I think. They don’t translate the flavours for tourists.”

“You’re my saviour, then.” Leaning back, with the large tub of ice-cream on his knees, Dan smiled at Vadim. “I didn’t ask you beforehand, but are you alright with Duncan knowing?”

“I’m okay.” Vadim carefully unwrapped his tub. “Family is important, especially on your side. Duncan has a right to know. I just ... didn’t want to hear it.”

“Okay, I understand that.” Tucking into his ice cream, Dan made a face of ecstasy. “I’m quite glad that you didn’t, in fact.” Talking around a mouthful of cold goodness.

“Yes, I thought it would be awkward.” Vadim tried to work out what a white, creamy flavour was, then eventually decided it had to be coconut.

“At least you don’t hit me anymore, aye?” Dan winked before shovelling another large mouthful in.

“Unless you want me to.” Vadim grinned. “But I guess you don’t.”

“I’m not Hooch.” Dan let out a laugh and had to catch a couple of drops of ice-cream. Should have kept his mouth shut. Literally. “Speaking of whom, have you heard from him lately?”

“No, he’s busy. Don’t forget he’s still in active service. Not sure either he’s the type to call or send long letters.” Vadim shrugged. “Not that I’d mind, though. I like him.”

“Mmmmmm ...” Melting then swallowing a particularly rich mouthful of chocolate flavour, Dan tilted his head. “A lot, aye?”

Vadim shrugged. “Yes.”

“I know.” Going for the vanilla this time, Dan let it melt on his tongue before continuing. “And I’m damn lucky you like me just that bit more, and that there’s also Matt.”

“It’s a strange feeling,” Vadim murmured, setting the tub aside. “Not nearly as intense as with you. I can’t even define it.”

“You got a crush on him, because he gives you something else that I don’t, and because he is bloody sexy, and because he is very much your type, what with the dark hair and eyes and the dangerous aura,” rolling his own eyes to prove his point, “and you miss him.” Dan smiled, looked at Vadim, “that’s how I would define it.” Before putting another scoop of ice cream into his mouth.

Vadim gave a long, drawn-out sigh. “You started it. I wouldn’t have fucked with him if you hadn’t pushed me that way.”

“Hey! Don’t blame me, Russkie. You wanted him, you just didn’t know how to accept that.” Dan shrugged, put the almost empty tub down as well. “If you hadn’t gone for it back in the Gulf, you would have always wondered what it would have been like and if only ...”

“Damn. How strange that I’m with you and there’s still a fucking ache for another guy? Is that similar to your Jean-thing? Only that he’s not at all like me.”

“Ache?” Dan frowned a little and shook his head. “No, if I don’t see him I don’t see him, but if I do then it’s great. I’m not in love with him.”

“You’re lucky, just enjoying these guys and doing that in a friends-only manner. It’s ... all fine for me, the strangers, Jean, Beauvais ... but Hooch. He’s different, and it’ll be best if he sticks to Matt. Because ... our thing is non-negotiable.”

“Fuck.” Dan stared at Vadim, eyes dark and wide. “You really are in love with him.”

“I don’t know. I honestly don’t. Much of the time, my emotions are ... flat. And dark. I don’t know, Dan. I only know that it ... could have been, if it wasn’t for you, if I weren’t so fucking broken, and if he was ready for ... more. And all three together ... make anything else pretty much impossible, you know?”

“Fuck.” Dan was visibly shaken, and he got off the chair, pacing the room, just to expend his energy, to do *something*. “I was an idiot, then.”

“And I shouldn’t have said anything.” Vadim shook his head. “Understand that I can’t live without you. You ... keep me on course. You’re getting me through all this. You’re there when ... all I want is to ... end those nightmares.” Managed not to speak of suicide. “When I can’t go on. You’re there. You’ve always been there, Dan. Hooch ... won’t break that. How could he, anyway?”

“So that’s what I am about? Keeping you together?” Dan turned to face Vadim, and he was pale under the tan. “Keeping you alive? What the fuck happened to the touches in the cave, to the vows and the cutting, to the one fucking big thing that isn’t about need and doing but about being? What the fuck happened to the love?” He shook his head, agitated, and damn, this was painful all of a sudden. “I don’t want to be *needed*. I want to be loved, for fuck’s sake.”

Emotions jumbled, a chaos that was whirling all around him, getting worse, constricting his vision and breath, leaving him nauseous, a mere passenger of his own body, his own mind. Vadim began to sweat, tried to focus, closed his eyes for a moment, but couldn’t stand *not* seeing. Konstantinov, he thought, would be so proud. Fucking him up, his mind, his emotions, and even getting to the point where the foul touch could reach the thing between Dan and him. He shouldn’t have said any of that, should have diverted away from Hooch, not answered any of the questions - only that these things had been under the surface, silent and mighty, like rocks in a river. Worst of all, he didn’t have an answer. He couldn’t distinguish anymore between need and love. Like the doctor had warned him. Was this the moment? When everything came apart? Vadim shuddered, feeling the bile rise. The sudden, almighty fear to lose Dan. Not lose him to sunny Jean, but to his own darkness. Konstantinov would finally manage to kill him. “They ... I ...” I died. They died. Did they?

“You *what*, Vadim? What?” Hands in fists behind his back, Dan felt like shaking, anything to express the horror that was creeping up inside. That he’d been wrong. That he’d been making a fool of himself; that he hadn’t wanted to see what was so unspeakably dreadful, and it made him sick to the bone.

“I’m ... losing my mind,” Vadim said. “I’m ... losing myself, and there’s ... nothing I can do about it.” He turned, had to leave, because he knew what would come next - the vomiting, the sweating, the crying, and he had to get away, try and not let it happen. Keep ... his pride? His integrity. His sanity.

Dan reached out, his hand clamped around Vadim’s wrist. “No, you are *not* leaving. You are not doing this shit to me, you get it? Just fucking not.” Fingers closing merciless around cartilage and bone. “If you are losing your mind, then you are bloody well going to do something about it, or why the fuck did we go see Dr Williams before we went to the Balkans?”

“Fooling myself that I’m not going insane,” Vadim pressed out, fighting the instinct to fight, fighting the instinct to vomit and curl up. “He said ... that might happen. Exactly this. I can’t. I can’t allow that to happen. I can’t lose you.”

“Because you need me or because you want me?” Raising his voice, Dan held the wrist so tightly, he was close to breaking it, causing Vadim to struggle

to take the pressure off, but it was half-hearted, weak. "I am not your carer, Vadim. That's just fucking sick. I am your lover. Remember?"

"Both. I need ... both. I know, I hate it myself, I feel so fucking weak and useless and desperate, feel absolutely pathetic." Vadim met his eyes, the blue blurred and dark. "How much I hate myself for that ..."

"Then you got to do something about it. You got to see Dr Williams. Fuck the Balkans, the job, forget it. You got to do something about this shit, you can't walk around hating yourself, because if you hate yourself there is no fucking way you can love me. And you don't, or do you? I don't think you do. Not like you used to." Dan's eyes were almost black. "Or you would have never reacted the way you did, back in camp. Beating the shit out of me. And Hooch, *fuck*, falling in love with him." Dan shook his head violently, "you are fooling yourself. You don't need both, you need the carer. You can have the lover in someone else now. Can't you?"

"No. No, Dan." Vadim felt frantic, feared Dan would hit him and tell him to fuck off and leave. He had no idea what was going on, only that it was huge and terrible, and that he couldn't deal with it. "Don't. Fucking don't. Please."

"I love you, don't you fucking see that?" Dan was desperate, grabbing hold of the second wrist, shaking Vadim. "But how can I do that if you can't love me? If you need me instead of love me? If you fall in love with someone else, while expecting me to keep you together? How the fuck is that going to work? It fucking hurts, you understand? And I don't know what the fuck to do about it, because I can't just switch off and stop loving you. It doesn't work like that. It'll never happen, you get me? I tried that shit, several times already, but there's no fucking way I'll ever *not* love you and that fucking hurts like fucking shit when you're someone I don't recognise anymore!" He was almost shouting by now.

Vadim allowed himself to be shaken, he'd have taken any amount of abuse, hitting, kicking, more angry shouting, wrestling his demons at the same time, trying to not completely lose it. "I know ... I'm not ... that. What I was. I'm ... my own ... pathetic shadow."

"No, you're not. You are still there, but if you tell yourself that often enough it'll come true. And if you really believe it, then *do* something about it, do you hear me?" Close now, so close, Vadim's face was blurred before Dan's eyes. Wrists in the vice grip, as if he'd never again let go, as if he'd need to anchor himself, Vadim, keep him from moving even further away. "Or is this what you want? Me, keeping you together, like a goddamned motherfucking amateur shrink, because it's more convenient? Because I will always be around? And because someone like Hooch can't or won't do it? Because you two haven't got the past that we share and you don't wear his scar and he's just not as convenient as I am?"

"No!" The sound was so desperate it was closer to a roar. The accusations. Speaking things that hurt, worse than being kicked around on the floor of a barren cell. As bad as having his mind vivisected, because this was *Dan* who did it, not an enemy, but right now, the distinction paled. Right now, Dan was an

aggressor, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Wrenching his guts. Vadim moved into the attacking body, managed to hit Dan's chest with both elbows to free his hands, the attack desperate and surprising enough, it got Dan off balance, stumbling backwards. Vadim feeling stress so severe he could feel the veins throb in his brain, painfully. Sweating like he'd run a marathon.

Dan hit the chair in his back, almost toppled over when the chair clattered to the floor, and he twisted his knee in the process, howling in pain. "You will *not* hit me again!" Dan shouted, seeing red, nearly out of his mind with emotions so extreme and deep, it was like being skinned alive. "You will *never* hit me again!" Propelling forwards, shouldering into Vadim, who, by skill alone, took only half the attack, turning, twisting out of the way, finally free, finally could move, and that was what he had to do, desperate to get out of the way. Shadow of his former self. The old Vadim would have stood and fought. But he couldn't. With only a few steps, he was at the door, very nearly shouldered into it, managed to open it and was through, breaking into a full-out run towards the staircase.

Dan took after him, but crashed into the bedstead, lost a few seconds, before he followed Vadim, running as fast as he could, but getting down the stairs with his fucked-up knee was a killer, and he kept losing more and more precious seconds, while Vadim gained in distance. He got through the main entrance, ignoring the bewildered stares of patrons, when Vadim was already out on the street, too far for him to catch, not with that knee that was throbbing like a beast. Shouting at the top of his lungs, in his most impressive, earth-shattering Drill Sergeant voice: "I order you to stop, Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada!"

Hearing the shout behind him, Vadim slowed, turned, safe distance, seeing Dan there, his thoughts still a jumble. He didn't want to fight. Didn't want to hit Dan, didn't just want to accept getting beaten up. Now, ordered. Go back and get hit? Accused? Forced? Vadim was breathing hard, but he stopped. He had no fucking idea where to run, anyway. He'd left his wallet and his passport in the hotel room.

People were staring at them, but Dan ignored everyone and everything else, except for Vadim. Fighting hard to get himself under control, the adrenaline was making his heart hammer against his ribs. Forcing himself to calm down, with all the strength of his willpower unclenching the fists and opening his hands, palms up. Starting to walk, slowly, he limped towards Vadim, never taking his eyes off him, never increasing his speed.

Vadim stood there, eyes blurring again, lowering his head. Carer. Lover. Was it really that much of a difference? Dan called the shots, he had no idea what to do without Dan. Sooner or later, he'd come back anyway. Why not take whatever Dan gave him for keeping him alive and very nearly sane. Vadim forced tears back, blinking, standing there and fighting the profound despair that just took him in every sense. The darkness had him fully. Immobilised him, immobilised any other feeling.

"I need your help, here." Dan forced himself to keep his voice low and smooth. Forced himself to once again, *again*, ignore what he was feeling. To

once again realise it was not about him, and never would be. All about Vadim, and that would never change. If that was his fate, what chance did he have to rebel against it? "I need you to tell me that you will never hit me again, aye? And I need you to tell me that you won't run, because I can't follow." Standing close, still ignoring anyone else on that busy street. Not touching, though. "And I need you to tell me the truth. I need you to tell me if there is any love left in you."

"Of course." Vadim's voice was unsteady, breaking on every syllable. "I'd have killed myself if there wasn't."

"Okay." Dan nodded, swallowing. "Come with me?"

"Yes." Vadim followed, head down, eyes on the ground, couldn't see anything, didn't want to, too trapped in the chaos inside.

Dan got them back into the hotel and into their room. Hardly acknowledging anyone, just a nod to the concierge. He didn't know what to think, let alone what to feel. Once he'd managed to negotiate the stairs he sat heavily down on the bed. He needed his painkillers, but couldn't be bothered to search his soap bag for them. "Have you got the route for tomorrow?"

Route. Tomorrow. Vadim stood there, dumbfounded, for at least a minute. Then nodded. "Right under the travel guide." He reached up to wipe his face, not surprised that it came back drenching wet. What now? Dan wouldn't ask for the route and hit him afterwards, that made no sense. The fight was over? Was it? He felt weakened and nauseous, and his clothes were wet. But he couldn't even think the word shower, he was nailed to the spot.

"Thanks." Dan forced himself to smile, feeling like an automaton. He was so lost, he had no idea where he was going right now. Knew the route, but not his life, and least of all Vadim. "I have a look in a minute." Hiding his hand, because it was trembling. "Want to take a bath? I could do with one."

"Yes." Eager to clutch any straw, whatever Dan offered him. "I'll start it. A moment, okay?" He turned, feeling stiff and wooden, entered the bathroom that still smelled of shaving cream, closed the door, managed to get to the toilet, then threw up so violently that it was painful. His guts, everything, his whole body rebelling against the stress. Sweaty palms clutching the rim of the toilet. He didn't hear how the door quietly opened, nor when Dan came inside, hardly noticing the sound of running water, then a shuffle, laborious movements, until Dan was beside him, on the tiled floor, pressing a cold, wet towel against his forehead, which was a godsent. Dan's other hand, fingers spread, between his shoulder blades. Dan said nothing, just sat on his hip, forehead resting against Vadim's shoulder, as Vadim's body retched a few more times, but not much coming out but saliva and bile. Breathing heavily, Vadim closed his eyes, waiting for the nausea to come back so he could prepare for it. His throat hurt, his stomach hurt, and bile and ice-cream was a horrible combination.

The hand in his back moved in small, gentle circles. Massaging, while the other wiped his forehead, went down to his neck, cooling there, finally back to his forehead. Warmer now, but still refreshing. The presence beside Vadim one

of infinite patience. Just there. Steady. Undemanding. Just existing. Right there and beside him, touching.

Vadim managed to relax. “Get off the cold tiles ... your knee.” He reached back, touching Dan’s side. “I’m so fucking ... sorry. I don’t deserve you. I don’t.”

“That’s bullshit.” Dan lifted his head, the hand still massaging. “I think we deserve each other very much.” Quietly, he offered a small smile. Exhausted, deflated, and a thousand things more that he couldn’t even name. And lost. Very much lost.

Vadim turned, he felt it was safe to no longer face the toilet, well, he’d just risk it, and opened his arms, pulling Dan into an embrace. Didn’t even know where to begin to understand what had just happened. Still hurting, but too exhausted, too fatalistic, to do anything but hold Dan.

They sat like this for a long, long, time. Until the air grew cold and the stone tiles icy, and until Dan’s body protested with stiffness and increasing aches. Sitting, in silence, just holding, and unable to make sense, when the only thing that made sense was the touch.

April 1993, British Embassy in Belgrade

They had been back in the Balkans for no more than a generous month, after a trip through Tuscany. Most of the wounds had healed over, but never fully closed. Healed enough, to treat each other once more with the well-worn and comfortable ease, and without the need to step on eggshells or to avoid the other's hurt like barbed wire across no man's land.

Duties were less harrowing this time, and done with a new-found detachment, carefully avoiding to get drawn into anything emotionally. It was hard to develop a distance, though.

A month, until one day the Baroness contacted Dan, letting him know she would be in Belgrade, and inviting the two of them to a day reception in the embassy. Something Dan dreaded, despite his considerable experience in the area, and something Vadim was not sure about.

* * *

Of course it was cold, miserable and drizzling lightly. April weather wasn't any better in the Balkans than in Britain, spring or not. The crowds of illustrious guests were huddling under a series of heated tents, set up on the large sloping lawns that ran from the impressive residence towards the formidable gardens. The four larger tents in the middle were housing the buffet and – most importantly – the drinks, with waiters circulating amongst the guests.

Dan was lingering around the buffet, having both his dessert plate and his glass replenished at regular intervals. Bored to the core, until every bone in his body was dried and discarded, screaming to be let out of this goddamned place. Yet he stayed, listened half-heartedly to the pipers while indulging in pained smiles, trying to look like a decent human being who even remotely fitted into the gathering.

Watching the way the Baroness made small talk with admirable grace and uncanny ability, now and then glancing over to him and he remembered each time to flash a smile and to nod back at her. He liked her, no question, old friend and all that, but to blackmail him into getting into this bloody stiff and formal suit and to stand around like a piece of furniture? He'd get her to pay for that. Friendship was one thing, but torture quite another.

Disgruntled and already having frightened off a couple of dutiful small-talkers, Dan had his glass refilled once more, before letting his eyes travel across the room.

Men, women, suits and posh dresses, a veritable congregation of the *crème de la crème*. All goddamned motherfucking boring wankstains of a dreadfully unbearable stiff and ...

Dan sighed. Going for every swear word under the sun wasn't going to make this event pass any quicker nor the wasted time more bearable.

He suddenly caught a glance from the Baroness, and he tried to smile back at her, if that grimace could be called a smile. The corners of his lips appeared pained but quirked up, while his eyes were swimming in dark pools of misery. His mood didn't increase at all when he realised she was almost smirking at him. How dared she. She was *laughing* at him! What had he done to deserve this? He growled beneath his breath, seeking to soothe his frazzled nerves and threadbare ego with a replenished glass of white wine, holding it out for another refill. He didn't even like that sissy crap, would much prefer a beer, but better to get drunk on anything, than staying sober. He was so bored he was ready to cry.

He couldn't find solace in Vadim's companionable misery, either, because the goddamned bastard was seemingly enjoying himself. As much as his Russkie could 'enjoy' himself outside of beds and other suitable furniture that withstood two - or more - heavy men. Dan was watching Vadim across the room, the broad back in the brand new black suit, white-blond hair neatly shorn, listening to some small-talking big bozos and talking about probably absolutely nothing. Bastard. Wanker. Fucking cunt. Deserting his own partner for the glitz and glory of half dead crusties that kept exchanging meaningless pleasantries.

Dan growled once more to himself, turning away, when suddenly presented with something in his view. Black-breasted. Crisp and neat, and yet another one of those same-self suits. Lifting his eyes, Dan found himself scowling into a friendly smiling face that shockingly flaunted a fashionable three-day stubble beneath dark hair. A rebellious feature in an otherwise a perfectly respectable outfit.

"If you ask me now what I think about the bloody weather I am going to fucking scream!" Dan snarled at the tall and gangly stranger, who probably wanted nothing but refill his glass or pop a couple of 'nibbles'.

To Dan's surprise the man didn't frown, let alone look shocked at a profanity in such a refined place. Instead he laughed, just like that, and lit his cigarette, then shushed, while looking behind himself, as if he weren't allowed to show any signs of amusement.

"I take it you are not one of the 'regulars', then." The man's eyes had a certain twinkle to them, and the corners of his lips kept twitching as he spoke.

"Thank fuck, no." Dan growled, slightly calmed down. "I'm here because of a promise to a friend."

"Lucky you," the man put the glass down and wiped his hand on one of the starched napkins. "That means you can get away with an escape plan at the ready." He grinned, and Dan found himself intrigued by this person. The humour was completely unexpected.

"You sure you didn't take the wrong turn at the security gates?" Dan twisted his brows, looking straight into the other's face. The man was as tall as himself and that in itself was rare.

The man laughed again, quietly this time. "Oh dear, where are my manners. No, I'm afraid I do belong here. I'm Markus Kaltenbrunn," holding his hand

out to Dan, who shook it, pleasantly surprised at the strong grip, and at the same time noticing a cursory glance at his scarred left hand.

“German?”

“No, Austrian.” Markus grinned, letting go of Dan’s hand.

“Almost the same,” Dan shook his head, dark hair, silver streaked at the temples, just as unruly and wild as ever. He couldn’t help but smirk at Markus’ mock-shocked expression. “Nicht gleich?” Dan offered, venturing into the rusty remnants of his German.

“Not at all.” Markus chuckled, “never call an Austrian a German, and I don’t even dare to tell you what might possibly happen if you did that to a Swiss. I reckon World War III would be nothing compared to the reaction.”

Dan laughed, catching a surprised glance from the Baroness, which made him shut up immediately. No fun. Copy, Ma’m. “Since I’ve already had my foot squarely in my mouth, I reckon I can’t make it any worse.” He flashed a grin, “you don’t seem like one of those small-talking mummies. What the hell are you doing at the function?”

Markus looked as if he were going to laugh aloud once more, but caught himself and tapped a finger against the side of his nose. “If I told you that I’d have to kill you.”

“Oh, really?” Dan let his arched brows shoot up to the dark hairline, “you and whose army?” His grin broke through the mock anger, twisting the scar in his face.

“My admin.” Markus nodded, as gravely as a man could, whose face threatened to be split with a grin. “I can tell you, you don’t want to mess with her. All of five foot nothing and looks like a porcelain doll, but if she gets going ...”

“I’m shaking in my boots,” Dan smirked, hardly noticing that his glass was being refilled. “Sounds like a formidable foe.” Taking another mouthful of the wine, the stuff still didn’t taste any better now than it had tasted, ah, a bottle or so ago. “What about her boss?” Gesturing towards Markus with his chin.

“I might tell you that,” Markus grinned, “but only if I knew who I’m actually talking to.”

“Oh shit.” Dan exclaimed, overheard by an extremely distinguished looking French Colonel in white dress uniform, whose fine brows furrowed in disapproval at the Anglo-Saxon profanity.

“I’m sorry, completely forgot. I’m Dan. One of the merces, but that’s obviously not why I’m here. I used to be Baroness de Vilde, Her Excellency’s, head of security, in Kabul and Dubai, and am still kind of working for her.” He gestured to the Baroness.

“Pleased to meet you, Dan.” Markus took a sip of his drink, and smiled.

Dan protested, “No, no, pleased to meet *you*. I was going insane with boredom. I’ve been standing around at functions too many times for her. Drives me bloody mad.”

"I can imagine." Holding his now empty glass out to one of the waiters, Markus chuckled. "Quite intriguing, though. How did you become a mercenary after working for a British embassy?"

Dan shook his head, downing some more of the wine. "Uh-uh. No telling, not before you've answered my question of what makes you a regular guest at these dos."

Markus managed to look almost properly chastised for a moment or two, before offering a shrug and a grin. "I'm the head of delegation of the Red Cross in the Balkans. One of the 'perks' of the job is to practice small-talk at these functions." Adding, when Dan grinned at him in an altogether evil fashion, "ha, ha, very funny. I can see you are a very sympathetic man."

Dan didn't answer, just laughed, hiding face and sound behind his glass and hand, all the while shaking his head, mane flying.

"I think I must have made a funnier joke than I thought." Markus looked as if he alternated between being be- and amused.

"No, sorry, guess 'sympathetic' is a bit of an insider joke."

"Do tell."

"Long story, how many hours have you got?"

Markus looked at his watch, pondering in an exaggerated fashion, "I reckon this is going on for another couple of hours."

"Not enough." Dan shook his head again, before emptying his glass.

"What about a short version then?"

Thinking for a moment, Dan's dark eyes suddenly took on a wicked glint. "I could give you the extremely shortened one."

Markus grinned, "go right ahead."

"Well, you asked." Dan shrugged, "don't complain afterwards." He took a deep breath. "Once upon a time there was a Scottish SAS soldier in Kabul. He met a Soviet Spetsnaz soldier. They were enemies first, then shagged for nine years, fell in love at some stage. Dragons, battles, and damsels in distress in between, until an evil wizard took the Spetsnaz away. The Scot and the damsel battled the vile foes, until the Russian returned, but the evil spell still had him in its claws. More dragons, battles, knights in not-so shiny armour later, the spell got broken, the Princes got reunited, and our Russian and Scotsman kind of lived happily ever after." Dan flashed a toothy grin.

Markus' brows had crept up his forehead, "You are taking the mickey, surely."

"Nopel!" Dan grinned, "I warned you, you wanted to hear the story." Twisting around Markus to spot the broad black-suited back with the blond shorn head, he pointed at Vadim. "The proof's over there. My Russian. One of the two princes."

Markus craned his neck, stared at Vadim, turned his head back, and Dan saw an expression on his face that was entirely different to anything he had expected. He was confused at first, tried to decipher if it meant disgust, annoyance, disbelief, or ...

“Your partner?” Markus asked with an altogether new sound in his voice. Unguarded.

“Aye,” Dan nodded, still frantically decoding the non-verbal message, “Vadim. Got a British passport now, thanks to the Baroness. He works as a merc, too.”

He watched how Markus’s lips pursed a millisecond, and then the Adam’s apple moved, when he swallowed hard. All of a sudden it clicked and Dan realised in a flash what on earth he had been trying to decipher: the unexpected.

“You married?” Dan asked out of the blue, catching Markus off guard.

“Uh ... no.”

Dan grinned. The evening had just become exponentially more interesting. Deliberately taking a step forward, entering the other’s personal space while reaching for a strawberry tart, which he could have picked up from somewhere else. Markus didn’t flinch, nothing, and Dan’s suited arm brushed along equally fine cloth, as he pulled back slowly. Chewing the sweet morsel while watching a badly hidden intake of breath. Ah, yes. Just as he’d thought. Thirty seconds and the amusing banter had turned into something else entirely.

If it had worked with Frenchies, Yanks and Russkies, why not with an Austrian? The guy was admittedly in a completely different league, but sex was sex, no matter how fancy the man, and Dan had never believed in subtlety. Besides, the bottle of wine or more was helping him on the way.

He waited until Markus had his glass refilled, before throwing himself into the surprise attack.

“If I asked you if you knew of a place around here for a quickie, would you a) be disgusted at the suggestion, b) tell me to fuck off because I’m not your type or c) come with me?” Dan flashed a grin.

Markus’ brows shot up, but to his credit he hesitated less than a second. “Option C.”

Dan grinned, somewhat predatory, before catching another glance from the Baroness, which made him smooth his face back into a smile. No amusement, no fun, and definitely no sex. Copy, Ma’m!

“The question is where, though.” Dan looked around the room, as if to try and find a suitable spot, right there and then.

“We might be missed.” Markus followed Dan’s glance for a moment.

“Depends on how long you define the duration of a quickie.” Dan found what he had been looking for, made eye contact with Vadim, who acknowledged him briefly before continuing his conversation. Dan returned his attention immediately to the nicely spoken man with the enchanting accent, and who was still standing his ground with a bemused expression. Dan secretly admired the fact that the guy didn’t appear to be remotely rattled. Perhaps the poker face came with the job, just like it did for Maggie.

“What about your partner?” Markus had caught Dan’s glance to Vadim, who looked everything but the type who didn’t mind if his lover shagged around.

“Vadim?” Dan shrugged, putting his glass down. “He knows I love him, but while love’s love, so cock is cock.” Straightening his suit jacket, Dan grinned at

the other's perplexed expression. Eureka! He'd finally stirred up a reaction. "Does that answer your question?"

"I ... guess." Markus followed suit, and put his glass down as well.

"Good." With one last glance towards the room, Dan turned his attention fully and exclusively onto Markus, the scar in his face twisting. "Lead the way." Snatching one of the pristine napkins off the table in an afterthought. "Wherever to. Soggy bushes? Broom cupboard?"

Markus hesitated for a moment, before he straightened up to the same impressive height as Dan's, starting to grin. "I know just the place, and it's neither wet nor cramped." He headed out of the tent and towards the low-slung building with its rows of picture windows overlooking the garden. "There are two drawing rooms which should be empty, just before the dining room. All enfilade." Making pleasant conversation to not draw any attention, while Dan followed through the drizzling rain, nodding now and then, while trying to figure out if he felt the bottle-plus of wine or not, and what the hell 'enfilade' meant.

"I am sure the residence is deserted." Markus commented as he held the door open for Dan to step through.

"Only one way to find out." They walked along the hallway, with Dan following Markus, who seemed to know the layout very well. They soon reached the first drawing room, and Markus slowly opened the door. As expected, the large room was empty and steeped in a dim light. The daylight muted by heavy, floor-length curtains, either side of the swags and drapes that covered the picture windows.

"Seems safe enough." Markus commented, and Dan stepped inside, his grin growing to predatory proportions.

"You could say so." Shutting the door behind him, Dan moved forward, chest against chest, and Markus more than willingly stepping back, closer and closer towards the corner of the room, towards the floor length curtains, which barely moved when his back hit the heavy, blood red velvet. "Do you kiss, mein Herr?" Dan grinned toothily, a hand on each side of Markus' head, who swallowed, nodded and just grinned, not saying anything, as if he couldn't trust his voice.

Dan proceeded to do exactly what he had asked for, coaxing and demanding, soon kissing deeply, but light-heartedly and without the heart rending emotions, that kissing Vadim could bring. His hand dropped to Markus' fly, while he pressed against him, trapping his hand between their bodies, when it had found the rapidly hardening cock. He never let up the kissing, not even when he shifted his hips to blindly open the fly and push it apart, trousers out of the way and cotton shorts down, until his fingers closed around the cock, thumb rubbing precum into the crown. He broke the kiss and pulled back to grin at Markus, whose lips were parted, breathless, and with a somewhat glazed expression in his eyes.

Using his other hand, Dan was about to open his own fly, when Markus' hand joined in, swatting his own away. His grin grew, matched by the other

man, who soon had him bared, which caused a raised a brow, encountering nothing but skin beneath the fine suit. "I prefer commando ..." Dan murmured and Markus huffed a laugh, captured by Dan's tongue and lips, kissing as they stroked each other.

They were fast and needy, their movements soon turned demanding, and it was Dan who's hips jerked erratically, breath hitching, shallow and fast, when he came, soon, too soon, in a last thought swiftly turning to the side, away from suits and expensive fabrics, spoiling only the curtains as he came, not their clothing.

He was gasping for breath, kiss broken, about to concentrate on Markus, when a sudden sound in the hallway caught his attention. "Shit!" Muttered, he stared at Markus, who was hardly capable of intelligent thought. So close, his mind was taken over by lust and need. "Someone's coming." Even now, Dan caught the absurdity of the double meaning and he was simultaneously laughing, breathlessly struggling, and pushing Markus backwards, while trying to close his fly.

"What?" Markus protested feebly when he suddenly heard another noise, and the expression in his face turned from lust dazed to utterly shocked.

"Behind the curtain!" Dan hissed, shoving to make him move, but he didn't need to, because Markus was already hurrying behind the thick fabric, trying to steady the folds and keep the wet spill out of view at the same time. Dan just about managed to close his fly and straighten his suit, whispering, "keep the thought!" and the door opened.

He turned, fishing for his cigarettes, while shielding the still juddering curtain as best from view as possible, trying hard to appear normal as he smiled at the uniformed gentleman who stepped inside. "Searching for some peace and quiet?" he inquired politely, hoping to hell and back that his voice didn't betray him, that no stains showed and that the scent of sex wasn't that goddamned overpowering as he perceived it to be. He swiftly lit the cigarette anyway.

"Not quite." Clipped consonants and lengthened vowels, and Dan knew straight away from what kind of posh background the man came from. "I was on the lookout for Capitan Molineux. Have you seen him by any chance?"

"No, I'm afraid I haven't." Dan smiled his most polite smile, just hoping the guy would leave. "But perhaps if you ask the embassy staff ..."

"Indeed, I should have thought of that myself."

Dan forced the smile to stay on his face.

"I shall leave you to your peace and quiet, then." With that the gentleman left the room and Dan let out a sigh of relief.

"Holy fuck, that was close." Muttered, he hurried across and checked the door, this time locking it and wondering why the hell they hadn't thought about it before. Booze and horniness didn't go too well together in the brain. "All clear." Calling over, but the curtain didn't stir. "You alright?" Dan was soon back and pulled the curtain out of the way, confronted with a shocked looking Markus, whose trousers were still round his ankles, still standing frozen, and very much *not* having kept the thought.

"I locked the door this time." Dan grinned, inhaled another lungful before stubbing the cigarette out in a potted plant nearby. "Where were we?"

"I don't think I ..." Markus finally let out a breath he seemed to have been holding all that time. "Sh...ugar! That was close."

"Aye, but not too close." Dan grinned toothily, stepping closer. "I see you haven't kept the thought, best I do something about it."

"Hm?" Markus looked at him, not fully comprehending.

"Fancy a blow job?"

Markus stammered something that wasn't intelligible, but Dan took it as consent, ignoring the few sounds of protest that could have had to do with being in a room in the British embassy and having been almost caught out, while ... but all those noises ceased and turned into something very different, when he got down to his knees. Cumbersome, since the knee was stiff and sore, but he nevertheless was soon on the floor in front of Markus. He grinned, hand closing around the not yet interested cock, coaxing by stroking, leaning in to trace his tongue along the side, beneath and around, until the interest became clear and he closed his lips around the head, causing Markus to let out a choked sound.

Using all his extraordinary skill and gusto, Dan soon got Markus to a point where his hands twisted in the thick velvet of the curtain, and his breathing became shallow and noisy. Hips jerking involuntarily, he came suddenly, without much warning and with such suppressed sounds, they almost sounded as if he were in pain. Knees wobbling, Markus had his hands in Dan's hair, touching, while trying to get back down, breathing hard. Dan took his time, cleaning him up properly, then pulling himself up to stand, and tucking Markus him in, even closing the fly.

"Better?"

"Sh...ugar!"

"You are repeating yourself." Dan grinned wickedly, reaching for his cigarettes.

"I ..." Markus stammered, but to his credit, he had himself under control soon after. "Didn't expect that when I came here."

Dan laughed, offering Markus a cigarette, then lit both. He felt mellow now, and in a damn fine mood. Despite all the booze, he'd become surprisingly sober.

"Did I just sound really stupid?"

"No." Dan shook his head, "just funny. Imagine ... expecting a quickie with a stranger when going to an embassy function. That'd be ever so damn hopeful."

Markus joined in the laughter, leaning against the heavy table to smoke his fag. "Do you often do that?"

"What?"

"Picking up strangers."

"Whenever I can. Variety is the spice of life." Dan winked. "Well, or something like that."

Markus grinned and just quietly shook his head while smoking. "You're pretty good at that, you know."

"Giving head?"

Markus nodded, exhaling smoke.

"Aye, one of my favourite things in life."

"Your partner is a lucky man."

"I should think so, but perhaps you should remind him."

"Uhm ... perhaps it's not the right time just now."

Dan grinned, extinguishing his cigarette. "I guess you are right. Anyway, what about heading back? You could go first."

"No, I leave that to you. Give me a moment to compose myself. I'm just a hapless civilian." A grin was tugging on the corner of Markus' mouth. A rather wicked one.

"Sure ... and if I believed that I believed anything." With that Dan turned, still grinning sharply, and made his way to the door to unlock it. "Nice meeting you, Markus, let's repeat that."

The grin that answered him was still there when he'd already left the room and closed the door behind him.

May 1993, the Balkans

Dan was chatting to his team mate who was driving the Lannie up a hill. No matter the conversation and the occasional laughter, they were both alert. Of all people in that camp, Dan knew what it meant if he let off the vigilance.

They were heading towards a headland on the top of the next hill, when they turned around the corner and almost drove straight into a vehicle right in the middle of the path.

"What the ...?" Dan exclaimed when his mate managed to stop their car just in time. The vehicle that blocked the narrow path was white. Bright white with rather large and gleaming red crosses painted on, and flying two flags. White as well. And red-crossed. Dan started to grin, surely there couldn't be such a coincidence?

"Need help?" He shouted and got out of the Lannie. Despite the obvious scenario, he was still alert and the weapon was always at the ready. Defence, not attack, of course. Even though he didn't think this was anything but what it looked like. The sound of foreign curses came to his ear, from the direction of a man who was deeply buried inside the bonnet of the car. He didn't have to wait for an answer, though, because that moment another man stepped out from between the trees, and that man was all too familiar. Dan grinned toothily at none other than Markus Kaltenbrunn. "Stranded? Need help?"

Markus shrugged his shoulders and pointed at his driver who was straightening up. "According to Dragan there is no chance we can get the car going again."

"Shall we have a look?"

“Wouldn’t say no.” Markus motioned to his driver to step away and both Dan and his mate had a good look under the bonnet of the Toyota LandCruiser. Murmuring to each other until both nodded.

“Aye, the carburettor’s fucked. Damn shame you’re not using one of your armoured Lannies.” Patting the hardtop of the Toyota, Dan stepped to his own Landrover, equally white but instead of a red cross, emblazoned with KFOR. “We might have been able to fix it. You know, shoelaces, plasters, and glue.” He grinned, while his mate laughed and the local driver looked anything but impressed.

“And what now?” Markus sighed, looking from one to the other. “Do I need to radio help?”

“Let’s see ...” Dan pondered a moment, when his mate had an idea.

“There’s a town fairly nearby, isn’t it? I saw it on the map. Just a few miles down the hill. You could get it fixed there.”

Dragan, the driver, interrupted before anyone could say anything. “That’s right. Have family in town, uncle has garage.”

“There’s always an uncle ...” Dan muttered to himself with a grin.

“Perfect,” Markus nodded to Dragan, “but how are we going to get there? Unless we could get your uncle up here with all the necessary equipment, which is fairly unlikely.”

“Easy, we just tow you down into town.” Dan looked at his mate, who agreed.

“We got some leeway, just have to radio base and let them know. I guess helping the Red Cross is part of our remit.” He grinned and turned towards the Lannie for the rope.

“Listen to my mate,” Dan pointed a thumb at the man, “he’s right.”

“There’s only one small problem,” Markus frowned.

“Which is?”

“I have to be back in the office for a quick update today. No way around it.”

“Well, what about that, then. We tow you down into the town, you stay with your family, if possible,” Dan pointed at Dragan, “and then we take you back? Your vehicle could be brought across tomorrow.”

Dragan nodded, indicating with a thumbs up that he was all up for it.

“Sounds like a plan.” Markus smiled, “and thank you for your help.”

Dan flashed a grin and leaned unexpectedly forward, “oh, the pleasure is all on my side.”

He was rewarded with a momentary fluster from Markus, and when Dan turned away his grin had grown beyond all proportions.

They quickly positioned the cars with some careful navigating around the Toyota, and set up the towing rope. With Markus in the back of the Landrover, Dragan sat behind the wheel of the Red Cross vehicle, and they went on their way. The organisation, once they were in town, went fairly smoothly, with Dragan’s uncle promising to fix the car before the next day, if he could get all the necessary parts together, but he was confident. A couple of hours later they were back in the Lannie and headed up the hill, when Dan’s team mate

requested to be dropped off at the camp first and foremost, after a call came in for him via the radio.

Some time later, only Dan and Markus were left in the vehicle, when they drove from camp to Belgrade to get to the Red Cross headquarters.

“Long time no see, aye?” Dan grinned towards the passenger seat, while scratching a troublesome spot beneath his body armour.

“Not really that long, or is it?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“How blue your balls are.”

Markus let out a huff of laughter. “Quite.”

“Quite what? Quite blue or quite depending?”

“That would be telling.”

Now it was Dan’s turn to laugh. “And would it be a problem if it were? I guess it all depends if you’d like to invite your rescuer to a strong cup of coffee or not. That is, if you can get out of the office in any amount of reasonable time.”

Markus turned his head to look at Dan, seemingly pondering for a moment. “I ... think I could arrange that.”

“The coffee?”

“Yes.” Markus grinned and lit a cigarette, then a second one for Dan, who’d grunted and flashed a grin.

“Let’s step on the pedal, then.” With that Dan turned onto the faster road and they headed straight into the centre of the town, where he waited outside the Red Cross building, carefully behind cover, for no more than half an hour before Markus reappeared.

“All done?”

“Yes, sorted. Very thankful you were there to help.”

“I live to serve, or something like that.” Dan laughed, awaiting directions, which Markus delivered once he had buckled up.

They arrived after a few minutes in Markus’ private residence, an impressive old building on Uzicka, one of the beautiful tree lined main alleys.

“It’s not all mine, and it’s not actually mine anyway.” Markus commented with a smile.

“Shame, that.” Dan glanced to the side after he’d parked the car. “I’d murder a strong coffee right now.”

“Thank goodness you’d just murder the coffee and not murder *for* the coffee.”

“You never know ...” Laughing, Dan got out of the vehicle and secured it behind the gate. “But I might murder for cleaning up my hands, I still have car oil sticking to it.”

“Of course, come on in.” Leading towards the ground floor flat, Dan found himself soon in a place with high ceilings and tasteful decorations. If he hadn’t already known he’d realise now that Markus was a different league to his usual conquests. But he didn’t mind, on the contrary.

"The bathroom is over there," Markus pointed to one of the doors that led out from the hallway, "I'll get the coffee going."

Dan nodded and vanished into the bathroom, taking his time. Long enough for Markus to finish preparing the coffee and to head into the bedroom to change out of the outdoor gear. He was down to his t-shirt when Dan came back out of the adjacent bathroom, drops of water still clinging to his face and the scent of soap in the air. He was still wearing the armoured vest, hanging open over his sweat stained t-shirt. Army issue of whatever Forces he happened to come across.

He took the few steps towards Markus, who was standing close to the bed, lighting a cigarette with a sudden tinge of nervousness about him. Dan smiled, watched the other man inhale the first, deep drag, before taking the fag out of his hand, which earned him a surprised glance, as he pulled in a lungful of smoke himself.

"You smoke too much." Dan's smile grew, while stubbing the cigarette out in the empty ashtray, despite Markus' incredulous glance. He didn't manage to utter a word of protest, because Dan's hands were on his shoulder and hip and Dan's lips on his mouth, with Dan's body demanding closeness.

"And you wear too much." Murmured against Markus' lips, as Dan managed the task of kissing, grinding, crushing his armoured body against the other's, while slipping buttons through holes, running down zippers and pushing garments off the other's body.

They'd forgotten the coffee stewing away in the kitchen, when Dan manoeuvred Markus onto the bed, somehow getting all of their kit off, including the boots. He was grinning when their long limbs entangled and chuckling when he managed to produce some positively impossible sounds from Markus, who was in return smirking when watching Dan lose himself and nearly falling out of the bed, but nothing stopped them. Neither painfully hitting the wall with an arm, nor the frantic search for lube and the almost desperate curses when the condoms couldn't be found. Resulting in laughter and grinning, while thoroughly enjoying the other. Light hearted, fun, and entirely without any deeper agendas. Something Dan relished and Markus seemed to revel in, until the heat got too much and even the laughing stopped, when a sheen of sweat covered their bodies and finally, the release came and left them panting, finding themselves grinning at the other when Markus commenting dryly that his vehicle should break down more often.

An hour later, Dan was finally sipping his coffee, a fresh one, sitting in borrowed shorts in the kitchen. Soft cotton, almost see-through in places, and washed a hundred times, they were infinitely comfortable, and Dan had one leg hooked beneath the top bar of the stool, elbow on the breakfast bar, watching the other man's back. Wondering if he noticed some tension, or not. Markus was busying himself at the stove, something Dan regarded with awe.

"How many languages do you speak?" Markus asked, craning his head back.

"Hmmm ...," Dan pondered while watching the smoke from his cigarette curl towards the ceiling, "not sure. I keep losing track whenever I learn a new

one. Several Arabic dialects, just getting into Yugo speak, then the European ones, getting by in French, German, and whatever else might come in handy. Russian, of course, I'm fluid in that one." He shrugged, "to be honest, I seem to pick them up as I go along. Guess my one big talent – apart from killing and surviving – is languages."

"You lucky ba... so-and-so."

Dan grinned at Markus' interminable politeness, wondering if he ever allowed himself to let go, but then he knew, didn't he? He'd just witnessed it.

"The surviving or the languages?" Dan laughed.

"Both, I guess."

"Aye, but then you would manage to survive *and* to eat well. I'd say you definitely have a shot up on me." Grinning, Dan pulled in a last drag of his cigarette, before he extinguished it in the ashtray and stood up, stretching, watched from the corner of Markus' eyes, who was beating an egg.

"Fucking hell, I'm stiff." Dan groaned, stretching his whole body, the soft cotton shorts almost sliding over his hips, but he managed to hoist them up mid-way, tightening the string. He padded over to where the bloodied meat was tantalisingly displayed on the butcher's block. "You know what that reminds me of?" Poking a finger into the soft texture.

Markus raised a brow. "I really don't think I want to know." Pouring the fluffy eggs into a mixing bowl.

"Not what you might think." Dan laughed, wagging his brows, "even though I have to admit I wouldn't have a clue what you think. Can't claim I know you all too well." Flashing his teeth in a broad grin, "apart from ..." again those brows went up and down, "you know what."

Markus said nothing, busying himself with the mixing of the ingredients, but Dan detected a hidden grin.

"Anyway, do you know what it reminds me of?"

"No." The no-nonsense reply came from a whisking man.

"Baby rabbits."

"Baby *what*?" Markus turned, with that incredulous look on his face that had made Dan grin and get entirely wicked ideas, earlier.

"Rabbits." Dan nodded, dead serious, while opening the fridge door to help himself to another beer, as if he were at an old friend of the house. "Babies, to be precise."

"Why?" The whisking had ended, but the glance kept coming, shot once more from the corner of Markus' eyes.

"They're fierce, you know?" Dan kept his voice deliberately serious. "Incredibly fierce. You really don't want to mess with a bunny rabbit and especially not the baby ones. But if you do manage to kill one, hell, the reward is manifold. Big slabs of meat just like this one."

Markus was cleaning his hands under the tap and towelling them dry as he stared straight at Dan. An expression in his eyes that stated clearly he was considering the other man to be absolutely bonkers. "Baby rabbits. Fierce baby rabbits. You sure you didn't get too much sun?"

“Absolutely!” Dan protested. “Oh, it’s just a harmless little bunny, isn’t it? Well, it’s always the same. I always tell them ...”

The corners of Markus’ lips were starting to twitch, and he burst into a full blown laughter when Dan continued, “And the Lord spake, saying, ‘First shalt thou take out the Holy Pin. Then, shalt thou count to three, no more, no less. Three shalt be the number ...’”

He didn’t manage to recite further, when the towel came down hard onto his chest, then his hip. “Hey!” protesting, “what’s going on here? You’re not supposed to use any force, you’re the *good* guys, remember?” He laughed, trying to snatch the towel away, but he was just that bit too slow and Markus managed to get a good shot onto Dan’s arse. “Ow!” Laughing, Dan protested loudly, “have you forgotten? Red fucking Cross! Not the guerrilla!” He managed to get the towel at the next attempt, probably because his adversary was laughing too hard, and Dan raised it threateningly, but it never came down onto the other man.

“Guess I can’t spoil your outfit, eh?” Grinning, while Markus nodded, still chuckling.

“Guess you can’t, but you almost got me there, you son of a ...”

Dan jumped right in, ever helpful, “so-and-so?”

“That as well.”

Dan laughed and shook his head, when Markus mock-glared at him.

“You better sit down and get out of my way or I can’t guarantee how edible the food will be.”

Dan saluted crisply, slamming his bare heels together as he shouted sharply, “Sir! Yes, Sir!” Before once more sitting down at the breakfast bar and lighting another fag.

Markus was shaking his head again, but Dan would bet that if he had seen tension before, it was gone.

“Any way I can entertain you without spoiling the meal?”

“Trust me, you are entertaining enough as it is.”

“Do I take this as a compliment or ...?”

Markus laughed. “You take it as whatever you’d like to take it.”

“Good. And thanks for the compliment.” Sitting and smoking, while watching Markus whip up a miracle of an exquisite meal, they chatted about the job, with Dan mostly listening, fascinated by ‘the other side’. The one that constructed, negotiated, and saved.

Dan tucked into the meal with gusto, enjoying the food, but even more enjoying the stories. And over two hours later they finally got up, and Dan got dressed again, ready to head off.

The good-bye was friendly and warm, and Dan whistled all the way on his journey back to camp. Mates were a good thing, and friends even better.

May 1993, United States of America

"I know you're an opportunist, but that's not me." Leaning against the doorframe, Matt watched the other man, who was silent, as ever. At least with him. Hooch was chewing gum, shades tucked onto his forehead and one strap of the backpack over his shoulder. Dead cool, as always. Matt didn't expect him to say a word.

"I'm not a romantic, Hooch." Matt shrugged, half-expected a smirk from the other man, never received it. "Been there, done that, didn't work out." Paused. "I'm sorry, man, but this here isn't what I want either." Matt glanced down, shook his head. "I don't want to be one of many stations you pass through." Paused, "I want to be the central station." He fell silent.

Hooch opened his mouth and drawled. "I understand."

Matt nodded. Nothing left to say.

Flicking his shades back on, Hooch tapped a couple of fingers against his temple in a mock salute, turned and opened the door. No hesitation when he stepped through and left, closing the door behind him.

Matt stood. Stared at the door. Less than sixty seconds and it was all over. What had he expected? Fuck.

He stood for several more minutes, heard nothing, didn't expect a sound, finally turned and walked into the kitchen to grab an ice cold Bud. He threw himself onto the couch but forgot the TV, even the beer. Just stared at the ceiling for hours. Wasn't thinking about anything, just floating in grey space.

What now? Whatever. Work. Marines. Military. Closet and all that shit. Don't ask don't tell. The usual.

Matt's beer had turned lukewarm in his hand when he was suddenly jerked out of his musings by the door bell.

"Fuck," he frowned, got up despite himself. Hoping it wasn't anyone from the nearby base. "Leave me the fuck alone, dickheads." Leaving the unopened beer on the table in the miniature hallway, he pushed the buzzer and counted the customary minutes it took to make it up the stairs, unless whoever it was had taken the elevator. Opening the door, he nearly did a double take into the mirror behind him.

Hooch.

Hooch, pushing his shades back up onto his head, and re-shouldering the bergan.

Hooch, standing in the doorway. "Been thinking." Two words, more than usual. "Been around a bit." Six, speech worthy of a national holiday. "Looking for a station now." Eleven, whole fucking fireworks. "Central station." Thirteen, and the heavens came down for Matt.

"You still offering?" Sixteen, and the world stopped spinning.

Matt stood thinking for a while, not a muscle in his face twitched. Then stepped aside, gestured the other man to follow him. Closed the door.

"One condition."

Hooch's brows rose for a split second.

Matt broke into a grin at last, which threatened to split his face. "Promise not to talk too much."

May 1993, the Balkans

"Krasnorada!" The voice shouted across the cookhouse at lunchtime. Against the noise of dozens of men wolfing down their food. "Phone for Krasnorada!"

Vadim looked up, set the half-eaten yoghurt down, swallowing the last spoonful, and got up and out of the benches and tables, untangling himself, while Dan watched him leave with a shrug, before turning his attention back to a team mate. Heading towards the phone, Vadim moved fast, but not running. Could always be important. Only what. What. Something could be wrong with the children. He got called very rarely.

"Yes?"

"Vadim?" The line was fairly clear, and the voice unmistakable. "Hey, buddy, how are you?"

Hooch. The voice and drawl went right under his scalp, felt like the caress of fingernails. "In one piece. I'm good. Shit war, but I'm good. How are you?" Apart from sexy and ... calling me, unexpectedly.

"I'm alright. Been to a couple of shitholes, got myself worked over in between, went to the wedding, travelled the world and all that."

"The usual, then." Vadim gave an amused snort. "Good to hear you got a chance to wear the killer suit."

Hooch chuckled, "listen, man, I tried to contact you a few months ago. Didn't have the right numbers. Haven't forgotten about you."

"I guess you can talk? I mean ..." Vadim looked around, but the rest of the wolfpack was still feeding. "Freely?"

"Yeah. I'm at Matt's, but he's on duty." The sound of shuffling and then the snick of a lighter and Hooch exhaling. "He gave me your number."

"Good. I'm near the Mess." Matt had given him the number. Which surely had to do with Matt and Dan staying in touch. And Hooch and Matt staying 'in touch' so to speak. Lucky jarhead. "Haven't forgotten about you, either." Vadim kept an eye on his surroundings, but it all seemed safe. Ridicule was the only danger, these days.

"You up for a repeat some time?" Hooch exhaled audibly.

"Yes." Fuck, no. Yes. Feeding the danger? What the fuck was he thinking? And what about Dan? And that really bad evening in Rome? But Hooch, naked. Hooch, in pain. Hooch, needing the man he'd been. Could always be again, even if it was just make-believe.

"I'm in the States until September."

"Should I ... come over, or are you?"

"You ever been here?"

"No. Cold War. I'm ex-Soviet. Until recently, I didn't even know if your side would let me in at all, but seems I got cleared when I saved some Yankee boys."

“Yeah, I remember.” A pause, “you free in July? I let you pick the state.”

“No idea ... what I know of the country is from movies.” Raking his brain. He’d learned quite a bit about the US of A, but that was a long time ago. Some cultural studies along with the language, and proof how corrupt and inferior they were, culturally, historically, and in everything else. Uber-Capitalist society. The Place That Did Everything Wrong and Posed A Threat to Everything Right. USA. “Not too hot, not too cold?”

“Colorado. Rocky Mountains.” Hooch’s grin was audible. “The whole Wild West package. I’ll organise it when you give me the dates.” Exhaling and pausing, “a cabin’s a good choice. Secluded.”

“Okay. July is fine. We should be due R&R by then. Unless things go to hell, as it may still happen.” We. Dan. “Let’s say third week of July, to be on the safe side. Have to talk to Dan about it.” Who’ll be delighted. Fuck. “Maybe shack him up with Matt in the meantime, so he’s not bored.”

A pause, nothing for a while until Hooch asked, “you feel guilty?”

Vadim paused. Did he? Yes. Rome. The very fact that Hooch wasn’t like Jean or any of the other guys made this a problem. Fuck. If Dan flipped, what then. So, he tried to pacify him. The ramifications of this - this reflex - were enormous. “Just a chance for them to be in touch, too.” Liar.

“They are. Dan told Matt to tell me to call you.”

Check. Being outwitted and moved into a corner by an American. If Dan had done that, he had to know they’d meet up. Or had he not thought that far. “We went through a rough spot, recently. I’m just ... trying to play things safe.”

“Because of me?”

Check and mate. Vadim closed his eyes and leaned against the wall, trying to think his way out. No chance. He opened his eyes, ever watchful. “No, because of me. You have the smallest part in it.” Which was true. It was his feelings that were all messed up, his broken mind, his need for a ‘carer’, a ‘minder’.

“Okay.” The sound of another exhale, then a shuffle when Hooch stubbed out his cigarette. “I’m with Matt.” After a lengthy pause.

The last sentence could mean anything. With Matt. “I’ll call you there, soon, okay? I want to see you, Hooch.” I do. I fucking do.

“Yeah, can’t wait. I make sure we’ll have toys. Need you to remind me.”

“Yes. I will remind you.” Vadim smiled, the unease now getting replaced by some arousal, as the images flooded his mind again. Hooch in pain. Hooch coming apart. Hooch absolutely craving what he gave him, his, mind and body, dignity, the killer self, the predatorial soul.

“Till later.” Hooch signed off, the receiver was put down and the line went dead.

“Later,” Vadim murmured, and hung up. He needed a few moments to clear his thoughts, then went back to his place in the Mess and put away the tray. Everyone else was already gone. Why did Dan get Hooch to call him? That was something he had to work out.

He headed towards the barracks and entered their room, when Dan looked up from flicking through a magazine, smiling. “Everything alright?”

“Yes, I got a phone call from the States.”

“Hooch, aye?” Still smiling, while putting the magazine down and fishing for a fag. Movement aborted, when Dan remembered how much Vadim disliked him smoking in the room. “Is he okay?”

“Sounds it, he’s with Matt.” Vadim sat down, near Dan.

“Is he?” Dan broke into a bright grin. “Good choice. Looked like make or break for a while, there.”

“He wants to meet. Over in the States.”

“Hooch?”

“Yes.” Vadim inhaled. “I’m torn. I don’t want that to cause any trouble. I don’t want ... a repeat of what happened ... in Rome. Okay?”

Dan tilted his head, the grin turning into a smile, and he did his best to keep any darkness away. “It won’t. I just let you go, okay?” Adding, after a split second. “When?”

“End of July. Colorado, most likely.” Vadim looked at Dan, met his gaze, felt uneasy about it all, but at the same time, he *wanted* to go. Of course Dan was more important. But he wanted Hooch, too. Fuck.

“Alright, that’s some time yet.” Dan nodded. “For how long?”

“A week?” Vadim felt how tight his throat was. “You could meet Matt, face to face. And ... if you say don’t, I won’t. I ... it’s not, not as serious. Doesn’t touch what we have.”

Dan let out a huff of laughter that distinctly lacked the full spectrum of his usual humour. “Don’t defend yourself before you’re attacked.” Poking a finger gently into Vadim’s chest. “Makes you sound guilty when you might not be.” He rolled his shoulders, hand going to the cigarettes again, but once more they stalled. “And don’t try to parcel me off to Matt again.” He smiled, keeping the darker flavour at bay. “I’m fine staying here, getting some more money in and having a drink with Dima and Markus, or Maurice. By the way, you need more than a week, don’t forget the flights.”

“Ten days, then.” Vadim wasn’t quite sure how to take it, the lack of trouble. “That’s a day for any trouble at any of the airports. Being a Commie bastard and all that.”

“You’re not. You’re British now.” Dan got up, rolling his shoulders again. “I’m off to the gym. I’ll see you later, aye?” He forgot the usual control when he turned and walked towards his gym bag, and the limp was more pronounced than ever, before he remembered and forced his body to comply.

“Okay.” Vadim looked at the leg, didn’t like at all what that looked like. “But go easy on the legs ...”

“Yeah, yeah, I will.” Dan let out another huff, bag over his shoulder. He usually changed in the room, but somehow he had to get out. “You sound like Dima, but you’re less convincing.” Opening the door he stepped out. “See you later.” And he was gone.

True. He did sound like Dima. Minus the kicks and curses. Vadim grinned, shaking his head, then he went back to the phones, after he’d found the number, and called Hooch back.

The voice that answered the phone was out of breath. "Yeah?"

"Were you running?" Vadim grinned.

"No. Jerking off."

"Because of me?"

"Yeah. Remembered the pain, the lust."

Vadim was suddenly breathless, remembering Hooch's taste, the feeling of his cock, his arse, the abs, the chest. Everything about him was fucking sexy.

Another very audible breath through the phone, and rustling against the receiver. Hooch was obviously shifting position. "Not finished ..."

"Just go on. I could listen."

"No. You tell me. I have some toys here."

Vadim felt heat rise in his cheeks. Public phone. And Hooch didn't understand Russian. And in this place, there were several who understood Russian. He lowered his voice some more, hungrily listening to Hooch's every breath. "Nipple clamps?"

"Yeah." Where the hell Hooch kept them didn't matter right now, not even the question if Matt knew about all of these 'toys'.

"Put them on. I'd twist them, and bite the flesh around them, then twisting more." Vadim bared his teeth when the sharp intake of breath from the other end indicated Hooch had done exactly that. Of course, Vadim could do nothing with his erection, apart from hiding it in the semi-dark corner.

"Done." Hooch's voice had changed. Huskier. "I'm kneeling on the floor. Fucking hard."

So am I. Fuck. Vadim grinned, felt reckless, horny, bad combination, especially with the control needed. "Nice big dildo. You have that?"

"Yeah, got it. Like a fucking fist." Hooch voice betrayed how he could hardly control a moan.

"Lube it. I'd fuck you right there, but I'm here. I'd bitchslap you and then fuck you. Put it in. Not slow. You need to feel it. Feel it good. Ram it in like it was some bastard fucking you."

"Shit, yeah." Forced out, the sound of the phone being put down on the floor, then rustling and movement. "Got it. Am on all fours." Breathlessness up a notch, Hooch's voice clearly audible, his head had to be over the phone as he braced himself. The next sound was a suppressed cry that changed into a pained groan, then harsh breathing, before another near-scream was heard, which made every muscle in Vadim's body twitch and tighten. This man was most obviously ramming the dildo as recklessly into his arse as if Vadim manoeuvred it. Or worse. "Fuck!" Hooch cried out between clenched teeth.

The image. He could see Hooch like that, could see him sweat and coil, in pain, with that vicious arousal. "Good. Don't move it. It's me who gives that order, suka." Bitch. He knew that Hooch would remember that word. It had slipped during one of their games. "Beg me. Make it convincing, or I'm hanging up on you."

Hooch groaned, the proof that he did exactly as Vadim told him, had stopped all movement, and it was killing him, no doubt. "I ... can't!" Begging, the greatest struggle of all. The man still proud, no matter his needs.

"What can you do? Bitch. What can you trade?"

"My throat." Pressed out, Hooch was shuddering with need, and yet even through the phone it was evident he was still obeying. "Please ..." Begging, and contradicting himself.

I'd kill to be there, Vadim thought, his free hand a fist, whole arm tense, legs locked. He wanted to be there, see and hear and smell this. "Got another dildo? Suck on it."

"Yeah ... got to ... got to move." A deep groan followed, indicating Hooch had to pull the dildo out of his arse, and the nipple clamps, undoubtedly with weights, were pulling cruelly on his sensitive flesh, when he moved around. The sound of a drawer shut, loudly, and then rustling when he came back to the phone on the floor. "Both?"

"Put the other one back. Yes, both." Vadim swallowed, wanting so much to get lost in the imagined thing, and that was absolutely impossible. He checked around again. Nobody. Still. Impossible to jerk off here.

No answer, except for another deep groan, soon muffled, more and more, until the sounds became unidentifiable, except for some gagging noise and a desperate whimper. Then stilled, Hooch was clearly waiting for orders, nothing except the loud breathing. Unable to speak, the first dildo forced as deeply into his arse as he could and the second down his throat, with every breath fighting the gagging reflex.

Vadim gave a groan himself, need, plain and simple, and not so simple, right now. "Now fuck yourself. You earned it, suka."

And Hooch did, there was no doubt. Neither a doubt that he didn't pull the dildo out of his throat, was so obviously fucking himself on both ends. Violently thrusting the large dildo deep into his body, while never ceasing to suck and swallow and push on the other. Sounds increasing, until the desperate noisy breaths, the whimpers and cries finally culminated in an unbridled scream that not even the dildo could hold back, when it slipped out from between his lips and he came hard, the dildo embedded so deeply inside his body, the pain was robbing his senses, as the lust crashed and suffocated him.

Vadim was desperately aroused, he could decipher the sounds, knew Hooch enough sexually to read them. "Right. Easy ... easy now. Take the one from your mouth. Put it ... down." Now, to take him right now. Vadim couldn't even swallow, his throat was parched.

Hooch groaned, breath coming in short gasps, the sounds that were coming from him still desperate, but slightly soothed. "Thank you ..." Murmured, and it was obvious he hadn't taken off nor out anything else yet. Obeying every word.

"Now the other. Easy." Feeling the same tenderness that came 'after', and, at the same time, the cruel need himself. It didn't make much sense. Cross-purposes. Cruelty, need, tenderness, protection. Somehow all tangled.

Letting out a hissing breath, Hooch forced himself to calm while pulling out, slowly. "What would you do with my nipples?" Mumbled, still breathless, but rapidly coming down. The pain biting, increasing, getting worse, and yet ... he needed

"I'd suck and bite them, roll them between my teeth, now that they are nice and raw." Vadim smiled. "Pull them with my teeth, as far as they will go."

"Let me wear the nipple clamps for you ... longer?"

"Yeah. Wear them for me. Take them off before Matt comes home." That could be a few hours.

"Yeah, I will." And he would, no matter how long it took and no matter how great the pain. Nor the lust. "What do you want me to do with him ..."

Vadim inhaled, sharply. Now. That. Fuck. Like Hooch was playing his lust, now, trying to make it as tough for him as possible, knowing exactly that Vadim was in a public place, with a tent in his camo. Matt. What would ... Hooch and Matt. He could decide how they'd have sex next. Like he was in the room when it happened. He'd be in Hooch's head, for sure. "Get him at the door. Take him nice and rough, just a touch of pain ... fuck him right there in the corridor, and when he's close, still. Make him beg to get finished off, however long it takes." Vadim grinned. "I'm sure he'd like to beg."

A husky laugh was Vadim's reward. Breathless, but for entirely different reasons. "He doesn't beg." The sound of the phone being picked up. "Yet."

"I'm sure you could teach him to. Evil scary Delta. And he's begged you before, when we interrupted you." Vadim grinned.

"Not sure I want to ...". Another husky chuckle. "Not the way I do." Shuffling, then once more the sound of a cigarette being lit, and a suppressed groan when Hooch moved. No doubt the nipple clamps were biting torturously. "You want me to suck him while using the dildo on him?"

"Yeah. I'd like that." Vadim gave a suppressed sound. "Would love to watch you. Be ... there."

"I'll tell you later. Call me when you can and I'll tell you ...". The sound of smoking, and another shuffle, as Hooch moved to lie down. "Later, Vadim."

"Just ...". Dazed brain remembering why he'd called. "End of July, ten days. I'll book flights, okay?"

"Okay. I'll book the cabin. Later." And Hooch put the phone down.

"Later." Vadim hung up, then decided he should at least try and cover the evidence. He pulled his shirt off, like the British soldiers did at any opportunity, all the sun had to do was peek through the clouds and the British boys lost their shirts. He held the garment, he hoped, perfectly naturally just so that it covered him as much as possible, then he headed to the barracks, trying to avoid contact, being seen, or remaining out in the open for too long.

"Hey!" Dan's voice was suddenly heard in Vadim's back, just as he was about to enter the accommodation block. "Didn't know you were a sun worshipper?" Grinning, Dan stepped out of the gym, drenched in sweat and in sports kit, on his way back to the room.

Vadim slowed, grinned. "Done already?"

“Forgot my soap bag.” And my knee hurts like fuck, “figured I’d do a light session today. Or am I not man enough for you yet?” Smirking, Dan raised his arm and flexed the muscles.

“You’re exactly as much man as I need,” Vadim murmured, glad when they’d reached the door, and opening it. “Love you sweaty.”

“Do you?” Dan stepped through the door, bending down, just a couple of steps in, to retrieve his soap bag.

Vadim closed the door, then covered the distance, pulling Dan up with one hand, pressing against him, while pushing the shorts down. “Yes. I need you, Dan. In the ‘want’ sense.” Hand moving down his front, sweaty, scarred, down to his cock.

“What the hell ...” But Dan didn’t protest. Surprised, yes, no idea where all this that was coming from, but he took the lust as an unexpected bonus. About to turn round to face Vadim, he stalled the last moment, when Vadim’s hand closed around his cock, from zero to one-hundred, stroking, and the way Vadim was going, it wouldn’t take more than a couple of seconds, before his cock responded. “How?”

“Get on the bed.” Vadim was pressing in, trying to get Dan towards the bed.

Dan’s brows rose to his hairline, before a slow grin crept onto his face. He nodded and let himself get pushed towards the bed. It hit the back of his calves after a few steps, and he fell backwards, onto the mattress. Sitting, knees open, looking up. “Whatever you’ve had, I want some of it.”

No you don’t, Vadim thought, following closely, hands reaching for the lube that was always close to the bed, getting some of the stuff on his hand that went right to Dan’s cock again, pumping him now, again, trying to get him fully hard. “Help me get the trousers down.”

Dan leaned forward, hands on Vadim’s fly, swiftly working to get it open and down, face to face with an impressive hard-on, weeping and needy, like a man who’d been aroused for too long. “Holy fuck.” Murmured, Dan felt saliva gathering in his mouth, wanting to taste that cock, and his own reacted by jumping and hardening fully.

“Lie back.” Vadim pushed his trousers down, kicked off the trainers. Dan’s t-shirt was out of the way, had ridden up, and Vadim managed to pull Dan’s sports shorts down completely, fully baring the cock. Dan scooted up, until he lay on the bed, legs partially dangling over the edge. Vadim sat down, straddling Dan as he took more lube, which he just pushed into his own arse with two strongly greased fingers. Watched intensely by Dan, whose lips had parted, staring at the sight.

Vadim didn’t care if anybody could come in, the door wasn’t locked, then again, this wasn’t Kuwait. Taking Dan’s cock again and positioning it at his arse, then moving down, back, having to work a bit in this awkward position, but he fucking needed it right now - a cock up his arse, release, Dan - all three.

Dan gasped out, reaching up to touch Vadim, aborted the movement, and fell back down onto the bed, groaning, when Vadim pushed down, recklessly.

The heat and tightness that engulfed his cock was almost unbearable – and unexpected.

Vadim groaned, forced himself to take it all, shaking when it was too fucking right, and he clenched his teeth as he moved up again, and bore down, again groaning. He could decide on the speed, depth, force, and he wanted as much of it as he could have. “I ... feel ... feel you,” he pressed out. “Good. So good.”

“Aye ... fucking good.” Dan moaned out, dark eyes almost black, as his hands scrabbled to touch Vadim. Taken aback, and taken in, and fuck, it really was that good. “Only you feel so damn fucking good!” he gasped when Vadim moved slightly differently, and his hands clenched into fists.

Vadim concentrated on the sensation, the reckless need, grinding, thrusting against Dan, fingers on his chest, under the t-shirt. He changed the angle, bent down to kiss Dan, hungry, open mouth, tongue, groaning far too loudly, but his groans were swallowed in Dan’s mouth and own greed.

Riding the lust in whatever form Vadim dictated, Dan was soon senseless, arching up and taking, wanting, spiralling closer and faster, until he soon was close, so close.

Vadim straightened, needed just a little more, and took hold of his cock, greased fingers tightening around it, pumping himself, while moving on Dan, then using more force, harsh and demanding, fast, like he did when he was alone, when he had to get off fast. It was enough to get Dan over the edge, and when he came, he arched up high, while Vadim tightened up more, lips open, body sweaty and flushed, as he came, across his chest, Dan’s chest and t-shirt, at the same time grinding into Dan’s groin, who was shuddering with the aftershocks, clinging to Vadim’s thighs.

“Shit!” Breathed out, Dan fell back onto the bed, panting. “I don’t know what the hell happened while I was in the gym, but I sure as fuck don’t complain.” He was grinning from ear to ear, tanned face flushed.

Vadim slowly moved away to lay down, grabbing his own t-shirt to wipe the mess a way. “Just ... just needed you.”

Dan pulled the soiled and sweaty t-shirt over his head, flinging it across the room, before he rolled to the side, looking at Vadim. Propped up on his elbow, he smiled and reached out to stroke Vadim’s face. “Always need you, aye?” Softly.

“Yes. Always.” Vadim leaned in for another kiss, feeling the post-orgasm heaviness tug on his eyelids. “Don’t forget that.”

“I won’t. As long as you don’t either.” Pulling Vadim close, sweat and all, Dan didn’t care, just wanted to hold him. Right now, the world was good, and it all made sense. Right now, nothing could touch them.

June 1993, the Balkans

Dan was whistling to himself, cigarette in one hand, the other in the pocket of his BDUs. "Well, that's settled then."

Vadim looked up. He'd been writing something into a notebook that he now closed and slipped into his thigh pocket. "What is settled? Any dirty tricks going on without my knowledge?"

"You wish, aye?" Grinning, Dan flopped himself down into the only other chair. "We're going to this nice restaurant in Belgrade we've been to before. Dima's coming as well. Oh, and Maurice can't." Giving away more than he intended to with a flash of a smirk, "but I invited Markus."

"Really?" Vadim leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. "I guess we only really need one medic. A surgeon might be ... ah, overkill."

"Aye, that was my thought, too, or would you want to listen to medical bullshit all night?" Grinning from ear to ear, Dan took a last drag before extinguishing his fag. "Besides, Maurice is the most convinced bachelor of all bachelors. He likes his full pick of all available genders, types, ages and chances too much." Chuckling, Dan stretched his arms behind his back and rolled his neck. "Not that I'm implying anything, of course, nor have an ulterior motive ..."

"Markus?" Vadim shook his head. "You're throwing the poor bastard to the wolves?"

"Poor bastard? Oh come on!" Dan stood up to stretch some more. The day had been hard on his knee, but the latest shot was still holding. "That guy's been dealing with bigger bastards than any of us ever encountered, so I guess he can hold his own against a poor wee medic from good old Russia and little old us. Aye?"

"Hm." Vadim didn't seem convinced at that. "I don't want to ruin the fun for you, but apart from a convenient source of sex, what does he have to offer?"

"Who, Markus?" Pulling his shirt over his head, Dan stopped half-way.

"Damn. Good question." Vadim paused, frowning. Who was he to protect Dima? From Markus? Ridiculous thought. He liked the man, whom Dan had introduced to him over a nice dinner, but the Austrian wasn't dangerous at all. Dima was, but he was also the guy he cared more about. A whole deal more.

"Well." Dan pulled the shirt off completely, and threw it onto the dirty laundry pile. "How old is Dima?"

"About my age."

"Markus is thirty-five. Hardly a kid." Dan shrugged, "frankly, I don't expect them to say anymore than 'good day' to each other because they have nothing in common, but humour me, okay? I'm bored, I want good food and good drink, and, if I can help it, good company. Maurice is a great guy, but he fucks

anything that moves, and that makes conversation in a group a bit tedious, when you know he's just out to get laid again." Dan added with a grumble, "and damn, if only I had realised the arsehole thought I was straight."

"Or he'd have joined your harem?" Vadim smiled to take the sting out of his words. It was just strange – Dan seemed to take every opportunity, positively drew anybody compatible towards him, and, without much further ado, had sex with him, whereas he ... well, being in Dan's close proximity meant he got a lot more sex with a lot more different partners than he'd ever anticipated. And he wasn't complaining.

Dan grimaced and grinned simultaneously, "I'm too old for bloody complications, but at the time you were hardly a source of sex. You didn't even talk to me." Adding with a smile, "bastard." He shook his head, "anyway, the remaining two mates are Markus and Dima, so sod it all, let's see how things go, at least we'll have food, booze, and good conversation."

"I liked the restaurant. Good meat dishes." Vadim winked.

"Hey, you get your meat right here, aye? Enough inches of prime Scots beef for you to feast upon." Dan produced his cheesiest grin while flexing his chest muscles. "And we've got about half an hour to get going."

Vadim gave a laugh, but his eyes fixed on Dan's groin. "Does that translate to 'blow me'?" Keeping his eyes right on the shape of Dan's cock under the cloth.

"In under ten minutes? How young do you think I am?" Grinning, Dan stepped closer, until he could reach out and touch Vadim's hair, with Vadim's eyes only then meeting his. "Or are you trying to make sure that I have really no interest in anyone tonight?"

Vadim grinned. "Maybe. Or should we keep the thought until afterwards? We can always take the other guy with us if the hook-up doesn't work."

"For once I'm not opting for the instant gratification but vote for keeping the thought till later." Dan smiled, fingers carding through Vadim's short air. "I may be turning into an old git, but hell, you never know what happens tonight, and I might not fire my cannon twice."

Vadim shook his head. "Greedy. Two Russians and an Austrian. Ever hopeful, aye?"

"You know that I am. That's why you love me, right?"

"Apart from being the man who takes me apart during sex and puts me back together? Yes." Vadim had turned away while speaking, casually looking for civilian clothes, in this case the slightly more upmarket outdoor gear that passed as civilian in these quarters.

"Well." Dan smiled, more touched than he wanted to let on, "that's alright, then." He fiddled with his trousers and they fell down to his ankles a moment later. Baring all, as usual, and he was even considerate enough to turn around and present his arse to Vadim as he bent down to open and discard his boots. "I'll grab a shower, won't be a sec."

Vadim felt his guts tighten in that good way, but it might indeed be good to 'keep that thought'. The alternative was to jump Dan and do it anyway. Not that

he cared much for either Markus or Dima if he could have Dan. Truth be told, he didn't need the 'change of scenery' or whatever it was that drew Dan to recruit as many providers of sex as possible. Unless it was Hooch, but Hooch was in a different category, and on a different continent. "Okay. I'll get dressed."

Less than ten minutes later Dan reappeared. Hair towelled dry, the wet towel clinging around his hips, and slightly shivering. It might be May, but it wasn't that balmy yet, definitely not in the evening. "Anything in particular you want me to wear?" He grinned as he hung the towel over the radiator in the room. Knowing damned well that while he didn't care nor knew any better regarding his outfits, Vadim would.

Vadim watched him, eyes all over Dan's body, and knew he was being teased. Comfortable teasing, as if Dan did that in part to entertain him and also because Dan liked that. "I'd keep it low-key. Besides, I'm not sure we packed any of the suits."

"Aye, but what exactly? The light coloured trousers, or the black ones, or the khaki? And what damned top?" Laughing, Dan planted himself in front of Vadim. "You know me, I wear anything in any combination and it makes no difference to me."

Vadim moved forward to place a kiss on the upper edge of scar tissue. "Black. Take the grey jumper with that. That's what I'm in the mood for."

"Your wish is my command." Dan smiled, and so it was. Dressed within the next five minutes, black jeans and grey jumper over black shirt, Dan had his jacket under his arm, waiting for Vadim. "I booked one of the Volvos, and because I'm in an awfully generous mood, I'll do the driving tonight, unless you really do want to stay sober."

"I'd be an easy victim for your nefarious plan if I got drunk. Is that what you're planning? Maybe me at the bottom of your little pile of orgy participants?"

Dan was laughing out loud, "Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada, you should know by now - after all the shit that we've been through - that you'd always be on the *top* of any orgy pile. So stop fishing for compliments and get your remarkably addictive arse into gear."

"Yessir." Vadim gave a crisp salute and left the room while Dan was zipping up the jacket. "Do we meet them in Belgrade?"

"Aye, at the restaurant." Steering them towards the vehicle park after locking their room, Dan got the keys for one of the inconspicuous Volvos, and they were soon on their way. "By the way," Glancing to the side as he was driving out of camp, "I never quite grilled you properly, did you really not realise that Dima would have been game, back when?"

"No. I considered him a friend ... he's not the type that shows it, is he? There were no code words, no longing glances ..." Vadim laughed. Romance in a Spetsnaz unit, fucking hilarious. "I was busy appearing straight. And we were already fucking."

“What, fucking, as in *fucking*? With whom? Hapless recruits? But not with each other?” Dan heaved an exaggerated sigh as he turned the car towards the main road. “Damn! There is some fine porn waiting to be filmed.”

“We. You and me.”

“Oh ...” Dan laughed again, this time with a certain something in his voice.

“Dima joined me when I was sent out into the mountains for counter-insurgency. He was in the unit when you fucked me on patrol.”

“He *what*? Oh fuck.” Dan’s grin grew a few more proportions.

“Yeah. I was always worried he could see that I was walking a bit stiffly ...” Vadim laughed. “Back in the days when you fucked me out of anger, I suppose. It was him that tried to save ... what was his name. John, your friend, whom we found, wounded after a fight. And maybe ... I don’t know. I respected him too much to try it. Out there, you relied on each other. I could only do that kind of thing in Kabul, or one of the camps. Out there, abusive officers sometimes got a bullet in the back.”

Dan was nodding to himself at the mention of his old mate, when he glanced to the side again. “Is this the cue that I shouldn’t keep prodding?”

Vadim paused. “No. I’m just saying that it wasn’t possible in a front line unit. Vanya was different, back then. We’d been together since Tajikistan, getting ready for Afghanistan, near the border.”

Dan nodded, said nothing this time, fishing one-handed for his fags instead. Took his time to light one, before he finally asked, “this Vanya, was he an okay guy? A buddy fuck?” Remembering something else, something about Tajikistan, something ... but couldn’t quite put his finger on.

Vadim’s brow was dark. “I think some kind of buddy fuck. He ...” Strange, to remember the man after all that time, “was a comrade. He loved a fight. He liked getting beaten, and he liked to fight me. He still lost against me. I was stronger. We were both fucked-up. Shit.”

“It’s okay.” Dan shrugged, smoking his fag while driving, “it’s been a damn long time. Can’t say I’m sorry I killed him, but can say I’m fucking glad I didn’t kill you, and shit, was I close at times.” Casting a smile across, to take any darkness away.

Vadim lowered his gaze. Dan had remembered who Vanya had been. The other guy, that night. “I’m ... glad, too. He wasn’t a good guy, but neither was I. He got his due. I did, too, eventually.” He gave a weary smile.

“No you didn’t, that’s bullshit. You got more than ten lifetimes’ worth. And I’m not saying that because I’m biased.” Exhaling smoke, the lights of the city became visible in the distance. “It’s not about who deserves what. I read *The Lord of the Rings* a long, long time ago. Bored me stiff, parts of it, but the action was shit hot, and I liked what it was all about. I remember something about who deserves what and that you shouldn’t give death to someone thinking they deserve it, because you can’t give life to another you think deserves it.”

As if there was any cosmic or religious rule that anybody could enforce, Vadim thought. No. It was just about ability, potential, and choice, but morals

or right and wrong didn't figure in the equation. "But you are biased, Dan. Not that I mind ..."

Smiling at Vadim, Dan flicked the ash out of the window. "Anyway, that's that. The past is the past, no matter how much it affects us, and tonight it's fine food, drink and company. Your Spetsnaz days are over, just enjoy an evening without getting shot at. Aye?" He moved his hand from the gear stick to squeeze Vadim's thigh.

Vadim covered Dan's hand on his thigh and thought how very strange it was that something that had started like that could now be like this. All that violence could smooth out into something so deep and good that it very nearly brought tears to his eyes. He cleared his throat and gazed out of the window. "Yes. An evening with friends."

"Aye, exactly that." Dan was driving on in silence, his hand in Vadim's or on his thigh whenever he didn't have to shift the gear, until they got into Belgrade, navigating the streets towards the restaurant. A miracle that some things still appeared to be normal in a sea of chaos and terror. But anyone needed a semblance of normality, or insanity would take hold. He parked the car close to the place, and looked around. "Seems we are not the first ones." Pointing to a car with conspicuous number plate.

"We should let him decide on the wine. He knows something about that." Vadim scanned the street for Dima, or actually any danger that could suddenly erupt. Old habits. "And be subtle."

"Subtle? I was born subtle." Laughing, Dan threw the cigarette butt onto the street and locked the car door, speeding up to walk beside Vadim. "And just so that this is clear, I haven't started a matchmaking business."

"No. You don't take commission. Yet." Vadim laughed and opened the door for Dan. "After you."

Dan was still grinning when he stepped inside the restaurant, spotting Markus before the waiter approached them. With the rudimentary language he'd already snapped up, he explained that they'd booked a table and one of their friends was already there, pointing at Markus, who got up when they were led to the table.

"Good to see you." Markus smiled and held out his hand, which Dan shook.

"How's the ping-ponging going on in your building?" Dan grinned.

"Don't get me started ..." rolling his eyes, Markus turned to Vadim.

"Ping-pong?" Vadim extended a hand and shook Markus', giving a smile when he remembered to smile. Settling in right next to Dan, and pulling the chair closer.

"Snipers and a glass building don't go together too well." Dan grinned, leaning against Vadim for a moment, while Markus chuckled and went back to his pack of cigarettes and the glass of wine.

"That's an understatement, but we would have a lovely view if we didn't have to seal the building with steel sheets." Markus lit a fag, but not before offering one to Dan, who took it.

“Oh.” Vadim glanced over his shoulder, expecting Dima, but the medic was nowhere to be seen. Maybe Maurice had put him to good use. That would certainly please him. “I mean, if they really want to shoot you, why not keep the entrance in the scope?”

Markus laughed, giving proof to the same irreverent sense of gallows’ humour that Dan usually displayed, “it’s too boring, that’s why. At least in this building they can play billiards: ricocheting a bullet off a wall might mean you hit the person on the desk across the room.”

“If they can’t see the effect, it’s pointless.” Vadim shook his head. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell them to use a grenade launcher.”

Markus laughed, then took a sip of his wine before asking, “So, are we ready to order, or are more people coming?”

“Just Dima. If he can make it. It’s unlike him to be late, though. His timing was always pretty good. Normally.”

“Dima?” Markus smiled questioning.

Vadim looked at Dan, who just looked back at him. Yes, why would Dima have featured in their conversation? So he was making the introductions. “He’s a ... former comrade,” Vadim ventured. “Dimitri Starov, actually. He’s a medic.”

“Fascinating,” Markus offered, “I believe he’ll have a lot to tell. You have no idea how much I am looking forward to shutting up tonight.”

Dan flicked the ash of his fag into the ashtray, “another fancy to-do?”

“Worse,” Markus leaned back, glass in one hand, cigarette in the other, “shaking hands with people you’d ... let’s just say, you might not wish to be as polite to, as you have to be.”

Vadim turned around, keeping an eye on the door, which, eventually opened. Strange to see Dima in a civilian setting. It had been several months, and it seemed surreal, now, to think that, for a long moment, he’d held Dima’s life in his hands, and Dima had, without wishing to, eventually joined ‘their’ side. Dima paused just for a moment, then made eye contact, and Vadim found himself stand up. Worried that Dima would walk back out after the last encounter. On the other hand, the medic was tough and not the type to hold grudges.

“Vadim,” said Dima, stepped up close and pulled him into a hug; no kisses, though. Instead, Dima held him tight and close for five heartbeats, then pushed him away, slapping him on the back like the oldest of friends. “Dan.” Turning towards Dan, who stood up, offering a hand. “Sorry, I’m a little late. No excuses. I’m just late.” His English was fairly good, observed Vadim. He would probably even be able to still strike up a convoluted discussion in Pashtu.

“That’s alright, if I had been forced to go through as much paperwork as you did, I’d be sitting in a corner, rocking to and fro with my arms round my knees right now.”

Dima grinned. “Don’t underestimate Soviet paperwork. The main thing, as Vadim can attest, is remaining consistent with what they *want* to hear.”

“Just like SAS selection.” Dan grinned, shaking Dima’s hand, before he sat back down, pointing at Markus. “Markus Kaltenbrunn, friend of mine.” He smiled as Markus got up, offering Dima his hand as well, which Dima shook.

“Hi. Dima Starov.”

Vadim noted that he introduced himself with the short nickname. Already a good sign. Damn. He would have preferred not to know what Dan had planned for both of them.

“Head of the Red Cross delegation around here,” Dan continued, “but you don’t have to be a POW to get treated by him ...” he smirked, while Markus tensed, had the good grace to blush, and threw a glance at Dan that would have killed any other man.

“Oh, really?” Dima, bright spark that he was, gave Markus a much longer look than would have been perfectly fitting or polite. “That’s lucky. Because I’m not a POW.”

“Well,” flustered for a second, Markus looked down, then up, then took a breath and squared his shoulders, pulling himself up to his full height. He towered over Dima, with Dima meeting his gaze, all the time. “I’m glad you’re not, because I’m right now off duty, and I’d hate having to skip dinner. I’m ravenous.” Looking down at Dima, and for a moment, obvious to all, studying the face.

“There’s something about not mixing work with pleasure. I mean, leisure,” said Dima.

Vadim spotted the hint of dry irony that betrayed that Dima had made a clever pun and enjoyed having done so. Dima could be very smug indeed, in his strange little ways.

“If you mixed my work with pleasure, that would be ... interesting, but not my kind of thing.” Markus grinned, still standing. “Then again, Vadim told me you’re a medic and used to be spetsnaz, so perhaps we have more in common work-wise than one might think.”

Dima grinned and moved towards the only free chair, which was the place right next to Markus, who picked up his cigarette that had been lying forgotten in the ash tray. Dima shed his jacket and hung it over the back, checking the pockets for something. Maybe just keys and papers and likely some packets of pills. “Altruistic professions, hm?”

“Pisces.” Markus shrugged, as if that explained everything, and took a last drag from the cigarette before extinguishing it. “Or just a German Literature graduate who applied for a job at an editor’s and never got an answer - until three years later, but by that time I had started to enjoy the ‘temporary’ job at the Red Cross headquarters.” He turned his head to look at Dima, grinning, while offering a cigarette, which Dima took. “Serendipity. But you’re not going to tell me that spetsnaz are altruistic, or are you?”

“I’m a failed proper surgeon. Adventure, motherland, good IQ test, tough enough, spetsnaz.” Which was the shortest version Dima had ever brought his life story to.

Holding a lighter to Dima's cigarette, Markus grinned, "you beat me in the sarcastic quarters."

"More practice." Dima pulled on the cigarette, taking hold of Markus' wrist to steady a flame that didn't need any steadying.

Dan glanced at Vadim, raised his brows, said nothing and just flashed a grin as he shrugged his shoulders. Seemed they'd been forgotten already.

Dima released Markus' wrist and lowered the cigarette for a moment. "And - altruistic? No. Just a much harder job than the other spetsnaz had - with the possible exception of my esteemed team leader." Dima pointed towards Vadim and inhaled some of the smoke.

"Aye," Dan murmured, "and you've got no idea about that patrol."

"Hm?" Markus looked up, as an afterthought, offering the cigarettes to Dan, who refused with a shake of his head.

"Nothing." Dan smiled.

"Vadim was your team leader?" Markus looked from one to the other after placing the packet of fags back onto the table. "If I were a curious man I'd ask you questions now, but since I am not ... when did you become spetsnaz and why a failed surgeon?"

"Originally, I'd planned to study medicine after my two years. But I ended up enjoying it, well, if you can 'enjoy' war." Dima grinned. "Instead of taking it easy, I put a lot more in than most others, and my officers decided I should get trained further. Medic courses, spetsnaz, then some specialisations and further medical training. After that, it was a fairly natural progression. I was planning to continue and one day train young medics how to pull the 'tough special forces types' out of the fire and patch up amputated limbs ... operate under some fairly unhygienic circumstances, too."

"S...ugar!" Markus exclaimed, "I can just about imagine that. I've seen my fair share of blood and gore, and know the work of my medical team. Thankfully I'm not the one who has to patch people up." Taking his glass to have a sip and only then realising that no one else had a drink. "Oh dear ..." he offered, which Dan quickly picked up on.

"Shall we order?" He smiled brightly, before poking Vadim in the ribs with his elbow, then waving the waiter over.

Vadim grinned. "Same as last time for me."

Dan nodded, and while Vadim joined the conversation, he got wine for all.

Vadim regarded Dima's expression for a moment, which, he assumed, hinted Dima was pleased to have made an impression. "And if you think Dima's bluffing ..." He saw Dima look at him and gave him a smile. "That reminds me of a story when Dima tried to work on a wounded guy - he was from an artillery regiment, I remember that much. The guy's belly had been torn open by a mine. I'm pretty sure it was a mine. The guy was in shock, a complete jabbering idiot because of the stress. He was shouting at Dima, not making a lot of sense, while Dima was working like his own life depended on it. He'd called me over to hold the kid down so he could work. That was the only time I've seen Dima react to anything like that. Remember what you said, Dima?"

Dima grinned, placed his elbow on the table, hand formed into a fist. "I took a handful of his guts and said: 'Hold that for a moment.'"

Vadim laughed. "Aye. That shut him up. He fainted. And with that, Dima could 'work in peace', as he called it."

Markus laughed out loud, leaning back to regard Dima full-on. "You're a man of my heart, and my surgeons would love you. Our best one is only happy when he's drowning in blood, but don't tell that to anyone."

Dima grinned. "I like the battle with death."

"Did you manage to get the soldier through? Or don't you know?" Markus smiled, while Dan sat quietly in a corner, grinning to himself and watching the commotion. Knowing that whatever thought he was keeping for later, it would most probably be for Vadim alone, but he sure as heck didn't mind.

"No idea. Conditions in Kabul might have killed him. Or the transport. I know he stood a chance when I was done with him. That's all we get. A fighting chance."

"We do it somewhat differently. We start when the fighting chances are over. We take what pieces are left and try to hold them in place, to put them back together in the end." Markus finished his wine, "we're just a band aid, but a big one." Smiling at Dima.

"If not the biggest one," Dima said, somewhat pensive, or just very calm. Vadim wasn't quite sure how to read him. "And talking of big, I do need some food. Maurice can exist on a diet of coffee and fags, but I can't."

"Thank fuck. At last." Dan murmured with a grin, while Markus looked up. "Maurice? Do you live with someone?"

Dima took the menu from the waiter, who distributed the other menus around the table, while another waiter came with the wine Dan had ordered. "No. I'm bunking on his couch for the moment. But he's starting to get fed up with me, so I better find a different couch until I have an idea how to pay for my way around."

"I can cover what you need," said Vadim. "I owe you."

"No, Vadim, I owe you, and I'm old enough to solve my own problem, thanks, comrade Major."

Neither Dan nor Markus said anything, but while Dan was thoughtfully smoking his cigarette, Markus had extinguished his, and was looking at the menu. "Has anyone tried the venison?"

"I had the steak last time," said Vadim. "And I'll stick to it."

"The venison does sound good," remarked Dima, glancing over the rim of his menu, the quickest of glances that made him smile while reading the list. "I'll risk it."

"In that case, I shall risk it, too." Markus smiled, putting the menu down.

They ordered, and the evening went on as it had started, with casual chatting that every now and then veered into more serious territory, and it was strange to see Dima so relaxed and natural. He was a completely different man off the battlefield and passed easily as civilian - something, no doubt, that would help him keep a low profile.

Markus was enjoying himself, and Dan kept glancing at him, watching how he chatted animatedly with Dima. He smiled to himself, until he prodded Vadim again. It was past eleven, and he'd had nothing more than a measly glass of wine, knowing they'd have to be on duty for mid-day shift the next day, and knowing ... that they didn't seem to be particularly needed right now.

"I think it's time to retire for little old me." Dan grinned at Dima and Markus, before leaning his head for a second against Vadim's shoulder. "Unlike *someone* here," glaring mockingly at Markus, "I am in my forties, and need my beauty sleep."

"Sure you do." Vadim rolled his eyes, but got the hint, standing up.

Dan grinned, "Truth is, I have to drive, and we're both on shift tomorrow." He waved to the two remaining men, as if he'd always expected them to stay. "I'll give you a tinkle, aye?"

"Aye ..." Markus repeated. "Have a safe drive and a good night." Safe, in these parts, taking on a very different meaning.

Dima was rifling through his jacket, seemed to have located something, but didn't pull it out, then glanced up. "Night. And thanks for the invitation." Smiling at Vadim, who shrugged. "You're welcome."

After a stopover at the entrance, on the way out, Vadim held the door open for Dan, and they were gone.

Markus was watching the door for a moment longer, before reaching for his cigarettes. The second packet of the night. "Have you got time for another drink?" He looked at Dima.

"Sure. I have no appointments tomorrow and nowhere to be." Dima relaxed on the chair and leaned back, feeling sated, tired, and curious, which made a strange combination, but not at all unpleasant. "How come you know Dan?"

"He ... picked me up at an embassy function." Offering the cigarettes to Dima, Markus caught the waiter's eyes. "I was bored." A sudden grin crossed his face, "guess I should say, he was even more bored. For me it's part of the job, for him it's torture."

"Being picked up?" Dima paused. "I'm not sure I get the complete meaning of that phrase."

"Well." Markus paused, and his grin was somewhat self conscious. "We met over the buffet and he ... don't know how much you know Dan, but he came to the point fairly quickly. We ended up in an empty room, only to be walked on in, with me hiding behind the floor length curtains. It's quite funny in retrospect, but when you have your trousers round your ankles it's really rather horrific."

"Oh." Dan clearly spent his time wisely in this country. Dima pulled a cigarette from the pack, but instead of protesting the 'theft', Markus flicked the lighter, asking, "excuse me for being curious, but are you a friend of Vadim?"

"Comrade, yes. Friend ... I don't know, to be honest. I guess it's not easy to be his friend, even if he cared much for friends."

The waiter arrived to take their orders for more drinks, before Markus could reply, but he picked up the conversation once the man had left. "I don't know

Vadim at all. He's Dan's partner, that's for me the most important bit of information. But are you sure he doesn't care about friends?"

"Okay, in his own way, he clearly does." Killing everybody in the house but him, lending a hand, keeping him alive, even if that meant chaining him up like an animal. "But if you look at him, it's all there: emotional detachment, rationalization, compartmentalisation, alienation, it's all there."

"He doesn't seem to be doing any of that with Dan." Markus pulled nicotine deeply into his lungs, thoughtful. "He seemed to me to be, what's the best word ... committed? I don't think I've ever seen such an intense relationship."

"I can't tell. I knew him when he was rather different. Married, children, picture-book officer."

"Married?" Markus interrupted, eyes wide.

"Yes. Vadim had ambition, being gay would have killed that ambition. You didn't progress anywhere if you had the wrong ancestors, such as Germans. And the Great War for the Fatherland had ended a while ago ..." Dima grinned. "He knew the rules, and he followed them. I wouldn't have thought he had more depth than that. No, that's not fair. He was always bright, read a lot, but I believed that polished facade. I wouldn't have assumed he'd ... be anything but." And what would he have done if he'd known? Could he have trusted an officer that was actually a traitor? Somebody who'd fooled everybody? But then again, had his own little lies ever made him a traitor? It was a huge, grey area - one that even the Interior Ministry wouldn't have been able to navigate.

Markus looked up when the waiter arrived with their wine, thanking the man, before picking up the glass. "I don't know him well enough to comment." He smiled, raised the glass to his lips, looking at Dima over the rim, "and I don't know you either. Seems to be a Russian thing."

Dima grinned and took the glass. "What, being gay?"

Markus chuckled, took a sip, before he picked up his cigarette once more. "Perhaps that as well, but I'm afraid I'm not Russian, and still gay." Keeping his voice down at the latter, as if he couldn't help being worried about voicing the wrong words. "No, I meant being ... intriguing."

"Churchill's riddle in a mystery wrapped in an enigma." Dima grinned, feeling flattered at the younger man's attention.

"You've seen too many WW2 films, or read too many books, Dima." Markus chuckled, leaning back, but the way the name flowed over his tongue was a very comfortable one.

"Can you read 'too many books'? I doubt it. But Churchill was a good judge of character. He got Stalin right."

"No, you can't, and yes, he did." Markus' smile grew deeper, warmer, something in his eyes as he regarded the other, "wish I had my library here with me."

Dima took a sip of the wine. "But me, I'm fairly simply structured. I became a professional soldier to get away from my village - and any rumours."

"Rumours about your sexuality?"

Just one last opportunity to get away from this. Deny everything. But why? Why indeed. "Yes. Joining up was convenient, and I didn't go back for a long time. Always too busy, always working hard, and everybody understood I wouldn't marry during that war. Too much to do, responsibilities ... it's another way to hide."

Markus nodded. "I understand. While I have no need to hide, theoretically, and according to my employer's official statements, I practically have to deal with certain ... individuals, who would be even less 'pleasant' to deal with if my sexuality was known."

"That's okay," I'll be discreet, was what Dima almost said, and managed to swallow that part of the sentence before it got out. "I mean, that sounds like a compromise, really. Doesn't seem so bad." He grinned, leaning forward, elbows on the table. "So, apart from ending up in embassy rooms, pants around your ankles, and being seized by admittedly a very sexy British mercenary, how do you handle your encounters?"

Markus burst into laughter, quietening down at a strange look from across another table, and, still chuckling, leaned over the table as well, sitting opposite the other now. Faces close, so he could keep his voice low. "The park at Kalemegdan Fortress, with its rather 'impressive' statue, has an interesting and secluded area, with fairly dense vegetation, which offers the possibility for chance encounters." He shrugged and grinned, "but otherwise? I haven't got that many encounters. Lack of chances." Tilting his head a fraction, chin in his hands, "and maybe I'm not the world's most prolific performer of one-night-stands anyway."

"Can't say I'm refusing many offers," said Dima under his breath. Shit, that did sound needy, but since they were both out in the open, it was time to up the ante.

Markus smiled for a moment, "of one-night-stands or of invitations to dinner?"

"Both, actually." Dima glanced quickly at the waiter, who lingered in the background. "As you can see from the fact that I'm here ... still here."

"Which one do you prefer?" Not letting up, Markus stayed where he was, close but not too close.

Dima laughed. "Depends on whether I'm hungry or horny."

"That's a bit of a poor choice." Markus smiled and moved back to sit straighter. "You've never combined the two?"

"You mean, successively? Dinner, and then bed? Rarely. It's not something you do when ... exchanging pleasantries quickly and in secret."

Markus smiled again, and this time, it had a new quality to it. "In that case, I'd like to invite you to dinner. There's another comfortable restaurant that has so far survived this madness. It's close to the river and boasts the best of the local delicacies." Watching Dima, while taking a few more sips of his wine, "would Saturday be suitable? At 7 PM?"

"Sure! I mean, you don't have to." And that sounded wrong, too. "Just knock me over the head and chain me up in a cellar, and I'm all yours." He

grinned while Markus' brows shot up, but he didn't comment. "No, I'm joking. I'll ... be there."

"Do you have a car?"

He'd have to check whether Maurice would need it. Impossible to say. Maurice might be away for some reason or other. Strange. It all had moved towards sex, and Markus now put it off. "No, I've borrowed the one outside."

"I could pick you up." Markus smiled, "no problem, I mean, I'd like to. Where do you stay?"

"French embassy, but I don't remember the address."

"Ah, yes. Been there a few times. At least their food and drink is quite good, and they have occasionally some generals in the most delectable uniforms."

Dima grinned. "I haven't had that pleasure yet."

Grinning, Markus emptied the glass. "I'm afraid I have to leave now, it's a week day after all, and I'm usually a good boy and in bed by ten. Got some wrangling to do tomorrow, and I don't think my deputy would be thrilled if I told him I'm out of action because I stayed too long in a bar." Moving to get up, Markus took another look at Dima, who also got up and grabbed his jacket.

"I'll see you on Saturday, then. I'll pick you up at quarter to seven." Fishing in his jacket pocket, Markus produced a business card. "That's my address, and ..." he found a pen, scribbling down another set of numbers, "and that's my private phone. Just in case." Standing up to full height, he extended his hand, "I'm looking forward to seeing you on Saturday," adding, as an afterthought, and just because he enjoyed the sound of the name, "Dima."

Dima put the card into his pocket, then took Markus' hand with both his and shook it. "Yes, I'm looking forward to it, too." It. Food, sex. Both. Part of him was stunned by how this was going, and the fact that he had a 'date'. He followed Markus out of the restaurant, after Markus had paid the drinks, discovering everything else had already been paid. Dima wondered if he should say something more, but merely said "Goodbye, then," shoved his hands into his pockets, and headed for Maurice's car. How strange.

"Goodbye." Markus stood and watched Dima for a while, before getting into his own car, and pondering if he should actually still be driving - but such questions were to be answered at a different time.

* * *

1845 hrs sharp on Saturday, and Maurice's phone rang internally.

Dima was on the way to the door when he remembered that that was the phone, and he answered. "Yes?"

It was the guard house, telling him that a visitor was there for one Dima Starov, and that the visitor was waiting in the car park, right next to the gate.

"Thanks!" Dima grabbed his jacket, the door key, and headed outside, rushing down the stairs, then slowed down when he left through the door, and fell into an easy jog towards the car.

Markus was standing outside of the car, leaning against the driver's door, and smoking. Smiling brightly when Dima appeared. "Military time keeping?" he winked.

"No, medic. I'm rushing everywhere." Dima gave a laugh and extended a hand. "Or maybe I'm just hungry?"

Markus shook Dima's hand, cigarette between his lips. "That doesn't bode well for a comfortable evening over a few glasses of wine." Grinning, he opened the driver's door and waited for Dima to get into the passenger seat. "Unless you're of the 'wham bam' persuasion." Buckling himself in, he glanced across.

That answered one question and posed several others. "I could be persuaded to take my time." Dima grinned. "How was your week?"

Ignoring the first statement, Markus navigated the car out of the embassy ground. "Half a week, to be precise, and it was like most weeks: full of ijits."

"That's people for you." Dima studied the other man's face, when Markus glanced across again, extinguishing his cigarette before his finger hovered over the 'on' button of the stereo. "Do you mind opera?"

"As long as it's not Wagner, I can deal with anything."

"Oh good, because I can't help it, I do believe some voices are divine." The first chords were tentatively heard in the car, before an almighty voice of epic proportions filled the small space, singing of love, death, betrayal, pain, and joy. The sound was almost physical, brutal, and very distracting. About five minutes later, they were reaching the shore of the Sava, "and how was your week?" Markus asked.

The voice was level - but too much so. Expectation, dread, or nerves? "Well, I started work as some kind of nurse in a local hospital. That was part of all that paperwork. It's good to use my skills for the right thing." Dima grinned, wondered how he could put the other man at ease. But truth be told, he had no idea how these things usually went. How people actually did these things if they didn't have to hide. Only that this was a far call from Maurice's very practical attitude to stress busting.

"Nurse ... does that mean you're dressed up all prim and proper in a starched white uniform?" Markus glanced to the side as he turned a corner, "I can imagine that might suit you rather well." Sounding as if he were about to add something, but never did.

Dima grinned. "Yeah. And I hand out pills and give injections, and I prepare the paperwork for the doctors. I could do more, but I guess that's their way to break the new guy in." He studied Markus for several long moments. "They tried to make me work today, but I told them I have a date."

"That's ... good." Almost missing his next turn, Markus was smiling at Dima, just about making the exit. "And tomorrow?" Stopping himself once again, as if he kept saying too much.

"Russian Orthodox. I don't work Sundays." Dima grinned. "No, in fact, they didn't ask. Lucky ... me." Pausing. "So, what do you like? I get opera, wine, books ... what else?"

“Good food.” Markus smiled, more relaxed now, as he moved the car into a parking space near to the river bank. “Good books, films, and company. Travelling in colder climes, and the beauty of language - especially English. And men.” He switched off the engine, leaned back and turned his head fully to smile at Dima. “And you?”

“I ...” And who was nervous now? One thing to tell Maurice how he liked sex, another to tell Dan to go slow, but completely different situation now. “Pretty similar. Travelling, saving lives, sex, men, getting drunk ...”

“But do you like your sex without getting drunk, too?” Markus asked, and looked suddenly mortified, as if he hadn’t meant to say this.

“Alcohol helps.” Dima grinned sharply. “Brings down the barrier faster. You know, it’s a pet theory at the moment, but I think men are made to fight each other, and alcohol dulls that reflex. Especially with soldiers. Civilians are different, or when you’re young, but soldiers?”

“I’m not a soldier, though. Is that a problem?” Markus hesitated, smiled, admitting with the question that he had been thinking far too much about this. “I don’t want to bore you ...”

Dima frowned and placed a hand over on Markus’ thigh. “It’s a job. That’s really all there is to it. It’s a job.”

Markus’ glance fell onto the hand, and it felt good, perhaps too good. “Just wanted you to know that if I wanted a one-night-stand I wouldn’t have asked you out for dinner.” Convoluted, but the words didn’t come quite as smoothly right now, as they usually did.

“Yeah, I gathered. If you’d wanted that, it would have happened Wednesday.” Dima leaned over, keeping his hand there and bringing his face close. “Relax. I rarely think beyond the next hour.”

“I do. I have to. Guess it’s a good thing that you don’t.” Markus leaned his head against the support, allowing his hand to cover Dima’s, and just smiling. Faces close, far too close to not want to kiss, and Dima’s hand turned slightly and pressed his.

“Time to go in for our dinner, hm?” Markus asked.

“Yes. Let’s try that dinner thing. Okay?” Very briefly touching his cheek to the corner of Markus’ mouth, just barely brushing it. “I don’t have any other plans for the weekend.”

“Okay.” Markus smiled, nodded, and forced himself to move away and get out of the car. Waiting for Dima, before heading towards the restaurant. Once they were seated inside, at a cosy two-men table in the corner, Markus leaned forward. “I was wondering, what is your favourite literature?” Offering Dima a cigarette, “and don’t say ‘porn.’” He laughed quietly.

Dima puffed on the cigarette and grinned. “Short stuff. Short stories. I think good writers should be able to tell a story so you can read it in one sitting. In my line of work, that’s a bit of a habit ... I could never know whether I’d live to read the rest of the book.” They received the menus, and Markus chose the wine. The food was good, service fast, some of the best food Dima had had in a long while, but while he enjoyed it, Markus seemed to stall, as if something kept

him from eating, something that made him look and smile, and talk and listen too much, instead of getting through his food.

"I prefer long stories that let you delve deeply into the minds of the characters you care about." Markus explained, when they had finished their meal. Glass of wine in one hand, cigarette in the other. "I am fascinated by motivation ..."

"Well, fictional people have better reasons to do something than real people. Most people just run around on autopilot all their lives, which would make for boring reading in any case."

"Not in all cases, though." Markus was looking at Dima, studying the short, grey hair, and the face and eyes. Not handsome, not ugly, and entirely attractive. Lowering his voice, "would you like dessert or ... would you like a whisky to finish off the meal, at my place?"

"Whisky." Dima grinned. "Because I don't want to scandalize these good people here with anything I might do."

"And that would be?"

"Ah, that would be telling." Dima made eye contact with the waiter, somewhat impatient now to get going.

"I guess it does help my safe driving, if you don't tell me." Looking at the waiter as well, who approached speedily, there was a small kerfuffle about paying, but Markus insisted since he had invited Dima, he would pay and that, if Dima were so inclined, if he wanted to invite him in return, he would gladly accept. Which, incidentally, was the best outcome - Dima wasn't exactly flush with cash at the moment, anyway.

A short while later they were back in the car, with Markus backing the vehicle out of the parking space. "I have to tell you that I kind of share my house with my admin. She lives in the basement flat. Just in case you believe in anonymity, because ..." Markus hesitated, before glancing to the side, "believe me, watch me *not* officially telling headquarters that I have a partner, should I ever have one."

"I'm not ashamed," said Dima. "There's no rule that says I can't do this." He reached out to touch Markus' face, made him look at him, and Markus stopped the car, foot on the brake. "Just tell me how discreet I should be, and I'm sure I can accommodate you."

"I don't care. I honestly don't. Even if you prefer to be a one-night-stand," Markus wanted to say more, but didn't, "I don't care anymore who knows."

"No preferences." Dima moved over, holding Markus' chin, keeping it pointing in the right direction, then touched his lips to the other's. "I'm not planning beyond this."

"I ..." Markus murmured, "can't help planning for the universe, but I just ... want to get us back to my home, right now. I really, really want to take you to bed, and I haven't thought about much else all week." A dry, soft chuckle, before he added, "and if I could explain that to myself, then I'd be a candidate for the Nobel prize."

“Oh damn,” muttered Dima, smiling fondly, almost against his will pulling back to allow the poor man to be able to drive. “I ... yeah.” Defeated, elated, and his stomach tightened, as if he were nervous. Completely different thing again, he just didn’t want to hurt this man, suddenly, all this was such a different kettle of fish to what he knew and accepted about how things went.

Just about making it back to driving capacity, Markus got them out into the street and towards the road that would take them to his house on Uzicka. He didn’t talk much, just let the music play, and occasionally glanced to the side, while occupying himself with driving and smoking another cigarette. When they arrived, he parked the car in the driveway and waited for Dima before locking the car. “Welcome to my temporary home, is what one says, I guess.” He fumbled for the key a bit more than necessary, and it took him a couple of tries before he managed to unlock the door of the ground floor flat. When he finally succeeded and switched on the light, Dima found the place to be comfortably furnished, with several doors going off from the hallway. Markus moved off towards one door, smiling at Dima. “I think I need that whisky.”

Dima stood in the middle of the hallway, looking around, then gave another grin. “I’m pretty sure I know what you need right after that whisky, though.” Following the man, he hung up the jacket on the wardrobe in passing, taking in what he could, anything that allowed to study the character, but it was tasteful, nice, friendly, with personal touches here and there betraying that somebody spent a lot of thought on these things and enjoyed the finer, better things in life.

Markus was standing at the buffet, pouring the first generous measure, when Dima came inside. “Water or ice?” Glancing up, “I prefer it neat.”

“Neat, too.” Dima lingered close, watching Markus pour another glass, and accepting it when he offered, then gently clinked the glasses together. The alcohol warmed his mouth and throat, and then slow and deep down. He finished the whisky with another swallow and put the glass down, then moved in, hands on Markus’ shoulders, down to his arms, and Markus put the glass back onto the buffet, just about finished as well. “I’m bad at guessing,” Dima murmured. “Anything you don’t want?”

“I ...” Markus almost said ‘don’t know’ and his hesitation made it all too obvious, but instead he smiled. Tentative, genuine, and a whole lot of other things. “I’m not naïve, nor inexperienced, just ...” he shrugged, lowered his head until they were eye to eye, “let’s just see where we get to.”

“Okay.” This close, it was obvious that Markus was at least a few inches taller - a fact Dima could conveniently forget when they were further apart. His hands moved to the belt; hesitated there, and he got no encouragement from Markus either. Giving a blowjob was the first thing that had crossed Dima’s mind, he suddenly wasn’t quite sure anymore. Felt horrible, in a way, he just couldn’t fall back on his routine, because there was none in place. Almost back to stupid teenagers again, when nothing was certain, everything was sprinkled with either angst or frosting, so he decided, right, teenagers again, and kissed Markus full on the lips, who smiled, tilted his head and stooped a little more, as his hands went up to Dima’s head and face. Holding, kissing, and fingers

stroking through short hair, but only for a while, before need got the upper hand, and Markus pulled Dima closer, tighter, as the kiss became instantly passionate.

Dima began to pull the shirt out of Markus' trousers in the back, hands making contact with bare skin, moving up, while pressing in, and he relished the feeling of skin on skin, then kissing down the throat, the side of the neck, producing little sounds that caught in Markus' throat, while baring his chest and discarding the shirt. No fear of getting caught. But a strange kind of expectation, odd thing, really, but he allowed it to happen, whatever it was. Kissing again, while getting rid of his own shirt, then placed both hands on Markus' arse and pulled him close, tight, with just enough force to stoke the fire.

Markus' hands were on Dima's back, arms, neck, stroking down to his hips and up again. Contact and pressure, almost greed, and no doubt Markus wanted this man, had thought about little else since they'd met. Hardly slept, hardly ate, no matter how stupid he'd felt. When he lifted his head, he barely got out, "need ..." what, you? "Bed!"

Dima grinned. "Which way is it?" Following the motion of Markus' head, he let him go only enough to lead the way. All tidy, bed large enough to accommodate both of them, and Dima shed his shoes on the way in, smiling at that hint of desperation, too damn fond of the other to make fun of it, but he was, what, ten years older? He opened his own belt and trousers, while Markus pulled the elegant bedspread off. Dima shed the rest of his clothes, leaving everything on a chair near the door, finding himself watched with an intensity unlike anyone had ever looked at him. He crossed the short distance towards Markus, who stood, watching, and opened Markus' belt, button and zipper, pulling the trousers down as he knelt down, and Markus still just stood. Not shell-shocked, definitely not uncertain, but struck into immobility with his hands on Dima's shoulders and his eyes fixed onto every movement.

Dima stayed on his knees, pulled the other closer, and quickly took him in, causing Markus to cry out, "Sh...ugar!" Something Dima had wanted all evening, sucking and getting another taste of this man, who reacted as if his knees would buckle any second, breath coming fast. Markus' hands on Dima's hair, neck, shoulder, again and again back to the short hair, while Dima's hands stroked Markus' sides, wanting nothing more than to take that shyness away, right now, as his head moved back and forth, deeply enjoying Markus' every response, who couldn't help but shudder.

Too soon, too much need, and Markus almost staggered backwards when he forced himself to push against Dima's head, trying to make him stop, a Herculean effort. "Can you ..." stammering, breathless voice tinged with lust and desperation. So close. "Can you ... I ..."

Dima looked up. He could read it all over the other's face, flushed and feverish, eyes alight with life and emotion. "I can," he murmured, and gave a smile. "And I want to." He stood, again kissing the other fully on the mouth,

but pushing him towards the bed, and Markus sat down, scooting up, dazed with lust.

"Nightstand?" Dima asked and Markus nodded as Dima reached over to pull the drawer open, finding condoms and lube. When he moved onto the bed, looking down at Markus, he marvelled at the openness of emotion in the face. A hint of nervousness, large amounts of need, and relief that Dima had understood without making him spell out what he wanted. And a breathless smile on Markus' face that stayed, grew and deepened, as their bodies moved and connected, slow and steady, to give and take, until there was nothing but lust and an abandon that completely took Dima by surprise. Taking him in and swallowing him whole, when he finally came, deep inside Markus' body.

The night saw them awake for much longer, exploring and enjoying. With more whisky and wine, and all the time in the world, as they talked and discovered, laughed and touched. Listening to music, then once again concentrating on the other's body. Learning through touch and taste, until even Dima fell asleep, with a last glance at Markus' profile, illuminated by the dimmest light of approaching dawn that came through thin curtains. The night was quiet, not even the usual sound of explosions far in the distance, and the regular breathing of the sleeping man was as peaceful as Dima's thoughts, before sleep claimed him.

* * *

When Dima woke, it was to bright sunshine streaming into the bedroom, and the smell of cigarette smoke next to him. He realized it was Sunday, and he had nowhere to be, and then remembered the last night. Smiling, then yawning, he stretched in the bed to place a kiss on Markus' arm. "Awake already?"

"You're lucky I didn't wake up at my usual five thirty." Markus grinned, "it's your fault I slept until eight. That's unheard of."

"You don't get laid enough." Dima laughed softly. "That should sort out your insomnia." He pulled a cigarette from the pack that Markus offered, placing it between his lips and reaching for the lighter.

"You have no idea how right you are." Markus looked at Dima for a moment, then smiled, "or maybe you do ..." Keeping the cigarette between his lips to free a hand, his fingers once again touched Dima's hair, carding through the short grey. "You look so Russian." Talking around the fag between his lips, "and I think you can guess by now that I really like that."

"It's that haircut," said Dima, grinning. Inhaling the smoke, he sat up to lean against the headrest, pulling a leg up. "And you're aware we were set up?" He reached over to Markus' neck, pulling him a bit closer, kneading the neck muscles, which caused Markus to lower his head on Dima's shoulder, but not before glancing at him with raised brows.

"Set up?"

"Dan." Stroking through Markus' hair, Dima moved his head to kiss his temple. "I think he was playing matchmaker." Only then realizing he'd breached

a different topic with that, which seemed like a risk to take. "But ... that's okay from my end. I certainly don't mind."

"Really? Blast!" Markus chuckled, before inhaling a last lungful of smoke, then reached across to extinguish the butt in the ash tray, while staying as much as he could in the comfortable position. "I must be more naïve than I thought, I didn't notice."

"Didn't spot it either." Mr Perceptive. Some way to get paid back for second-guessing Dan. "I guess I must have been distracted by something."

Markus chuckled, "I'm glad you were. Would have really bothered my ego if you hadn't been sufficiently distracted."

"Well, consider your ego un-bruised." Resting his head against Markus', Dima relished the fact they were lying in bed, with a whole day in front of them. So utterly normal, compelling, and calming. Sharing more than a few crazed minutes of need.

Remaining in companionable silence for a while, until Markus took in a deep breath, lifted his head and rolled his neck. "Are you hungry? Would you like breakfast? I, for one, am famished."

Dima stretched again. "Sure. Let me grab a shower first. What are the breakfast plans then?" He stood, gathered up his clothes, but Markus stopped him, when he swung his long legs out of bed and stood up.

"If you want to, you can borrow a dressing gown?" Reaching for one that was hanging on a hook beside the wardrobe, which he then opened and pulled out another, black as well and much newer than the one he'd slipped into.

Dima paused, then nodded. Surprised, but clearly, that was the more civilized approach to having guests around overnight. Borrow? Why did he get the feeling that Markus had ... rather well prepared for this? And how much care and consideration had gone into this, while he just hadn't thought further than the next five or thirty minutes. If his job had taught him anything, then it was thinking on his feet. "Thanks, that comes in handy." Dropping his clothes back on the chair again.

"As for breakfast, what would you like? I could whip up scrambled eggs, or eggs Benedict, or any other egg variety, and bacon, or freshly baked bread with a variety of cheeses and spreads, or ..." Markus offered a grin, somewhat self-conscious, as he tied the belt around his hips. "I might have gone overboard yesterday, when I was out shopping, but I didn't know what you like." Adding, while his grin grew ever more conscious, "yet."

"Uhm, I ... what is eggs Benedict?" To say anything. Much more care, consideration and ... concern? Than he'd ever seen from any of the guys he'd encountered for longer than five to ten minutes. Which put this very firmly and deeply into Unknown Country. Terra Incognita.

"It's two halves of a muffin, topped with ham and poached eggs, and a good dollop of hollandaise sauce."

"Sounds good. I'll have some of that."

Slipping into a pair of sporty flip-flops, Markus walked towards the door, and pointed to another one right next to it, from the hallways. "You'll find a

couple of fresh towels on the shelf in the bathroom.” When he turned he had coloured ever so slightly. “I ... was hoping you’d stay, you know.” Busying himself with looking around the hallway, “but I don’t think I have a second pair of flip-flops, and I fear they’d be too big anyway.” Stepping once more closer to Dima, until he towered over him, and put his foot between the other’s legs, to measure. He chuckled, and had the good grace to colour a bit more, “but if you tell me your size I could have a pair for ...” finally hesitating, “next time?”

“Or I’ll just get some.”

“Or that.” Markus smiled and Dima glanced up, not quite sure what to say. This wasn’t casual, Markus had enjoyed it, and he had, too. Well, that was one way to sum it up. The other was that Markus kept throwing him, kept surprising him, but always with kindness and generosity. If he wasn’t careful ... “Looks like we’ll be having an affair, hm?”

“What do you mean, an *affair*?” Markus’ brows moved into a frown.

“Something ... more than a night or a weekend.” Dima felt stupid, like the first man on earth. Other people had that; Vadim and Dan had been ‘together’ for, what, more than ten years now?

“I don’t want a one night stand. Not that I don’t do them but ... that’s not what I want with you.” Markus added with a hesitant smile, “I’d like a relationship, if it works out, and there’s only one way to find out, isn’t there?” Tilting his head, Markus ran his hand from the back of Dima’s neck up the head, against the growth of the short hair. “And what do *you* want?”

Dima was speechless, and he knew he shouldn’t have breached the topic, like he could jinx it now. Relationship. Dating, then relationship. Remembering the man’s reactions, his sounds, his taste, all that, the night, the talking, all that *caring*. Relationship. A commitment, a pact, a mutual bond. Was it that easy? Looked like it was. “Sh... sugar,” he said, deliberately copying Markus’ expression. “And that on an empty stomach.” Smiling, suddenly, weird mix of emotions just rushing all over his brain. “I want those eggs,” he murmured, “and, yeah, the same thing. That’s a first though ... I don’t know how it works.”

“I don’t really either.” Markus’ smile had grown to epic proportions. “I mean, I haven’t really had one, but ... it can’t be that difficult, right? Lots of people manage, and we seem to be starting out well. You want egg Benedict, and so do I, we both know the same crazy guys, who apparently set us up, I like the way you look and you happen to look that way, and I really, really, want you to ...” just the slightest of hesitations, before he broke into a wide grin, “fuck me again, because that was amazing.”

Dima pulled him closer, kissing Markus’ neck, hands moving to his arse, murmuring: “Feed me some breakfast, and more sex is a distinct possibility.” He wanted to say other things, about those visceral things, about touch and taste and smell – about what he felt, but he couldn’t put all that yet into words. He’d jinx it, for sure, and he’d never said these things. He’d try again, harder, but at the moment, it was all too new and unknown and amusing and daunting.

“Eggs it is, then.” Markus grinned, leaned in for another kiss, full on the lips.

“I could stay till Monday. I have a late shift.”

“If you don’t mind that I am usually at seven in the office, then I’d be more than happy if you stayed.” Taking Dima’s hand, Markus was about to drag him to the kitchen, but remembered the bathroom and shower first. “And if you want to stay after that ...” he trailed off, realising he might be to fast, but nothing had ever felt so right before. “Let’s just say you are welcome. Very welcome. We’ll just see how it goes, right?”

“Yeah. I have your number.” Dima grinned and let go of the hand to vanish into the bathroom. Whatever he’d got himself into, this was a good start.

“And don’t you forget it!” Markus called after him, chuckling, then retreated into the kitchen to whip up a miracle of tea, coffee, fresh bread, muffins and eggs and delicious hollandaise, with far too many other things, spread out all across the table, at which they sat for a long time, until Dima dragged Markus back into the bedroom, forgetting about dishes and fridge and half-smoked cigarettes. At least for the day.

June/July 1993, the Balkans

Dan was slouching in one of the phone booths that gave pretty little privacy, no more than a plastic shell around the head, dialling the French embassy's number. It took no more than a few seconds before someone picked up. The unmistakable voice of Maurice. Dry, French, and exhaling smoke. As always.

"Oui?"

"Hi, Maurice, Dan here. Can I have a word with Dima?"

"Non." Nothing else and Dan rolled his eyes.

"Why not?"

"Because he doesn't live here anymore."

Dan's brows shot up and he turned towards the wall. Out of habit, his hand went to shield the receiver. "Why? What happened? Did you throw him out?"

The dry laughter on the other end told Dan he was quite on the wrong path. "Non, he found himself a better place."

"And do you know where that is? A flat? Room? Where?"

"Red Cross." Came the deadpanned answer.

"Red ... *what?* What happened?" Eyes wide now, Dan wasn't sure if he was connecting the dots correctly.

"Best I give you the phone number. D'accord?"

"Aye ..." Dan quickly patted his short-sleeved shirt down to find the obligatory pen and even managed to pull out a dog eared piece of grubby paper. Noting the phone number down, he stared at it. Unsure if he really saw what he thought he was seeing. A slow grin began to spread on his face. Could it be? Did he ...? Did they? "Merci."

Maurice gave a huff of laughter. "You could pay me back."

Dan grinned and rolled his eyes again, "how?"

"Let's meet in the usual bar for a drink and I'll tell you." The grin was audible in Maurice's voice.

"Am I right in assuming this 'pay-back' might have something to do with you figuring out that I am gay and I kicking my own arse for not having figured out sooner that you're a worse opportunist than even a certain mate of Vadim's?"

"C'est possible." Maurice countered, not offering anymore than that. "Saturday, same time, same spot?"

"Aye," Dan grinned, "till then." He put the receiver down and double-checked the number again. He knew that number, he was damn certain but only one way to find out for sure.

Dialling the number, he was listening to the ring tone.

"Hi, this is Dmitri Starov, I'm afraid Markus isn't in yet, but I can take a message."

“Just the man I was looking for.” Dan was grinning from ear to ear.

“Oh, right. Dan? How are you?”

“Shouldn’t I ask you that?” Still grinning like a fool, “Maurice told me you shackled up with the Red Cross.”

“So to speak ... but not the whole Red Cross, just a certain representative. I guess I found my humanitarian bone somewhere.”

“I’m damn glad ... for both of you.” Fishing for his fag, Dan managed to light it, hold a conversation, and smile at the same time. “You happy, Dima Starov? Found your place to stay after all the wars?” Inhaling smoke. “And stopped waiting for that bullet?”

Dima laughed. “I didn’t think they made men like him ... or maybe I was looking in the wrong places. Yes, I think we are ... disgracefully happy. Thanks for, err, inviting us both to dinner, the rest went very smoothly.”

“I guess that means you have both forgiven me for my attempt at playing cupid, aye?”

“Oh yes, absolutely. Markus isn’t the type that doesn’t forgive - and me, well I’ll let you off.”

Inhaling, Dan leaned against the wall, taking the strain off his knee. It had become a habit by now. “Tell Markus from me that Russkies are fairly easy to handle – as long as you ply them with food, drink and sex.” He laughed.

“He sure keeps me happy. It looks like I’ll be working again soon, he’s working on some solutions to the problem. But it’s not bad staying in the house answering his phone calls and catching up on my reading ...”

Dan grinned, “apart from being obviously stressed out, you got time next month for an outing to the beach? Both of you? Vadim’s off to the States, would be good to have some time away from the job.”

“Sure. What about a weekend? Markus is free on weekends, unless some ambassador or other is inviting him for a party, but he has nothing lined up on the last weekend next month.”

“You organising his social calendar?” Dan chuckled, “or you going along to all those functions with him?”

“Well, let’s put it this way, I’m starting to teach him the meaning of the word ‘no’. Seems everybody at his place keeps loading him with work because he’s a ‘single’ while the other folks are married or partnered. He tells me I’m not half bad as a PA.” Dima huffed and Dan laughed. “We’re not quite there yet. With the functions. That would make it very official, you know?”

“Would that be a problem with the Red Cross?”

“More awkward than problematic. Their policies are ... very egalitarian. That’s Swiss for you. But we should be sure of it before we make it that official. It’s too early, we’re still at the beginning.”

“It sounds good, though, the whole thing. ‘Beginning’ and all that.” Dan smiled, snipped the ash off his fag.

“Oh yes. As I said, embarrassingly happy.”

“I’ll be best man at your wedding, you just wait and see.” Dan laughed.

"I think he's the type that would marry," Dima mused. "I'll keep that thought."

"You do?"

"There's Denmark."

"Touché, but neither of you is Danish." Dan grinned, "they have to change the law in our countries first, though, but even so, you wouldn't see me dead being married." Dan groaned for effect.

"Well, all respectability is lost on both of you," Dima teased.

"Thanks, bastard." Dan laughed. "Looking forward to seeing both of you next month. Take care."

"You, too. Give Vadim greetings, I'll greet Markus. We could meet up for dinner before that."

"Sounds good, what about in a week? What does Markus' diary say?"

"It'll be fine. Same place we met?"

"Aye, Saturday in a week, same place. See you!"

"Take care, Dan."

Dan was whistling on his way back to the room, and still in a mighty good mood when it was tea time and he got himself ready to queue for his food, but first waiting outside for Vadim to return from his shift.

Vadim came back right after he'd signed the weapons in. Peeling himself out of the armour on the way into their room. "What's up?" he asked, unbuttoning his shirt. He'd just quickly put on a fresh t-shirt before he'd head to the Mess.

"We're invited to Markus' and Dima's wedding." Dan smirked from ear to ear.

"What?" Vadim stared at him.

"Well ... that might be a little premature, but we *are* going to meet them for dinner on Saturday. Dima made sure there was a free spot in Markus' diary." His grin hadn't diminished at all.

"Practical Dima." Vadim shook his head. "Good move. So, he shackled up with him? That solves a lot of problems." Dima. With a partner. It was hard to believe. Dima had never struck him as somebody who was looking for that kind of thing.

"Aye, and if you ask me, it's the best decision he's ever made. He was ripe for settling down. Over-ripe." Dan got up. Holding a t-shirt in front of Vadim's nose.

Vadim grinned and took it. "There's something you can do in retirement ... hook up your friends and ex-lovers." He pulled the fabric over his head and stuffed it into his camos.

"Setting up a matchmaking ex-soldier business? Great idea ..." Dan rolled his eyes. "Let's get scran and we can talk about it some more. I have the best ideas with your cock down my throat." He held the door open in an exaggerated gesture.

"Really? I need to fuck your throat harder then, so you can't think." Vadim's eyes showed that that was a distinct possibility, for later.

“Promises ... promises ...” Dan grinned and shut the door behind them. It took all his willpower not to limp when they made their way to the cookhouse, but he managed.

* * *

That Saturday, Vadim led the way into the restaurant, and spied the two men before any of the waiters had noticed them. They were chatting, smiling, so obviously flirting he was amazed that Dima could even look like that: civil, happy. It was good to know he’d do alright.

Vadim touched Dan’s arm, then indicated to the waiter he knew where he was going, and headed towards the table.

Markus looked up first, and stood up, smiling while extending his hand. “Good to see you again.” He had a special grin for Dan, who shook his hand firmly and pretended he hadn’t noticed the wink. “What would you like to drink?” After he’d shaken Vadim’s hand.

“What about wine?” Vadim grinned. “Should last longer than vodka, even though Dima can pack quite a punch.” Glancing towards the medic, who shrugged, grinning.

“Personally, I’d go for the vodka.” The devil-may-care grin was back on Dan’s features as he sat down. “You never know what happens after a bottle or two or three.”

“Three bottles? These days I’d just fall asleep,” Vadim muttered.

“What? Losing the key qualification of a Russian officer there, Vadim,” said Dima.

Dan laughed, “we’re getting old, I guess, and the only one here who is still more or less a youngster is Markus.”

“Am I?” the man in question smiled. “But after three bottles of vodka I’d either be anyone’s or fast asleep as well.”

“Which one you’d prefer?” Dan grinned, hadn’t expected Dima’s reaction which followed promptly.

“The latter. With me.”

Dan looked from one to the other. “Monogamy? Proper, goddamned, motherfucking monogamy?” He gently nudged Vadim.

“Yes.” Markus had the charming sense to blush, “I’m afraid that’s true.”

Dima reached over and covered Markus’ hand with his, pressing it for a moment. “Old-fashioned proper monogamy.”

Vadim glanced at Dan, brows raised with humour. “Congratulations. Never worked with Dan, but both of you know that.” He waved the waiter over when Dan had a ‘coughing fit’ which was a barely disguised outburst of laughter.

“Vodka. We got something to celebrate.” Vadim ordered.

“Yes, it’s open for both of you, right?” Dima looked between them. “Seems to work for both of you.”

Vadim inhaled deeply and decided not to comment. He would have said something along the lines of Dan finding far more opportunities than he did,

but something had changed with Hooch, and he'd meet him very soon. It all seemed complex in terms of emotions, so the simplicity of Dima and Markus was appealing, but altogether unrealistic, from his perspective.

"Sort of." Dan smiled, leaned back in his seat on the bench. "I'm shit with the monogamy since Vadim's return, so I can hardly ask him to stay at home and mend the flowers while I'm out and about, aye?"

Dima gazed into Vadim's face, who knew that the medic could read him. Dima was perceptive, that made him so dangerous, out in the field, and in really any social situation. Perceptive and clever and very experienced. Plus, they shared history. And these days, he didn't have the façade to protect himself. "That's true," Vadim said, only to say something. "We share, too. If and when the opportunity presents itself."

"I'm afraid I couldn't do that." Markus chipped in, looking up when the waiter arrived with the shot glasses filled with ice cold vodka.

"Too late to change that." Dan's comment was delivered without much inflexion and little facial expression. "Make the best out of any given situation is what I say." His face broke into a grin as he lifted his glass. "To Markus and Dima and old-fashioned, proper monogamy. May it never get boring – and I don't think it will."

They raised their glasses and drank, while Vadim knew that Dima had caught wind of what was going on. He stayed non-committal, the topic of conversation soon veered towards the menus, and then to Markus' work, and Vadim tried to act perfectly normal. To his chagrin, though, a couple of hours later, it happened that he was in the men's toilet and Dima joined him.

"Hey, comrade," Dima said, tone, choice of words, everything exactly as it would have been in the eighties, in that forsaken country.

Vadim peered at him in the mirror. "Yes?"

"Are you guys in trouble?" Dima moved closer, stood within touching distance. "I don't mean your little crusade a while back. I mean the rest."

Vadim inhaled and lowered his gaze for a few moments. "Life isn't easy, Dima. That's our set of rules."

"You know you can change them. If he's fucking around ..."

"So am I."

"But you're not happy with it?"

"It's just sex, Dima."

Dima looked at him for a long time. "It's never just sex for you, though. Am I wrong?"

"No. You're right." Vadim shook his head. "Rules, Dima. We're a different case."

Dima reached out and took him by the shoulders, pulling him up and back against him, which made Vadim look at himself in the mirror.

"It's not easy. I wish it was."

Dima nodded, holding him in that weird backwards embrace. "We're still brothers, Vadim. Whatever happens, and whatever comes, we share something that nothing can take away. I didn't help you once, and I hated it."

“Nothing you could have done ...”

“No, but still. I won’t do that a second time. I owe you.”

“You owe Dan.”

“He’s a friend, too. But ...” Dima inhaled, his grip stronger now. “If I have to choose, I’m standing with a brother.”

Vadim smiled, touched against his will. Brother. The good kind of family. “Thought you never bought the military doctrine bullshit.”

“No bullshit.” Dima stared at him with an intensity that was unlike him. “I won’t do it a second time. I’ll be there. Whatever you need, whenever you need me. I’ll be there. As a comrade.”

Spetsnaz. Vadim inhaled and touched Dima’s right hand. “Go back. Your husband-to-be might get the wrong ideas.” Dima let him go and headed back, and Vadim murmured “thanks,” which, he knew, Dima heard and acknowledged before the door closed behind him.

Dan looked up when Dima returned. “Has Vadim drowned? Should I go and rescue him?”

Dima grinned. “Don’t worry, he’s on the way back. And no, it’s not what you think, sorry.”

“What *do* I think?”

Dima leaned forward, mottled eyes gleaming with mischief. “You wonder who gave whom a blow job.”

Dan tilted his head, suddenly serious for a second. “You might be surprised, but not all of my thoughts evolve around sex.”

Vadim appeared again, and settled back into his chair. “Okay, I missed something?”

Dima shrugged. “It’s the obvious thought. Sorry if I was wrong.”

“Obvious because it’s me, aye?” Dan shrugged as well, fishing for a cigarette but he already had a packet under his nose. Markus’ hand held it.

“Anyone ready to order?”

Vadim cleared his throat and carefully selected his menu. The things the place did best – everything that was grilled and spicy, whereas Dima stuck to today’s special.

Dima was more careful for the rest of the evening. Vadim could tell the difference, Dima rebuffed wasn’t quite the natural Dima, and he clearly kept his fastest responses in check, being far less spontaneous in his ripostes and jokes than normal – until more alcohol entered the equation and by then Dan was well on his way through a bottle and more himself.

“Can you believe it?” Dan grinned into the round, “Vadim really is going to fly to America in three weeks. Who’d have thought they’d let him in. Big bad Russian and all that.” He grinned, letting Markus refill his glass again.

“Means the cold war is well and truly over,” Dima commented, which made Vadim laugh.

“I ... guess. Unless they let me in to be able to grab me and ask some questions while they’re at it.”

“But you are looking forward to it?”

"I read about the place, I know some Americans ... it's certainly going to be interesting."

"Aye, especially with that particular American he's going to visit." Dan nudged Vadim, grinning, and clearly rather tipsy.

Vadim felt Dima's eyes on him again, that same perceptive expression. Fuck him, Dima was far too clever for his own good. "American special forces," he said, as if that explained everything. "The people you meet in the Gulf."

"And everywhere else." Dan quipped, glass once again on his lips.

Dima grinned. "Yes, there's still regimental pride."

"Aye, and that appeals to Vadim." Dan leaned his head across to touch Vadim's shoulder. He didn't notice how Markus was looking first at him, then at Vadim, and then ostentatiously busied himself with the wine.

Vadim shrugged and grinned. Hooch wasn't a matter of regimental pride. He was the same kind of man, special forces, tough, hard, physically perfect, mentally alert, the pinnacle of soldiering. Never mind the humour, the need, and the fact he had culture. Not sure what to say, discussing Hooch didn't feel right, it was his thing, strangely private, intimate, even. He didn't boast about 'conquests', certainly not when they came that close to the heart.

Dan straightened back up, grabbed his glass once more and tipped it back, all of it. "Yeah." Slammed it down onto the table, the mis-coordination of someone who'd had too much drink. "And he's in love with him." He then shrugged, leaned across the table and looked for the waiter. Clearly worse for wear.

Vadim turned his head, alarmed by the words and the reaction. Shit. Back to square one. In front of ... friends, yes, he knew he could trust Dima, and Markus was harmless, but, shit, it was none of their business. A quick glance to Dima told him that Dima had finally pieced the story together. Didn't even know how to limit the damage, fix the conversation after this. It made him look bad – exposed him. "It is not the same thing, Dan, as I keep trying to explain."

"Yeah, whatever." Speech slurred, Dan flashed a grin and shrugged again, as if nothing meant anything. "You enjoy yourself, you deserve it." Smiling brightly, Dan flagged the waiter down, focused on getting more booze.

Vadim debated with himself whether he wanted to get a taxi now, or get Dan to follow and get them both a taxi. Leaving him could be bad, would make him look worse: guilty. He shook his head. "Let's go back, Dan. We have to get up early tomorrow." Not strictly true, but a way out.

"Bullshit." Dan wasn't looking at Vadim, talking to the waiter instead, when Markus looked up, after a glance at Dima, and jumped into the breach.

"Actually, I have to be out early as well. Must admit I could do with going back. Do you mind, Dan? We just postpone the next bottle, until we head to the beach. Is that an idea?" He yawned for good effect, even making it look natural.

Dan turned his head and looked at him for a long time, slightly swaying. The last of the vodka was finally kicking in. "Aye ... if you think so?"

“Yes.” Dima stood first. “I’ll get the jackets.” He headed across, while Vadim waved the waiter over to pay.

Not much later, they were out on the street, Vadim waiting for the taxi, Dan beside him, while Markus and Dima waited with them, for courtesy. Vadim met Dima’s eyes for a long moment, and thought of the brief talk in the toilet. Brothers. On one hand, he was grateful for the unexpected loyalty, on the other, it almost felt like a small wedge that Dima was driving between him and Dan, professing his loyalty to one, but not the other. He couldn’t quite place the eerie feeling, only that he didn’t like it.

July 1993, Colorado USA

Hooch had promised to pick Vadim up at the airport, just in case there were any problems at immigration. He had supplied him with details of where he was going to stay, who had booked it, for how long, how he’d get there, and his own address, including the phone number of his newfangled cell phone.

Vadim was slightly queasy about entering the country, didn’t like people looking at him, because some part of him always feared retaliation. But the Americans didn’t appear to look at him any different to anybody else entering the country. If they noticed the Russian name, they didn’t show it, and Vadim was through immigration with none of the expected problems. Once through, Vadim shouldered his bag and walked into the airport hall.

There, Hooch. He spotted him right away.

Hooch stood at arrivals, leaning with his hip against one of the barriers, and looking every inch alert – to the eyes of someone who knew him – and relaxed to everyone else.

Vadim saw Hooch see him, then smiled at him and strode out faster. “Hi.”

Hooch’s face changed into a smile, and he reached out to take one of the bags from Vadim’s shoulder. “Hi, buddy. Good to see you.” He touched Vadim’s shoulder in a firm grip, a little too long, perhaps, squeezing, before letting go. “Everything’s set up, just get into the car.” Pointing towards the exit and the car park. “Did you have a good flight?”

“I could do with some exercise after this.”

“I’m sure I can arrange that.”

Vadim grinned, fished in his jacket for sun-glasses as they stepped out of the building, and put them on. “Brilliant weather,” he commented. “How have you been?”

“Bored.” They reached a large 4x4, shiny and black, over the top and entirely American. “Looks like I’m off to warmer climes in a month or two.” Hooch threw the bag inside, waited for Vadim to do the same. “And you?”

“Hard to get bored in the Balkans,” Vadim smiled. “Theoretically, the place provides much entertainment, only you’re not really invited to the show. So, it’s a lot of waiting.” Unless you go out and hunt your own, he thought, grimly, still proud of the dozens of men he’d killed. “I’ll tell you the story,” he murmured.

“Okay.” Hooch got into the driver’s seat and navigated them out of the parking lot.

“And you? Africa?”

“The Mog.” Hooch glanced across and shrugged. The US engagement there was no secret. Passing through the barrier, he drove out of the airport and towards the open road. “Matt’s currently in Monrovia, he’s just qualified as a PT instructor. Last I heard he’s wringing his kit out in the ‘sauna’ over there.” He grinned, and when they hit the road the full majesty of the landscape became apparent.

Vadim leaned back, took the sunglasses off to regard the range of Rockies – that was what they had to be, the way they filled the horizon. “Somalia, then. Another place full of fun and joy.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t matter. One’s like the other. What matters are the people.” Glancing across, “right?”

Vadim shrugged. Did they? Stjepan. Sanya. In a way, yes, they mattered, but it wasn’t the reason he’d done it. The only people he’d done it for was the Soviet – Russian – people. He wasn’t like Markus, who served, he assumed, some ideal of humanity; he wasn’t like Dima, who enjoyed the split-second decisions that had to be made under fire, both hands in some guy’s abdominal cavity, fishing for bullets or torn arteries. Dan saw it as a job. To Vadim, it went deeper, was a calling, perhaps. It called to the predator inside, the man who’d lived and breathed to compete. Competition who’d shoot whom, like sniper games. The civilians rarely figured. “All just humans,” he murmured, non-committal. Narcissist, Konstantinov had called him. All that mattered to him was he and himself.

“Comrades? More than that.” Hooch leaned back in the driver’s seat, sticking to the speed limit. All he had to do in the automatic was to keep the vehicle on the road. A road that went straight on through the most breathtaking landscape with clear blue skies above and a majesty that could rival – albeit very differently – Dan’s beloved Afghan mountains.

It was like taking him back. Mountains, open sky, the clear, dark blue. Vadim couldn’t help but smile at the irony. Mountains, a man, and himself. History repeating. If he’d allow it to. Only, it was Hooch who’d get tortured up there, there would be a lot more sex from the very beginning, and, he assumed, no scars, as always, playing as safe as possible. Thinking about Dan’s jealousy, the hurt reaction. He didn’t want to hurt Dan. But Dan had put him through the very same thing with Jean, the jealousy, and with Matt and whoever the fuck else. He deserved some space, didn’t he? It wasn’t like Hooch was anywhere close to falling for him – the comradeship and the need to have these things done didn’t add up to ‘love’. It wasn’t black and white, it was a world of grey.

When they got up to the cabin Vadim was pleasantly surprised at the rural comfort. No electricity, but gas cooker and lamps, and running water. The cabin was spacious, clad in warm, honey-coloured wood, and the furniture was wooden as well. It seemed handmade and well done, everything sturdy and

simple yet colourful, what with the woven rugs, the quilted bedspreads and flowers inside and out.

Hooch let Vadim settle down, then showed him the ‘toys’ he had brought, a selection similar to the first one, but with added twists and new items to explore.

The first day and night was spent allowing Vadim to deal with his jet-lag, and for the two men to become comfortable with each other again. Something that happened as if they’d never been apart. Friends that were close the moment they met, and the first sex was ‘fun’, a Hooch used to call sex without pain, with the understanding it would change the next day.

The next morning, Hooch told him what he wanted. Being hunted. He’d vanish into the forest, and Vadim would track him. He wanted it to be as real as possible, a true challenge to Vadim’s soldiering skills, and Vadim was confident enough. He’d trapped chetniks, he could deal with one man. He liked the idea, liked the fact it was gloves off, full-out sex, the prisoner game. The mountains were the perfect backdrop to it. Nobody around for a hundred miles. Just enough space for him, Hooch, and his demons.

July 1993, the Balkans

Vadim had been away for three days, when Dan was standing at the gate to the camp, waiting to be picked up. True to form, Markus’ car approached at exactly the correct time, and with him Dima. As promised, they were picking him up for a day at the beach – one of the few areas that was deemed fairly safe in a country where nothing at all was safe anymore.

The day was brilliant, with blue skies and sunshine, the heat begging to be enjoyed in bathing shorts in the water, not in body armour and certainly not in an armoured vehicle without air con.

It took them an hour to get to the spot, and while Dan got out of the car to look around, already in shorts, t-shirt and the obligatory shades, Markus was heaving out basket after basket of picnic food, helped by Dima, who looked like the very image of healthy and civilian, a far shot from the dusty haunted man Dan had met.

“Down to the beach, the stones over there provide a bit of cover from the wind,” Dima said, taking a couple of baskets from Markus and carrying them down, while Markus locked the car. Dan picked up another two and shook his head.

“For how many people did you cater?”

“Don’t blame me, my cook went a little overboard.” Grinning, Markus shouldered the rest of the items.

“What do you say? Nice spot, or nice spot?”

Dan looked at Dima and nodded. “Can’t fault it, and it seems to be free of AKs. Which, in my books, is a bloody big bonus.”

Hearing Markus chuckle behind him, Dan followed Dima, carefully picking his way through the rocks. Uneven surface was the most difficult kind, but he'd be buggered if he let it on. Figuring that that overly perceptive medic had noticed anyway. "By the way ..." stepping over a couple of puddles, filled with sea water and algae, "did I behave like a right idiot, the other day?"

"You mean, in the restaurant?" Dima motioned him further, picking his way through the rocks towards a more cleared area. "Vadim seemed to not appreciate the topic. I ..." he shrugged. "I don't mind. Lucky me, I'm an outsider enough that I can see both views."

"I just had too much to drink." Dan shrugged, glanced behind him, but Markus seemed to be occupied with balancing the luggage in one hand while fishing for a cigarette with the other. "I'm okay with it. Really."

"Hope you don't mind me asking, but why is that? Is that because you *are* okay, or because monogamy bores you, or because you want other guys. And lots of them?" Dima grinned to maybe take the sting out. "I mean, having been one of them, I think it would be a waste of sexual talent ... but I'm also Vadim's old comrade."

Dan stopped when they had reached the spot. "Okay with what? Vadim having sex with other men? Aye, I *am* okay with that. Sex doesn't equal love, after all." He shrugged, turned round to Markus who'd managed to light his cigarette and was putting the basket, the towels and blankets down. "Markus, did you think, when I had sex with you, that I loved you? And in return, did you fall in love with me?"

Markus looked at him, about to say something when Dan turned towards Dima, "or Dima, did you suddenly fall in love with me because I had sex with you? Did you think I loved you because we shagged?"

"No. I never did. Before." Dima glanced at Markus, who grinned at him warmly, and smiled. "But it can happen. Some people fall easily, others fall hard, but there's always the potential to fall. And you think that is what happened to Vadim. He's had sex with this ... American. Oh god, the irony, and deep solemn thinker that he is, it was more than he could chew, because no way I believe he was actively looking for it, if it is really what happened, not with your history ... and now Vadim is all conflicted about what he wants. Is that the story?"

"In a nutshell." Dan unfolded a chair and sat down, fishing for his own fags. "But it's not all."

"What else?" Markus was sitting as well, rummaging in the picnic baskets.

"Hooch, the Delta, gives him something that I can't. He gives him the old Vadim, the darkness." Dan looked out over the sea, the coming and going of the waves. The sound was ridiculously peaceful in a country torn by civil war. "Hooch ... he looks a lot like me. Ten years or so ago." Lighting his fag, Dan looked down at his scarred hand, before he shrugged into the round.

"The old Vadim," Dima echoed. "Now, that's a tough one." He looked to Markus. "You need to understand that Vadim is very different from what he once was. He has mellowed a lot. I couldn't tell which I'd prefer, the Soviet

officer in all his glory, or the ... merc we've come to know in this part of the world. I could deal with him, back then, he wasn't all that scary to me, but he ... had his moments."

Markus looked thoughtful. "I would not want to judge either way, bearing in mind that I don't know Vadim well to start with, and have no idea what he was like before, but I'd be scared stiff thinking how he might have been."

"Good, natural reaction, the scared stiff bit." Dima looked at Dan. "You feel like you're getting replaced by the younger guy, then? Vadim's moving on, or rather, returning to what he was ... before?"

"I don't know. Replaced? Perhaps. But ... how could he, I mean, they have no history." Inhaling smoke, Dan's face didn't let on what he was thinking. Not the pain, not the worry, nothing at all. "Or perhaps that is it. Perhaps I remind him too much ..." Shaking his head slowly.

"Of what?" Markus asked. "Of the man he once was?"

"No." Dan shook his head again, "of what was done to him by the KGB. The captivity, the torture." Looking out over the waves again, "his ex-wife certainly thinks it is all my fault."

"And you think she has a point?" Dima frowned. "Or it wouldn't stick. Whatever she said. Maybe she is jealous, too. Maybe he's moved on from her, and she does everything to hurt the rival. There are lots of explanations. From my perspective, something went really deep and now you're doubting things. Re-evaluation. What it all means, how it all happened. Maybe?"

"Maybe." Dan looked down at his hand again. "Maybe I just think that if someone falls in love with someone else than the love he might have had for the first one isn't worth as much as it was before." He pulled on his cigarette, then stubbed out the butt on the rocks.

Markus remained very silent, but reached out to touch Dima, looking at him for a moment. Dima took his hand and held it.

"I think, personally, that we can't make judgements like that ... I'd take anything in its time and what it meant back then. And with your history, it's clear you guys both risked everything and did everything for each other. I think Vadim would still die for you, even though he went on his own little crusade, even though he was a scary bastard in Afghanistan. We're people, Dan. We're more complex than black and white. Vadim certainly seems to have some shades and colours there that ... probably defy all rational analysis." Dima inhaled. "But, if you think he's fallen in love, then there's three things: one, accept it and live with it ... which seems unlikely. Two: Wait till he's decided who he wants ... he might work out it's not all that serious, or three: force him to make a decision and to not see this American again."

Dan let out a soft huff of laughter. Not entirely without humour, but certainly with a lot of wistfulness. "Three would be a killer, and he never forced me to make a decision either, so it's a no-go. Besides, I don't believe in it." Glancing at the two men's combined hands, he smiled. "One, you're right, complete no-go, too. I thought I was okay with it, hell, I would have been okay if he'd just gone out and have sex and enjoy himself, like I do, but this ... this is

cutting bloody deep. Especially with a man who's damn similar in some ways to my younger self, and so extremely different in others." He looked up, from one to the other. "I guess it is two, then. Not much I can do until he's made up his mind, aye?"

"No, not really, I'm afraid. Apart from giving him space and not pushing him away further. He's in no great situation, either, I imagine."

"Listen to Dima, he's a wise man." Markus smiled.

"You're biased. You are clearly biased." Dan countered and Markus let out a laugh. Another shrug and Dan stood up. "At least I can stop moping and go for a swim. Anyone care to join me?" He was already pulling the t-shirt over his head.

"I'll help get the food out first," said Dima.

"No problem." Dan made his way across the rocks, careful to balance, but it was tricky in the flip-flops. If he took them off he might cut his feet, thus he kept them on until he got closer to the water, then left them there, before he threw himself into the waves. It was good to feel the fresh sea water, taste and smell the salt. While nothing would ever come close to the Afghan mountain air, the sea would always be a friend, even though he'd never love the water as much as Vadim did. Swimming for quite a while, Dan got out eventually and looked across, shaking his head with a grin when he spotted Dima and Markus oblivious to food, sea, Dan and anything else, lost in what seemed to be a rather passionate kiss.

"Hey!" Dan called out, waving, "is that resuscitation or are you force-feeding each other?" He was still laughing when he got the flip-flops back on and made his way back. Dripping wet, eager to get to his towel, he sped up across the slippery rocks.

"I start to feel like one of the parents of a young family," grouched Dima. "Honest, honey, I thought the kid was playing."

Bantering with the two men, Dan was shouting a particularly kind insult as he took a larger step, then a half-jump across a patch of algae, and he slipped. Balance gone, he hadn't seen the puddle, glistening amongst the rocks, but tried to stop his fall. "Shit!" he exclaimed, as he lost his footing completely, the flip-flop fell off and his left leg slid to the side. His foot caught in a crevice and he crashed down onto the rocks with his right knee.

He screamed, the sound torn from his chest when the bones and cartilage let out a horrendous crunching sound and the pain in his knee was unbearable.

Dima was on his feet instantly, running, far more nimble than his body let on. Full medic mode in a heartbeat, before Markus had even managed to pale at the sudden scream. Dima was there in a moment, cursing in Russian as he touched Dan's shoulders. "Calm. Breathe. I'm there." Firm, secure touches. "Don't panic. We're here."

"I'm not fucking panicking!" Dan pressed out between his teeth, sick with the pain, he wanted to tear into something, shout, yell, curse, and groaned out instead, "my knee!"

Dima moved stones to the side, one hand then on Dan's leg, soothing, no pressure, like he was dealing with a panicking animal. "We'll get you to a hospital. Can you stand on the other leg?"

"I don't know. Don't fucking know!" But of course he was already fighting to get up, even though the pain was nauseating. Every new pain was a fresh memory, and the old ones had paled.

"Take hold of my shoulder." Markus' voice, he'd made it across and was on Dan's other side.

Dima nodded to Markus, took hold of Dan's other side, firmly supporting him, as they very carefully made their way back to the car, evaluating every step like on a minefield, with Dan hopping on his left leg. Another trip-up could be potentially disastrous. They managed to get to the car, where Markus helped Dan inside and Dima returned to the beach to grab the stuff – moving quickly to gather the baskets and everything else, cursing inwardly for not having anything with him that could help Dan right now ... but with that kind of injury, he wanted an x-ray, and, besides, he wasn't a proper doctor.

When he returned, Markus had helped make Dan as comfortable as possible in the back seat. Leg stretched out, and towels rolled up for support. "He won't give me my fucking painkillers!" Dan hissed at Dima when he returned.

"I just don't know if I should." Markus looked at Dima for help.

"Not to a civilian, but in this case ..." Dima nodded and went through Dan's stuff to check the prescription, then counted him two pills out and handed them to Dan. "No need to make you suffer worse on the way to hospital."

"Cheers, bastard." Dan grouched, but it was the pain speaking. He swallowed the pills dry and pressed his head back against the backseat window.

Getting inside, Dima took the steering wheel after a short query from Markus, who explained to him the fastest way to the hospital.

Dan never made a sound except for an occasional suppressed groan, for the entire hour it took to get to the hospital.

They arrived at the main entrance, after somebody had tried to dissuade them – until Dima had stated in no unclear terms that this *was* an emergency, and he vanished inside, to return only five minutes later with several hospital staff and a trolley. Between them, they got Dan out of the car and onto the trolley, and got him inside, while Dima stayed around, trusting Markus to find a parking place and join them later.

By the time Markus arrived in the ward, Dan had been wheeled to an orderly, and was already on his way to be x-rayed. They hadn't let Dima follow Dan, and Dima was sitting in the waiting area, looking up when Markus arrived.

"What's happening?"

"X-ray." Dima leaned back and shook his head. "Shit. I knew this was coming, but it's bad all the same. Plus, not sure how to get in touch with Vadim. If this is what I think it is, he should be in touch."

"Best ask Dan when he comes back out, he must have a phone number." Markus frowned, sat close to Dima, and from his thoughtful expression it was

obvious that he was thinking of ways to help. The machinery that was at his disposal wasn't made for such situations and could not offer direct help, but it might come in handy nevertheless.

It took a long time before Dan came back out. Over two hours, before he finally returned in a wheelchair, leg elevated and knee tightly strapped up, holding a large envelope in his lap. His face was closed, showing nothing. "They can't do anything here. I need to get back to Britain." His voice, too, devoid of anything.

Dima nodded. "I'm sure we can arrange that." Looking at Markus, who was far better at organizing stuff than he was.

"Of course, I am sure I can get you onto the next possible flight. Where to?"

But Dan didn't answer.

"Let me have a look?" Dima took the envelope out of Dan's hands and pulled the foil out far enough to have a look at the knee, examining it against the light in the corridor. He winced when he saw the x-ray. Nothing should look like that, it was all wrong, the knee looked like it had pretty much disintegrated. He stuffed the envelope back. "Do you have a phone number for Vadim? I'd call him."

"No. They are in a fucking cabin in the fucking Rocky Mountains. No fucking phone." Pressed out, "he said he'd call in two days." Dan suddenly shook his head, violently. "I'll be okay. Been doing this shit on my own before." His fist clenched in his lap, "take me back to camp, aye? Need to organise some things."

"Let's get back into the car," Dima conceded, and they got out of the hospital and carefully manoeuvred Dan back into the car. On the way towards camp, Dima asked: "How long do you need to organize your things? That knee won't get any better." There was no space for positive improvement. None.

"I know. They told me." Dan looked out of the window, shutting up, clearly not venturing anything else.

Dima reached out and touched Dan's shoulder, looking at him, but wouldn't deny it. It was definitely over, and what that meant for Dan was anybody's guess. "We'll organize the flights and pick you up – what do you think? Tomorrow? Or later tonight? Can we do that?" Looking at Markus.

"Tomorrow." Markus was driving, his face concentrated, working out solutions. "I can get you on a flight early in the morning. There is one going to London Heathrow, and I am sure I can sort out the paperwork. Okay, Dan?" He glanced to the backseat, but Dan didn't answer. "I assume you need to get to a hospital?" Still no answer and Markus looked at Dima. "I can help with that as well, perhaps."

"Yes." Dima gave him a smile. "Do you know anybody in the area? What about Scotland? You're Scottish, so ... maybe get treatment there? Do you know anybody in the area?"

Dan didn't listen. No indication, no sound, nothing. Whatever they asked, whatever they said, he didn't react. Not until they got to the camp. "You

haven't got security clearance. I'll manage." The hospital had given him two crutches, and Dan made his way out of the car with them. Not accepting help.

"Okay." Dima got out of the car. "We'll call you about the flights. Meanwhile ..." He shrugged. "Call us if you need anything, okay?"

"Yeah, thanks." Dan nodded at him and Markus, barely accepting that Dima helped him sling the bag across the shoulders, then hobbling on his crutches through the gate, not turning once.

* * *

Vadim sat in one of those very American 'diners', having just demolished what amounted to the worst nutritional sin: a stack of pancakes with tangy syrup, but he'd always wanted to try those, having known them only from TV, and all washed down with coffee that wasn't great, but very strong. He asked for a phone and the booth was indicated to him. Quickly doing the calculations, it would be late morning over in the Balkans. Calling the camp, but the answer there was confusing – confusing and alarming, so he dialled the other number he'd taken, just in case.

The voice that answered the phone spoke English, with a Germanic accent, and was obviously in a hurry. "Hello?"

"Markus? Vadim here. How are you?"

"Vadim! Sorry, I was just ..." a loud rustling sound was heard, then a clunk, and Markus seemed to settle. "We were waiting for your call."

"I thought so ... Dan? Dan is back in Britain? The people in camp said he left a couple of days ago and has flown back to Britain. What happened?"

"I'm afraid he had an accident. I mean, not an accident, but we were at the beach and he slipped. He ... the knee's bad. Dima saw the x-rays and he told me the knee is practically shattered. Nothing that can be done." Markus lit a cigarette, Vadim could hear him inhale. "I organised a flight out for him the next morning, and as far as I know he got into a hospital in Southampton. It was the only one that could do the surgery as soon as possible."

Vadim felt his stomach churn, the pancakes in there felt as heavy as the same amount in cement. "Oh ... damn." *Practically shattered*. Fuck. The knee. The bad knee. "I'll be back over right away ... I'll take the fastest flight out. Do you have a phone number at the hospital? How is he ... holding up?"

"He wasn't talking." The worry was audible in Markus' voice. He hadn't liked that fact and it showed. "Do you know if he has any family close? He wouldn't even answer that." The sound of smoking again.

"Yes, he has family up in Scotland. I'll call his brother. Maybe Duncan can help."

"Scotland ... that's probably furthest away." Markus sighed, "I have a phone number for the hospital, but I have no idea when they will operate on him. Dima told me he thinks the only way is an artificial knee."

"Career-ending operation, yes?" That was the worst.

“Yes.” A pause, then, “artificial knees are pretty good these days, but it’s the end of a lot of things. Running, climbing, that sort of stuff.”

Vadim cursed himself for having left, but fuck, he couldn’t have known. “Give me the phone numbers. I’ll be back as soon as possible. I’ll ... do what I can.” Almost apologetic.

“Vadim?” Markus sounded hesitant.

“Yes?”

“I realise it is not my business, but before the accident happened, we ... Dan and Dima talked. He’s ... whatever ... whatever you decide ...” Markus was clearly uncomfortable talking about this private matter, but he seemed rattled enough to feel the need to say it nevertheless.

Vadim closed his eyes. Dan had discussed the whole thing. Not enough that he’d done that in the restaurant, no, they’d discussed it further. How bad did that make him look? Leaving Dan in an hour of need because there was Hooch? Fuck that. The thought alone made him angry, nauseous, helpless. “You mean, decide between Hooch and Dan?” Hooch the man that was helplessly tied up in the cabin up the mountain, and Dan, who’d suffered a career-ending wound and lay in a hospital, completely alone.

“No.” Markus exhaled noisily. “Whatever you decide to do.” A pause, then a small sound. “Sugar!” The most cursing that Markus allowed himself. “I’m sorry, I should have shut up.” A faint rustling sound. “Will you accept my apologies for meddling in affairs that are not mine but that of friends, and take the phone number instead?”

“Don’t worry. It’s ... it’s just not easy at the moment.” Vadim inhaled deeply. “Listen, I should make preparations to come back ... I’ll give you a call once the flight is sorted, and I’ll call Dan right away. Thanks for looking after him when I was gone, okay?”

“You’re welcome, and I will tell Dima that you called.”

Vadim ended the call with a bad feeling in his guts, dread, memories from another hospital and Dan shot to shit. Promises, back then. Now, years later, he had to stand by his word, he had to. It made him feel helpless, just like last time. He’d be there. No doubt. He dialled the number Markus had given him, waiting for reception to pick up.

They were soon on the line and asked what they could do for him. And when he told them, they flat out refused to give any kind of information, to, as they put it, unauthorized users. Vadim was stunned, but realized, yes, he wasn’t family; he was nothing. To all intents and purposes, Dan was none of his business. He shuddered, couldn’t think straight, didn’t argue, didn’t reason with them, just put the phone down, utterly stunned. He’d forgotten about the civilian, straight, heterosexual ways to deal with people like Dan and him.

He needed a few moments to calm down, then called Duncan, who was astonished first, then delighted, and then alerted when he realised why Vadim called. The alertness turned into worry when Vadim explained to him what happened, and Duncan promised to find out immediately at the hospital what

was going on, and to call him back, straight away. Duncan hung up after Vadim had found the number of the pay phone.

It took about half an hour before the phone rang again. "Vadim?" Duncan's voice was faint on the crackling line.

"Yes, I'm here. How ... what does it look like? What's the ... situation?"

"They are getting Dan ready for the surgery. He was lucky, one of the surgeons who's an expert on knee replacements has a slot free. It's all happening much faster than expected. He is currently being prepared."

"Fuck." And I'm not there. "I mean ... lucky, but ... I am in the wrong place." He remembered how much Dan hated hospitals, and by now it felt like madness that he'd left without a direct phone connection at all. Fuck. "Thanks. I ... I don't know. I'll get a plane back, I'll be there, but ... I think they won't let me through. Can you ... can you help somehow?"

"Not let you through?" Duncan sounded incredulous.

"Of course not. I'm a stranger for them. The gay thing doesn't exist, and certainly doesn't mean I have any right to disturb a patient." Vadim felt the bile rise. "Sorry. I'm just ... headless at the moment."

"Listen, I can't get away from here immediately. Mhairi isn't too well and the farm, I can't just leave it, aye? When do you think will you be able to be in Southampton? You are in the Balkans at the moment, aren't you?"

"No, I was ... visiting a friend in the States. I'll take the next flight back. Could you call and I check with you? I'm absolutely taking the very next flight to the UK."

"Aye. How many days? Two?"

"At most."

"I make sure they let you through and I will be there as well. I should be able to get down there in a couple of days, too. Call me anytime, in the meantime I'll organise everything with the hospital and keep checking up on Dan via phone. I'll speak to you soon, Vadim. Take care." The line went dead.

"Thank you." Vadim sat down, placed the phone back and ordered another coffee, then, after the first mouthful decided that the coffee would kill his raging stomach, and ordered tap water. Shit. What a fuck-up. He paid his food and drink and went to Hooch's car, and drove back. The roads were mostly empty, he was lucky that there was hardly anybody on the streets, because he drove like a sleepwalker. When he was back at the cabin he could barely remember how he'd got there.

He unlocked the door, walked into the bedroom, where Hooch was trussed up, blindfolded, and waiting for him. Vadim stroked his face, then cut the rope that held the whole bundle together, and Hooch collapsed. Muscles refusing to comply. Trying to get Hooch out of the 'scene' as gently as possible, but he was in no mood to continue the game. He'd be shit, as upset and confused as he was now. "Hooch. I'll have to go back," he murmured, stroking the man, not yet taking the blindfold off.

Hooch was struggling to get his thoughts together, to surface, and he attempted to lift his hands to get to the gag, but his arms, too, didn't comply.

Not yet. He managed to nod, though, while breathing sharply and harshly through his nose.

Vadim lay down on the bed, right next to him, stroking him. When he felt Hooch was starting to come round, he carefully took the gag out, ever so gently, and got up to head to the bathroom, returning with a warm, wet washcloth and a towel to clean Hooch up a little. He massaged the strained shoulders, the arms, then lay down beside him to warm and reassure him, to ‘cuddle’, even. “I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I made a call, and something ... serious has happened over in Europe. Dan is in hospital, they ... will replace his knee. I need to get back.”

Hooch took in a deep breath, body wrecked with shudders. “Dan?” It took him a while to clue on. Thoughts sluggish, and his voice raw and abused. “You got ... to go.” Lifting his head towards Vadim, despite the blindfold. He started to have control over his fingers again, and they scrabbled for Vadim, touching his chest.

Vadim placed an arm around him, holding him tight, chest to chest, and just having somebody close felt good while he was worried witless – at least it felt like it, fear, guilt, nausea. Waiting several minutes, then he took the blindfold off. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah ...” breathed out, Hooch’s eyes were disoriented at first, slowly focusing. “But are you?”

“At the moment, I don’t know, I really don’t.”

It took some effort to lift an arm, but Hooch managed. Strength would be returning eventually. “What happened to Dan?” The arm came down on Vadim’s shoulder, its weight reassuring.

“He tripped and his knee ... the bad one, apparently sustained some serious damage. He needs a replacement, and he’s going under the knife right now.”

“Shit. I’ll help you get a flight. Just got to ... got to get my body under control.” Hooch offered a half-smile.

Vadim nodded, held him tight. “Fuck.” Changing from the one who controlled and punished to the one who needed somebody close, right now, needed reassurance, closeness, needed the touch. “It’s the end of the line for him. I kept saying ... kept telling him I wanted to quit, and he always fought it, but fuck, that’s it now. He’s forced to quit now.”

“That’s bad.” Hooch’s voice was gravely, and he could hardly hold onto Vadim, but he still managed to convey his understanding. “Help me get into a bath?”

“Yeah.” Vadim stood, headed into the bathroom, ran the hot bath that should relax Hooch’s tight muscles, and helped him get up, steadying the man and helping him to get into the bath, where he helped to stretch and massage the muscles. He had to force himself to focus on Hooch, had to push all thoughts of Dan away, at least now, in the aftercare part, where much depended on him reading the body right. But fortunately the body was tough, incredibly resilient, and Hooch was coming back to functioning much quicker than usual. Clearly forcing himself.

He was more or less functional an hour later, dressing after downing a litre of water, topping up with a strong coffee that Vadim had brewed. Vadim drove the car, Hooch's muscles were still too sore, but when they checked out flights in the travel agency in town, Hooch appeared as normal as anyone could, at least anyone covered in bruises that were cleverly hidden beneath the casual clothing.

While Hooch was negotiating flights to Britain, using all of his considerable persuasion powers, Vadim was on the phone to Duncan. Nothing new from the hospital, still the same, and even Duncan wondered if he was being fobbed off by nurses who were too stressed to actually deal with a request for information.

It wasn't straightforward when he called the camp, either. Vadim's contract was still running, and he was forced to fall back onto the Baroness, but he didn't have her phone number, could only refer to her, but right now couldn't reach her. No matter, though, he wouldn't go back to the Balkans, was going to Britain instead. When he met Hooch again, after endless phone calls, Hooch was holding a ticket out to him. The next morning, the earliest possible flight, to London Gatwick.

"Thank you." Vadim's head spun – all the implications, all that work, and legal things and medical things and the worry. "Should we ... find a hotel near the airport? Think ... you can spend the night with me there?" Which amounted to: I don't want to be alone. Unlike Dan, of course, and the guilt was back eating at his guts.

"Sure." Hooch smiled, touched Vadim's shoulder. "Let's pack up, and head to the airport. I take you to the plane tomorrow."

They did exactly that, and while Vadim didn't manage to push Dan completely from his mind, he was less frantic, even managed to sleep after giving and receiving a blow job, not because he felt like sex but because he needed to get tired, somehow, any way that worked. He finally managed to sleep for a few hours, even if that sleep was restless and sweaty, but at the very least he didn't scream.

The next morning Hooch did as he'd promised, he was seeing Vadim off at 6 AM, even waiting until he had gone through passport control.

It had been six days since Vadim had seen Dan last, and it would take at least another one before he could gain access. It all felt bleak, depressing, dark. He was helpless, condemned to just wait it out, not knowing, with no way to check while in the air, and he didn't know how to face it. But it had to happen one day, they had both seen it coming. Dan had ignored it, and Vadim had allowed himself to be fooled. And nothing could bring that back. They hadn't actually planned for retirement, which meant a lot of work still ahead, a completely new life, a new routine would have to be found, a new way for everything. Vadim sat there, looking at the clouds underneath and wished he could have had this differently. That Dan had retired out of his own free will, and not been forced. Even now that he'd got what he wanted – this had indeed been their last war – now he wished he hadn't, but only for Dan's sake.

July 1993, Southampton, United Kingdom

In the hospital, Dan was sitting in a wheelchair, leg raised and immobilised. He'd been prepared for surgery, face stoic, not a muscle twitching, and he'd hardly spoken a word. Couldn't ... just couldn't. Alone, and so goddamned frightened, the fear was knotting his stomach like nothing had ever done before. But he wouldn't show it, wouldn't admit to it. He had no one to admit it to anyway.

Sitting in the hospital gown, all prepped, he was looking at the surgeon.

"Do you have any other questions, Mr McFadyen?"

Dan studied the man in his green scrubs. Questions? What was left to question? The valium was putting a veil over everything, and yet the fear was still there.

"Will I be a cripple?" First words spoken in a long time.

"Mr McFadyen, I would not use such a word. Of course you won't be. There is a lot you will be able to do. Sports, such as cycling or swimming, but of course not breasts strokes, have been known to be very beneficial. The modern medicine ..."

"No." Dan cut in between. "I want to know if I will be a *cripple* or if I will be able to do my job."

"Your job, Mr McFadyen?"

"Aye. I am a soldier. Ex-SAS ... I am ... a mercenary now. PMC."

"I am afraid ..."

"Afraid *what*? I want you to tell me here and now, once you've cut my bones, ripped out the destroyed joint and put that fake one in: Will. I. Be. A. Cripple. Or. Not? Will I get back on duty again?"

"If you put it that way ..." The surgeon was clearly uncomfortable, especially when presented with Dan's clenched fist.

"I do."

"Then the answer is no. I am sorry, Mr McFadyen, but you will never go on active duty again."

Dan and Vadim's story continues in the *Veterans* cycle