

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

Beyond Her Majesty's Men

## ***Short stories***

Code of Honour

Friendly Fire

For Queen and Country

## ***Special Forces epic***

*(co-authored with Vashtan)*

SF Soldiers

SF Mercenaries

SF Veterans

# Special Forces Veterans

- Original Version -

Marquesate & Vashtan

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Visit Marquesate's website "Camouflage Men: Military Gay Erotic Fiction" at [www.marquesate.org](http://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 - Veterans is the third and last cycle of the Special Forces epic, which consists of three cycles and about a million words. The first cycle is Soldiers and the second one is Mercenaries (in two parts).

This print version is the original version of Special Forces, as it was edited at the time of first publication on Marquesate's website. The Veterans cycle was published between November 2008 and April 2009.

This is the only version that is authorised by Marquesate.

Marquesate  
March 2010

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### July 1993, England

The man who was pacing the front of the hospital entrance was deeply in thought, oblivious to the comings and goings around him, and to the brilliant sunshine. Hands in his pockets, he kept looking up occasionally, but didn't seem to notice anything, despite his eyes scanning the parking lot and the one-way street that led towards the entrance barriers.

Half an hour later, a taxi drew up in front of the hospital, and Vadim emerged. He was tired from worry and a night from hell, plus the suitable amount of nightmares. Jetlagged, too, but he almost welcomed the discomfort - it seemed fitting that he felt like shit, too, while Dan was in hospital. He hated hospitals, the smells, the light, and he thought, how fucking ironic, that they were worse for him than battlefields.

“Duncan.”

“Vadim!” Duncan looked up, this time truly looking, and he smiled as he held out his hand. “Good to see you. How has the flight been?”

“Good.” Vadim took Duncan's hand with both his and pressed it. “Good to see you. Any news?”

“Nothing since we last spoke.” Duncan led the way towards the entrance. “The surgery has been successful. When I saw Dan he was still in the waking room, but he should be out now.” The automatic door opened to let them through. “Just in case you might worry, they always keep the patients for a little while under observation. It's nothing abnormal.”

“Aye.” Vadim forced himself to relax the shoulders, gazed around in the reception area. “You think you can get me through there?” He nodded towards the woman. “As a friend of the family?”

“I have already spoken to them. They'll give you five minutes, same as I had.” Duncan turned towards her, smiling brightly when she seemed to recognise him. The exchange was fairly pleasant, but firm, and they were informed that while Vadim would indeed be allowed to visit, visiting hours were over for the morning and they would have to wait for the afternoon slot.

“I guess they are not accepting bribes,” murmured Vadim, trying to hide some of the bitterness. He was too tired to force his way in, damned civilization, where force or bribes achieved so much less.

“No.” Duncan thanked the receptionist nevertheless, obtained the information as to the first possible visiting slot, and clapped his hand onto Vadim's shoulder. “We have four hours and, if you excuse me, but you look tired. I suggest going back to the hotel, you check into your room, we have a quick lunch and you rest before we come back. What do you think?”

“Aye.” Vadim was glad for the touch, and for a moment there was nothing he wanted more than embrace this man, his partner's brother who resembled him enough to soothe him and keep him calm. It was the tiredness. The worry.

He felt weak and drawn. “A shower would be good ... not sure I can sleep.” Not sure I want to try.

“Come along, then. I’ve promised Mhairi to take good care of you, and you can imagine what that means.” Playing at being light-hearted, Duncan joked, and yet – just like his brother – he was a lousy actor. Doing his best though, hiding his own concern behind a warm smile, and Vadim wanted to help him with the pretence, to get to any kind of normalcy.

“Whisky and a lot of calories?”

“You pegged her perfectly. My car’s in the parking lot.” They steered towards it and were soon off to the hotel. As promised, or threatened, Duncan made Vadim have a light lunch with him, and then left him to his own devices, while he went to call his wife for the latest report and to hear how their sons were doing.

Vadim didn’t unpack the small suitcase, but managed to dredge up enough determination to shower and shave, and then called reception for a wake-up call later. He tried to sleep, or at least rest with his eyes closed while focusing on breathing. He drifted in and out of a leaden half-sleep until the wake-up call, and while he was getting dressed, three hours later, with plenty of time to spare, Duncan knocked on the door of Vadim’s room. “Are you getting ready?”

“Yes.” Vadim opened, mostly dressed, just pulling down the t-shirt. “Start to feel more human.”

“Aye, won’t do to look less lively than the patient, will it?” Duncan joked half-heartedly, waiting for Vadim to get ready.

Vadim slipped into his shoes. “I don’t want Dan to worry ... will be hard enough as it is.” Like me being away to shag another guy. Fuck.

“My brother’s tough.” Duncan smiled again, nodding, as if telling himself the same thing over and over again. “All of us McFadyens are.” And their father had died of cancer far too young, and their mother way before that of a heart attack. “Dan will be fine.”

“As my father used to say: we can deal with anything, but not with weakness.” Probably another literary quote he’d never have located - and now never would, being all but unable to read. Vadim took the room key, his wallet and followed Duncan back to the car. “How are the kids?”

“Very well, they’re doing fine. You really must come for a visit when ...” hesitating, “when Dan’s back to being sprightly, this time with some fanciful engineering works in his knee.”

“There will be the question where to heal, Duncan. The Balkans is no such place, and the farm down under isn’t ready.”

“Dan and you are always welcome on our farm. Don’t forget that. Dan could heal while being taken care of by his family, I just don’t know if we have the right medical facilities available. He’d need physiotherapy, but perhaps we could get that in Fort William.”

They got to the car and Duncan waited for Vadim to get in, before driving them to the hospital, and parking in the nearly full parking lot.

Vadim was glad when the receptionist let them pass with no further problems, and not much later, he opened the door to Dan's temporary room in the observation ward.

The sight that greeted him was not all that different to another sight, in another country, a lifetime ago. Machinery and monitors, yet not as intrusive as they had been, in that other life, only one drip and a few cables and patches. Dan's eyes were closed, no tubes nor mask obscuring his face. A face that looked perversely tanned against the stark white of the bed linen, framed by hair that seemed out of place with its barely tamed.

The sight made Vadim pause, overwhelmed by the emotions, the fucking memory, and he could almost taste curry and feel starched civilian clothes again. Five years ago. He'd won and lost Dan then, lost and won himself, and how angry and cunning had the man been he had been once - fierce, loyal, brutal, no remorse, no compromise, whereas now he felt old and tired and mellow. In pain. He moved towards the bed, placed a hand against Dan's cheek, gently, as not to startle him, and touched his lips to the corner of Dan's mouth. "Hey."

The response was sluggish. Sedated, still fighting the last vestiges of the anaesthetic, Dan's eyes opened groggily, as if his eyelids were as heavy as lead. "Hey." Dan croaked, clearing his throat as he fought - and won - to keep his eyes open. Smiling a little. "What a shit ... end of a beach picnic."

Vadim grinned and pulled the chair close, sat, and took hold of Dan's hand. "Sorry I couldn't get in sooner. I took the next flight, but the bitches were giving me trouble."

"Planes? Or nurses?"

"Nurses."

Dan's eyes fluttered shut for just a moment, before jerking himself awake once more. Looking at Vadim, studying his face, but his thoughts remained sluggish, caught in a morass he couldn't and wouldn't wade through. Surgery. Drugs. His knee. And what the fuck it all meant. "You couldn't have done anything anyway."

"No, but still. You only ever get fucked up if I'm not around ..." Vadim leaned down to kiss Dan's hand. "Duncan's here, too, and he's taking care of everything. Don't worry, it's all taken care of." Or will be, with a few phone calls and after doing the paperwork.

"Doesn't matter." Dan's eyes slid off Vadim, randomly towards a monitor, then the glass of water on the nightstand, away from there again, closing once more.

"Rest. I'll be there as often and as much as they let me, okay?"

"Yeah ..." Dan kept his eyes closed, even though he battled falling asleep again. Knew he wasn't supposed to sleep. "I really fucking hate hospitals."

"We'll get you out as soon as possible. I promise. We'll find a good place for you to heal up."

Dan didn't answer for quite a while and the five minutes were up, when he opened his eyes at last. "Did you have fun?"

Vadim inhaled deeply. “Yeah. Hooch ... sends greetings, too. I ... I won’t do that again. It’s too dangerous. I don’t want you to wait for me, or think I ... I wouldn’t come back. Okay?”

Dan blinked sluggishly. “Didn’t think you wouldn’t come back.” Pausing, he yawned and tried to stretch, forgetting – with the analgesics – that he’d just been operated on, and he grimaced, lying very, very still after that. “Should I have?”

“No, of course not. But I still feel like shit. I don’t want you to think that. Ever.”

“Don’t feel like shit. Leave that to me.”

“Okay.” Vadim smiled, a weak smile. “I love you.”

Before Dan could answer, a nurse opened the door.

“Mr Krasnorada? Visiting time is up. You may come back tomorrow, if you wish.”

Vadim pressed Dan’s hand firmer, then got up and touched his cheek. “I’ll be back tomorrow. You get better. Sleep off the operation.”

“Aye, and tell Duncan he should ask Mhairi to send down some of her millionaire shortbread. They won’t let me have whisky.”

“I will.” Vadim pressed Dan’s hand again, then glanced at the nurse, and, very reluctantly, let go of Dan’s hand to leave the room. It hurt. It fucking hurt, every time, leaving Dan like this, and he struggled for his composure before he wanted to face Duncan again.

Duncan was sitting on one of the shabby plastic seats in the waiting area, looking up when Vadim arrived. “How is he?”

“Not as bad as I’d feared. Drowsy.”

“Aye, it’s the painkillers I reckon. Let’s hope he’ll remain comfortable.”

“Let’s get out of here.” Vadim almost fled the hospital, feeling only slightly better when they were outside. “I’ll have to make a lot of phone calls. We have contracts ... and all that. Have to call his, well, our friends ... and there’s my contract. It’s good I’ll be busy.” Vadim wasn’t sure whether he made much sense, because he hadn’t had time to think any of this through yet, but it would be just like back in his active duty times ... improvising, working with what he had.

“Does this mean you will have to return to the Balkans?” Duncan was driving them to the hotel.

“I hope not, but all that stuff needs to get sorted. No way I’m going back, I’d get my head blown off - I’m just not together knowing Dan is here in this state.” Vadim frowned. “I’m done with soldiering. Have been for at least ... two years, but I think it was even longer.”

Duncan was quiet for a good while, until he pulled into the hotel’s parking lot, switching off the engine. He turned towards Vadim in his seat. “And Dan? Is he ready?”

“No. That’s the problem. And we will have to find a new job ... we don’t have enough to retire, at least not without the trimmings, and if we have to pay for private healthcare in New Zealand or here.”

Duncan frowned. "If there is anything we can help you two with, let me know. I'd hoped Dan could use the houses he'd bought and was renting out for his retirement, what with the Highlands picking up the tourism business, but ..." too late recognising what he had said, Duncan caught himself with a visible blush and smiled to diffuse the subject.

Vadim nodded. "That's a quarter of a million we are lacking now ... and I have nothing to my name, which doesn't make it better. No way around it, we'll have to work. It's not like we don't have a few contacts."

"Never mind, as I said, you are both most welcome at any time and if there is anything else I can do, just let me know."

"I appreciate it, Duncan, but you're doing enough already."

The rest of the day was fairly subdued, and they decided that it would be best if Duncan visited his brother the following morning, because he had to drive back to Scotland the same day. It was impossible leaving the farm on its own, and he had to return, every hand was needed every day, nature did not suddenly stop existing, just because its humans were troubled.

\* \* \*

Dan had been moved into the normal ward, and when Vadim visited that afternoon, there was nothing but flimsy fabric partitions between each patient with eight in a large room. Vadim sat down and placed a packet of shortbread on Dan's stomach. "How are you feeling?"

"Shit." Dan grimaced, "but don't tell Duncan."

"My lips are sealed." Vadim reached over to hold Dan's hand. "I'll do my best to get out of my contract ... I have to call the Baroness, discuss the options with her. She set us up in the job, maybe she knows the best way out. I won't go back to war, Dan."

"I fucking won't either." The frown in Dan's face showed lines etched into the skin. Lines of pain. "I'm a fucking cripple now."

Vadim inhaled and looked at Dan's leg for a long moment. "We were getting too old anyway." Not sure what else to say. The career-ending wound. If only he had received it, and not Dan. Although it could be argued that his broken mind was just such a career-ender, or maybe his humanity. "We'll be alright."

"How? I can't fucking work anymore." Dan tried to keep his voice down, while the intensity increased.

"Not this kind of work. Doesn't mean there's nothing else. I'll talk to the Baroness. Don't worry about the money. I'll handle that. You just get better."

"I don't *want* another job. I am only forty-four and this is all I've ever done and have ever been. Don't you understand that?" Dan shook his head, as if cutting himself off. "Doesn't matter. You go sort the contracts. Not that I'm useful for anything right now anyway. I'll just do this healing shit."

Vadim wasn't sure what else to say. Mind still reeling from the new situation, Dan's bitterness, he wasn't sure how to take that. "Let me know if you need anything. I'm in a hotel close by, I'll come as often as I can."

“I told you, there’s nothing you can do while I’m in here. You better sort things, aye?” Dan’s face had closed. “And as for what I need, I haven’t got pyjamas and they don’t appreciate their patients naked. And nicotine gums. I am going fucking insane without fags. They said it’ll be some days before I can make it into the smoking room. Don’t need anything else.” For a moment glancing at his hand in Vadim’s.

“Okay. I’ll get you some stuff.” Vadim stood, hated leaving, but he had to do things, shopping, phone calls, talking to the Baroness. He pressed Dan’s hand again, murmured that he loved him, and then set out to do what needed doing.

First, he drove the rented car into the town centre and got several bags of things - clothes, pyjamas, t-shirts, jeans, a jacket, underwear. A pharmacy was next, he got nicotine gums there, and then to an electronics store, where he bought a Discman and a pile of CDs that he knew Dan liked, then a pile of magazines, chocolates - all of which he handed over next time he was allowed to visit.

When he called the Baroness and reported to her, she’d already heard and had kept herself informed, promising help regarding the contract. A day later she called the hotel room and told Vadim there would not be a problem. What he was intending to do? And whether he had thought about consultancy, something they’d mentioned before and had talked about, the last time they’d visited.

Yes, said Vadim, he was ready for that.

She would arrange everything that was necessary, but he would have to fly to Budapest to meet her, since she was currently in a particularly fragile situation that required her continuous presence. A fact that would sadly not enable her to visit Dan, but she would stay in contact via telephone, once Vadim had organised and paid for phone access for Dan’s bed, something that Vadim would do the very next day.

She asked whether Vadim believed he could leave Dan alone - who might be in the good care of his family - for talks and further negotiations. Adding, that if he thought it necessary to move Dan to a private hospital, at any time, then she would see this was arranged – and neither man should worry about the costs.

Vadim mentioned that to Dan, who didn’t like the idea, and the NHS doctors were reluctant to let him go just yet, stating that, in case of emergencies, this was the best place for Dan to be.

Dan was adamant, after a phone call from Her Excellency, where she explained the situation to him and the possibilities she could offer, that Vadim should visit her straight away. Pointing out that there was nothing he could do anyway, while Dan was healing up, and so Vadim then organised whatever extras were offered in the hospital, and flew over to Hungary, to meet the Baroness in person, and discuss the next steps with her. The new job would entail a lot of ‘networking’, meeting people, being pleasant and serious at the same time, and Vadim realized this was political to the extreme, the art of manipulation more than his experience and the mind he had – it was about

whom he knew, who liked him, and who would pay a lot of money to hear his opinion, who thought him 'relevant'. She arranged a few contacts, who they met for lunch, or coffee, important men who made decisions. He wouldn't have been surprised if he had met the MI5 or MI6 agent again whom he had encountered in the club back in London, so long ago. He was now dealing with a similar type of man.

Those men treated him as if he was important, because to them he was useful, and thus he *was* important. Treating him with respect and interest, and engaging in discussions on a level removed beyond recognition from dust, pain, blood and gore, and the terror of battlefields. Talking about tactics and logistics, about experiences from one who *had been there* and who was able to transcend that knowledge into transferable levels of higher cognition. It was the officer they talked to, not the grunt, the man who'd run a sizeable operation in his time, partially under the most dire restrictions and circumstances. Above all, they applauded his resourcefulness, his ability to 'think outside the box' as they called it, and Vadim joked that outside the box meant outside the coffin.

He stayed longer than initially intended, after talking to Dan on the phone who claimed he was fine, that there was nothing that Vadim could do, that Duncan would come and visit when he could, and that nothing was really happening anyway. Dan reassured him that he was just okay without him, that the new job was be more important and Vadim should grab the opportunity when it arose. An opportunity that took Vadim away from Hungary to the US and then back to Europe, extending the initial preparatory tour of making contacts and connections until a month had passed. A month in a world he'd never been part of before. He'd enjoyed himself. Meetings in air-conditioned elegant rooms, starting to understand how the white, male, old, heterosexual posse worked, an old boys' network, with all-important cross-references. If he dropped the name of one guy, he made friends and engendered goodwill, far more than he'd anticipated. And, strangely enough, he genuinely enjoyed the meetings.

## **August 1993, England**

Dan's progress had improved at first, with physiotherapy working on moving his artificial knee, and getting him to walk, but the pain did not diminish. After a couple of weeks, his condition started to deteriorate, with the pain increasing. Not only was every step agony, each movement was turning into such a painful experience, Dan had to force himself to comply with the exercises. Until eventually his knee swelled up more than it ever had, with shooting pains up the thigh and into the groin, and down to the foot. The NHS doctors were clueless, trying different methods of therapy, and upping the dose of painkillers, which only worsened his overall condition.

Dan had lost his appetite, gaining dark shadows under his eyes, and lines etched into his face and a tiredness and fatigue he could not shake.

He never said anything, though. Not to Vadim who called regularly, neither to the Baroness, nor to his brother, who could not visit again until a month later. Pretending to all who called, including friends like Jean, Markus and Dima, and mates such as Matt, that he was just fine. Perfectly fine. Nothing but fine, and that he was still in the hospital not because of any problems, but because it was easier that way with the physio.

When Duncan finally arrived, he almost staggered back out of the room, hardly recognising his brother. Dan had substantially lost weight, the forever-hungry man hardly taking a bite, and he looked shockingly ill. Just that: ill. Gaunt and drawn from the ever increasing pain, and a passiveness that might have come from weariness and fatigue, or from something Duncan could not put his finger on. And still Dan lied, even to his face: he was fine. Goddamned motherfucking *fine*, and it was just taking longer and why the hell anyone bothered anyway, since it *did not matter*.

Dan didn't witness how his brother shouted at the doctors and nurses, nor did he find out that Duncan was told he had to leave the premises after his outburst, and he was definitely not aware of the string of telephone calls Duncan was making, until he finally had Vadim on the line.

Duncan was standing in a phone booth outside the hospital. "Where the hell are you?" Still shaking with anger, and a not considerable amount of guilt, Duncan's knuckles were white, he was holding the receiver so tightly.

"Chicago." Vadim was suddenly alarmed. The Baroness had this number. "En route to catch my flight back to Heathrow. What's wrong with Dan?"

"I don't fucking know." Duncan was swearing and agitated. "I just got thrown out of the hospital for yelling at the doctors. I don't know what's wrong, no one does, but my brother looks like ... like a very ill man! And the bastard has lied to us all the time." Duncan slammed a fist into the telephone book. "I am going to get him out of there. Those incompetent Sassenachs are killing Dan before they find out what is wrong with him."

"Killing him. Fuck." Vadim didn't doubt for an instant, and again, he felt that sickening feeling. He hadn't been there. Instead had met 'security consultants' that worked for America's weapon smiths – huge corporations that lived in glittering skyscrapers. He had at least managed to very politely decline the offer of two weeks' holiday on one CFO's Texan farm. "I'll call the Baroness. She offered a private clinic. We move him out of there – with or without his consent. I'll make the call right away."

"Good, and make her call him, because, I'm afraid, in this country you will need the patient's consent and if that stubborn blockhead is not going to want to do anything about his state, then someone else has to make him do it." Duncan was breathing hard. "I don't know why he has been lying, but I am going to find out. I should have been here, forget the farm, I should have noticed. I am his brother!"

"And I'm the guy who plans to grow old with him, Duncan." Vadim had already opened the calfskin suitcase and taken out his phone book. A glance found the folder that held all the business cards he'd collected over the last few



weeks. Fifty, maybe sixty names on which to build another career. His third. Or fourth? “I’ll keep you in the loop. Calm down. I’ll be back tomorrow, and then I’ll do my damned best that he gets proper treatment. I’m not worrying about the cost ... I have the feeling we’ll do better than ever if this is taking off.” Maybe not yachts, Texan farms and private golf courses, but they’d be rubbing shoulders with these guys and their trophy wives, sure enough.

“I don’t worry about the cost, I only worry about my brother. You understand that?”

“I do. Fuck, I do.” Vadim rubbed his face. “Thank you for calling me ...”

“Who else. Vadim, you are Dan’s partner.” Taking a deep breath, “I see you tomorrow. I will try to get back into the hospital for now.”

Duncan hung up and stepped outside, staying in the humid summer air for a long time until he had calmed enough and gathered himself. Once more the level headed man who would apologise for his behaviour to the hospital staff, no matter if he believed they deserved an apology or not, just to placate them enough to see his brother again. Which he did that same afternoon, talking to him for a long time, but Dan kept slipping away, falling asleep, and Duncan ended up sitting quietly beside the bed, worrying with each breath.

Vadim called the Baroness on her private line, gave her a quick update on what was happening over in England, and the briefest of summaries while some guy from the hotel was already collecting his suitcase. The taxi for the airport was waiting outside – but he looked and lived like a businessman, and they’d never rush him. “I’ll call again after I land in Heathrow,” he said, then called Dan’s number, who barely roused when the phone rang and Duncan picked up instead.

“It’s getting taken care of. She’ll call right away.”

“I’ll make sure he is awake. He’s got trouble keeping his eyes open, it’s like something is eating him up from the inside.” Duncan put the phone down without waiting for an answer, proceeding to shake Dan awake instead. He had just about managed, and Dan looked at him bleary-eyed, when the phone rang again.

“For you.” Duncan pushed the receiver into Dan’s hand.

There was nothing for a long time, nothing but a voice on the other end, which spoke very precisely and with an authority that Duncan could sense even though he did not understand the words.

“Yes, Ma’m.” Dan finally answered, then nothing again until finally, “yes, Ma’m, I’ll sign.” A few short moments later and Dan hung up, looking at Duncan.

“Cavalry, eh?”

“What do you mean?”

“That you brought in the fucking cavalry.”

“Seemed I had to.”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you are not, and you know you are bullshitting yourself.” The cussing got Dan’s attention. “You are clearly in pain, your knee is swollen like a balloon

and you look damn sick.” Duncan shook his head, leaning over his brother. “Have you looked at yourself lately?”

“No. Why should I? No chance for some entertainment in this place, is there?”

“Dan, you should be walking around by now. Not lying here. I don’t care the doctors say that the x-rays show no anomalies. I don’t care about blood works or anything. You *will* get to another hospital to get properly checked out, do you understand me?”

Dan stared at his brother and a ghost of a grin crossed his face. “Never considered you to be a bully boy.”

“I learned from the best.” Duncan rose both his brows. “After all, my very own brother was in the SAS.”

“Touché.”

“Thought so. Oh, and Vadim will be here tomorrow, I just talked to him.”

“Will he?”

“Aye.”

“What for?”

“*Dan!*” Duncan stood up, shaking his head. “I don’t know what’s up with you apart from the obvious, but it’ll be okay soon. Right?”

“Right.” Dan shrugged, settling back in the pillows and closing his eyes. The conversation was over for him, leaving Duncan on his own.

\* \* \*

Everything finally went according to plan, thanks to Her Excellency’s inimitable organisation skills and her unmistakable authority, and when Vadim landed the next day, getting into a taxi from the airport, Dan had already been transferred to a private hospital with excellent reputation. He had been through extensive tests of every nature imaginable, and was lying in a single room, in an environment nothing like any of the NHS hospitals. Friendly paint on the walls, art prints, private bathroom with fake marble, and all the trappings of a hospital discreetly masked while still being efficient – with an outstanding staff-patient ratio.

Vadim had got the address and number from the Baroness, and merely checked into a hotel close by for a shave, shower, and a change of clothes. He thought Dan wouldn’t appreciate him in the business suit, and he went with the designer jeans and t-shirt instead. He was soon on the road again, this time to the private clinic. He’d managed to nap a little on the plane, so he was reasonably fresh. He didn’t notice Duncan in the cafeteria area, and it didn’t take much convincing that he wanted to see Mr McFadyen – he supposed the Baroness might have made clear that he was to be admitted to the patient.

Still, it was a shock to see Dan – this time he looked almost as bad as back in Kashmir. Dan was asleep, and despite the relative cheerfulness of the pale yellow bedding, he looked gaunt.

“What are they doing to you, Lapushka,” Vadim murmured and sat down, setting the bag of gifts down on the nightstand. Leaning back, he stretched out his legs, and studied Dan, who was surrounded by more creature comforts than last time but looking far worse, which seemed like a paradox.

No one disturbed them, and Dan slept on for a while longer. The room was silent except for faint noises from beyond the door and Dan’s regular breathing. A shift in that pattern indicated that he was waking, long moments before he stirred. “Hey ...” groggy, Dan slowly opened his eyes.

Vadim leaned forward and took Dan’s hand. “Hey, sleepy. Just got back from the Windy City. Brought you some stuff.” He lifted the bag and sat it down on Dan’s bed.

“Not going to do much with it for a while.” Dan pulled his hand back out of Vadim’s to reach for the glass of water on the nightstand. His other arm had a couple of IVs in elbow and back of hand.

Vadim helped him with that glass and let Dan have his fill. Always thirsty. “It’s just some music and a better CD player ... and some sweets. I didn’t have time to do much proper shopping.”

“That must have been a bugger, aye?”

“Well, with so many meetings in the day, the last thing I wanted was see more people or make more decisions than what channel to watch in the hotel bed.”

“Aye, you told me it was going well. Looks you’ll have a business, then?” Dan handed the glass over, empty now, and Vadim refilled it and put it back on the nightstand, closer to Dan this time. “I’ll be back under the knife.”

“Shit. I mean ... to fix what went wrong last time? Fucking butchers. If I’d known, I’d have moved you out there right after that first operation.”

“No, it’s an infection. Don’t know if that’s the first lot’s fault, but the joint has to come out. I get a new one. They do some scary shit like sandblasting the bones where they are infected. You know, the stumps.” A mien of disgust ghosted across Dan’s face before it was replaced once again with the expression of nothing – and tiredness. “They said it should be alright after that. Eventually.” He shrugged, “guess I should be thankful there’s an ER close by, in case these ones here fuck stuff up, aye?”

Vadim reached up to touch Dan’s cheek. “Infection. That explains a lot. Fuck. If I wasn’t so worried I’d get really angry that you just didn’t tell me. But I guess that’s you ... like a fucking donkey ... always your way, or no fucking way at all.”

“You sound like Duncan.” Dan grimaced and shrugged at the same time. “I don’t want to talk about it, okay? I just want to get this fucking surgery done and over with. They said in the best possible case it’ll be a couple of bloody months before I can properly walk. That is if they catch the infection completely.”

“Okay. We’ll just have to have patience, then.”

“It’s pointless for you to be here all the time, though. Nothing you can do.” An echo of everything he’d been repeating before. “You should do up the house or something. Or more of that new work of yours.”

“Yeah ... the farm needs some attention, too, but the last call I got sounded pretty good ... Electricity, glazing, the heating ... all making progress.” Vadim leaned close. “I missed you. You’d have been bored stiff meeting those guys, but travelling alone is simply not the same ...”

Dan looked at him, a question in the forefront of his mind, but he couldn’t ask it. “Guess you’ll just have to get used to it.” Attempting a smile that never quite reached his eyes, to take the sting out.

Vadim inhaled, shaking his head. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll set everything up. It’s just a lot of flying around and humouring the money boys.”

“Aye, you’ll be good at that.” Dan added after a moment, “Major Krasnorada.”

Vadim glanced up, raising his eyebrows questioningly. Impossible to say whether it was banter or ... it didn’t ring true for banter. “The Americans sure like the rank, even though I can’t legally use it ...”

“Doesn’t matter, you never were anything else.” Dan blinked sluggishly, rapidly fading once more.

“Not sure that’s a compliment,” Vadim murmured under his breath. “In any case, sleep a bit, I’ll be back later. I’m still on Chicago time.” He stood and kissed Dan’s lips. “I’ll be back after a nap.”

“Okay.” Dan closed his eyes, the bag with gifts still untouched. “See you later.”

\* \* \*

When Vadim went outside, Duncan was waiting for him, smiling slightly. The worry was all too visible, though.

“Did he tell you surgery is scheduled for tomorrow?”

“No.” Vadim glanced over his shoulder, back to Dan’s room. Frowning darkly. He felt anger rise, but put it down to being tired and jetlagged that Dan rubbed him entirely the wrong way. “What time?”

“Seven-thirty.” Duncan shook his head. “He’s a stubborn old mule, isn’t he?”

Vadim gave a small laugh. “Yes. You think I can see him before they take him into the theatre? I guess I’ll have to ask staff. People here are nicer than what you get when you don’t pay. Capitalism, eh?” He shook his head.

“Aye, I am sure that’s fine. They don’t seem to have strict visiting hours. Shall I have a word with them?”

“That would be good. Now ... Dan’s sleeping, can I take you to dinner?”

“Best idea I have heard in a while.” Duncan smiled. “Mhairi keeps telling me I have to make sure Dan eats well to ‘put the meat back onto his bones’. Bless her.”

“And she’s right ...” Vadim took Duncan out to dinner, finding a good restaurant, and spending the early evening with good food and conversation, catching up, and Vadim felt very at ease with Duncan, which was understandable, with the similarities. It was good to spend time with somebody he’d known before, he could let his guard down a little, wasn’t buying or selling in this instance, just food and drink and chatter.

\* \* \*

That night, Dan lay awake. Despite all the medication, the exhaustion and the weariness of a body having fought an infection for so long. Lying in the dark and staring at the faint light that came from behind the curtains. He was frightened. More frightened than ever before in his life, and he had no one to tell. Because he couldn’t. Nothing to say, because fear was not supposed to be in his vocabulary – not in a situation like this. Passive. Used up. Useless.

\* \* \*

Vadim had gone to bed early, got up early, body obedient because it was important, more important than being tired, then took a taxi back to the hospital, and visited Dan. But Dan remained withdrawn, tired, defensive, and Vadim swallowed most of what he’d wanted to say, tried to project confidence instead, and being there. Dan was just stretched, he was – understandably – in pain. Nobody was their best in that state.

During the operation, he went to have breakfast, read – well, tried to read – the paper, but the situation in Iraq seemed to get worse rather than better. Clinton was clearly not having any of the towelheads’ bullshit. Vadim remembered conversations about Clinton and Bush senior, from guys who’d shaken their hands – and sold them bigger and better guns. A bigger nightstick for the world cop, the only remaining superpower. The men he’d met had discarded any talk about eternal world peace, just because the former Soviet superpower was withdrawing troops from its previous European real estate didn’t mean that the weapons manufacturers wouldn’t make any money anymore – quite the contrary.

Duncan came in an hour later, he’d seen his brother the night before and knew that the surgery would take several hours. They waited together, sharing the load of worry, while there was nothing they could do, with everything lying in the skilled hands of the surgeons.

Finally, around mid-day they called Duncan in, and, as the brother, gave him the good news that all had gone well and Mr McFadyen was in the waking room, under observation. He would be allowed a short visit later.

But when they went to visit, Dan was even more tired than before, drowsy and clearly in pain, despite the medication, and all he wanted was to sleep.

That didn’t get much better, even though he was healing well this time and three days later, when Duncan had to leave for home, Dan had gained colour,

but no words. Still withdrawn, and sullen. Having lost the mischievous gleam that had always been his own. Duncan chalked it up to the harrowing experience of the last months and left for Scotland with promises to be back as soon as possible, and the promise from Vadim that he would take care.

\* \* \*

While Dan healed and his body fought the infection successfully, he never changed. Doing what he was told by the doctors, nurses and physiotherapists, otherwise watching TV or listening to music while staring at the wall or out of the window. Never calling anyone, and giving monosyllabic answers when someone called, and not being anymore open with Vadim either.

Vadim didn't like to admit it, even to himself, but dealing with Dan was near impossible. There was only so much confidence and strength he could show, when nothing ever came back. He was looking for excuses, why he had to get going again, why he couldn't just wait for months in that hotel, visiting at least once a day. The farm. He would have to oversee the farm getting finished, would have to remain in touch with his new contacts, because in the world of business, regular catch-ups showed and confirmed interest and importance.

So, he attended an event in London, and another one in Barcelona, returning to Dan every time and for several days, then finally told him that he'd fly out to Palmerston North to make sure the house was making progress. He was hoping Dan could recover there, in New Zealand, but they'd need furniture and he wanted to arrange for their stuff to get shipped over from storage as well.

Dan didn't react much to that, and Vadim put it down to him being tired and recovering. But he was relieved when he could leave and was looking forward to getting the house up to specs, not having to pretend and not having to struggle to get closer to Dan – something that was impossible, as Dan was simply not allowing him closer anymore.

## **November 1993, New Zealand**

Three months had passed since the second surgery, when Dan was finally able to endure the long flight to New Zealand. He'd spent a couple of them in a rehab centre, despite Duncan's determination to have his brother close, to but Dan had refused. Claiming a host of unfeasible excuses why it was impossible. In the end, Duncan conceded and he and Mhairi visited a couple of times, but it was difficult to interact with Dan, because he hardly talked and preferred to sit in the nearby pub, downing a few pints in a corner. Alone. On his own, except for the regular phone calls from Vadim that never lasted more than a few short minutes. The silences tended to stretch for too long and they'd become uncomfortable.

Dan shut out everyone, and in the end hardly anyone called and even Jean's attempts at conversation had petered out. He was somewhere, he'd said last

time, and something about Pascal, but Dan hadn't listened and hadn't cared. He wasn't aware of anyone's worry, shut in his world, a world that didn't become any bigger when he was pushed out of the plane in a wheel chair. Preferential treatment of a kind that he loathed, but it was easier that way.

He was standing, though, on his own feet and a couple of crutches, when he came out of the gates in Palmerston North, hobbling into spring. Lighting a fag the moment he was outside of the building.

Vadim stood in the first row of the parking lot, maybe five metres away from the door. He recognized him immediately, of course, even against the glare of the sun, and he took off his sun glasses. Dan. Finally. He left the door open and headed towards him. "Welcome back," he said, nodded to the young Kiwi who'd been carrying Dan's suitcase, and took it from him. "How was the flight? I always find the last leg really difficult."

"Yeah, especially the *leg*." Dan rolled his eyes but smiled a little, and still made Vadim wince. Shit choice of words. And the retort took any other words from him, made him self-conscious and ill-at-ease. Like he was with their phone calls.

Dan was still pale, but no longer gaunt nor ill-looking. Thin, and having lost a lot of his muscle definition, but he'd been diligently following the physio, merely because it was less hassle to do what he'd been told, rather than to think. His hair was short, it was easier to keep it clean that way, since taking a shower had been a major undertaking and getting into a bathtub was right out. "Been a while, aye?" His voice was quiet, and despite an initial urge, he didn't try to touch Vadim.

"Months and months." Vadim tossed the suitcase into the back of the Landrover, then opened the door for Dan. "Don't worry, you can rest once we're there. Bed's made, everything's ready and waiting." His project. The house. It had kept him busy, and he had got on well with the workers, well enough to go out drinking with them a few times, which helped when he needed to get stuff done. The 'Palmies' as he called them were a friendly lot, and they clearly preferred somebody who could hold his own in a pub to a guy wearing suits and cufflinks. Vadim carefully kept the two lives apart.

He drove out of Palmerston North, back to the farm, while Dan remained silent most of the time, occasionally glancing across. The hills green, dotted with sheep, a few cattle, some horses, down into the valley where their 'farm' was. Everything was new. The bridge over the little but vigorous streamlet, the gravel, and then the house, top to bottom. Not a piece of wood that hadn't been checked, the whole second floor was all new, the foundations had been fixed, the electricity, cable, they even had a small generator, in case something went wrong. New Zealanders believed in being self-sufficient – small wonder, living at the end of the world as they did.

"Impressive." The first word for a long time, while Dan pushed the passenger door open, struggling with the crutches to get out.

Vadim went around the car and took out Dan's suitcase. "Let me know if you want anything changed." The three steps that led up to the house proper

had a flat ramp at the side. Vadim had expected the worst. And it had been convenient when the heavy furniture arrived.

“I can do fucking steps, you know.” Dan commented with a side glance, as he finally managed to get himself out, walking walked towards the front door. He was still heavily dependent on the crutches, but he had less of a limp than a need for balance. It would take several more months, they’d told him, before he could think of walking without them. It was a labour to get up the steps, though, but he was determined, and made it to the door.

Vadim was glad he didn’t have to meet Dan’s gaze as he could concentrate on opening the door. The limping, the vitriol, the acid. Each one bad in its own way. Had he really looked forward to this for so long? Worked his arse off to finance this, worked long hours to fix the house, done every tiny bit, every decision, what wood to use for the floor, what furniture went where, patterns, colours, each and every fucking decision because everything had been supposed to be perfect when Dan finally – finally! – arrived. In his house. Their house. He opened the door, let Dan walk in first and followed with the suitcase. “The bedroom is downstairs, though ... if you want to change that, we can have the guest room downstairs and our bedroom upstairs. Whatever you like better.”

But Dan wasn’t listening. He stood in the entrance hall, staring straight ahead, then slowly around himself. Walking on and into the vast living room, his eyes fixed onto the massive paintings. Huge swirls of colours and ... whatever the fuck else. Things he could not identify and made no sense to him. He turned, still not acknowledging Vadim, made his way to the next room, the kitchen. Then to another, the downstairs loo and so on, until he stood at the foot of the stairs. Nothing was like he’d imagined it. Nothing like he’d wanted it. It was ... Vadim’s house. He knew it that very second, but he also realised what amount of work had gone into it. For whom, though, for him? Nothing ... nothing was him. It all was Vadim. Perhaps that was the way it should be. All Vadim.

“It’s ... different.” Dan finally managed to get out. “You put a hell lot of effort in.”

“Yeah.” Vadim swallowed the emotion. Disappointment. Not understanding. His mind’s eye had played out this scene differently – ranging from serene to laughing and happy, but this was an anticlimax that he felt like a sucker punch. Okay. Okay. He’d just have to accept that. Dan was tired. But there was the creeping dread that it wasn’t that. That living together would be just like the phone calls had been. He’d assumed Dan just didn’t like to speak on the phone, or didn’t want to communicate with anybody else in the room, a nurse, a visitor, a doctor. But he knew that he’d been closing his eyes against the simple truth that he was fooling himself. It wouldn’t be different. Would their lives now really become like those phone calls, but 24/7? “If you want anything changed ...” but he didn’t finish the sentence.

“No, no, it’s okay. As I said, you really put a lot of effort in. Didn’t realise you had so much taste. Should have known, you always knew what to make me wear.” Dan tried a smile, pointing to another room. “What’s that one?”



“The bedroom. The guest bedroom is upstairs.”

“Downstairs?” The frown was back between Dan’s eyes. Steeple and severe, together with the lines etched into his face from pain and illness, it made him seem older than he had ever appeared. Harsher. Harder. “You think I’m too much of a cripple to get up the stairs?”

“It’s ...” more convenient, Vadim wanted to say, but the accusation in those words got him by surprise. Again. Every reaction of Dan so far had caught him by surprise. Curious, that. He shrugged. “Not carved in stone. You can have it wherever you want.” Vadim took a step back. The ‘tour of the house’ was turning into a nightmare, and he wanted it to be over with. Actually, the thing he most wanted was to take the car and go on an extended, four hour drive or so to clear his mind and let Dan do the tour of the house alone. But how to get out of the situation? ‘Shit, I forgot to get milk, I’ll just head out to Palmy?’ That would only win him an hour.

Dan said nothing, just walked on and opened the door to the bedroom. Stepping inside he almost recoiled physically. What greeted him was a room he couldn’t have imagined, even if he had tried. Sure, it was manly, if there was such a thing, certainly not cluttered, but the bed was a monstrosity made from leather and so goddamned stylish it belonged to someone who wasn’t even remotely related to him. Yes. Exactly. To someone like Vadim. Stylish, elegant, with class. Unlike him, but then he was out of a job without any hope to ever be back in it. He was done. Service over. Usefulness had ended.

The painting above the bed made him stare in disbelief. Huge, blue and red shapes, and ... just that. Colours. Shapes. He didn’t have a clue what the fuck they meant and it was motherfucking ugly. But didn’t matter. It was Vadim’s taste. Vadim’s house. Vadim’s effort.

Dan felt like a visitor, entirely out of place, and that was the only feeling he’d become accustomed to over the last months. Out of place and out of purpose.

“Where ... on which side do you sleep?” He finally managed to get out.

“At the moment, all over the place. I start left and wake up right.” Vadim shrugged, hands in his pockets, leaning against the door frame, working on excuses why he very urgently had to drive to Palmerston. “Do you want to unpack the suitcase, or have a shower and a nap? The jacuzzi is at the back of the house, just down the corridor, then left. There’s also an outdoor shower, we used that when working on the house. Very practical if you don’t want to stomp the dirt through the house.”

“Okay.” Dan nodded.

Which didn’t answer Vadim’s question, but he didn’t want to repeat himself. Dan was not even paying proper attention, unless there was something that set him off. Welcome home, Dan. I only waited for you for six months or so.

“What’s upstairs apart from the guest bedroom?”

“Two studies, the guest bedroom, big bathroom, and some storage space. There’s a small gym in the garage, too.”

Dan nodded. “I’ll look at the upstairs later. Going for a shower.” Jacuzzi was out, too difficult to climb in. “Been a long flight.” And he was far more spaced

out on painkillers than he was willing to admit. He turned before Vadim could say anything else, heading through the living room and towards the back of the house.

Vadim didn't turn his head to look at him, instead closed his eyes and leaned the head against the door frame. Bad start, or just simply bad? He wasn't sure. And why was he just taking that? Because it had surprised him. He shouldn't give Dan any more openings, or riposte right away, not remaining caught out on the wrong footing. No way. And when had it been last that he'd thought along those lines in regards to Dan? There was also the matter of Dan's birthday, soon, but right now, he didn't have any desire to plan for that or find presents. It felt stale and painful. He headed back into the kitchen, to fix a salad. Keep himself busy, even if it was just cooking or being aware of the other man in the house. And dreading what the next hour, day, night – night – would bring.

\* \* \*

The next hours were spent within the same stilted atmosphere. Dan did not talk, lay silently on one of the black leather couches in the living room, smoking, and trying to stay awake, while drinking whisky that he'd bought duty free. A packet of pills beside him on the table, he'd never inspected the upstairs, despite his earlier claims.

Vadim had eaten the salad standing in the kitchen, he'd asked whether Dan was hungry and all he'd got was a non-committal murmur. He was out of his depth, had no idea how to connect or what to say. Conversation topics had run out already – months back, probably even before the second surgery, and Vadim had no idea with what to fill the time. How. How to live with somebody with whom he had nothing to talk about. Nothing in common. Not anymore.

Vadim heard Dan get up off the couch, struggling with the crutches, long before he turned up in the kitchen door. Standing straight, but his weight was clearly supported.

“Guess I should try to sleep. Jetlag and all that shit.”

Vadim gave a nod. “Sure. Take your time. Always takes me a while to get used to the time shift. And the different seasons. You'll have your birthday in spring, not in autumn.”

“Yeah, shit, never celebrated it. No need to start now.” Birthday, what for? New years? New beginnings? All Dan could see was an end. An end to all he'd ever been, ever done, ever been good at, and ever wanted. An end to himself.

“Okay.” And never mind my birthday, thought Vadim, and shrugged again. That had been in August, and Dan had had other things on his mind, too. Another topic down.

“Anyway, I take the side closer to the door, aye?” With that Dan turned and made his way to the bedroom. A bedroom that wasn't his. Let alone theirs. It was Vadim's. A Vadim he hardly recognised, or perhaps he just couldn't recognise himself anymore.

“Sure,” Vadim said to Dan’s back. Whatever. Sure. Fuck you. He shook his head and decided he really needed a run. “I’ll go off for some exercise, shouldn’t be more than two hours.” Run where Dan couldn’t follow him. It was cruel, but running would help – would put him back together, stop the thought, smooth everything out.

Dan stopped in the middle of the hallway, but he did not turn. “Sure. Enjoy.” That was all, and he walked through the door.

Much later that night, when Vadim finally joined Dan in the bedroom, Dan was still awake, merely lightly dozing. He’d had enough whisky to dull his senses, but never enough to knock himself out, and he’d got used to that much medication, that it wouldn’t dull his mind enough to sleep. Not now, not with the jetlag. Not in a stranger’s bed in a stranger’s room in a stranger’s house.

It was Vadim who tried to instigate sex, and Dan reacted, as if this was something he ought to want and that he should have missed. The kisses were awkward, the deep feeling lost or merely hidden beneath all the pain and sorrow and all the fear – all the unspoken words that were kept inside, eating away at the soul. But that was nothing compared to the true extent of the disaster, when Dan could not perform. Did not function, could hardly ‘get it up’, and could not come. Failed. Emasculated. Unable to perform. No man anymore.

And despite Vadim’s insistence that this was a passing fluke, that Dan was overly tired and the medication had to have played havoc with his system, Dan said nothing, just believed what he knew and what he felt in every fibre of his being: he finally belonged to the scrap heap.

Vadim pulled back, then, struggled with his own desires, but with Dan ... troubled like that, and that awkward silence where something entirely else should have been. He decided to give Dan time, let Dan make the next move, when Dan was ready, healed up enough, when Dan had settled in.

But the feeling, the voice he heard in his mind, said different things. They were done, it was over, together with the wars and adventure. The pain had given way to a worse, deeper, darker pain. Over. Not even the failsafes worked, not even the visceral connection that had carried them, always, from a time where they’d hated each other. Hate, love, shame. And now indifference and isolation. Chained to a man; imprisoned.

## **November 1993 – November 1994**

Dan never made the next move. Not the following night, not the one after, neither the one after that. Not even the next week nor the following month. And Vadim got the message, lay on his side of the bed and eventually made sure he only went to bed after another serious bout of exercise, a lot of running, usually taking care of any wayward need under the shower, with no faces, no memories, no fantasies attached to the purely physical friction. A need that approached embarrassment, their sex life was dead and remained dead, and

there was nobody else – Palmy had nothing like a gay scene he could make out. Wellington was different, but Wellington was several hours’ drive away.

Dan did the physio, exercised exactly as he had been told, but that was all. It was difficult to get him to eat, he mostly didn’t feel hungry, and he only managed to keep some of the weight he needed by his liking for sweets, and the booze that he drank. More often than not forgetting to take his medication, most of all the supplements he was supposed to be taking since the bomb had torn him apart.

Vadim did his best with the cooking, with running the house, their lives while Dan was still healing. He’d promised he’d never leave Dan, and if that meant he’d be his valet and cook, well, that was part of the parcel. Not that he had many other options, not that he wasn’t resigned to the fact that he couldn’t just leave Dan. He owed him, his life, his sanity, and a quarter of a million pounds. The farm was in Dan’s name, too, and leaving Dan meant to leave the life he’d worked towards. He’d promised and sworn he’d never leave him, forever. And Hooch ... had Matt. He didn’t want to interfere with that, and he just knew if he met Hooch, everything else would break. Vadim pressed his lips together when his thoughts returned to that. Had sworn, promised, never meant to leave. If they couldn’t be lovers anymore, they could be partners. Business partners, sharing a house.

Dan didn’t even react much when another letter arrived from Hungary, with even fewer words, but with a new set of photos. A couple from Kisa’s third birthday, another few of her with friends. They always only showed Kisa, though, never anyone else from the family. Dan stashed them away in the study that he soon took over, ordering and installing technical gadgets that allowed him to spend his time watching the news channels, and getting onto the internet. Something he started out with, because it seemed the only thing of interest, and despite the slow modem that would not even always connect, he quickly got addicted to being online. Newsgroups, forums, email contacts. All connected to war zones, crisis areas, battles and fights. Military and PMCs alike, rebels and oppositions.

A habit and an almost unhealthy interest in that which he had once been and could not be anymore, which served him well, though, when he joined Vadim in the tours of the conferences. By that time he had managed to reduce the crutches he needed to one, and the limp was getting less pronounced, but still clearly visible. He hated the job. Loathed the conferences, despised the men who made him feel as if he was an inferior being, who clearly didn’t belong into those circles: an impostor in a tailored suit, and with a body that was everything but functional.

Yet he was good, and as much as he hated the work, he was sought after for his insights and expertise, particularly regarding the training and fighting he’d done in Afghanistan. A good speaker in any round table discussion – as long as he was sober, which happened increasingly less, which embarrassed Vadim to the bone, but he couldn’t just kick Dan out of that new partnership. First, they

needed the money, second, it kept Dan busy. He wasn't quite ready to try and arrange some events where he didn't have to drag Dan along.

When autumn in New Zealand was almost over and the land was heading into winter, Dan mostly spent his days and nights in one of the pubs in Palmy. He got on well with the locals, even though he didn't communicate much with them either. Still, a man after their heart. Rugged and hands-on, just that he did not believe anymore that his hands could do anything useful. He didn't talk about his past, didn't want to be reminded. Dodged phone calls from old mates and good friends, pretending to be fine, sticking to email where he could. Sporadic and lying. Fine, he was fine. He lived, aye? He existed.

It was in winter when he took to sleeping in the large leather chair in his study, full of beer and spirits, with the door locked. Just so he was away from what he'd lost. Away from Vadim, away from the man who had meant everything for so many years of his life – but then he'd had a life. All he had now was being alive.

Vadim spent the winter working. He'd subscribed to academic journals and had entered exchanges with those who wrote them, sometimes trying his hand at a piece of analysis himself. The careful, methodical work suited him, even if his lack of concentration and ability to read for long stretches slowed him down considerably. He used the winter to catch up with the pile of journals and letters that had arrived during spring and summer, planned the next round of meetings, and exercising like a man possessed to dull all other emotions. He couldn't allow himself to slip, had to remain busy, had to do things or he'd just find a good length of rope.

When spring arrived once more, Dan had finally discarded the last crutch and had learned to walk without it. Visibly favouring the leg, but he managed stairs and everything else that he had to. Managed the old and battered Landrover he'd bought, and managed to exist. Co-exist. With that stranger he'd once loved, but he'd lost himself and he did not recognise Vadim either.

Two strangers, both hurting, and one of them trying to pretend he was already gone.

November 1994, Madrid, Spain

And again Dan was making an ass of himself. He was irritated, and that meant Dan grew as irreverent as any British squaddie could be. Not that he had much of an equilibrium anymore, now that there was no danger, no wear and tear to take his edge off. Adding in the fact that he had behaved like an utter stranger for a year, had been distant and silent, barely a business partner, if that. No, Dan was being an arsehole. Basically told the West Point officer to go fuck himself because they did not agree on an intervention in whatever forsaken place. Vadim agreed on principle, but he knew the Westpointer was cosy with one of the UN big guns, and as long as the American buck went into the UN, it was all about singing the song as ordered, to the exact tune that was requested. Vadim shook his head. He'd smooth this out when Dan was drunk enough to only stare into his whisky at the bar and deal no further damage.

Vadim watched the uniforms mingle. Always carefully on the lookout for former brother states, or Russia herself. The so-called Russian Federation. He didn't fancy running into KGB, or whatever it was called these days. Same men, no doubt. Same grudges. But they would use foreign fixers, wouldn't they? Russia was working hard to be respectable, like a cheap whore that had spread her legs for everybody to survive and then decided to get her act together and behave like a lady. Not his problem anymore. Especially as he knew she was still turning tricks on the side. Old habits.

“Mr Krasnorada.”

He'd seen the man. That one was a buyer, not a seller. There were some arms dealers and some merc company salesmen, and there were buyers that had the power to give out contracts and nice desks all over the place. Good-looking man, dark skin with a golden hue, not the blue-tinged blackness he'd seen before. Somebody had mentioned it was about East Africans and West Africans. There were ethnic differences, but he knew nothing about them. He could tell most ethnic groups apart in Asia, but Africa remained the Dark Continent to him.

“Colonel Nelson. I am so very pleased to finally meet you.” The other wore the whole Christmas tree, but the tassels were mostly decoration. No service ribbons Vadim recognized, no medals of any importance. But what did he really know about Africa? And his own service ribbons and medals were missing, too. He was here as a civilian. Fuck his training, fuck ten years for that country and three years for the other. He wasn't even allowed to wear any uniform, any stupid flag patch on his arm. No citizen, no regular army, Mother Russia's disgraced non-son, Britain's protégée, but not child. Vadim nodded, took the offered hand. “Colonel.”

The other held his hand in his, like a prized friend, one hand on his elbow.

What a face. A long, thin nose, black eyes that were slanted a touch, which gave him an inscrutable, sphinx-like expression, high cheek bones, the chin pointed more than rounded. It reminded Vadim of Egyptian artefacts he'd seen on exhibitions, and the man was tall and graceful, even though that theatre uniform forced him to guess about any of his other qualities.

I never had a black man, thought Vadim. Tartars, Byelorussians, Ukrainians, plenty of Russians, one Armenian. Not a single black guy. Most blacks he had encountered were Americans, and grunts. He didn't particularly mind them, no more than their white comrades. Except for Hooch. Nationality more than skin colour. He noticed how the other man's fingers ran down the inside of his arm, saw that the Colonel was shielding that motion with his body, eyes slightly amused, lips quirked.

"I enjoyed your observations on tribal and inter-ethnic warfare." Genocide and how it was done. Africa was full of that. He'd stuck to Asia. Seemed this guy was interested in some knowledge transfer. Possibly even transfer of bodily fluids the way the Colonel held his hand, then gingerly let it slip away. "This happens to be one of the fields I have covered during my studies at Sandhurst."

Yes, that accent reminded him of the UK. Some of his officers had spoken like that, the deliberate twisting of vowels that distinguished the educated from the rabble. His own English was a random mix of some American, some British, and a fair bit of Russian. He envied the man that purity. The kind of English that made him think of the Baroness, club chairs, ladies in strange pastel colours and cucumber sandwiches.

The man was knowledgeable. They traded anecdotes and numbers, and Vadim found those countered, answered and questioned. Like fencers crossing blades, assessing the other for speed, precision, strength and technique. And the other was blatantly checking him out, which, in the middle of all those boring grey old farts – and an increasingly drunk Dan at the bar – provided some amusement. Vadim found himself genuinely laughing at the other's jokes, kept drinking the wine the other kept flagging down.

Nelson enjoyed Tolstoy. He enjoyed sports, had taken fencing classes at Oxford. After around two hours Vadim caught himself thinking he had more in common with this man than he'd ever had with the scruffy Dan who bee-lined towards the toilets. He shook his head. Fuck you. Go embarrass yourself. I don't care.

Again that hand on his arm, on his shoulder, and Vadim felt his skin tingle. A smile, that cultured voice, with an even more cultured smirk. "I'd love showing you just how much I appreciate your company." A small motion of the head, towards upstairs. Hotel room. After all the crap he had to go through with Dan since he'd come back from hospitals and then rehabilitation. The smell of beer around him, the bored, impassive "Yeah, whatever"-attitude that Dan had these days, if he even reacted at all. This promised to be nicer than with a hooker. They had invested too much into the business side of things to split up, the fucking farm, the fucking plans, insurances, all the paperwork. They were

tied and nailed down, and when sex and love just stopped, they were still tied down.

Nelson was different. Cultured, educated, distinguished, not one scruffy hair on him, he smelled of spices and the tang of wine on his breath, and they kissed in the elevator. Vadim looking at the mirror, seeing himself kiss a man that wasn't Dan, saw the dark hand against his face, knew where the other was going.

They made it to the hotel room, it was just opposite the elevator.

The heavy door fell into place with a soft thud behind them. Nelson's hand pushed him into the room, a grin on his face told Vadim that things would go exactly like he wanted them from here, in just a moment. The 'do not disturb' sign went out, the door closed a second time.

Nelson turned towards him. He seemed to consider, maybe offer him a drink, more conversation. "We are not rushing things, are we?"

Vadim smirked, thought of quick hard fucks in the barracks. Saw the uniform hanging from the door of the wardrobe, the leather attaché case on an empty shelf, the glorious view over the dark city. "I guess I can defend myself." His hands moved to the buttons of the jacket, opened them, then shrugged out of it, draped it across the back of one of the arm chairs. He gave a short laugh. "My modesty."

Nelson placed a hand against Vadim's jaw. "I should tell you, Mr Krasnorada, how impressed I am. I have read your CV and asked a few questions ... not in any sinister capacity, mostly asked about your credentials, as it were." Thumb brushed his lips, a tickling, intense sensation. Vadim opened his lips and teeth and felt the other push his thumb in, eyes narrowed as he began to suck that finger. He liked the man's panache to bring him up here, the killer, yes, aged, but killing was all about technique. He didn't have to rely on strength or stamina. He'd still be deadly ten years from now, as long as his mind remained intact, and he could see that in Nelson's eyes.

The man was truly fascinated, and that was a great feeling after having been ignored for too long. After nights alone on the couch, or even in the bed, at the beginning waiting for the sound of the Landrover pulling up outside, but eventually falling asleep. The bed was big enough to get lost in, and that was what happened. Big enough so they didn't have to touch, even if Dan made it into the bedroom. The yard or so between them had turned into a minefield. He didn't want to touch Dan. Dan didn't touch him, and even if he had wanted to, he couldn't sleep on his side. Not after the surgery and not for a long time. Sometimes it was easier to sleep in the study, on the leather couch. At least Vadim could jerk off there, watching some nameless pretty and buff guys getting fucked on TV. The occasional hooker had provided an outlet in long conference nights in boring hotels. Paying for sex was less risky, less complicated.

Nelson pushed his thumb deeper, fingers against Vadim's cheek, eyes, face, perfect, fucking his mind just by sliding his thumb in and out. His lips open, eyes half-closed, knowing, understanding, he didn't play by instinct, he knew



what he was doing, and Vadim inhaled sharply, nostrils flaring as Nelson's hand touched his groin. Colonel Nelson. Something magical about that rank, opera uniform yes or no, the strange thought of him acting the superior. Well, Oxford and Sandhurst.

They were chest to chest, Nelson pulled his thumb free, placed his lips on Vadim's, pushed his tongue in, while his hands began to free the shirt, hand slid into the trousers, and both hands began to massage his buttocks. A firm grasp, pulling and spreading, wet finger tracing his crack. Vadim groaned, began to move against the other, could feel how control began to slip. He didn't care. Fuck control.

"Ah, to have you ..." said Nelson and allowed Vadim to pull his shirt off. Chiselled chest, one of the nicest sixpacks Vadim had ever seen. Very likely the occasional dose of steroids, good work, though, well-measured, well-administered. That guy knew what he was doing to his body, probably balanced it with other medication to avoid the stuff some athletes had to deal with, back in the days. The method had seen much refinement in the meantime. Nelson smiled at that glance, could already read him like he was an open book with especially bold letters. "What do you think?"

They lost the rest of the clothes on the way to the bed, the undressing practised, nothing awkward about it, just as smooth as discussing Tolstoy. Teasing and stroking and kneading the other's body, starting with heat, but never any insanity, never anything that hurt the body or the mind. Vadim found himself groaning on the bed, watching his cock vanish between those lips, understood that Nelson gave blowjobs just like he did, because he liked the power, that was why Nelson pushed a couple fingers inside him and fucked him with his fingers and his mouth at the same time, but didn't allow him to come, pulling back when Vadim tried to push too hard.

Vadim was breathless and laughing with denial and a bit of embarrassment. "Okay, what do you want?"

Nelson looked up, dark eyes held no light, no reflection, and he was nothing but a faceless shadow in the mirror near the bed. Vadim reached to the nightstand and flicked the switch of the small stylish lamp, frosted glass shade ignited with a warm light that transformed the shadow into a golden statue. Much better.

Nelson gestured towards the wall, a measured movement. "I want you kneeling there, facing the wall, legs apart, and I want to fuck you for the rest of the night."

Vadim nodded. "Copy, Colonel." He saw the dark eyes widen at the use of the title, saw the man shudder, like he liked his power just a bit too much and knew that Vadim knew. He turned and rested his arms on the headrest, spread his legs as ordered, rested his head on his arm, as Nelson moved closer.

Lube, then he opened a condom, and smiled as Vadim frowned at that. Didn't like those things, still didn't, they just got in the way. "Much better than asking about any of your blood transfusions," said Nelson and managed to make it sound perfectly natural, rolling the thing down, and Vadim found

himself staring at that cock in the mirror. Black flesh, white skin, the contrast increased the sensation, somehow. How strange and erotic. "Do you ... like them white?" he asked, as Nelson moved behind him. He moved back to make things easier, following instinct as well as planning.

Nelson flashed a smile with sharp teeth. "I like them strong. As do you." Probed and opened, one hand against the small of his back to bring him lower, then pushed in, easing, control, absolute control of every inch of cock. Vadim bit back a groan, one hand was all that kept him down, bowed like that, saw how the man began to fuck him in the mirror, muscles tensed, slow and perfect, they both made quite a pair there. Black hand moved over his back, read the word, at the same moment, he pushed in and Vadim raised his head, fought the groan that tried to come out. Hoped Nelson knew no Russian. Doubted he'd know that kind of word if he did. The touch should freak him, but it didn't. It just felt good, relaxing, reassuring, and above all, completely deliberate.

Nelson exhaled, ran his hands over Vadim's flanks, as if measuring how much he could take. "Now, move, but slowly." An order if he'd ever received one. Vadim pushed back, felt that body move with him, slowly, so very slowly, and when he found a rhythm, it was Nelson who'd disrupt it, who'd pause when he craved to go faster. He was drenched in sweat, could feel the sweat run down his body as this strange game of control and concentration grew ever more serious, and it took forever, or that was what it felt like. He was completely exhausted when Nelson allowed him to come, he had no idea how the other could be so controlled, didn't care, suspected cocaine or something else, but he just collapsed afterwards, all strength and need drained. Felt the hand on his forehead and face, then another kiss, then heard the shower and listened for a while, drifting in and out of sleep.

\* \* \*

For Dan, the room couldn't be spinning fast enough, nor were the senses ever dulled enough, nor the vision sufficiently blurred. Didn't matter how much he drank, unless he managed to get himself so pissed he'd fall over like the sad and pathetic fucker he had become. No present, no future, only a past that had burnt out like a supernova.

There was nothing left. Nothing to do. Nothing that he *could* do. Nothing his body allowed him to do.

Just the booze and the accusing glances from across the room. The signs of distaste and disgust and the looks of embarrassment from Vadim. Worse, being ignored. Vadim animatedly chatting with that African geezer, no eyes nor ears for anyone else, but what would he have to offer anyway. Nothing. No whisky could wipe that knowledge away, no matter how much he tried, and he'd tried countless times.

He'd been to the loos, trying hard not to piss down his trousers, unsteady on his feet, but at least all of this shit hurt less when his senses were dulled. Could

forget the emptiness and the realization of simply not being good enough now that he'd lost everything he'd always been.

Not enough anymore. A cripple.

Dan staggered back to the bar, stopping before he'd reached his seat, trying to make sense of the empty space across the room - they were gone. He shook his head, turned and made his unsteady way to the elevator and their suite. Ridiculous, really, that they still shared the rooms, he was certain he did nothing but annoy Vadim. His mere presence a disturbance of the smooth perfection of Vadim's varnished life. A piece of unwanted rough in the fabric of the Russian's new-found culture.

The rooms of the suite were empty. Dan frowned. Shook his head again, unruly, unkempt and rather uncut hair falling over his face, he almost lost his balance before limping out of the door. Back down once more, to the bar, and found a waitress who was cleaning the now empty tables. Asking her where those two men had went and she pointed upstairs, to the rooms. Even in his state it took only a straightforward lie and a puppy dog look to get the information from reception, finding his way back to the level where the black guy resided. Fifth floor, extra plush lounge. Of course.

Dan brushed the wall while unsteadily marching towards the room number, the booze making the limp worse, but he was determined to beat the crap out of the door and to drag Vadim back out of there and ... but why? Habit?

He finally stood in front of the door. 'Do not disturb'. His hand raised for the violent knock, and stilled.

Useless body. Useless man.

He placed his palm against the thick door and let his forehead follow. Leaning against it, he couldn't hear a sound from the room and didn't expect it either. And he suddenly knew. Amongst the numbness and the emptiness, through the pain of over a year, and after having become strangers that could hardly look at each other, he suddenly knew the one single, unshakable truth, and it was the first thing he'd felt for a long time.

"I love you."

Dan didn't move for a long time, until he finally pushed himself off the door, making his way down to the lobby via the stairs. Step for step dragging himself away, until he found himself outside in front of the hotel, bathed in the glitzy lights, he steered towards a taxi.

"Take me to the city's Red Light district." Dan managed to get into the first of the cars in line. "No. Bullshit." He shook his head, fumbling drunkenly with the seatbelt. "Take me to a gay bar." The driver nodded, unmoved, nothing he hadn't heard or seen from the many shades of guests that came out of the posh hotel.

Twenty minutes later and Dan found himself leaning against a wall, smoking a cigarette and staring at the club on the opposite side of the street. No yellow light this time, not even a sleazy area he found himself in. The club had a stylish front, inviting patrons with polished steel and black granite, instead of hidden secrets and dirty corners. The world had changed, but he hadn't kept up.

He wasn't much different now to the man who had stood against a wall in a backstreet alley, in a seedy part of London. Watching two men kissing in the sickly yellow streetlight and realising that night who he really was. No, wrong. He was everything but, a shell of himself. Useless. Unlike the man who'd stood and laughed, smoking.

Thirteen years ago.

He took another drag, exhaling the smoke slowly, while watching the men opposite come and go. None of them older than in their thirties, most of them young and fit, none of them an overused, aging cripple like him. No sad fucks, just fresh and young faces, like Matt, untouched by life and lines and wrinkles. Buff bodies in fashionable clothes that clung snugly to the physical perfection of youth.

He was old. Almost forty-five, not even officer retirement age, but over a year ago, he had 'retired' for good. Against his will. Throwing the cigarette butt to the ground, he watched it glow and sizzle before burning out. Just like him. Burnt out. Old and discarded. A piece of useless scrap. He didn't belong here anymore, as little as he was part of Vadim's new life. A Brave New World which had no place for a worn-out veteran and aging adrenaline junkie who'd passed the last chance to chase the thrill.

It was time. It was over. All things had come to an end.

Dan pushed himself off the wall, disregarded the club and walked through the night and its remaining hours. Ignoring the chill and the increasing limp, and ignoring the pain like he'd ignored all pain, inside and out. Just a middle-aged man past his sell-by date, who had done his duty and had outlived his usefulness, shuffling through a world that had chewed him up and spit him back out.

\* \* \*

At five, Vadim woke up, his usual time. Nelson was working at his desk, still wearing the bathrobe. Vadim padded towards the shower, cleaned up, got dressed, regarded the other man, who looked up with a bit of irony. What now, that glance seemed to say. "You could stay for breakfast."

Vadim nodded. "Thank you for the offer."

Nelson inclined his head. "It's not politeness."

"I know."

Nelson pursed his lips, then stood and came towards him. "Are you alright?"

"Better than alright."

"Good. I don't want you to regret this." I will not allow you to regret this, said the tone of his voice.

"I don't." And that was the truth. Vadim was fascinated by that face, the way this man could make him needy and knew what he was thinking, without all the painful years that it had taken Dan to get there. Dan. Shit. But then, he'd been too drunk to notice, and he wouldn't care anyway.

"Do I get your number?"

Vadim checked his pockets, pulled out one of his cards. "It would be nice to meet again at some point. If and when the opportunity arises." He didn't meet that gaze, then felt the dark fingers close around his hand and the card, pulling it out.

"Yes, I enjoyed your company, too." Nelson smiled, a dazzling, beautiful smile. "And you are welcome to be in touch."

In touch. Vadim looked up, knew what that kind of touching would be, didn't feel used or exploited, the rules had been clear from the very first moment, and would be to the last one. He nodded and smiled, and returned to his own room, not hungry enough to stay awake for breakfast. He paused. Dan should have been asleep, drunk and half passed out. He wasn't. He could feel some tension return, but he supposed that Dan had found himself a watering hole. Dan had reflexes, could trust his guts to not get him killed even when stupidly drunk. And even if he got into trouble piss drunk as he probably was, that might teach him a lesson or two about simply wandering off. Vadim pushed that thought away, and stretched out for a couple more hours. Listened to the echo of the other man in his body, on his skin. Just good, nothing bad or painful about it.

Welcome to be in touch.

Why not.

\* \* \*

Dan did not return to the hotel before eight o' clock. That left him no more than an hour to get showered, shaved, his clothes changed and his suitcase packed. The plane was scheduled for 1015 hrs and they had to be at the airport at least an hour before that. Despite their business class tickets, long-haul flights to the other side of the world still required check-in time.

He could not bear to be anywhere near Vadim, did not want to talk nor even look at him, snuck into the room instead, trying to get to the bathroom without being noticed. Wondered if Vadim was even there, almost expected him to be already downstairs in the genteel breakfast room where the bread was some fancy crap and the coffee came in such special ways, it had hardly any resemblance to a good, strong coffee with several lumps of sugar.

Dan smelled of booze and fags, but he was not drunk, not even close to it. Just numb. Enough alcohol in his blood to take the edge off the pain; this aching tightness inside his chest, beneath the solar plexus. The hole that nothing could fill. No future. No more 'Mad Dog'. Mad Dog was dead, he'd died on the operating table.

An eye opened as Vadim heard a noise. Softly, the door closed. His heart pounded suddenly, body, despite those years, ready for combat. He'd still be ready like this in twenty years' time. Hormones, adrenaline, and the healthy paranoia of a body that had learned to be awake in an instant. He smelled Dan before he saw him, didn't really see him through near closed eyes.

Bathroom. Vadim waited till the door had closed, then got up. He expected some foul-mouthed accusations, or some other form of hostility. He had got used to that, and he had learned to muster his defences by arranging his own weapons neatly, his own blades to make sure Dan didn't walk out of that fight unharmed. He was surprised just how deeply he resented him that moment. Guilt? Fuck guilt. He had only regretted a few things in his life, and this was not one of them.

Nelson. He'd slept with other men, like Hooch. Dan couldn't accuse him of anything that he hadn't done before. It was not about being faithful, because they had never been. It was just the fact they couldn't talk anymore. Their last attempts made the first encounters in Kabul look like distinguished conversation. Dan was sullen, misunderstood everything, shrugged when Vadim expected a reaction, any kind of reaction, and retreated into his room, his car, his pub, his beer and whisky. One thing to put up with that, another to resign to a life of that. He wouldn't. Nelson had been a nice change, relaxed him, made him feel good, even flattered. It wasn't like they were married. And seeing how his first marriage had gone, even that wouldn't have made a difference.

Vadim was packing when Dan returned from the bathroom. Dressed, too. He glanced at Dan, every now and then, but the other didn't look at him. Okay, whatever. Fuck you, Dan. Fuck you. Vadim kept his face carefully controlled not to show the anger, then called reception for the bill to be prepared, and for a taxi in twenty minutes.

Dan was trying to talk, to make conversation that had a semblance of normality, but he couldn't bring himself to utter anymore than the question if Vadim had the tickets. He packed his suitcase, haphazardly throwing things inside, unlike himself. Even during the years in the mountains he'd always been packing meticulously.

The taxi ride took place in near-silence, and so did the checking in at the business class desk. Dan bee-lined for the drinks once they had entered the waiting lounge, ignoring the selection of nuts and raisins and the plates of tiny sandwiches and petit fours he used to empty like a Hoover. He didn't feel hungry. Feel. The crucial world. He felt nothing.

He sat himself down in a lounge chair, cradling his glass and staring at his hands. They'd belonged to a killer - now caressing a drink. The booze kept the numbness going, made the close proximity bearable. You're a failure, Dan. You ultimately failed at love and life.

Vadim had bought himself the current issue of the Economist, and now sat down near Dan, not actually looking at him much, instead reading an article on the world economy. He glanced at Dan, who was drinking again, but ignored the food. That meant he'd be drunk sooner. He put the magazine down and went to the buffet to have something like a breakfast. Dan not eating. His clothes just stuffed into the suitcase. Remote and distracted even by his current standards. Dan didn't look at him, didn't speak, didn't take anything in. Hadn't taken anything in for over a year. And was this all they would ever get out of life together? Routine things, like travelling, superficial stuff that didn't matter, with

all decisions made by Vadim. He was the driving force these days, secretary, valet and cook, but not lover. He had no alternative. He couldn't just pack up and go. Remaining alone? Fucked up? Old?

Vadim returned to his seat, while Dan was looking down, watched the whisky do exactly nothing. Dan could outwait a mountain if he had his mind set on it. But that was the problem. Lack of focus. Dan had no focus, not even hating him, not even the whisky. He just drifted.

Vadim wanted to bitchslap some sense into Dan, but saw those eyes blind. Worse than sulking.

His mobile phone rang. Unknown number.

"Yes?"

"Just wanted to hear your voice," said Nelson.

Vadim stood up. "Why?"

"Because I had the most pleasant dream." The voice was rough with something, and Vadim felt his hackles rise. That was lust, as pure as any he'd encountered.

He stepped to the side, acted like it was a business call. Shit. "You are not doing what I think you're doing?"

"What do you think I'm doing?" A small groan.

Vadim swallowed. Shit. Back to square one, back on that bed, back to watching himself in the mirror. Knew that was exactly what Nelson was imagining.

"Are you still there?" Breath going harsher. "Because I'm close."

Vadim gave a short laugh, embarrassed to the bone, but his body liked the image of Nelson stroking himself, still in the hotel room. Fuck. Too hot. He'd have a long, long flight to think about it. "I am."

"Good. Why don't you head to the toilets and come for me?"

Dan looked up. Watched the other, saw the face, the expression of something that he hadn't seen in a long time. Not since Kabul, Baghdad, and Belgrade.

"Uhm, I'm sorry, I can't ... oblige you there." Vadim peered over his shoulder. Shit. "The flight's just getting ready. I need to switch off. Sorry." Heard the beginning of laughter, soft, mocking, sexy, and pressed the button. Shit. Been forever that somebody had got into his mind. Under his skin. Inside his body. Oh fuck. He returned to the seat, felt the mobile phone heavy in his pocket like a traitor. Hooch was in his own league, and none of the hookers had called him after sex. That was the difference.

Dan's eyes still on Vadim, he'd heard the lie, knew the flight had another ten minutes at least. He didn't need to be told who had called, could see the flushed face clearly. Liar. Couldn't even bring himself to add an expletive. Just liar. "Slept well?" He tossed the last of the whisky back, felt it burn down his throat, dulling and smoothing, but none of the booze could ever touch the tightness and pain in his chest.

Vadim inhaled deeply, wanted to crush that cell phone and the mocking, aroused voice inside. "Not too bad. Yourself?" Asking that of a man who

looked like shit. Fuck. Back into dagger-twisting, comrade spetsnaz? “You don’t look very rested.”

Dan shrugged. “I was walking.” Without a crutch, and yeah, that’s why your fucked-up knee hurts like fucking fuck and why you can’t remember anything of your surroundings. Could have walked through the desert for all it was worth. “Plenty of time to sleep on the plane.” His attention went back to the glass in his hands, debating if he should refill now or wait until they had boarded. Didn’t want to drink too much, seemed the stuff had the opposite effect and made him feel even worse if he had too much. He had to keep the booze to a certain level.

Impossible to go back to reading. Nelson had shaken him, and Dan’s sullen stare didn’t help. Vadim debated a number of responses, one of which was to grab the fucker and toss him right onto the buffet, then show him each and every wall and hard surface in this place, stop for a moment to neutralise the fat, badly-trained security guards he had seen, then hit Dan a couple times, and make a speedy exit before any real security force arrived.

He could feel his pulse go up, his body liked that idea and signalled readiness. Shit. Start a fight here, just because Dan was not responsive, not really reacting. What was the problem? Couldn’t have been Nelson. And where did that violent urge come from? He hadn’t had that in ages. Not this bad.

Talk to me, you bastard, Vadim thought. Convince me I wouldn’t be better off being some colonel’s plaything. Some – any – guy’s that can tell an aria from a recitative. Somebody graceful, with culture that was ultimately useless and refined, fifteen thousand miles removed from how to cut a man open and how to clear a house with a fire team. Civilization.

Vadim sat down and felt heavy, allowing the anger to dissipate. Dan wouldn’t listen anyway. He’d tried to explain that life wasn’t over just because they’d stopped killing people. “Cities look all the same,” he murmured, clutching at what little Dan offered in terms of conversation. Dan was near impossible to talk to. And he had tired of trying to reach out.

“Yeah.” Dan offered, he tried. Tried to make conversation but it was as if every word in his mind had been dried up and every sound was as sharp as sandpaper, scraping his throat open along the way and never getting out. Too much effort. Far too much to even look up or move, to do anything but sitting and staring. Lost in a darkness, tied and bound with an inability to get out of bed in the mornings for lack of reasons why. Why, indeed. What was there to wait for, move to, show interest in.

Vadim leafed through the magazine, couldn’t concentrate on the small words, and so many of them together, it didn’t make much sense, and got up to buy a National Geographic. Back to pretty pictures, like a child. He only wished that magazine was bigger and would keep him busy for longer.

The plane was called, friendly staff notifying their business class passengers to make their way to the gates. It was the final push that Dan needed to get out of the seat, leaving the tumbler on the table and snatching his bag. He was trying to think of something to say, anything, but the words were lost.



Settling into their comfortable, spacious seats, he was thankful for the mindless selection of films to watch, magazines to read and a cloudless sky to watch. Could still stare for hours at heaven and earth, soothed by the silence.

Vadim looked at pictures, tried to sleep, just waited for the plane to touch down. Singapore, a few hours to kill. He checked the mobile phone. Two calls. Two calls in ten hours. He had saved the number from the first call and of course it was the Colonel. Vadim listened to him on voicemail, something about what that memory made him do, and that he wanted to see him again. Be in touch. The second call was half an hour after that. He hoped he hadn't offended him, there should be, by all rights and purposes, more of a courtship and that he had been too eager, pushing too far too fast.

Courtship. As if Vadim had ever in his life done anything like that deliberately. Always his body racing into things, deciding he wanted that guy and maybe try it with a girl, and, oh, that felt good, so get more of it. Nelson felt good. That Nelson even thought about it, or even considered something like courtship with some guy he'd fucked in his hotel room, spoke of somebody who actually bothered. Gifts, dinners, invitations. The next step. In that class of people, that was what people did.

Vadim felt a little smug that Nelson did consider him for that, ah, more than smug, pleased with himself, flattered, relieved that he could still cut it, still get that expression on people's faces. Vanity was the least of his sins. He let Nelson wait, didn't want one of those embarrassing phone calls that he was sure Nelson was after, something sexy, probably. Instead let him wait, there would be time in Kiwiland.

Dan continued to drink, just a steady low-level flow of alcohol. He didn't show signs of drunkenness, managing to keep the emptiness contained and finally getting sleepy. He never touched any food, he'd simply forgotten how to feel hungry, but he popped his pills, at least remembering those. The usual cocktail of vitamins and extra nutrients and whatever the rest were doing. He'd forgotten, just swallowed them anyway.

He'd brought out a maximum of ten words throughout all those hours, but every time Vadim checked his phone and listened to the voicemail, he watched. He could read Vadim's face, and wondered for a moment if the Russian was even aware of that, but in the end, it did not matter, because it obviously made no difference to Vadim what he, Dan, was thinking or feeling. It was over. Even spelled out in neon letters could not make it anymore clear.

Dan finally managed to sleep for an hour before touch-down in Singapore. Curled into his seat and facing the window. Several hours to kill in Singapore and he didn't know what to do, wanted to stay in a bar at the airport, mindlessly watching people and continuing his steady drinking. The flight home would be soon.

Home. Strange concept. He'd lost his home long ago, since he'd arrived, even though it had been sitting right beside him.

## November 1994, New Zealand

Back on the plane in Singapore, Vadim had bought CDs and some electronic gadgets in a place close to the airport. He tilted the seat back, crossed his arms, leaned the head against the window, and willed himself to sleep. Best part of being an ex-soldier. He could relax under strain, even close to an enemy of a very different kind.

He was completely disoriented when he woke up, but it wasn't the nightmare, just incredibly deep, leaden, unrestful sleep that told him his body was well and truly jetlagged by now. Ah, landing. The sinking feeling in his stomach had woken him up. He stretched, massaged his calves to get the blood going, tensed muscles, reached for his water bottle, glanced at Dan.

Dan was not looking, blind-eyed staring out of the window. New Zealand. Home. What bullshit.

Then, finally, the landing. Vadim heard the gangway scrape, then lock. Grabbed his bag first, enough space to not be in Dan's way, a warm, pleasant smile from the crew, fly Emirates again, thank you, Sir, and trotted down the gangway, sore with sleep. It was spring here, late autumn in Europe. His body and mind reeled, the change like a blow to his sanity every time.

Dan followed, had not said a word since Singapore, not even to the cabin crew. He tried to, so hard, did his best to appear like a normal human being, but just didn't have the energy to interact. Just wanted booze and nothing else.

The last leg of the flight was nothing but a blur, and when they finally arrived in Palmerston, Dan waved an over-eager airport worker away, who offered to carry his bag since he was limping, but didn't want to be reminded of who he had become. From Special Forces soldier over Mad Dog mercenary, to crippled middle aged man with nothing left, least of all a future, or even just a reason to go on. Day after day. Why?

Dan's Landrover stood exactly like they had left it on the way. "Who's driving?" Vadim asked.

Dan shrugged, patted down his pockets, had to have the key somewhere. Even less steady on his feet than he usually was, the constant flow of booze had deteriorated the precarious balance, but at least it made him feel numb. "I've been drinking. Can't find the keys, you got the second set." The most he had said in over twenty-four hours.

He stood beside the passenger door, holding onto his in-flight bag, while Vadim loaded their suitcases. Funny how his own was so much smaller, he guessed that was why Vadim seemed to be embarrassed these days to be seen with him. Less suave than scruffy, not that he'd ever been anything else, but now he wasn't good enough anymore in this Brave New World.

Vadim sat down behind the steering wheel, flicked the button of the aircon, thought better of switching on the radio. Right. Waited till Dan had properly settled, then began to drive home, mostly a long road through nothing, beautiful landscape with green hills that were unlike any other hills. Nature here never seemed to rest, there was always an explosion of life, of fertility, and the land as

primal as the soul, one of the things that reminded him of Russia. Not the enslaved, cultured thing that was Europe, or Britain, where every square metre – apart from the Highlands – looked tamed, subjugated and gentle.

Dan was sitting and staring, silently smoking fag after fag, the worst passenger in the books, not saying a word unless he was forced to. Just couldn't, truly couldn't, no matter how much he tried. He fell asleep at some stage, ignored the world and Vadim, ignored himself.

About forty minutes later, Vadim stopped in front of the farm. Turned the key, leaned back and rubbed his face. Tired as all hell.

Dan woke up, wiped his face and eyes, groaned with the stiffness that had settled into his bones. He'd have to take painkillers, if he could be bothered. Climbed out of the car, the limp more pronounced than ever, he grabbed a couple of bags but almost fell over, cursing softly. Fucking decrepit cripple of a bloody old man. Useless.

He made his way inside and upstairs, left everything else with Vadim, he'd know far better what to do anyway. The house was his, no, really. Vadim's stamp and seal and style, none of it a scruffy ex-squaddie's interior. No matter what name was on the deed; no matter that Dan had bought and paid for it.

Vadim grabbed the heaviest bag from the trunk, walked to the door, opened the door, pushed the bag in with a foot, returned to the car and got the rest of the bags and suitcases out, loaded himself like a mule, but he preferred to have the car empty. He could unpack later. Once Dan was inside, he returned to the car, got his jacket, shut everything down, even though there was nobody within ten miles, and criminality was so low that the Landrover stood no chance of getting stolen.

Shower. Bed. Vadim felt completely fucked, and in no good way. Not even remotely good.

Dan had grabbed a bottle of whisky and locked himself in his study. As usual, he had vanished from sight and sound, a hermit in his own house. He didn't belong there, except for the room with computer, high-fi, widescreen telly, satellite and cable, big chair and bergan stored in the corner. Bergan.

He fell asleep several hours later, still in the same clothes, reeking of nicotine and alcohol.

Vadim listened for any sound. Dan was gone, had walked upstairs, up into his study. His island, where no one could touch him, least of all Vadim. He shook his head, had hoped against hope that Dan would stick around and maybe finally talk. He walked into the kitchen, checked the fridge. It was stocked, their house keeper had left a note with the receipt, and a scrawled "welcome home" on it, even with a smiley face. Nothing to smile at. After the plane food, he needed something lighter, something healthier. Vadim grabbed the 500g tub of yoghurt, pulled the foil lid back, found the maple syrup, poured a good amount into the blender, found the powdered vanilla pods, dusted the surface of the yogurt generously, screwed on the lid and mixed it quickly, poured everything into a tall glass, and walked into the living room. A pile of mail, magazines, mostly Diplomacy Weekly, Jane's, Soldier mag for Dan, some

more obscure, some purely scientific. He would have to catch up with his reading. Bills, too, he'd tackle those tomorrow. Or whenever he woke up.

He switched on the mobile phone, plugged it in, sat down with the yogurt, relished the clean, semi-sour taste. He should call back. He gazed out through the glass doors, into the patch they called the 'garden'. He didn't have a plan yet what to do with it, whether he wanted to cut down the old apple trees or not. His concepts wandered from a Japanese style Zen garden with rocks to letting it go completely wild. Vadim just couldn't make up his mind, unlike with the house. He'd known exactly what to do here. Every piece carefully selected, the furniture, the beautiful redwood floor that shimmered like silk in the sun.

The mobile rang. Vadim reached for it. "Yes?"

"You should have arrived by now."

Nelson. You creep. He doubtlessly had checked the flights, calculated the distance. Vadim was flattered, but he wasn't quite sure he liked the lengths to which the other man went. "Yes. Just sitting down with a ... drink." Don't mention yoghurt. He wasn't in the mood for suggestions what else he could drink.

"Did you think about the offer?"

"What? Breakfast?"

"No. Did you check your email?"

"No."

"Do it."

Vadim shook his head. "Listen, I'm tired." He got up and headed up one flight of stairs, into his study, switched the computer on, waited forever for the system to load, phone in one hand, yogurt in the other. Sat down in the leather chair, all papers neatly stacked and filed, this was for work, anyway. "Where are you now?"

"Me? Still in Madrid. Will you be in Rio in three weeks?"

"Could be. I am not sure we were booked for that."

"You were. I booked you."

Wow. Creep. "You managed to cramp us into your budget?"

"One Russian won't stretch the budget much."

No plural. No Dan in this. Pointedly.

"Did you read the email?" Nelson asked.

"Give me a second." He logged on, downloaded his email. Sure enough, one was from 'Nelson', nothing more. It had an attachment, the email restated how much he had enjoyed their recent exchange. "Exchange, huh?"

Nelson laughed. "Who knows who else reads those emails. I don't trust the technology."

"True." Vadim opened the attached document. A lot of legalese. A contract of sorts. A job. Fixed job, for that country of Nelson's. It said 'military advisor'. And there was a big number in the salary field. "Woah."

"Do you like that number, Vadim?"

"You don't buy your Russians cheap."

"Good people don't come cheap."

Vadim hit the 'print' button, and had the needle printer noisily whiz away. He got up again. "What would you want me to do?"

"We are restructuring the military. And there are a few troubles with rebels and unruly minorities. Nothing you wouldn't know how to deal with."

"I'm getting a bit old for genocide."

Nelson's laughter had a nervous touch. "Vadim. Pacification. Nobody speaks about murder. You were involved in the Soviet pull-out. Most of the people here are corrupt in some way or other. Sold out to self-interest. I need to bring outsiders I can trust to not sell themselves to the highest bidder. People trusted you, repeatedly; I know most of your story, and I think you are perfect for the job. We get you into the staff of the defence minister. My country could be a paradise, but we need to reform it first, slowly lead it where it belongs."

Vadim glanced at the pile of paper stacking up in the printer. "I can't have been that good to fuck?"

Nelson coughed. "Well, we'd have to work rather closely together, too. That might entail regular meetings." He purred. The word 'meeting' had never sounded so sexy. He had found his feet again. "You'll enjoy it, Vadim. You will enjoy it a lot, I promise."

Vadim inhaled. "I'll call you tomorrow. I really need to sleep." He switched the computer and screen off, and got up again.

"Not a problem. We won't rush matters. As much as I would like to, but I feel I want to take my time with you. Maybe in Rio?"

Vadim smiled. "Yes, Rio. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Vadim switched the phone off, headed downstairs to plug it in again, finished the yogurt, got undressed and went to bed. Shower, sauna, tomorrow.

\* \* \*

His body clock fucked to oblivion, Dan slept late into the afternoon. Not a good sleep, cramped and aching in the chair, but he'd got used to it over the past months, and he wasn't supposed to sleep too often on his side anyway.

He took a shower in the upstairs bathroom, then walked around the house in silence. Touching things he did not recognise, not even after a year, furniture that meant nothing to him and looking at paintings and objects of art that he would throw into the trash if he could. He remembered how Vadim had been brimming with pride at the way he had made the farm a 'home', working his arse off while Dan was forced to stay in the UK, but in the end - in the end it had become a stranger's house. Dan felt like a guest, one that had overstayed his welcome. The only place that held his own memories and some of his - old - self was what he called his study. And that hurt, had hurt from the first moment on, no matter Vadim's good intentions.

Walking through the ground floor rooms, dressed in jeans and shirt, he looked through the patio doors. He smiled at the old apple trees, one of the main reasons why he had bought this pace. Apple trees that reminded him of a

childhood in the Scottish Highlands and their neighbour's farm, a memory so faded that all that remained were trees, hills and mountains. He had wanted this farm, because of the stunning view from the patio across the mountains.

He walked back to his study, returned with some business to his Landrover, checked tyre pressure, oil and water, old habits still dying hard. Limped back upstairs, rummaged through some of his files and papers, cursed when he'd run out of paper in his printer. Had to check Vadim's room. He had to get these printouts, had to sort the paperwork, and had to do the right thing, now that he finally knew what he had to do. Grabbed a beer on his way, he needed to steady his nerves and ensure he'd do what had to be done. Without fail and finally. A resolution he should have taken long ago.

Dan was looking for a fresh packet of printer paper in Vadim's desk, when his eyes fell onto a whole stack of paper, still in the printer and not torn off yet. Stopped. Froze. Couldn't help but read. Contract. Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada. Military Advisor. Africa. Nelson. Colonel. Contract. Vadim.

Hands shaking, flicking through page after page, Dan saw numbers and names, date and times and descriptions, but could only remember the one word: contract.

Gone.

Alone.

Lost.

Over.

He'd known. But this ... too much. Too painful. Dan stood. Cold. Forgotten the beer in his left hand, papers clenched in his right, shaking with his tremors. Fucker. Slow-curling anger that had been buried deep inside came rising to the surface. Last attempt at rage, a flame kindling in the forgotten ashes of his former temper.

Dan took the last stand, the final siege, went over the trenches and across no man's land. Heading out of the room and across the landing, he barged into Vadim's bedroom that had been meant to be theirs, with its poncy stupid pretentious designer bed and the fuck-ugly art scattered about.

"You fucking bastard!" He shouted, waving the contract at the sleeping man. "Backstabbing cunt! What the fuck's this?"

Vadim nearly jumped out of his skin and the bed, reflexes from the barracks. He'd hated the 'night raids', somebody storming in and shouting, when he'd been only a raw recruit, barely dressed and herded together by the voice, and fists, and boots. His heart racing so hard in his throat it hurt. Dan. What the fuck.

He saw the papers, didn't quite get the rage part, too dazed, still too tired, surprised, shocked. What was it. Papers? Oh.

"Job offer." Vadim pulled back against the wall, got out of bed, he was naked, found shorts and put them on, on the other side of the bed, a couple yards away. "Haven't even read it yet. Too tired." Looked up from the bed, saw Dan, that rage, that temper, and felt a horrible stab of ... gratitude, that Dan shouted at him. Dan cared, there was not just nothing, but anger, a hell of a lot

better than nothing. He was grateful that Dan was angry. Sickening feeling. Somewhere, it had all gone wrong, horribly wrong.

“What the fuck are you doing, hoping I won’t notice? Pissing off for millions, selling yourself to the highest bidder? Didn’t you have enough genocide yet? Or was he such a good fuck? Did you not think I noticed? Too fucking embarrassed by the useless ex-squaddie who doesn’t fit in with your new high-class cronies. Ashamed of the crippled loser, aren’t you?”

The irrational, ultimate rage had Dan firmly in its grip and he threw the contract across the bed, paper flying everywhere. “You want out? You don’t want me anymore? It’s fucking obvious, don’t think I’m so stupid that I’m totally blind. You fucking coward, if you don’t want me, then tell me. Tell me you want me out of your life, you can have it all, it is already yours anyway. Just tell me, tell me the truth, because I accepted that fucking bullet of yours!”

Vadim walked straight into a hail of bullets, crossfire, the barrage made him tense up and retreat, back right to the wall, saw the paper rain down, the sound it made. Dan. Drunk already, fucking beer, whisky, anger. Sell to the highest bidder. Genocide. Good fuck. Coward. That cut the deepest. Coward. Christmas. The bullet. Vadim shuddered, the image crawled unbidden into his head. Him asleep, Dan loading the pistol and shooting that bullet into his head while he was asleep. Not this bullet, that had become harmless, but one of its siblings, one exactly like the one he’d given Dan so long ago. This rage, this raving lunatic could do it. Could have done it. He had narrowly escaped death, a death he had asked for, several times. But at least it would be over then. He was speechless with dread.

Dan was unstoppable. Buried pain finally burst to the surface, and he shouted, “You’re the fucking man I loved so fucking much, no matter how much I drink, the bottle will never fill up that empty hole!” He threw the bottle across the room, beer exploded on the wall, ripping and drenching Vadim’s pretentious painting, and soaking into the hated bed.

There was nothing left; nothing except running down the stairs as fast as his knee allowed and throwing himself into the waiting Landrover. The sound of the engine being revved up, and then gravel splattering and tyres screeching, as Dan tore off.

Bitchslapped. More words than Vadim had heard in a year. And realized it, suddenly. He had just lived a different life, one that had nothing to do with Dan, his own life slowly being filled with things he liked. And that Dan hated. Vadim sat down on the bed, stared blankly at the beer running from the acrylic painting. Two abstract forms merging, one blue, the other black. He’d always thought it was ironic, that painting in this room. Loved the dynamics, the stark colours, the aggression and passion of the struggle and merging. He couldn’t stand grey anymore, just needed colour, needed something that gave his eyes, his brains, something to do. Veneer.

He couldn’t just break down, felt too numb, overpowered, stared at his hands. Genocide. Killer. Rapist. So long ago. He wasn’t going to repeat all that in that military advisor job. The spetsnaz was gone. He wasn’t even really

Russian anymore. His passport said “Her Majesty’s Subject”. His roots upturned and burnt, long ago. He was no longer the man who had done all these things in Afghanistan. No Afganets, not even an expat. All he had wanted was to have a life he had never been able to get. Never had the freedom, the time, the money. This was all Dan’s. His money, his land, his connections and friends that had bought all this, had enabled him to have another shot at life.

The lion and the tiger. He could feel the tears, he’d been waiting for them. How fucking sick that that anger, that hurt cut through all the shit, a year of not talking, no ‘I love yous’, no touching of souls, no gut wrenching desire, nothing. Solitary confinement of a different kind.

His phone rang. He jumped up, ran downstairs, ripped the phone from the charger. “Dan?”

“No, I’m terribly sorry.” Nelson’s voice oozed irony.

Vadim felt his body grow cold. It felt like death, like bleeding out. “This is ... really, really bad timing.”

“Have you rested up?”

“I said it’s really bad timing.” Vadim glanced outside, saw the sun set already, suddenly knew what he had to do. He needed to find Dan and get him out of here. Out of the house, somewhere where the rules were simple. Put down a set of rules. Most of all, keep him from the whisky, fucking force him to sleep close, excise the hurt, the rage.

“What do you say?”

“Sorry. I wasn’t ... listening. I said I’d call you tomorrow.”

“This is tomorrow.” The voice grew ever more ironic. “Can’t you tell how much you did impress me? I can hardly sleep without thinking of you. Ah, ‘sleep’ is one of the words for it.” Nelson made a pause, while Vadim forced his body into gear. He headed upstairs, to get the worn survival trousers, sand coloured, the boots, Matterhorns, had always stayed loyal to the brand ever since, a nicely clingy shirt. Rummaged for the bag under the bed. There. Packed for any surprise trip. He opened it quickly, had a very quick look at the contents. Ready to go.

“I am somewhat busy right now.”

“What are you doing?”

“Sorting important stuff out. Listen, let’s meet in Rio.”

“That brings me to the reason to call.”

Vadim slipped into the jacket, headed into Dan’s study to grab the bergan. It was gone. Opened a drawer. Wallet. Passport, photos, all gone. He wouldn’t take the wallet to go drinking. Squaddies never did. Dan would limit himself to a certain amount, and that was it. But the photos worried him more than the American Express card, or the traveller’s cheques. Kisa’s photos. Dan was gone and wouldn’t come back. “I can’t talk now.”

“Aren’t you curious?”

Vadim glanced around. Nothing more. Dan had left everything else. “I’m dying to know.” Shit. And that creep kept pressing his advantage. He could swear Nelson knew it was about Dan.



“I was thinking, why not join me in Rio before the conference. We could finalize the contract. Maybe have a few days calm and quiet in Belize? It’s the ideal retreat.”

Retreat. Calm and quiet. “Sounds great.” Vadim knew he couldn’t shake off that creep if he disagreed or told him he needed to find Dan before Dan did something even more stupid. “Listen, I’ll call you. Thanks for the offer. I’ll be in touch.”

“You better be.” Soft laughter, and the line went dead.

“Why is everybody even more insane than I am?” hissed Vadim. Shit, think. Where had Dan gone? Where? Towards the airport, of course. He’d take the usual route. Not that there were many to choose from. The only question was, would he go to Palmerston North or drive all the way to Wellington. Or Auckland, for the intercontinental flights. His money was on Palmerston. Dan knew the place, he was more likely to go with tried and tested, and the positive thing was, there weren’t many flights from Palmerston North. He could hope to intercept Dan right there.

He headed into the garage, hoped to fuck Dan hadn’t disabled the machine of his trusted old jeep. Vadim tossed the bag onto the back seat, the engine came alive, and Vadim breathed relief. He had forgotten the cell phone. Shit. Whatever. He didn’t need it where he was going.

Vadim drove down the road, twenty minutes, hoped Dan had stopped at his usual watering hole on the way, but the people there told him, no, Dan hadn’t been there. Some glanced at him, strangely, and Vadim wondered what they knew about him. How much Dan had talked when drunk. Whether they knew he was the gay lover of that Scotsman, who did the blokey thing while his Russian cunt tended the house. He felt himself blush, mutter an excuse, noticed he’d swallowed the articles again and stormed out.

It was getting dark, and soon the headlights tore a silhouette out of the night. The Landrover, or rather, the tail end of it. The doors were open, half the car in a ditch. Vadim’s blood was all adrenaline, he braked, hard, skidded to a halt on the shamefully bad road, grabbed the torch, ran out, thought he’d see a mutilated body, a crash site ...

But the body was unharmed, curled up maybe two yards from one of the tyres in the ditch. Looked like Dan had tried to crawl out and given up to lay down to sleep, one foot almost in a small brook that noisily gurgled over the stones.

“You fucking bastard.” Vadim slid down the slope, knelt down, checked pulse, checked the main bones, the legs, the ribs, the spine, the neck, then slid an arm under his neck and shoulders and pulled him up, pulled him against his body and held him close. He reeked of alcohol, but he was alive.

Vadim pulled him up, placed him across his shoulders, got up, staggered under the weight, could feel each and every of Dan’s kilos in his back, and managed to get out of the ditch, opened the door of the jeep, put Dan down on the seat, then went to collect the keys from the Landrover, switched off the

headlights, and, sure enough, found a couple of empty bottles in the back. He got the bergan before he locked everything. He really didn't care right now.

He checked the map in the light of the torch, he knew the way in theory, had always wanted to go there, one day, but had been busy. He memorized the route, then started the car again and headed out onto the road, towards the mountains.

\* \* \*

It took a long time for Dan to become aware of anything; the last time he had been drunk to unconsciousness was in his late twenties or early thirties, sure as fuck not at the age of almost forty-five. The moment he came round with blurry eyes and unable to focus, he started to feel the rattling of the car, the humps and bumps and the nauseating way his body was thrown all over the place. Didn't know where he was, just that his stomach was lurching back into his throat.

"Shit ..." he groaned, hands patting around him, panicking for a moment, thought he was locked into a cage, had overturned his Landrover and would die before they could cut him out of it, until he found the handle and managed to wind down the passenger window. "Oh ... fuck ..."

He could do nothing but hang his head out of the window into the cooling night air, throwing up helplessly, too much whisky spilling out of his guts and running down the door of the jeep, ending in pot holes and bushes along the way. Retching until his stomach was empty and the alcohol in his blood started another assault on his system. Hands searching again, didn't know for what. Water. Thirsty. Grabbed the bottle that was pushed into his hand and gulped down half of it.

Where the fuck was he? Tried to focus, he made out a silhouette beside him, and groaned pathetically, "Was just ... my car ... no need to punish me ... like this ..." He barely managed to finish the sentence when the jeep hit another pothole and he threw up yet again, out of the window. Heaving until he fell asleep with his face towards the wind that came in through the open window.

Vadim hardly understood the words, but it didn't matter. Navigating the hillside was a pain even in daylight. He didn't really want to be disturbed, and, so much had to be said in favour of Kiwiland, if one wanted wilderness, all one had to do was leave the beaten track. Which meant potholes.

Vadim finally stopped, did a very quick recce of the place. Lake, trees, check, dry wood, check. He got the tent out, put it up in a time that would have made his survival instructor proud, started a fire, built a nice little camp, then opened the other door. He held Dan in with a hand, washed his face with a wet cloth, then lifted him out, began to undress the messy bastard, disgusted but only vaguely so, like he had never much minded carrying blood soaked comrades. Vomit was just part of the body. He washed him, washed the sweat off his body, then carried him over into the tent, wrapped him up in blankets while he shielded the fire properly. He'd go fishing in the morning, they had beef jerky

for the moment, and a couple gallons of water. Plenty of water filters and purifying tablets. Taking no risks, not even with a lake as clean as this.

Dan was waking after a couple of hours with a mouth full of straw and the disgusting taste of bile. This time with far more clarity, and he started to realise he was still alive. Shit, since when were hangovers killing him that badly? Since he'd got old. Since he'd been worn out and discarded.

He had no idea where he was, it was dark all around him, and he patted the ground and himself, finding a plastic water bottle beside him and a box of tissues. Gulping down cold water as if it were a life saver, he wiped his face with a damp tissue. Had no clue what happened, didn't know where he was, and how the fuck he had got here. Wherever that 'here' was. He felt rotten, but tried to scramble up instead. Found himself naked, which confused him even more, until the flicker of a fire shone through what had to be a tent.

He grabbed the blanket, pulled it over his head and shoulders, and crawled towards the opening, even though he really wasn't supposed to be on his knees. But he couldn't ache anymore than he already did. He stuck his head out, then the rest of his upper body. Blinked a couple of times, trying to focus.

Vadim looked up as the figure emerged from the tent. He had been tending the fire, watching the flames, finally had time to think. Think clearly. Back to basics, just him, and Dan. No alcohol, no house, nothing to get between them. He sighed, shook his head, saw how pale and miserable the other man was. He got up and sat down near the tent, within touching distance.

"Sleep, Dan. You look like shit." Dan would need to be sober and rested. This would be tough for both of them. Much like surgery. He needed to remove the cancer eating away at their hearts. "Drink plenty. There ...". He fumbled for a jar of Dan's vitamins and put it down in front of his face.

"Where the fuck am I?" Dan's voice sounded rough, abused and as sore as his whole body. His hand trembled as he reached for the vitamins and he started to shake with a cold that began to creep into his bones. "And why are you here?"

"Foothills of the mountains, near the lake." Vadim opened the jar for him, could see Dan was coming crashing down from the alcohol. Very near to alcohol poisoning. This was bad. This was worse than bad. How he had managed to drive at all was a miracle. "I'm always here," he murmured. "Until you use that fucking bullet. But right now, I don't think you could shoot straight. So, that is not an option." He gave half a smile. "Rest up. We need to talk. Not shout. But not now."

Dan nodded, shaking so hard now, he felt as if he'd been dipped into a Norwegian lake and left to dry in the middle of a Siberian winter. Some pills were poured into his hand, and he closed his fingers around them. "Bullet ...". He nodded again, teeth chattering. Crawling backwards, he retreated into the tent and towards as many sleeping bags and blankets as he could find. Luckily Vadim seemed to have piled them up around him.

"Wouldn't have used the bullet." Head still visible for another moment, then he was gone. "On you."

Vadim closed his eyes, formed fists. He had actually believed Dan would kill him. He was a self-centred bastard. It was Dan who had left, and who the fuck knew why he hadn't left in a different way. Kisa? Maybe for the kid's sake? He shook his head. He had been given everything on a silver plate, new life, a man like Dan, all these things, and he had somehow managed to ruin it. Without noticing that Dan had slipped from him and fell, kept falling, and falling.

He moved to the fire and poured tea, let it cool for a bit, then went into the tent, offering some of the hot liquid, helping Dan to drink, then readjusting the blankets so he could sweat it all out. "Don't worry. I'm here."

And I'll prove it as soon as you feel better.

**November 1994, New Zealand**

The next time Dan woke, it was to dark green daylight filtered through the tent walls, and the smell of coffee and frying fish. He believed his senses were kidding him with the peculiar combination of scents, and he felt like death warmed over. Still wrapped in a mountain of blankets and half-way rolled into a sleeping bag, he vaguely remembered the presence of the other and what seemed like gallons of water and tea.

His bladder was full enough to protest, and he tried wriggling his toes, since his head had decided to torture him with the mother of all headaches. A disgusting taste in his mouth, he reached beside him and found the water bottle. Dan shook his head after drinking, regretting the movement instantaneously. No matter what, he was forced to crawl out from under the blankets. Didn't fancy pissing himself, not even while in the clutches of a hangover that made every other one he'd ever had before look like a mere test run.

Dan groaned as he got up, aching everywhere on his body, not just the knee, and he had the terrible sensation of not remembering what had happened. How he got there, what had been said, if anything, and if Vadim's presence was mere wishful thinking. Grabbing one of the blankets, he slung it around his naked body, emerging from the tent to stagger into the magnificence of a cool spring morning. Disoriented at first.

Vadim glanced up, hid the smile that was threatening to creep onto his features. Dan was so hung-over it was actually funny. Pale, sweaty, and growing an impressive stubble by now. He pulled one of the twigs out of the ground, blew on the fish, pulled the skin back with the tip of his knife and checked whether it was done. Slightly pink, but that was alright. "Feel hungry?"

He was being stared at with incredulity by a man who was slightly swaying until he had got used to standing on both feet again. Dan grunted something unintelligible, took a few steps to the side, away from the camp, and turned his back. A man's back was all the privacy he ever needed to take a long piss. At least it wasn't shovel recce.

Dan turned back round, just as Vadim was pulling the skin off one of the fish and filleting. He pulled the bones out and then reached into the ashes for the potatoes in foil. Checked them with the knife, the big ones needed more time, but the small ones were done. All the while watched by a silent Dan who couldn't make head nor tails out of anything. Vadim cut a deep cross into the potato, sprinkled some salt in there, and offered Dan the plate, sorting a fish and potatoes out for himself.

He glanced up at Dan and smirked. "Try to eat something. And get some electrolytes down, small wonder it hurts like a bitch. The stuff you do to your body."

“Fuck you.” Dan muttered, looked down at his hands, still trembling. Wouldn’t hurt to dig into food. He tried to sit down on one of the bergans that looked as if they had been propped up for just this purpose, not bothering to suppress the groan as his whole body protested. “Need a wash.” He reached for the plate, the blanket wrapping somewhat in the way.

Vadim nodded. “I brought water up, it’s in that bucket. Your bag with razors and stuff is over there.” He nodded to the place where he had even set up a makeshift shower. Plastic bag and an improvised hose. Wouldn’t be too comfy, but he had something in mind for that setup. Dan would need to be clean. He had even wedged a mirror between stem and branch of one of the trees.

Dan glanced to the side while eating, took in the arrangements, shook his head. Surely the fucker had gone crazy all of a sudden. “What the fuck are you doing here? And while I’m at it, where? How? Why?” Using his fingers to tear pieces off the fish and peel open the potato.

Vadim grinned, eating the potato with the peel, remembered lessons about nutrition and the fact that the best part of the potato was right under the skin. He liked the taste, even the faint aroma from the ashes. “At the moment, I’m playing host.”

He looked at Dan, judged his state from the coordination of his fingers, from the way he responded to the heat of the oily fish and the food. He was coming round, but would probably need a few more hours before he could get serious. “On a related note, we’ll play the old game, Dan. Isolation and re-focusing. Emptying all the trash. The lies, the pain, the guilt. And when I’m finished with you, you’ll be as clean and as mellow as a newborn kitten.” And you’ll be mine again. You taught me one thing in the mountain. One week with a man opens you up, your heart, your body, everything. I will gut you and drain the poison out.

“Kitten? Fuck off, Vadim.” Dan’s fingers got stuck half-way in a piece of fish. “Fuck off and go back to your pretentious crap. Your paintings, music, interior decoration and bloody Colonels.” He lowered his eyes back onto the plate, angry, sullen and silent once more.

Nelson? Yes, exactly the kind of thing Vadim wanted to be reminded of now. Nelson managing to corner him from half around the world. Rio would be fun. And what if he was actually wrong and it didn’t work? Failure was not an option. They couldn’t do it, couldn’t go on like this. It was the bullet, one way or the other.

He considered tying Dan up. He had been tied up. It put the mind on edge, but the body adapted, could grow around it, comfortable. He looked at Dan, saw the same sullen hostility, the same remoteness, worse than when they had been enemies. At least they had hated each other.

He stood, fetched a bottled, found a tube with electrolytes, dropped some in, closed the bottle, watched the tablets dissolve, then walked up to Dan and dropped it in front of him. “Lucky then that you have no idea where you are. Or where I left the car. Or where the keys are.”

Dan had finished his food, looking up when boots came into his vision, then legs, finally a bottle. “You kidnapped me?” He took the offered liquid, his abused body gave him no other option. “What for? Going to keep your crippled piece of rough like an amusing pet in the mountains?” Gulping down half of the bottle, he wiped his lips, all the time watching the other.

Vadim stepped back. The urge to hit him square in the face was so strong he needed to tense every muscle in his arms up to his neck to keep from hitting Dan. Kick him. Make him bleed. Control. He needed fucking control. Dan had lost it. If he lost it himself, he could just go fetch the gun. He inhaled, flexed his hands, exhaled, calmed.

“Crippled? You’d be dead with your fucking legs cut off, Dan.” He sat down again, two yards away, crouched, studying the other man, who was shaking his head before drinking the rest of the solution. Sullen, Vadim thought. But how to do it, how to open him up? He wasn’t ready for what he had in mind. “You should eat, and drink, and rest. Detox. I’ll do the rest.”

Dan put the bottle down, shook his head again. “What would it matter, even if I was still as deadly? No more wars to fight, Vadim, no more suicidal operations, no more battlefields.” He shrugged, pulled the blanket closer. “Mad Dog is dead.”

That was the problem. That was the heart of it, the infested, the rotting core. Dan mourned Mad Dog, because he had loved him in a way that Vadim had loved his own illusion of himself, before the prison. And he had. So very much. “But you are alive,” he murmured, and felt weak and pathetic. “You fought all the time, and now you have a life, and you just ... stay there and look at the past. Just ...” Wait to die. Pass the time, somehow.

Dan just sat and listened, passive.

Vadim shook his head. It hurt. That went deep. He suddenly understood why Dan had been like that, all the time. He just couldn’t let go. “Oh shit.”

Dan looked up. “Life? What life do I have?” He felt the old bitterness creeping up, an acid that had increasingly poisoned every one of his thoughts since the surgery. A growing numbness, until all he had felt was an emptiness that hurt like a motherfucking knot right in his chest.

“You got your fancy shit, your art, the house, even the fucking furniture. Clothes as if you’d never had a shred to wear, and ballets, concerts, music that bores me to fucking tears. I haven’t got a clue who you are anymore, but fuck me, you got a life. There’s just no space in it anymore for a burnt out, useless veteran who doesn’t understand what you’ve become nor who you are.” He shrugged as if nothing mattered, then scrambled laboriously onto the good knee, trying to get up. Needing to walk away, like he had done, for almost a year.

“The house? I did that so you could rest up after the hospital. I wanted to have the workers out before you came in. All I did was fucking catch up with stuff I never had the ...” *money* “time for. Just wanted to understand what I missed.” Shit, he was hurling accusations, and he didn’t want that. Not just Dan

who had to get rid of the poison. Dan, who was walking towards the lake, refusing to listen.

The clothes. It was just fucking *nice* to not wear uniform anymore. It was nice to be groomed and be dazzled by patterns, by cloth, by the smiles and easy courtesy of bespoke tailors. Nice to wear shoes that were made to measure and didn't hurt his feet. Nice to lean back and have a wave of sound wash over him, see something as pretty and useless as ballet. Nice to see the control of those bodies, and nothing about it was about killing or hurting. It was discipline without the fucking darkness, control without the violence. He hadn't really changed, he was still the man he'd always been.

No, he wasn't. He had been dazzled alright. Dazzled by men that could argue fine points of some arcane weapon system late into the night. Men who discussed the theory of war without ever having felt a bullet impact in their flesh. Men who knew that he had felt it, and moved apart so he could fit between them, one of them, not by education, not by refinement, but by experience. They were so well dressed, so well spoken, he loved their company, loved it because they seemed to understand war, and talked about it, and he felt respected. For once in his life, somebody respected him. He had nothing to hide, not being gay, not being in love with an enemy, not being the homeless Russian the Soviet army had spit out for treason. It had felt so good he had tried to saturate himself with it. So hungry for respect.

"Ah, fuck all that. Fuck the farm. Fuck Nelson." Vadim followed, reached for Dan's shoulder. "Listen to me."

"Why?" Dan stopped, feet already touching water. Turning round abruptly to face the other, the blanket fell off his shoulders, which Vadim caught by instinct, baring a body that was too bloody thin. "Why should I listen to you? I don't fit into your world anymore, and I've lost my own. I'm not as stupid as you seem to think, I know I'm just a fucking embarrassment to you."

Vadim paused, tossed the blanket behind him. They'd need it to keep warm, it could get chilly up here. Saw more bones around Dan's shoulders than he should, and looked into those dark eyes. Still Dan. And not him at the same time. It raised his hackles, should have done that a year ago, when all this had started. But he had taken it lying down.

"Yes, you've been a right cunt the last year, but that is not how it has to be."

Dan snarled. "You think you've been anything other than a fucking cunt yourself?"

"We can change. Sort stuff out. Fucking remember why we are here in the first place." Vadim inhaled deeply. "And that's not just because of a bullet I took out of my pistol in the Gulf."

"Change? How, Vadim, how, if you don't even want me anymore!"

Vadim stepped close, abruptly, and decided Dan needed to cool down. He decided that *after* his hands had connected with Dan's chest and *after* he had sent Dan backwards, knowing the water was getting rapidly deeper behind him. "You fucking chill," he hissed, as Dan went straight into the water. "I'll show you. Wanting. It would have been like fucking a whisky bottle, you bitch."



Stumbling backwards, Dan shouted, “Fucking bastard!” before losing balance. The water was bloody cold, “and sex with you, fucking nancy arsewife, would have been like shagging a soft poof!” He just about managed to hurl the last bit of abuse before he crashed into the water, cursing violently all the way.

Vadim very much wanted to send a spinning hook kick into Dan’s head, but held back. Nancy. Fuck. In moments like these, he was too close to giving it all up. That was the first response, but he saw Dan snort water as he came back up, and couldn’t help but laugh, stepping back towards the land just in case Dan had the supremely stupid idea to try and make him crash into the water himself. Dan’s legs were too weak, no way he could kick his legs from under him. “Yeah. I have my whisky ... with water,” he muttered and remained within safe distance. Only that no distance with Dan was safe.

“Arsehole!” Dan spit towards Vadim together with a mighty arch of water, while his eyes threw daggers at the Russian cunt. The bastard laughed his head off. Fine. He’d get his own back eventually. He was freezing, but he dunked himself under again. The fresh, cold water seemed a life saver, it did wonders to the persistent headache. Coming back up dripping wet, water running in rivulets out of his unruly hair, he shook his head like a dog before stalking back towards the shore. “You,” he pointed at Vadim, glaring, “I get you for that when you least expect it.”

“Promises,” said Vadim, off-handedly.

Dan was too bloody cold to do anything about it right now, starting to tremble, he looked for anything he could use as a towel. The drop of body temperature in a body that had been abused like that, not a clever option. He could hardly keep his teeth from chattering. “Did you nancy boy at least bring a towel in your designer suitcase?”

“Get your arse to the fire.” Vadim headed towards the tent and found two towels, microfiber, nice and light. Tossed one against Dan’s chest, took the other one in both hands and stepped behind him, when he found that Dan had for once obeyed, and stood as close to the warming fire as he could.

Dan sneered at the towel, held it in his hands like a precious jewel. “Only you could take anything that isn’t a bogstandard towel into the mountains.” There was no venom in his words, though, as he rubbed his face and head dry. He really was bloody freezing.

Vadim concentrated on drying the shoulders, remembered how much he had loved these shoulders, how he had rested his head right there, smelled him. Fucking cried against that shoulder. Shit. Vadim tensed his jaw muscles and concentrated.

Dan slowly continued to dry his arms and then his chest. Hesitated. Hadn’t been touched like that in ages. No, wrong. Hadn’t been touched. Full stop. For months.

Vadim ran the towel down the body. The curve towards the waist, lower back, the curve of arse. One of the very first things he had actually consciously acknowledged about Dan. He crouched to dry the backs of his legs, then got up again, saw Dan was managing just fine with the rest.

“The coffee should be ready now.” He dropped the blanket right next to Dan, got the mugs and poured them coffee, placed one on a flat rock on Dan’s side of the fire. “You need a shave. Walking tree.”

Dan’s brows rose, but he didn’t argue. The smell of coffee was too much of a lure, and hell, Vadim was right: he’d sport a fully grown beard in another day or two. He shrugged and started the laborious process of getting down to the ground, managing in the end like he always did, but without any points for elegance. He pulled the other blanket close and wrapped it tightly around his shoulders, then reached for the mug as if the coffee could save his life. “Remembered the sugar?”

“Yeah. But I think we’ll need more calories sometime around tomorrow.” Seeing how much weight Dan had lost was not pleasant.

Dan nodded, sipped his coffee with an expression of pure bliss on his face. Piping hot, overly strong and sweetened to hell and back.

Vadim continued, “Your usual treasure of biscuits and chocolate, more bars.” Shit planning, really, he had been too nervous, too fucking scared. He just wasn’t as cold-blooded as he had been.

Dan huffed, “What, you telling me you didn’t bring any sweeties? Fucking useless host you are.”

Vadim refused to bite this time, got up to get the shaving kit and the water bucket, sat down within reaching distance. Not enough to be hit with any strength of conviction, if Dan tried to, but close enough. “I’ll drive tomorrow. I’m too tired to do the big drive today.” Sounded like an excuse, and he thought, damn it, since when did he have to apologise for everything he did or didn’t do. Every potential mistake? “Fancy that shave?”

“I hope for your sake you got at least some energy bars.” Dan conveniently forgot to mention the emergency ration in his own bergan, together with an even more vital supply of a 500g pack of tobacco and rolling papers. He looked pointedly at the bucket of water, muttered, “not even hot water. Fine sort of treatment that is. Kidnapped, starved, and now tortured.” But he didn’t have the energy to be truly spiteful. Something inside of him was too exhausted and tired of fighting, worn away by that awful, numbing pain for which he had no name.

Vadim grunted, took a handful of water to wet Dan’s growing beard, and foamed the stuff into his hand to lather it on, then selected one of the razors and began to shave. One slow, deliberate stroke near the other, whisking the razor through the water, going for a thorough shave, slowly uncovering the skin, fresh and clean and smooth. Dan’s eyes closed after a while, tilting his head back to allow access to his jaw and throat, all the while cradling the mug of coffee.

Vadim liked Dan smooth, loved his face right after the shave, the smell and feeling. Loved to brush his cock across his cheek when it was like this. He swallowed and looked at the bucket, watched the foam float in patches, the shorn off hair. He finally took the damp towel and wiped Dan’s face with it, wanted to lean in to kiss, but was fairly sure all he’d get would be a headbutting.

Once he'd finished, Vadim reached for his own coffee, moving a little away, still close, but just out of range. "I was thinking maybe a week or ten days. The weather seems to hold, might even get a little warmer again. I don't want to make it too uncomfortable." What exactly? Sleeping close to you, listening to the wind, feeling the ground underneath. Feel you against me, at rest, trusting, close, and fucking open.

Dan tilted his head, said nothing, just watched Vadim for a moment, then raised the mug to his lips once more, concentrating on drinking. No repartee, no cries of kidnapping and no claims of insanity on the Russian's part. Nothing, as if he had simply run out of steam during the shaving.

Vadim stood when he received no reply nor comment, picked up the bucket and razor, cleaned everything, got fresh water. Being this close to Dan had an odd effect on him. Memories. Memories in every motion, in every word, every gesture.

"Strange." Dan's voice suddenly, just loud enough to be heard. "It's been, what, eight years since the first shave?" The memories of mountain, cave, heat and cold were still in his bones. Imprinted into his being. "A lifetime ago, but it sometimes feels so close, yet unattainable." He aborted a shrug, lowered his head and eyes, concentrating once more on the coffee.

Vadim nodded. Unattainable. Good word, nothing but the negative of a different word, and it hurt to think about it. A simple gesture, a way to hold a blade to the other's throat that didn't mean what it used to mean. It was taking care of, not taking power. How much he missed all that. He drank his coffee, one of the things he had got used to, coffee, still preferred the smell much to the taste, but it was warm liquid one could hold, and that was clearly the best aspect of it. He watched Dan, was there, but silent. Wondered about sleep, wondered whether he could really sleep that close to him, or whether he'd stare at him all night, scared to blow it and lose him completely.

"I still think steel against your skin is the most poetic thing I know," he murmured. "I always think I can feel your heart beat in my fingertips." He didn't look at Dan, he wasn't sure whether he'd get mocked or ridiculed or whether it might affront Dan. When there was a little pause, he did look up.

"If you can feel my heartbeat, then you feel more than I can." Dan's quiet voice, their eyes met. Another pause, and another moment of silence. "Sometimes, somewhere, between the operating table and coming here, I lost myself."

Vadim nodded, eyes still meeting. He moved closer, reached out, slowly, as if he could startle Dan, maybe into violence, whatever, he'd take that, punches, ridicule, hostility. Lowered his hand to rest it on Dan's lower arm, left side, slowly relaxed his arm to rest it on Dan's.

Dan's arm twitched, almost threw the other arm off, muscles tensing, then relaxing in increments. Allowing the contact, as alien to him by now as the memory of Mad Dog.

Vadim wanted to lean against him, against that shoulder, knew he was supposed to be strong right now and wanted nothing but to hold him and touch

him and tell him everything would be alright. "I'm not ashamed of you. Not embarrassed. Not disgusted." A lie.

Dan laughed dryly. "Bullshit." He shook his head.

Vadim's hand tensed a little. "Only when you are drunk, a little, I mean." He'd done his fair share of drunken shit, then why? "I don't like you being drunk, because I feel you are hiding, that you do that to tell me I can't reach you."

Dan huffed, let his head fall back into his neck, rolled his shoulders and took his time before coming back up until their eyes met once more. "I let you into a secret, Russkie, I don't even like being drunk on my own all that much." Wry grin, self-deprecating. "Stopped me remembering, though. Who I was, who you were, who we used to be." He shrugged in a half-arsed attempt at indifference.

Vadim nodded, wrestling with that idea. Forget. Forget the two killers who had failed at killing each other. Comrades. Lovers. All that, and much more. He kept his hand right there, didn't want to claim it back just yet. "Yes, but who are you, Dan? Who the fuck are you? Without whisky? Without battlefields?"

"I don't know." The answer came quietly, yet without hesitation.

Vadim looked him in the eye again. "You are the same man I met in Kabul. Only older. And hurt. You never changed. Na, not much." He grinned slightly.

"And you? Are you someone different? Art, music, suits and fancy men? Or have you always been like that and I just never noticed, too busy staying alive?" Dan shrugged again, resigned.

"It's the only bit of Russia I can still have," murmured Vadim. Fuck, that hurt, but it was true. Literature, music, ballet. Have a bit of Russia when he couldn't travel there. "I might have had the money to do that, but there was nothing to buy and I did not have the time for the finer things. Always fighting in another war. I just want to know what it is like. The whole ... art is part of what we fight for – it's what civilians do. That stuff lasts longer than memory, longer than wars. I wanted to try and understand and have some of that." His father had said, that in a world where the present was lying, the past was the safest place. That, too, had barbed hooks, but he only understood that now.

Dan shook his head slightly, even though he began to understand. "The house ... when I got finally back. The house was you, but not a you that I knew, while I ... I was lost without a purpose." Dan's voice grew quieter. "It's not so much a question of who I am, but what the fuck I'm here for anymore. They said I should 'find myself another hobby'. Which fucking hobby? Killing time instead of soft targets? They said I had to get used to this, it was just the beginning. Would get worse, a matter of time until ... but I could still 'do things'. What things?" Trailed off, silenced. The final shrug as much resignation as acceptance. No pity, not ever that. Just not that.

Vadim nodded. "I think they thought swimming, or cycling. Activities like that." Looked down at his hand, which looked quite comfortable on Dan's arm. "Well, there's ... me, and ... the farm, and the consulting, and a whole country full of rainforest and mountains and reefs ... or we travel. Or ... collect stamps or something." Mocking slightly.

Dan tried to grin, but it ended in a fucking pathetic attempt. Laid open and bare, truth that was fragile, cutting too deep. “What am I going to do, Vadim. What am I going to do?” Barely above a whisper.

Vadim smiled, finally, again, inside Dan’s mind. Couldn’t afford to gloat this time, because it was too important. “You don’t have to do anything. Just trust me.” Moved closer again, hand moving up to Dan’s upper arm, could feel tension in there, then up to his shoulder, to his neck, resting there, against Dan’s throat. Shifted his head closer, to whisper, not to kiss. “I want to make you relax. You don’t have to move. Don’t do anything. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Trust you.” The tension in Dan’s body grew, couldn’t help it. Closeness and intimacy, they’d become aliens, despite fourteen years. “With a bullet and a knife.” His lips twitched, the ghost of a smile. They’d grown apart, separated not by war - but by peace, and yet some things he remembered. Always would. Mine. Yours. Scars and caresses.

Vadim kept looking into Dan’s eyes, intense enough to make his vision blurry. “You can keep a knife.” He smiled, too, but felt the tension. Knew Dan might not agree if he asked him straight out. “I hurt you, you cut me. Simple rules.” Less complicated than the other set of rules.

Tension remained in Dan’s body, even when he nodded. “Aye. I can do that.” Knew he wouldn’t need to, but a knife was a prop, a lifeline.

Vadim nodded, then slowly came closer again to touch Dan’s forehead with his, closed his eyes, as if to draw strength, when indeed all he could feel was Dan’s presence, Dan with him, not somewhere else, doing whatever. The world had become smaller and that was reassuring.

A moment of irritation, uncertainty, but Dan’s forehead remained against Vadim’s. Trying to remember the familiarity that had become unfamiliar, until he relaxed slightly.

Vadim took the mug out of Dan’s hand and got up, offering a hand only to not break contact for too long. Dan was already naked, good, excellent start. He nodded towards the tent. “That’s where the blankets are.”

Dan’s grip on Vadim’s wrist was strong, his weight behind it, as he pulled himself up. Hands that could still kill with ease. If only he believed in it. He stood, caught the blanket that fell off his shoulders, raised his brows, said nothing. His fingers circled sinews and bone, before letting go and turning towards the tent. “You want the blankets outside or me in?”

Vadim wanted to reach out again, to touch him again. Glanced around. He was pretty sure there was nobody else anywhere near, but he liked the tent for the very fact there was nothing distracting about it, no sounds, no wind, nothing. Much like a cave, he thought, smiling. Damn, they’d never really got out of the caves. “Get inside. For the moment.”

Dan nodded, unsure, but went along, because he had no other option. Had come to a dead end and a stop sign, hidden in every bottle.

Vadim followed, relishing in the luxury that they were indeed alone, and no danger he could think of, nothing worse than mosquitoes in this place. He

motioned Dan to lie down, stayed close, crouched, regarding the other, read the body like he hadn't done for ages.

When Dan had settled, Vadim leaned in, put his lips against Dan's sternum, felt him breathe as his hands moved to his flanks, slow, deliberate stroking. Loved the dark nipples, the curves of flesh, especially when there was this underlying tension. Knew he never won much with dealing with the nipples, compared to him, Dan didn't feel much there. It was nice enough, but nothing that Dan really craved. Thought for a moment whether it could work, or would, but he had got him this far.

Dan's quiet voice sounded brittle. "What's this going to be, an attempt at taming?"

Vadim didn't answer, moved down the body, relishing in the taut stomach, a touch on the thin side, felt the heart pound against the flesh, then moved towards those scars that looked like some creature had ripped Dan open. Massive, impossible scars, by no means pretty, just impressive, something that made Vadim feel awe when he touched them. Moved away, and licked the stretched skin between two of the scars, breathing through his nose to make the wet trace tingle.

Tension, Dan's fist suddenly clenched, breathing noisily through his nose. He lifted his head to look down, grabbed some extra blankets, stuffed them under his neck, to have everything in his vision. Fist lying at his side, opening and closing like a pulsing artery. "Where ... is the knife?" Had to clear his throat. Lost. Confused. Wanting. Bitter. Hurting and aching for more. Contact. Touch, inside and out, of mind and body, yet rejecting the attempt with every fibre, like a rule he had to follow, established a year ago with the words 'no, Mr McFadyen, but you will never go on active duty again.' His body, it had never failed him, no matter how battered, broken and torn. Until a year ago. What if it failed now? Again?

Vadim reached to the side and pulled the bergan closer. "In there somewhere," he murmured against the scars, rubbed his face against Dan's stomach, felt how the muscles shifted against his skin, loved how Dan's body responded without Dan even noticing. The one thing he understood better than Dan, always had, and wasn't that ironic, now. "Relax," he murmured. "Nothing you can do about it anyway." Fuck that knife.

Dan's fist eased its tension only to grab hold of the bergan, a white-knuckled grip, needing an anchor, and he found the knife, fist closing around the handle.

Vadim traced the line of muscle from groin to hip, licked it, used his teeth to trace that line, teeth taking a bit of muscle and just testing it, no biting, but not just teasing, either. Moved across the stomach, knees between Dan's, just so he had a better angle, and did the same, licking and teeth, and taking his time, on the other side. No rushing, it wasn't about lust or winning, just pleasure.

Dan's body was brimming with stress, couldn't ease it, impossible to relax, and when Vadim looked into Dan's face, he saw tension. Lots of it. He moved up again, returning to the sternum, nuzzling it. Something that wasn't dangerous. Placed his lips around the right nipple, rolled it gently between his

teeth, took the sting out with licking it, then circled it with his tongue, his free hand stroking Dan's side. "Just relax. I can do this all day."

"What if *I* can't." Dan pressed out, head lifted, faces close. His breathing shallow, chest restricted, cursing himself for his fucking stupidity.

Vadim looked up, brought his face close again. "You don't have to," he murmured in Russian. "First, we have time, second, all I want to do is make you relax." Touched his face, the touch of sweat on the freshly shaved skin. "If you can't, I'll still do this. All fucking day and all fucking night." Wanted to kiss him, the lips that seemed just as tense, just as vulnerable. "Your body is more than ... that." Cock. Fucking. Many more possibilities, many more good things.

Dan nodded, felt relieved and pathetic at the same time. *More than that*. Was he? More than that ... than what? Cock. Cripple.

"Just want to make you feel good." Vadim murmured, "that's it. No danger." Turned over to the other nipple, caught it between his teeth, opened his jaws to scrape them against the pec, did that again, loved the taste and the feeling. "You never understood how fucking sexy you are .... Tough luck. I did."

"Fuck ..." Dan gasped out, watched Vadim, head propped up and looking. Shuddered, a rare reaction to the play with his nipples. Perhaps the tension had brought nerves on edge, and maybe he was more than ... that after all. "You're a fucking perv," fists easing their tension in increments, trying to give himself over, "finding a useless ragbag of scars sexy."

"Ah, but you wear them so well," murmured Vadim, returning to the nipple, sucking on it, indicating what he planned to do, later, further down. Slow, intense, gentle, and teasing. "And I still wear mine." Moved his head up to suck and lick that round scar, the one from their first kiss. Of course that kiss had to leave a bullet scar. It seemed so logical. Always loved that skin, dark as it was, so easily bronzed in the sun.

Dan couldn't keep the tension in his fist, had to let go of the knife, the lips and teeth on the scar acted like a local anaesthetic. His arm fell limp, while his jaws tensed and his breathing became ragged. Fucking scars. Fucking memories, each and every of them connected to Vadim. "I can read you ... on my body." Forced out between locked teeth.

Vadim smiled. "That one? Oh, that one is special. It says I love you." He winked at Dan, only way to say that sentence was with humour, to not earn a kick in the balls right now. "Let's see ... I think those are special, too." He began to move down again, traced the middle scar with his lips, just kisses, almost chaste. "Those say you're alive."

Dan shivered. *Alive*. The word had taken on a whole new meaning over the past year. He'd been existing, side by side with Vadim, but more separated and hopeless than he'd ever been before. Alive but not living.

"What about the scar ... in my face." He managed to force out, couldn't find the words, no better nor easier way to ask and even plead. Do you want me. Do you honestly still want me?

Please, want me.

Vadim looked up, eyes narrowed for a moment, wondered, wondered whether he had read him wrong, had been wrong in thinking Dan would punch him if he tried that. And these days, he didn't just shrug off punches. His age, too. Looked at the scar, weathered away as it was, one line in that face, part of Dan like his nose. For somebody who spent insane amounts of time and money on being as good-looking as he could still manage, he had never bothered much about the other's scars. "That scar ..." Moved up until he was breath to breath with Dan, tilted his head to study the scar, the line he had not created, time had not brought. A story he didn't know. Found the beginning of it at Dan's temple, kissed it, moved, kissed the end of it, part of him waiting for the punch. He'd risk it. "That scar says I'll carve its twin on the other side if you punch me now."

"I ..." Dan opened his mouth, but Vadim flashed teeth and attacked Dan's lips, open-mouthed, taste of Dan's sweat still on them as he met those lips. Nothing merciful about that kiss, he kept the jaws open with a thumb and kissed Dan like he was trying to drink his soul, ignoring the sounds of protest, because there was no fight. Fuck you, you're mine, thought Vadim, about to lose it himself, lose control, irony and composure.

Dan's head tilted backwards, allowing access, deeper, baring his throat, his whole self. A self that he couldn't recognise anymore, that had lost its path and meaning. He tried to say something, but that, too, had lost all sense, and only a grunt came out.

Vadim parted, breathing accelerated, then grinned at him, trailing down the kisses, down to the chest, running his face against Dan's chest, hands already moving deeper. "Turn around."

Dan hesitated, his hand once more clutching the knife, until Vadim took Dan's hips to help him, and to position him, and only then did Dan let go and allowed himself to be handled, until he lay flat on his stomach.

"You want payback for all the lost nights?" Dan's voice sounded bitter, and so very much unlike the feisty man, then opened his legs, without any prompting. He'd be good for that still, and if that's what he'd get, he'd take it. Better than nothing.

Vadim paused, hit by the sentence like by a punch. Dan still delivered the most intense pain of all. As if he'd fuck him. Maybe. It had occurred to him, but not in the state or mood that Dan was in. "There are no lost nights." Vadim kissed the small of Dan's back.

"There were. Plenty." Not much more than a murmur, the words were almost swallowed by the ground. "I don't ..." Don't what?

Vadim reached for the Vaseline tub in the bergan, unscrewed the lid, scooped a good measure with his fingers, warming the grease. "Just relax."

No answer, then, and Dan knew that his question was answered. He was someone to fuck. And what was he going to do about it? Use the knife and defend himself? Perhaps, if he could be bothered, but he just didn't have the energy nor strength - and perhaps ... perhaps there was something. An echo of past longing.



Beginning to work the grease into Dan's arse, Vadim felt queasy about it – like he was getting Dan ready to be fucked when he was actually planning something completely different, but Dan didn't know it, just spread his legs further and closed his eyes. Head pressed deeply into the blanket and the ground.

His needs didn't matter, Vadim thought. Not that there was much of a need right now, just memories, just the feeling of knowing, familiarity, trust, and hope. Keeping the darkness away. He slowly worked two fingers into Dan, carefully adding more grease and opening him up, leisurely, soon adding a third finger, when the tension in Dan's back suddenly jumped up, before he wilfully relaxed. Bone after bone and muscle after muscle.

He could have asked what Vadim was planning, but it didn't matter. Simply didn't. Was good to feel, feel anything at all, and the time Vadim took, the care, as if he was still worth something.

Vadim ran his free hand across Dan's back, smiling slightly when he felt a reaction, an increase in awareness, maybe, hoping he'd get Dan to focus. Slowly working, keeping the fourth finger close to the hand, strong fingers forcing, coaxing their way in, not much, just enough to make progress, like he'd done only a few times – Dan wasn't often in the mood for this. But sometimes it wasn't about moods. But survival. Reaching. More grease, then Vadim added the thumb, and the tension in Dan's body jumped up once more. Hips lifting, his breath catching, he shuddered, and finally understood. The tough bit was the row of knuckles, and that could take forever. A forever that no one would take for anyone who meant anything less than everything. "Russkie?" Dan murmured.

"Yes?" Vadim paused, staying where he was, attentive, listening, watching, gauging reactions.

"Why?"

Nothing less than I love you, Vadim thought, and inhaled sharply. "It worked once. Why not again." Why not indeed.

A pile of corpses. Dead Mujas. Rotting, stinking, festering flesh. Why not. It made sense. More sense than anything had made since he had lost his knee, his livelihood, and with it his manhood. "Aye ..." Dan breathed out, and relaxed in increments, until his body opened up to the very core.

A long time passed, until Vadim managed to get past the knuckles, hand closing naturally, smooth and tight and hot, and he allowed Dan's body to accept the treatment. He remained still, silent, listening to Dan's breathing, which became erratic, and followed every twitch of muscle, visible or invisible. Only then did he begin to move, carefully, working with the body, which became pliable, rather than against it, even though he was stronger at present, heavier and Dan was helpless, but he hadn't thought in such categories for a long, long time. Vadim ran his fingers across Dan's flanks, then leaned in to kiss the skin. "Calm. I'm here."

Dan's fingers trembled against the ground, no sense of time. Ensnared in the safety of darkness behind closed eyes, and yet he was fighting a fight that

had nothing to do with Vadim. Focused, feeling, more feeling and more sensations than he had allowed himself to remember. *Before* the time. Before he'd become useless. There was a pain inside, which rose and moved, fluttered against his chest, and it took his breath. Took his mind and reduced it to the one sensation: his body being opened up and taken, once more focused completely, while everything else was crashing in around him, and the pain grew and grew, until he could taste it, and it tasted like failure and loss and suicide.

Vadim remained focused, calm himself, desire the last thing he was thinking about or feeling right now. It was all about Dan, and whether he could find that connection again. Moving, turning his hand, ever so slightly, opening the fist a little, then closing it, minuscule movements, as too much, too intense, could probably be painful. He had no idea. Dan had never done this to him.

Too much, yet never enough, not even after hours. A sound was finally torn out of Dan's chest, lost and utterly desperate, unlike any sound he'd ever made. Not in the mountains - half-insane, not even torn apart by a bomb - almost dying.

Vadim closed his eyes, knowing something had changed, something major, important, this was unlike Dan, and all he could hope was that it would be the start of all that pain coming out. Blood. Flesh and blood. He moved again to kiss, wanted to hold and caress, and did it with the sex instead. Slow, considerate motions, more intense now that he remembered what Dan liked, what kind of twists, what kind of movements.

Dan reacted, and something opened inside, letting him feel the pain and fear, the self-loathing for which he had no name. Tapping into the darkness and depression, to tear open the deepest hurt: being useless, old, belonging to the scrap heap and having lost all sense, reason, focus and task. Reaching inside, deep, deeper than words ever could. Touching - to drain the puss.

Patience and listening, Vadim was wide open to Dan's responses, a body that reacted as if separated from the mind - while the mind was given the strength to allow the pain to surface. Vadim took his time, determined to allow Dan to find the way back, shed whatever had come between them, at the same time feeling an intense tenderness that had, itself, been buried under his own stuff, until Dan had felt only like the guy he shared a house with.

Dan opened his legs further, pushed his chest and head down, almost on his knees, open, wide open, allowing, expecting, demanding the intrusion that anchored him. Once more. Deeper. The sob that was torn out of him shook his whole body. Shuddering violently, only the hand inside his body still anchored him, when another sob poured out. Sounds of utter devastation, sounds he wasn't aware of, as the pain rose to the surface, spilling open and he wept like a lost child.

Vadim stroked Dan's back, never relenting, never withdrawing, moving ever so slightly, trying to be *there*, even though he assumed, judging by his own struggles, that Dan might not fully realize him, his presence, just going through his own inner world. And Dan, who had always been so uncomplicated, probably had a worse time than he had. Ill-equipped to deal with these notions.

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Notions that saw Dan weak, and yet strong, because he was still struggling, still fighting on, as the hurt and fear of a whole year poured out of him. His cock still hard, but never moving beyond that stage. The arousal did not wane, as if the one had nothing to do with the other - no matter how long it took, and the night had been shielding them in darkness during the last hours, while the silence of the mountains cocooned them both. The sobs finally began to quieten and die down, and yet Dan's body was still in the same state.

Only then did Vadim withdraw his hand, just as slowly and gently as everything else, and he turned Dan by the hips, nudging him to lie down, lie flat on his back. Shifting his own weight, he moved between Dan's legs and took the hard cock between his lips. Gently, again, no greed, just tenderness, caring.

Dan was past noticing, and he shuddered once more, bereft of the anchor which had centred his mind, but his body had different ideas, reacting to the touch. Too many months without connection, and without the physical manifestation of a love he'd believed lost. Now that his mind had stopped thinking, his body took over once more, like it had done all his life. Breath quickening, his cock hardened under the tender administrations, and he was taken away, further towards the edge.

Vadim glanced up briefly, studying Dan's face, then concentrated on Dan's cock. Hadn't done this in a while, not to Dan, not for Dan, but it still felt completely natural, he'd never love doing this, but that wasn't the point. The point was to bring release, relief, and he concentrated on sucking and licking, not going anywhere fast, just continued stimulation for a while, before he finally took the cock deep into his throat, moving fast.

Dan's body reacted almost immediately. Arching up with a hoarse groan, face still wet, hands in fists, he tensed once, twice. Sounds were torn out of his chest, when he pushed himself towards the accepting throat. He came with a shout that had nothing to do with the mind, but all with the body and the man.

Vadim swallowed, took Dan's hand when he was arched up, pressing it, and then continued to lick and suck, cleaning him up, until he finally rested his hand on Dan's hip, breathing faster, but smiling, caressing the scars, while Dan remained out for a long time. He had almost fallen asleep with his breath evened out and his face slack and peaceful. More calm and relaxed than it had been for months after months.

Vadim only moved enough to pull up the sleeping bag and make sure that Dan wouldn't be cold now. He cleaned his hand, reached for a bottle of water, drinking, then lay down beside Dan, watching him breathe.

"Vadim?" Barely audible, after what seemed like an eternity.

"I'm here," Vadim murmured, smiling. "You okay?"

"Aye ..." Drowsy, eyes still closed. "You ... still want me?" Not a question, despite the inflexion of his tired voice.

Vadim moved up to look closely into Dan's face, then kissed his lips, even though Dan never opened his eyes. "I do. And I ... love you. Okay?"

"Then who am I?" Barely more than breathed out.

“Everything. Everybody.” Vadim moved up, touching Dan’s legs, hips, chest, shoulder.

“Everybody?” Dan’s head fell to the side, the vaguest of smiles ghosting across his lips.

“Well, for me.” Vadim smiled, too. “But you did ask me.”

Dan lifted his hand sluggishly, wiping across his closed eyes. His hand remained across his face. Too much effort to remove it. “Even though I am not Mad Dog anymore, not even ‘Daan?’”

“I don’t care. I take you as you are. SAS, mercenary, consultant, pensioner. Whatever. As long as ... this doesn’t happen again. Because it fucking hurts.”

Dan opened his eyes, a great feat of willpower do to so. “Yeah.” Moving no muscle except eyes and lips. “Like standing in front of a closed door?”

Vadim inhaled deeply. “Still. Good it came to that.” Even if Nelson had become more trouble than he was worth.

With a strange, nearly invisible smile, Dan’s eyes closed again. “I have to do some thinking now ...” drifting off.

“Take your time.” Vadim closed his eyes, breathing deeply. “I’ll doze a bit.” The whole thing had been much harder - and easier - than he’d thought. But he got the feeling he’d managed to break through. Even if it would be tough to repair all that, but they’d been through worse.

“Aye.” Dan shuddered, a gentle movement all through his body, as he fell asleep. Mind finally shutting down, his body succumbed to the abuse of months. Asleep - deeper than in ages - within the next second.

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When Dan woke with a full bladder, it was already dawn. The first sensation was that of warmth - shared warmth - and it had become so unknown, that he lay there for a moment, just feeding from the sensation of feeling a body beside him and against his own. When he stretched he felt the deep seated ache, and he grimaced, biting down a sound, as he shuffled to sit up and peel himself out of the blankets. The ache was nothing, on the contrary. He’d felt it before, had been stretched and filled and taken, and the only true feeling that lingered was that of no longer being alone. Connection. Worth.

It was chilly and damp, so he carefully took a blanket with him, wrapped around his shoulders, trying not to wake Vadim, whose face looked relaxed in his sleep, with the hand curled in a loose fist beside his head. Crawling out of the tent, a glorious dawn greeted him, and it felt strange to do such a profane task as to piss. But needs must, and he was just a profane man, after all.

Blinking into the powdery colours of rising light, he stood and relieved himself. Mind blank, and the pain was gone. Replaced by a blank slate that waited to be filled.

Vadim emerged from the tent not much later, when Dan had finished his business, dressed in his jeans, T-shirt in his hands, and yawned, then stretched.

He watched Dan closely and smiled, still somewhat sleep dazed. "Was a long night," he murmured.

"Aye." Dan nodded, offered a vague smile, before turning his face back towards the rapidly approaching dawn. "Is the towel dry?"

"I think so." Vadim put the T-shirt on, then headed back to get Dan the towel, slipping into his shoes on the way back. He handed Dan the towel. "Any plans?"

"My arse is full of Vaseline and itches." Dan's brows rose with dry humour. "The plan's to jump into that cold water and wash it off."

Vadim laughed wryly. "Okay. I'll make coffee." He headed back to the fireplace and rummaged through the bergan to find what food he'd brought. Not much. But he could always venture out, drive for a little and get some provisions.

Dan left the towel over a branch, put the blanket down, and walked straight into the water. The water was a shock to the system, but he walked on, as if the cold could wash the puss away that had been drained. The guilt, loathing, anger and resentment. He stayed only a few minutes, washing best he could and quickly, before coming out with chattering teeth and goosebumps all over. Drying himself in record time, vigorously rubbing at skin and hair, until he could slip the blanket back over his shoulders.

"Got sweets?" He was beside Vadim the next moment.

Vadim placed some more dried wood onto the fire. "Not nearly enough to last us," he murmured and smiled. "I'll head down the mountain again and get some stuff. Didn't have much time to pack." He stood and stretched and got his jacket. "I could probably tie you up, but I imagine you're not the most unwilling prisoner I've ever had." Raising an eyebrow, as if in question.

Dan huffed. "Never been your prisoner. Not going to start a habit now." He sat down near the fire, a laborious process. "I think I'm hungry." Didn't quite know if he was, it had been months since he'd truly been hungry.

"There's a ration and some bits ... nuts." Vadim gestured at the bergan near the fire. "Should last you two hours. I shouldn't be longer than that."

"Shopping?"

"Yes. But don't worry, no suits or furniture." Vadim smiled, and gave a little wave, then headed down the mountain, to the car, then towards one of the small, idyllic cities and there to one of the outdoor stores and the nearby supermarket.

Dan didn't move much in all that time. Drank the coffee that Vadim had left, went onto the rest of the water bottle, and ate whatever food was there. Strange to actually feel hungry, something he hadn't realised he'd missed. The alcohol and emptiness had numbed even that.

He was lying with his back on the blanket in a patch of sun, a packet of cigarettes beside him, when Vadim returned. He didn't even twitch at the sounds, keeping his eyes closed, as if he'd lost all of his instincts. Still naked, the new scars on his knee anything but pretty. But what did they matter, only another one on an already flawed body.

Vadim set the bags down, then the bergan that was stuffed full with beverages. "That should last us for a while," he said and crouched down. "Sweets, meat, outdoor food, dried, smoked ... I even got a kettle and a pan."

"You going to cook for me? Mother Goose style?" Cracking one eye open, a fleeting hint of Dan's old irreverent humour appeared for a moment.

Vadim glanced up, then shrugged. "Depends what you're offering in return."

"Depends on what you want from me."

"More of the same." Vadim began to set up the pan, eggs, bacon, cheese, all dug out of the bergan, and already started to cook.

"My arse is not going to keep up with that." Pushing himself up on his elbow, Dan watched Vadim, every movement, each simple and focused task.

"Hm. Maybe some substitute? Or maybe I'm just talking about sharing warmth?" Vadim cut the bacon into the pan and melted the fat over the fire, then broke the eggs into the pan and added several chunks of cheese.

"If you don't know what you're talking about, how can I?" Dan shook his head, then let himself roll once more onto his back. One arm shielding his eyes against the sun, the other boneless beside him. Silent while the eggs cooked and the bacon sizzled.

"Just teasing."

"Are you taking the offer?" Suddenly.

Vadim looked up, knew in an instant what offer Dan was talking about. "Only if it's over between us," he murmured.

"You really think it could ever be, unless one of us was dead?" Him, most likely. He'd been dead for months.

"I ..." Vadim paused. He hadn't been sure. For months. "I want it to work, Dan. If I have to go, I will. But I don't want to. I am not sure I can function without you. Or live."

"Aye, function or live. Or are we back to the needing? The carer?" Dan trailed off, silent once more. He slowly let the arm fall from his face, turning, until he looked at Vadim. "You still *want* me?" So much implied in the few words. Do you still want me even though I am no longer myself? No longer strong? No longer functional?

Vadim nodded, in silence, felt his guts knot and twist inside. Of course. It was a different kind of wanting, though, but that was fine. Gentler, more considerate, more caring.

"That's not very enthusiastic."

"We've drifted apart for so long. It's like ... it takes time. It's been a year, Dan. So much ... darkness." He frowned and took the pan off the fire, scraping the eggs into two bowls, handing one to Dan.

Dan nodded, took the bowl and didn't say anything for a long time, well after he'd started tucking into the bacon and eggs. "That's not actually the question." Choosing, chewing and swallowing another mouthful. "Question is if you want him. More than you want me." Looking up from his food. "It's really that simple. You choose what you want. That's all."

"He freaks me out."

Dan laughed, a dry sound that died quickly. “So you haven’t lost your taste for knives, blood and danger. It just comes without the blades and in a suit, these days.”

Vadim grinned, shaking his head. “I’m serious, Dan. He freaks me out. Keeps calling, that ... contract. That was unsolicited. I didn’t tell him I was looking for a job. Nothing I did encouraged that.”

Dan’s brows rose, but he said nothing otherwise, finished off his food instead. He had rolled back down before he spoke. “Guess the fact you stayed far away from your ‘business partner’ was telling.”

“Well, he was staying away from me, too.”

Dan turned onto his side. “I just hate the fucking wannabe arseholes in that job. Bunch of tossers, just like my worst COs.”

“Yeah.” Vadim sighed. “I don’t want to point the finger. We both made mistakes. We both fucked it up. Nelson just took advantage of it, and ... it was nice to be desired, too.”

Dan nodded slowly. “Yeah, I get that.” Trailing off once more, he closed his eyes, as he tried to find the words. “Don’t know what happened to me. Seems I lost ... myself.” My job. My self esteem. My reason for being. My everything. Except you, but then I lost you, too.

“And I should have seen it sooner, but I didn’t. I’m sorry.”

Dan nodded once more. “You were busy and I was away. All those months in hospital and rehab, hospital again and final fucking weeks in rehab, at the other side of the world.” He reached for his fags, “not good.”

“No. Not good at all.” Vadim began to eat his own portion, thinking about everything, but truth was, all he wanted was get back to normal, live like they had before everything had come down around them. “What do you want me to do?”

“I don’t know.” Dan lit the fag, then moved to sit. “I don’t even know what I should do.” Inhaling deeply, he watched the smoke curl from his nostrils, up into the air. “Perhaps we could start with letting me have a say in what the house looks like.”

“Okay. We start with the house.” Vadim was eating, quickly finishing the food and then drinking half a bottle of water. “I guess you hate it?”

“Not everything. Just some of the pictures, looks like poncy shit to me. And I fucking hate the bedroom. That’s no proper bed. It’s all so ... just too much. Everything’s just too much. It’s like someone had transplanted a Scottish peasant into a Florida villa.” He tilted his head, “sorry. I like it simple. I bought the farm for the view of the mountains and the old apple trees.”

Vadim looked somewhat shocked, especially at the last bit, then nodded. “What about this: you tell me which pieces you hate and I get rid of them. I guess I could find a buyer for that.”

Surprised, Dan backtracked. “Not everything. Would be unfair. You keep your favourite stuff, but the bedroom ...” he trailed off, watching the smoke once more. “You want it to be *our* bedroom? Then we should furnish it

together. You show me catalogues, I tell you what's shit and what isn't." A miniature grin broke through. "Just get rid of that picture, I fucking hate it."

"It's ripped." Vadim shrugged.

"I'm sorry." Dan was watching him. "I don't feel like the place is my home. Always felt like a guest in *your* house."

"Okay. Let's do everything to make you feel like this is your place, too. Especially," Vadim grinned, "the bedroom. Looks like we'll be using it more often, soon."

"Aye." Stubbing out the cigarette. "That would be good." Dan rolled once more onto his back. Arms and legs relaxed, lying sprawled on top of the blanket, bare skin soaking up the mild sunshine.

Vadim prepared some more coffee, then went to wash out the pan, and lay down near the fire, staring into the blue sky, thinking, calming, allowing the mind to drift. Just spending time with no purpose but be near Dan, who had fallen asleep after a while, gently snoring. Lying partly on his front, face cushioned on his forearm, legs sprawled. Vadim moved over, lay down beside him, touching and warming, and feeling calmer and more at peace than in a long time.

Dan was asleep for a couple of hours, hardly shifting throughout all the time, except for rolling over onto his side, facing Vadim. Subconsciously moving closer to the human warmth, that provided heat in addition to the sun on his bare skin. Surfacing from his slumber, he was awake from one heartbeat to the next, like he used to, back when his life depended on split decisions. But this time he wasn't faced with an enemy. Not when the face in front of him was more familiar than his own and was still the most attractive one he had ever seen. He smiled, a minute reaction. 'Attractive', he hadn't thought in those terms for an eternity.

Vadim noticed the shift and opened his eyes, regarding Dan from touching distance, close enough to blur his features slightly. He gave a smile. "Any discoveries?"

"Hm?"

"You look like you're looking for something. Here." Vadim pointed at his face. "Just wondered whether you've found it."

"Answers? No." Dan pulled his arm from under himself, resting his head on his biceps. He was about to say something, but didn't.

Vadim looked dubious for a moment, then returned the gaze. Dan's face, tanned, weathered now, lines - he'd seen it gradually change, and it was still Dan, always him, the eyes hadn't changed much, not the way his face moved through different expressions. "Okay. I was just thinking you might have."

Dan shrugged one-shouldered. "Remember, I don't think. I'm the peasant. It's you who's the thinking man." Reaching out to touch the jaw, running along to the temple.

"Maybe your thoughts are just not as long as mine." Vadim leaned in to kiss the inside of Dan's arm, tilting his head to get more of the touch.



“Aye. They go from here to my body.” And yours. “No further.” The hand stalled, fingertips resting on Vadim’s jaw. Reacquainting themselves. “And as for my body, we got money for a pool?”

“If you want a large one, I’d think we need to get some more jobs in.” Vadim smiled and kissed Dan’s wrist.

“They said I should swim.” ‘They’, the doctors, physios, massage and rehab specialists. ‘They’. An unknown entity that stood for his downfall. “And cycle. Guess I should invest in an exercise bike.” Turning his wrist slowly, fingers keeping in contact with the jaw all the time. “How many jobs for a pool with view of the apple trees and the mountains?”

“Depends how much we want to spend as pensioners, Dan. How much interest we get, where and how we invest. If you do want a number, I think a few more years should set us up alright. If we’re careful, and if we work hard.”

“Just a few years? And then nothing? I’m fucking forty-five. Scrapheap, but not pensioner yet.” Dan’s hand slipped off Vadim’s jaw.

“We can do the consulting stuff for longer and let it slowly peter out. At the moment, we’re answering a need.” Vadim lay back on his back, but took the hand with him. “What’s so bad about a life of leisure?”

“No purpose. Worst thing imaginable.”

Vadim thought about it. “Find a purpose. A hobby, people ... You have family, friends ... comrades ....”

“Bullshit.” For Dan the chapter was closed for now, and he pulled his hand out of Vadim’s grasp, slowly getting up. “I’m off for a swim.”

Vadim nodded. “Enjoy the water.” He turned to watch Dan head into the lake, didn’t want to join him, wanted to lie there and think. He’d never really needed a purpose in life - beyond Dan, at least, and once he’d had Dan, everything else just seemed to fit in with his life. He enjoyed the job, but he’d enjoy just as much to be at home and rest, take life slower. Much slower, eventually growing old. He looked forward to it. In a way, he looked forward to resting, and even to death. It would be good to rest, to enter a deep stillness and calm, and even be wiped out. He’d seen many things, done many things, he’d just take it when it came. Dan, he thought, wasn’t quite there yet.

Dan was shivering when he came back. Muscles worked, body warm, but skin cold. Dripping wet and covered in goosebumps, his ‘manhood’ had clearly seen more glorious moments. “Bloody cold. Got the towel?”

Vadim grinned. “I’ll get it.” Heading back into the tent, he found two towels and handed them to Dan. “How was the water? As cold as it looks?”

“Aye. As cold as that.” Pointedly looking at his cock that had shrivelled into nothing. “Was thinking. Short thoughts.” Drying off, “but even those need time.” He offered a small smile. “What sweets did you get?”

Vadim pointed at the bags. “See for yourself. Something for every taste, I’d wager.”

“Any peanut butter energy bars?” A flash of a grin broke through the otherwise mostly passive face, before turning to look for the bag. He stooped

down without bending his knees, and it was obvious he was compensating, but perhaps he was getting used to it.

“No, nicer than that. I went to the bakery and got a whole lot of those sugary cakes and cookies, all wrapped up in nice little boxes.” Vadim watched him, then headed over to get some of the plates from the camping shop.

“Holy shit!” Dan was too occupied with unpacking the goods to notice Vadim had walked off. “You really did get strawberry tats?” Opening up one of the boxes, there they were. In all their round glory, filled with thick cream, and transparent red sweetness covering the fresh strawberries. He turned to search for Vadim and spotted him with the plates. “Guess not all’s lost between us, eh?”

Vadim turned and grinned. “Well, if the Baroness managed to bribe you with those ...”

“Depends on what you want to bribe me for.” Another smile, a rare occurrence lately, before Dan took a hearty bite, and the pleasure was written all over his face.

“You know, just get back into your good graces.” Vadim set the plates down and sat near the fire, regarding Dan, watching him eat. He wasn’t hungry himself - he’d eaten something in a takeaway place in the city, fish and chips, actually, which kept his stomach occupied with the greasy coating.

Dan opened his mouth for the last big bite and spent the next seconds chewing. “And what do I have to do to get back into yours?”

“Stop drinking so much, open up to me, and be my partner instead of this guy I kind of share a house with.”

Dan swallowed more than just the cake and he looked at Vadim, brows knitting for a moment. “I already told you, I don’t actually like drinking on my own. But it kept me from thinking what a fucking joke I’d become.”

“You’re not a joke. You’ll never will be a joke, Dan.”

Dan huffed. “You said I’d still be lethal with my legs cut off. You really think that?”

“Yes.”

“And how the fuck do you mean that?”

“As I said it. It’s the mind, Dan. Mind over matter. You kill with your mind, not your body.” Vadim shook his head. “I sound like a cheap Bruce Lee rip-off. But I mean it.”

Shaking his head with an amused huff, second strawberry tart in tow, plus a selection of chocolate biscuits, Dan made it over to the fire. Picking up the blanket on his way by hooking his toes into, he managed to get down on the ground without any accidents, and wrapped his naked body partially into the blanket, the rest warmed by fire and sun. “Regarding the opening up to you I have to say ‘you, too’. I wasn’t the only one who didn’t talk.” Dan shrugged, started on a chocolate biscuit. “And the partner ...” the biscuit was gone with the next bite, “that goes for you, too, aye?”

“Of course. It’s a mutual thing, this relationship. Takes two.”

“That means you’ll make some time in your fancy life to do stuff with me?”

“Yes. If it’s more than getting drunk, yes. But you haven’t been doing much lately.”

“No, because I didn’t know what.” Dan knew Vadim was right. “I wasn’t even hungry anymore.” Biting a piece off another biscuit with determined gusto.

“It would be good to see you hungry again.”

“Guess you’re seeing it now.” Dan managed a brief grin while chewing. He took his time before he swallowed, reaching for some water. “You realise I haven’t seen you naked for months?”

Vadim paused, then nodded. “I don’t exactly prance around the house naked ... much. There’s always the way from the bath to the sauna, though.” Smiling.

“Haven’t been in the sauna yet.” Dan shrugged, wiped his lips after a good mouthful of water. He was slowly starting to feel human again. At long last the hangover was gone. “But for being naked, what about now?”

“You think?”

“Aye, I do. All the crap’s somewhere else when you’re naked out here.”

Vadim stood and began to undress, watched intently. It wasn’t exactly warm, not freezing, either. Shirt, shoes, socks, jeans, underwear, all on a pile, as he stood there, just as naked as Dan was under his blanket. “I’ve lost a lot of definition,” he murmured.

“No, you didn’t.” Dan looked him up and down. A little soft in the sides, perhaps, but that was all he could see and he knew that body damn well. “Not to my eyes.” Lifting the corner of the blanket, an inviting gesture.

Vadim moved closer and got under the blanket, skin to skin. Fuck. He’d missed that. Just being close.

“You want a biscuit?” Dan was holding the parcel out to him with one hand, the other arm wrapped around Vadim’s back. Shit, that was good. So familiar and yet so unknown for too long, it hurt. In all the good ways.

Vadim grinned. “No, I’m okay. I guess I could do with something else, though. Something else I’ve wanted for far too long.”

“A blowjob?” Dan turned his head, and there was no doubt, the familiar, old, irreverent grin was peeking through.

“That, or even getting fucked.” Vadim smiled. “Guess your arse is out for a while.”

“I’m not sure yet.” Dan tilted his head, reaching for another biscuit. “The fucking, that is.” Munching his way thoughtfully through the chocolate covered crunchiness.

“Okay.” Start again slowly. Testing the ground with every step, whether there was a basis to stand on or not. It was probably the safest way to do it - only that things between him and Dan had never been safe, had always been all out. All out war, all out love, all out sex. “That’s fine. Not ... sure I’m quite there myself.”

“The blowjob, though ... don’t you think I need a reminder? Been a while. Not even others.”

Vadim nodded. “Absolutely. Won’t say no.”

“That’s not a lot of enthusiasm, Russkie.” Dan flashed a rare grin.

“You keep saying that.” Vadim shook his head, smiling. “Make me enthusiastic? I’m worrying too much.”

“About what? Can’t imagine it’s as bad as my own worry?”

“Same thing. Worries about you worrying. It’s a bit awkward.”

“So you worry about me worrying that I won’t perform?” Dan shook his head slightly with a vague grin. “Holy shit, that’s complicated.”

Vadim didn’t answer, turned his head to kiss Dan’s neck instead, his throat, running his hand over Dan’s chest towards the scars.

“Seems that’s less complicated than I thought.” Dan murmured, turning his head until he was face to face. He hadn’t kissed Vadim in months. Not deliberate, not truly, and he couldn’t even grasp anymore how he’d stayed away from it. Moving, now, lips against lips and he parted his, inviting and exploring in return.

Vadim smiled a little, opening up, kissing more deeply, focusing on the taste of the sugar and an echo of strawberries and chocolate, feeling his body respond to the kiss, the skilful tongue, Dan’s closeness.

Dan’s hands began to wander all over Vadim’s body, until the blanket fell off, but he didn’t notice. Lifting his head after a long while, he murmured, “and how are we going to do this? Any ideas? Kneeling’s right out.”

Breathing faster, Vadim lay down, stretched out on the ground, pulling Dan with him. “On the side ... just lie down right next to me. I could ... blow you, too.”

“69?” Dan flashed a grin, “and here I was, thinking I could only focus on *one* thing.” Voice husky, and he moved already. Hastily spreading the blanket on the ground, before lying down, waiting for Vadim to join him.

Vadim grinned, getting into position for his cock to be close to Dan’s face, and he was faced with the same prospect, moving only to kiss and touch Dan’s thighs and stomach. “Doesn’t have to be simultaneous ...”

“Best not.” Dan’s lips were close to Vadim’s cock, close enough that his vision was blurred. He inhaled deeply, greedily, when the scent hit his nostrils, creating a stab of desire he hadn’t felt in months. “Shit.” Breathed out, as he moved close enough for his tongue to taste and lick, and for his lips to kiss and suck. “I fucking missed this.” Steadying Vadim’s hips, he concentrated on nothing but the cock. Eyes closed, letting himself go, not thinking, just remembering and wanting - allowing himself to want and thus to give.

Vadim shuddered, closed his eyes, taking hold of Dan’s hips to steady himself. Good. Much better than good. The sheer length of time since Dan had done this, it added to the intensity, and he was soon panting, trying to keep himself from pushing, thrusting deeper into Dan’s mouth. He wanted Dan to find his own rhythm, do it as he wanted to do it, but damn, it was getting harder by the second, while Dan appeared to be oblivious - deliberate or not.

Dan took his time, almost like he had done, half a lifetime ago, back in Kabul, when he had taught himself how to give head with a knife at Vadim’s balls. Remembering the taste and sounds, the sensations beneath his fingers,

lips, and tongue, and remembering, most of all, how much he wanted this. How much he loved sucking a cock. Not any cock, *this* cock, Vadim's.

He pulled back when Vadim's thighs trembled beneath his hands and remained barely poised at the head, lips circling lightly. He smiled, tongue flicking across the slit, and then an almighty grin spread across his face before he pushed himself down, concentrating, breathing with wide nostrils, as he remembered it all at once - deep throating Vadim without an ounce of holding back. Just like ever: reckless. Skilled. And entirely steeped in confidence.

Vadim jerked, unable to hold back, pushing in, moving because the alternative was going insane. Tensing up as the pressure mounted, whole body getting there, clinging to Dan's hip, muffling strangled sounds with his face pressed against Dan's thigh, moving, then stilling as he came.

Dan pulled back just enough to breathe, Vadim's cock still in his mouth. Swallowing the last drops, he moved to clean the spent cock, then rested his cheek against the flesh. "Seems there's something I'm still fucking great at." He grinned from ear to ear, more relaxed than he remembered.

Vadim swallowed dryly, unable to speak, orgasm still making him shudder. Holding onto Dan's hips for a little longer, he remembered his promise. Moving to take Dan's cock, he played with it just because he was still too breathless to take it in deep, then allowed it to slip free so he could suck on his balls, hands moving to Dan's arse, kneading it in time with his motions, all the while listening to Dan's breath. How it quickened, and how he let out small sounds that could almost be classified as pleading.

Dan's hands convulsively flexed and relaxed on Vadim's thighs and hips, as he lay with his face pressed against the now flaccid cock. The musky scent of male and sex and cum a heady mixture. No time, now, for worrying, his body had other plans, it simply remembered who he'd been and how he'd always reacted to Vadim. And not just Vadim, to many others. Sex, he'd loved it, had craved it, and it suddenly came back, reminding him with a vengeance how fucking *good* it felt to climb towards an orgasm, and to lose himself.

Vadim smiled at Dan's reaction, then decided he'd got him where he wanted him, and took the cock with one swift motion. He was out of practice, his throat constricted a bit, but he wasn't slowed down, too determined to do it, and his body quickly remembered how to do it.

Dan let out a sound over which he'd had no control, shuddering violently. His hands tightly gripped Vadim's buttocks and thighs, and his hips jerked forwards, unable to reign himself in. Not that he wanted to, he was helpless and this time he relinquished power willingly. The orgasm came suddenly after a steady climb, lust increasing until he'd lost all sense except for the throat tightly around his cock, and he came with a shout.

Vadim swallowed, swallowing just because it felt damned nice for the other, as he knew, giving Dan time before he pulled back just enough so he could breathe again, then licked and sucked the cock. Gentle now, more deliberate, before allowing it to slip out, head fell back, and he rested. But after a few

moments, he shifted and turned, lying down beside Dan, reaching out to hold him. "Okay?"

"Yeah." Dan smiled, "never been better." He closed his eyes, shifting closer, until their bodies gave warmth to the other. "Perhaps some things never do change, aye?" Quietly.

Vadim smiled against Dan's neck. "Guess not. You're still far better at this than I am."

Dan laughed, and he suddenly realised that it had been ages since he'd laughed with that much genuine feeling. "I don't complain." Glancing around, but he couldn't see his fags and he couldn't be bothered.

"You're the master, no question about it." Vadim lay back, looking at Dan, marvelling at how his face had opened, relaxed. Closer to the old Dan.

"We could still practice?" Dan winked. "If you ply me with food I might rediscover more than just my hunger for sweets."

"If that wasn't hungry, I don't know what is." Vadim stretched, suppressing a yawn. "But yeah, we can practice more. Much more."

"But right now I need a fag and then another snooze. You've worn me out." Dan smiled, rolling onto his back. "And if you cook something for me tonight, you never know what might happen." He flashed a grin and despite his demand for a cigarette he never reached for them, just closed his eyes.

Vadim huffed laughter, got to his feet, and found his clothes. Dan was never cold, but he was. He added some more wood to the fire, then found another blanket for Dan, allowing him to rest and sleep. And he did cook. He could never know what might happen, after all.

\* \* \*

Dan slept until it was time for the food, and fell soon asleep again, once it had turned dark, with an amazing sky promising a rather cold night. Vadim had to rouse him to get him into the tent and tucked in, and when Vadim finally joined him as well, Dan turned towards him, wrapping arms and legs around him in his sleep, as if he were clinging to the presence, for more than just warmth. Vadim ran his fingertips over Dan's back and shoulder blades, breathing in the scent of Dan's hair, feeling his breath, and thinking that the good things were always simple like this.

It was barely dawn, when Dan was up and outside. Still naked, clothes didn't feel right, as if they represented all the shit they'd left outside. He was wrapped in a blanket, busying himself with boiling water for a strong coffee, while smoking a fag from his stash.

Vadim eventually emerged, dressed in outdoor trousers, to wash himself at the lake and to shave, something Dan had done well before the first proper light. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine." Dan nodded, pouring some of the strong concoction with its wonderful aroma into the second tin mug, handing it to Vadim, who took a

careful sip. “Been thinking.” Dan offered a smile, before sipping from his own brew, generously laced with sugar. “I want to go to Afghanistan.”

“You mean, the real place?” Vadim looked up, alarmed, but he’d sworn that he’d do whatever it took to get Dan back from where he’d vanished to. “Not a metaphor, not a memory, you mean the physical, real place?”

“Aye.” Dan nodded. “I want to see the mountains again. You coming with me?” Proving himself that he could. Fucked knee or not. Just one last time.

“Can’t we see them from the other side? India? Pakistan?”

“I might have been drunk, but I wasn’t out of it. The Najibullah government fell in 1992, aye?” Conveniently ignoring that a group of Pashtuns had developed enough strength to capture Kandahar and impose the Shariah law on parts of the country already. “So no more communist bullshit going on.”

“Najibullah is the least of Afghanistan’s problems. It’s when the savages come out of the mountains that things get bad in the country.” Never mind Dan had helped train them.

Dan snorted. “Shit, eh?” Looking at Vadim for a moment in a display of weary self-mockery.

“If you think it’s safe for us to go there ... because I’m not sure I can take up arms again and fight my way out if the place goes to hell in a hand basket.”

“Yeah, I guess you are right.” Dan sighed, sipping some more of his coffee. Wasn’t it fucking ironic that he was the one who got those bloody Mujas organised? But back then, he’d been obeying orders. “Not sure about Pakistan either. I remember distinctly the crap going on there last year. I’d have thought you wouldn’t forget the Mog and its clusterfuck. What with Hooch and all.” Hooch, a strangely sore point, because it reminded Dan of his friends, and having lost touch. Having lost touch with anyone, in fact. Even the Baroness.

“Leaves India.”

“Never saw anything but the hospital.”

“That’s a yes, then.” Vadim smiled. “Kashmir is beautiful. If you’re in the mind to enjoy it.”

“As long as I get into the mountains.” Dan finished his coffee, fishing for a fag as the first light of the morning illuminated his face. Still striking, but weathered. “Fuck the knee, I’ll make it up there.” Up was easy, down was the problem, but he’d be fucked if he didn’t make it. “I had worse, aye?”

“As much Hindu Kush as you can want. Himalayas are fairly close, too. And India is definitely nicer than any of the mental asylums surrounding it.”

Dan laughed, the first deep belly-laugh in an eternity. “You could say that.” Pouring himself some more of the coffee. “A propos clusterfuck, have you heard from Hooch?” No matter how thin the ice and how difficult the subject, it was a new day and he’d had to brave some of the shit.

“Briefly. He called, and we had a chat.” Remembering how he had wanted to relax Hooch by hitting him, inflicting pain, pain that would have helped Hooch deal with whatever had happened in the Mog. But he hadn’t, it would have been too tempting, too dangerous. Vadim had heard it between the lines, though, the fact that the place had been shit, and Hooch in the middle of it. If he’d guessed

right and read the reports correctly, Hooch had been a hero in that impossible place, saving lives, saving comrades, and losing comrades.

“Yeah ...” Dan nodded, concentrated on his coffee and the fag. “And Matt?” Dan looked up, flicking the butt into the fire.

“Matt ... Matt takes care of Hooch. I think he secured himself a Delta, our little Jarhead.”

That made Dan chuckle, and he shook his head. “I’m afraid I was a fucking bad friend. Matt called and even wrote, but I never returned anything.” He shrugged one-shouldered, avoiding Vadim’s eyes as he turned towards the fire, poking at the embers with a stick. “Have you heard from Jean?”

“He called a few times, but bad timing. He seems to be doing okay, but I haven’t heard anything from him for a long time.”

“Markus or Dima?”

“Yes, they called in regular intervals. They are doing just fine. Markus has taken over a delegation in Africa, and they are now official, so Dima went with him.”

Dan nodded slowly, poking at the embers again until sparks flew up. “I really was a shit friend, aye? And let’s not even mention being a shit brother ...” And lover. Spoken into the fire, he didn’t look at Vadim.

“If they are friends, they’ll be okay with it. Maybe get in touch. See how they are doing?”

“Aye, I should do that. Should definitely call Duncan when I get back. Should call Maggie, too. She’s been rather insistent lately, even threatening to come here.” A smile ghosted across his face.

“Do that. Call her first.”

“I will. Better than have her stand on our doorstep, aye?” Dan managed a brave smile. Throwing the stick into the fire, he turned towards Vadim. “And you? How have *you* been? Have you been in touch with ...” hesitating, “your family? Have you heard anything about Kisa? Your father? Your children?” And have you found anyone to have sex with, instead? But Dan did not ask that, couldn’t.

“My father’s still alive,” Vadim murmured. “Katya’s doing well, and so is Kisa. And my kids. We are in touch now. Not often, but I guess ... that’s still plenty. I just ...” He shrugged. “I just waited it out, I guess. Waited for something to happen. Feeling bitter, and lonely, a lot of the time.”

“So did I.” Dan nodded slowly. “And I thought you enjoyed being a civilian. While I hated it.” Dan held a hand out to Vadim. Not sure if he expected it to be taken, but Vadim came closer and took his hand with both his, and Dan looked at him. “I hurt like fuck, and I don’t mean the knee. Didn’t understand what was happening, how I could just lose everything I’d ever been, because of that fucking body simply not complying anymore.”

“I still enjoy it.”

“What, my body?” Dan offered a crooked grin.

“That, and being a civilian. Both. We’ve slowed down, Dan. That’s fine. Didn’t we kill enough?”



“Aye ...” Evasive, Dan glanced towards the fire again. “But I’ve been a soldier all my life. What am I now, Vadim? I feel like shit amongst those suited bigwigs at the conferences. I don’t speak their lingo and I feel like they look down at me as if I were scum.”

“I don’t think they do. Maybe some. Like ... Nelson, but the others? They respect you. For your experience ... the things you’ve done, the things you know. Officers are always bastards. Don’t forget that.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true.” Squeezing Vadim’s hand, Dan let go of it slowly. “You think it’d kill me to take another swim?” Getting up, he shed the blanket and stretched. His body illuminated in the glow of the morning sun. Nothing that could be hidden, and nothing to hide. Scars, skin, muscles and not enough meat, but the perfect lines were still there.

Vadim shook his head. “Can’t see how it would. I could always catch you before you drown. I’m pretty fast.”

“That’s alright, then.” Dan flashed a grin and went off, towards the ice cold water, and with a yelp he immersed himself. Not much later, after Dan had tired himself out until he was freezing, they were lying in the tent, naked, for a morning nap. Dan behind Vadim, like they used to do. Bodies generating heat, Dan had warmed up, while Vadim idly stroked the hair on Dan’s arm that was lying across his waist. It felt good having him so close, felt good to feel Dan’s breath rise and fall like this. They lay like this for a long time, until their breathing evened out and in sync, until finally, Dan spoke in a low voice, barely above a murmur.

“I wish I hadn’t lied.”

“Lied?” Vadim opened his eyes, looked at the bergan stowed away, then closed his eyes again. Nothing to see. “About what?”

“When I told you there was nothing you could do. When I sent you away, and told you it didn’t matter if you were there or not.”

“Weird. I think, in that moment, you did mean it. But sounds like it has changed?”

Dan shook his head, a small movement in the back of Vadim’s neck. “I was fucking frightened.” His voice had dropped even more. “But I couldn’t say it. Couldn’t admit to it, bad enough I felt as if I’d stopped being a man because my body stopped functioning.”

Vadim reached behind to touch Dan’s flank, stroking it. He wanted to turn around and hold Dan, but he thought maybe it was easier to talk not looking at each other. “It didn’t make a difference to me, it never did.”

“That I was frightened or that I’m fucked up and not anymore the man you knew?”

“That you’re different. There is something ... something that makes every person what they are. The core. I’m still, somewhere, the guy you met in that awful place. The man who has committed all those crimes. But I’m different. So are you. But the core ... that’s the same, and once you get to know that core, changes don’t screw up the love. You could have turned out a farmer like Duncan. I’d have still fallen for you.”

“You’re not taking the piss, are you?” Dan smiled, a measure of confidence creeping back into his low voice. “If I had been a farmer I wouldn’t have matched you, wouldn’t have been equal. You sure you would have fallen in love with me?”

“It might have gone differently,” Vadim murmured. “Meeting would have been difficult, for once. But your strength is ... not just the strength to beat the shit out of a man and to truss him up like a turkey or to put a gun into a guy’s mouth ... you do match me. You have so much guts, Dan. You’d have shown me my limits, in any fashion, in any possible way. I might have been older, calmer, but I could have fallen for a man who’s not a soldier. Easily. I fell for a masseur when I was young. Soldiers were just ... the easiest, because they were there. Even Szandor. He was a fencer. Camp. Aristocratic. I could have fallen for him easily.” Mentioning that he really liked Duncan would have been a bad idea, now, and he gave a small, amused snort. Duncan was a lot like Dan. Like he’d imagine a Dan that hadn’t been trained to kill. Could he have fallen for a guy like that? Absolutely.

Dan’s hand on Vadim’s abs moved upwards a little, lightly stroking across a pec. Just revelling in the feel of warmth and smoothness. “I was always strong,” murmured, “always matched you. Always held my own ground. The only fear I ever had was the one that kept any soldier alive. But lying there ... waiting for the surgery that meant the end of everything I’d always been, I wanted to run away. Scream, or cry, or shit myself with that goddamned motherfucking fear. Fear that ... that I wasn’t your equal anymore. That I couldn’t keep up with the likes of ...” hesitating, “Hooch.”

Vadim shook his head. “Similar to, I guess, what I felt when you do things with Jean. The Frenchman tries everything to diffuse the situation, but he does show me that you could have had better guys. People who are still sane, who don’t scream. And in tastes, Jean is much closer to you, too.”

“Not as intellectual as you, aye?” Amusement coloured Dan’s voice, and the former accusation had turned into something much calmer, gentler, perhaps even laced with pride.

“No. Not by a long stretch ... He’s not stupid, just ...” Vulgar, Vadim thought, and gave another snort. Vulgar. And since when had he taken on all the upper-class standards that he, strictly, didn’t deserve, either?

“Just like me?” Dan’s lips touched the back of Vadim’s neck. “But I never realised how ...” pausing, gathering his thoughts while his hand continued to stroke and touch, in the most tender way. “Never realised how much you might have been hurt, or worried, ... you know. Others. Until I found out how fucking painful it is to fear losing you.”

“I never wanted anybody else after I’d found you. After I understood what it is we have. Didn’t want any other man. Sure, it was sexy enough ... but I’d never have gone out of my way to find somebody else. I wasn’t interested. Took me a while to work out you did it differently. And then took me a while to get my head around it myself. But I fall easily, Dan, and Hooch was easy to feel something for.”

Nodding, the small movement made Dan's forehead bump gently against the short shorn hair of the back of Vadim's head. "I can understand that, even though I don't fall for anyone. For me it's just you, or nothing." Hand travelling from pec to back, caressing the skin, fingers re-acquainting themselves with lines and angles he'd known and read like Braille. "You told me once that you needed me. To ... to keep you together. While I wasn't there, the whole last year, how ... I mean, do you still *need* me, or can you love me now?"

"I can do it alone, apparently." Vadim moved back, closer to Dan. "I didn't fall apart. Didn't go insane, but ..." He shrugged. "I am still as fucked up, broken and scarred as you are. Just differently."

"You think together we make something like a whole?" Dan splayed his fingers on Vadim's chest, holding him close, body pressed against body, and it felt so damn good. "Don't care how stupid it sounds, but with both of us fucked up, you think we are complementary?"

"Perhaps. But I love you."

Dan smiled, burying his face against the back of Vadim's neck. "And I love you, a fucking lot. Without you, I'd be dead."

"Yeah, me too." Vadim reached over to touch him again, keep touching him. "We deserve each other. The good and the bad. We just do."

Small movements, almost negligible, as Dan rocked gently against Vadim's body. Not thinking, just feeling, and it was all good, and so long missed. "Will you ..." breathing, just that, just feeling, "will you help me?"

"Anything you want, Dan."

"Help me find myself. An adjusted self." Not new, not different.

"Okay." Vadim half-turned now, moved for a kiss, tenderly, hands wandering over Dan's body, carefully, like he didn't want to scare Dan when he moved too quickly. "Besides, if you feel weaker than I am, you can always ... level the playing field."

"What do you mean?" Pushing himself up on his elbow, Dan kissed once more, before concentrating on watching his hand that roamed across the abs and further down. Touching, finding, until it covered Vadim's cock, and he almost didn't notice how his own responded.

"I mean ..." Vadim smiled, desire rising, his lips now on Dan's throat, kissing and sucking while moving his hips closer to Dan's cock. "Take my strength. Tie me up. Chain me. Force me with your will."

"Oh shit." Breathed out, Dan clearly did notice his cock now, and the sudden surge of lust at those words. "I ..." want to do that. "I would want that." His breathing quickened at the same time as his cock hardened. No memory of his failure, no echo of his fear, not even a thought that he might not function.. Feeling his lust as his hand closed around Vadim's cock, and proving his own.

Vadim grinned. "Good. Because I want that, too," breathed into Dan's ear. Hooch wasn't the man to do that to him, he knew that. It was Dan. Dan who would control him, any way he could, any way he could imagine, even, and his own need increased. "Do whatever you want. I'll take it."

“I don’t want you to ‘take’ it. I want you to feel me.” Pressing as close as he could into Vadim’s arse, with a twist of his hips his cock slipped between the buttocks and Dan let out a soft groan.

“I do.” Vadim reached for the bergan, the lube had to be somewhere. He found it, squirted some into his hand. “Give me ... a second.” He pulled away just enough to get his hand between his cheeks, lubed up fingers finding the way, opening the ring, then reaching for Dan’s cock, slicking that up, too, and Dan didn’t have to think, didn’t want to think. Just watched, felt, and finally took Vadim’s hand and moved it away, replacing it with his own.

He didn’t say anything when he closed his eyes and remained poised, nor when he pushed forward in small increments, and neither when he let out a breath, noisy, deep, breaching the muscle. He stilled, waiting, and just feeling so fucking much, while Vadim curved his back to get more of it. “How long ...” At last, breathless, when he pulled back a little again and pushed once more, deeper, but oh so slowly.

Vadim closed his eyes, felt a shudder rise in his body, the concentration, the focus, the need. Very different from any other man. He thought that part had been over, that he didn’t *need* so fucking much anymore, well, that had been a mistake. “Too long.”

“Aye.” Just that, because words were too much effort and didn’t convey enough, and it was his body that mattered. No, not his, both their bodies, and when Dan pulled back once more and pushed slowly, torturously slowly, but without letting up, until his cock was deeply embedded, they found themselves once again in the most intense position. Bodies moulded, arms holding, hands touching and stroking, two bodies as one. Time didn’t matter, just the lust that grew slowly and steadily, as they rocked together, Dan’s hand on Vadim’s cock matching the rhythm of his minimal thrusts.

Slowly driving Vadim insane, like it always did, and he struggled against the moans and the need to plead with Dan; he wanted to allow Dan to do all at his own speed, at his own leisure, but fuck, it was difficult when he grew really desperate and tried to push back as much as the little space allowed. That was all the incentive Dan needed, and everything he had waited for. He changed the angle, pushed Vadim’s leg into a more angled bent, and increased the speed of his hand and his hips. Not as much stamina and strength as he used to, and he was breathless, heart hammering, but he concentrated on Vadim, wanting and needing to bring him off first, the ultimate goal to give lust and receive in return, and to feel once more the sensation of Vadim clenching around him. Needing him to come, more than to fulfil his own lust.

Rewarded with loud, needy groans, Vadim’s body shifted and tensed, fully responsive, squirming with need and desire, the stage where it wasn’t tenderness that mattered, or care, just mindless need, as primal as hunger. Vadim clenched, pressed back against him, all muscles coiled and tight, cumming with a choked, desperate, relieved sound, and Dan finally let go. Unleashing the strength he still had, and he followed Vadim, only a few thrusts later, with an almost blinding orgasm, a rush of need and so many goddamned emotions, it was hard to

contain them, hard to just shudder and hold Vadim, and breathe frantically – and not to cry. Because that would have been too much, still too much, and too overwhelming. “Missed you.” Just that, again and again. “Fucking missed you.”

Vadim reached over, stretched out his legs, but didn’t want to move much more, as he wanted to keep Dan inside him, touching his skin, flank, then found the hand and entwined fingers. “I’m ... here. And I’m yours. Fuck. All ... all yours.”

Dan clung to him, and when the mantra finally subsided, he was breathing, concentrating hard on just the breathing, or he’d lose it, would give in and lose himself to his emotions, and he just couldn’t let go right now. Too much to deal with.

Vadim closed his eyes, resting just a bit, feeling a shift in Dan’s body that told him he had nodded off, despite the increasing heat in the tent that soaked up the sun, then gently moved away to clean up - both him and Dan, before he opened the tent flaps and lay back down, on his back, staring into the strip of blue sky, content, relieved beyond words. It looked alright. They were pulling through. They’d manoeuvred the beast away from the cliff.

\* \* \*

The next day, Dan began to get back into his usual routine – that of not being a morning person and sleeping until the sun hit the tent. He was woken by the smell of a freshly brewed coffee and the first thing he saw was Vadim’s face as he held the mug out to him. He couldn’t remember when he had last grinned that widely that it threatened to split his face, and if he had ever seen anything so fucking wonderful, as Vadim’s face, Vadim’s body, Vadim’s presence and ... Vadim. It felt as if he had started to live again.

He remained naked during all of the days they were staying there, as if dressing was just too much bother and too much a reminder that there was a world outside. Thinking a lot, but they were ‘short thoughts’, but they were beginning to make sense, forming into a plan. He’d call everyone he knew, trying to explain, and apologising for having vanished off the radar, turning into a piss-poor friend. He’d talk, and he’d listen, and he’d find out who was still there and who wouldn’t bother anymore. He’d arrange to see the Baroness and his brother, perhaps, and most of all, he’d stick his nose into the job and figure out if there was any way to enjoy at least some of it.

Sleeping a lot, Dan spent most of his time in a patch of sunshine, much like a cat, then talking when he was awake. Explaining his plans and ideas and asking for advice, which Vadim gave freely and thoughtfully. Deciding his body needed a lot of work if he was to regain as much strength as he could, they sat and devised a routine, with a plan of what machines to buy for the small gym to exercise the legs without putting strain on the knees, and to train his upper body.

A lot of thinking, a lot of swimming, a lot of eating since Dan’s appetite had returned, and a lot of sleeping – and the rest, the rest was getting to know each

other once more. Reacquainting themselves with the terrains of their bodies. Tasting, touching and taking, and being taken in return. Spending time kissing, and spending even more holding. And fucking. As Dan claimed, sex counted as medicine. When Vadim finally fucked him, Dan almost lost it again, barely holding together his emotions, and as they lay and breathed into the come down, he began to laugh. Because it had all been a motherfucking nightmare and the solution was so simple, right there and under their noses. It had just been hidden: love.

Fair and square. Just love.

November – December 1994, New Zealand

Dan was actually dressed when they returned to civilisation. Vadim drove them back, and eventually pulled up the car before the house. Dan's Landrover sat there, and he remembered guiltily that he'd left the car on the road. He got out, walked towards the Lannie, but it looked alright, the keys were in the glove compartment. He then spotted a note at the door of the house and went to pluck it off:

"Hi guys, thought you'd miss it. I towed it over. Allan."

That was the sheep farmer that they shared the valley with. Doubtlessly, somebody had come across the car in the ditch and had rightly worked out whose it was. Despite its sheer size and wide open empty spaces, New Zealand was a village. "Allan got your car. Might want to get him a bottle of that good whisky?"

"Aye, damn." Dan rubbed his nose as he got out of the vehicle and walked towards his own one. "Seems I was bloody lucky." He flashed a rather guilty grin and patted his trusted Lannie. As much as he loved it, though, it was a pain to haul himself in. But once inside, the seating position suited his knee perfectly. "I'll get him that and a crate of lager. He's one of *them*, you know." *Them*, the lager drinkers, who – according to Dan's grouching – wouldn't know a real beer if it bit them in the arse.

He walked up to the front door then remembered he didn't have a clue where he'd stashed the key, and waited for Vadim, who fished the key out of his pockets and opened the door. "I'll get our stuff," Vadim murmured, and went back to the car. Dan watched him for a moment, at first a frown on his face, wanting to help, but then Vadim asked, while he unloaded the first batch of bags in the corridor. "Coffee? Tea? I could use something to drink."

It took Dan only a second before he caught himself and nodded. "Sure, I'll make a coffee." Even though he wasn't sure where the implements were, he thought, and grinned ruefully. It took him some time in the kitchen before he found all the bits and bobs and worked out how the coffee machine functioned. Muttering to himself about stupidity, idiocy, drinking too much bloody booze and goodness what else, when Vadim turned up in the doorway. "How's it going, donkey?" Dan grinned, switching to teasing within a heartbeat.

"Donkey? You're the stubborn bastard, not me." Vadim grinned, a sunny, rare grin.

"I remember you calling me donkey once. Or was that pack horse? Or mule?" Dan let out a laugh, and bugger it all, things were so much easier taking the piss. New territory, still, but getting there. "So, how's it going, 'Light of My Life?'" Dan smirked toothily, while pouring two mugs with coffee. He ladled the sugar into his, pushing the other towards Vadim, who quirked an eyebrow.

“Going well, I think. We should have a shower or bath, relax a bit, then maybe head over to Allan’s and tell him we found your car, maybe his wife feeds us cookies and cake, as usual?”

“As usual? She does that?”

“Yes, she does. If we give them some advance warning, she might even put together a proper dinner.”

“Definitely a good idea, then. I got some whisky somewhere.” Diminishing the stash without drinking it himself would be good. Sipping the strong brew, Dan leaned against the kitchen counter top. “I’d say yes to a real bath, and you could help me shave.” He wagged his brows. “Been forever since I properly shaved the way *you* like it.”

“True.” Vadim’s expression turned speculative. “While I kept mine up.”

“I noticed.” Dan grinned, “trust me, I noticed.” He opened the fridge to look for something edible, but nothing tickled his fancy. “Bath straight away, or do you want to call Allan first?” Dan flashed a short, sharp grin, “in the meantime I could demolish the bedroom.”

“You already demolished it. The painting got ripped.” Vadim shrugged, as if it didn’t mean anything, a couple thousand Kiwi dollars’ worth he’d spent at an art fair in Auckland.

“Shit. I didn’t mean to. Just ...” Dan shrugged by way of silent apology. “You know.”

“I guess it could be repaired.” Emphasis on the ‘could’. Torn like that, the value would increase by a lot less, re-selling it right now would probably be pointless. “I’ll run the bath, call Allan, check email, and we’ll take it from there.”

“What do you want me to do in the meantime?”

“Demolish the rest of the bedroom?”

Dan laughed, relieved. “I will.” He took his mug, and kissed Vadim in passing, as he walked past him.

Vadim took his own mug to the Jacuzzi, ran hot water, then called Allan, who was relieved – in an understated but heartfelt Kiwi way – that they were both alright, and, sure enough, invited them over for the evening when Vadim hinted that Dan might want to say thank you in person. He then stopped the water, started the bubbles, and poured a generous amount of bath foam into the water, soon working up lots of white foam. He then went up to check on Dan. “Bath is ready, and we’re invited for in two hours.”

Dan looked up from his work. “Two hours? Hardly enough time for a proper shave, aye?”

“Well, that’s when the lamb shanks come out of the oven.”

“Damn, that sounds almost better than the prospect for sex.” Dan grinned, standing in the middle of the room and waiting for Vadim to notice the changes. He’d taken the ripped painting off and had stashed some other objects into a corner, same with a couple smaller pictures. Leaving some others, more realistic ones, that he’d rearranged on the now empty hooks. The bed had been stripped and white sheets thrown over it, hiding most of the leather and thus



most of its designer flair. His pillow was back on the side he'd initially taken, and so was his clock.

Vadim took hold of two of the paintings. He could store all this stuff in the guest room for the moment. "Fine. If you like this better, that's fine with me."

"I do, and we can find a bed together." Dan smiled. "I figure we could do with a balcony. What you think? I could smoke a fag without annoying you."

"You mean, have one built?"

"Aye, good idea or not?"

Vadim glanced out of the window. "Good idea. Just ... one thing. If we have to buy the furniture again and have things changed, there will have to be more conferences. Work that we need to be suited and booted for, yes?"

"Yes, I know. And don't forget the swimming pool. I guess we also need to get more gym stuff." Dan shrugged. "Shit, you know what I feel like? Like I'm about to say 'I'll be a better boy from now on, dad.'" Grinning, Dan took hold of Vadim's free hand, which closed around his fingers, as easily and as confident as if the last year hadn't happened. "I'll take this job seriously and bear in mind what you told me. I'll try to ignore arseholes of the likes of Nelson, and I won't embarrass you anymore, aye?"

Vadim's face twitched. "Nelson. Oh shit." He'd promised to call, and there was still the contract.

"That bad?" Dan frowned. "Can't you just ignore the fucker?"

"I'm trying, but he's not getting the message ... He's too important to royally piss him off." Vadim frowned. "Listen, you might even end up enjoying the circus. They are less sexy than the Americans fawning over 'Mad Dog', but it can be fun. Seriously."

Dan shook his head with a wry grin. "I take your word for it, even though I'm not convinced." He let go of Vadim's hand. "Anyway, you want to check if that Nelson guy has contacted you? I'll be in the Jacuzzi, naked and willing."

Vadim grinned. "Need a hand getting in? There's plenty of bubbles."

"Worried I might drown in the bubbles?" Dan shook his head. "I'll manage, you deal with that fucker, I wait for you."

"Okay." Vadim was about to turn, then paused and faced Dan again, pulling him close for a kiss, took his time, just a gentle, perfectly normal kiss. Finally. "Be with you in no time."

He headed to the computer, logged on, watched the email downloads, then checked on his phone. Fifteen calls, all from the same number. The Colonel. Jesus H Christ, as Hooch would say. And there were several emails. Plus a reservation for a beach villa in Belize. The description read great, chartered plane, all kinds of extras booked, the sum was handsome, too, only that Vadim had never actually agreed to spend ... ten days with Nelson in Belize.

He read the emails that were as cajoling and ironic as Nelson was. He did have a great, fluid style of writing, and clearly the leisure to think about his words and how to place them. He was already outlining Vadim's future job, was making plans, introduced him – in writing – to the main players so he knew what he had to think of them. It was scary in a completely new dimension, and

Vadim put the phone down. He didn't actually want to call him. The man freaked him out.

Dan was stretched out in the Jacuzzi, looking up when Vadim arrived. "And?"

"Seems I'm pretty much married to the guy. He treats me like his fucking property." Vadim began to strip and got into the Jacuzzi. "If I'd known what weirdo that is ..."

"Holy fuck, what has he been doing?" Dan moved a little to the side to make space for Vadim.

"He keeps calling, books holidays – in Belize – he booked me for a conference in Rio ... me, mind you, not us." Vadim shook his head when Dan's face turned thunderous. "I didn't encourage him. I never did more than ... what I did. I didn't give him any reason to expect anything more." Be in touch. That was just a phrase and didn't mean 'I'm available, please try and fucking control my life', did it?

"He treats you like his fucking property?" Dan's anger was close to the surface, and as bad as that was, he felt intensely alive. "If you belong to anyone you belong to *me*, is that clear? I'm going to rip that fucker's throat out."

Vadim gave a laugh. "I know you would. Shit."

"I *will*. You said it yourself, I'm still lethal, and I'm starting to believe it."

"Yes, but I don't recommend prison." Vadim leaned back in the hot water, fully enjoying the heat and the way it drained the strength from his muscles. "I'll have to talk to him, but not right now. I need to think about it ... because ... something is off about him. I'm not sure he gets a 'no'."

"In that case, I'll set the Baroness' bloodhounds on him."

"You think she could give us some help with that case? I mean, he is important, he's good friends with several of the important people, that is."

"If I pegged her right, she won't refuse to help, even though I've been a shit friend." Dan took a deep breath, forced himself to relax, and Vadim reached over to place a hand on his thigh. "There must be some dirt on that bastard. No one goes through life like that without leaving some shit behind."

"I'll try it the civilised way first." Vadim leaned in to kiss. "And – you should call her. Just to stay in touch."

"I will. I'll actually go and call everyone. I told you. And I'll take the stick as it comes." Dan accepted and returned the kiss. "As soon as it turns day on the other side of the world ..." Murmured, Dan leaned in properly. The lovemaking that followed was tender. Starting to learn that it might not always have to be about fucking, not even about cumming, and that getting older was perhaps, at times, a good thing.

As promised, Vadim helped Dan shave, and that turned into a very different situation, where the need was back, and the lust for the other's body. When they arrived at their neighbours', they were both pleasantly exhausted. Their company was appreciated, as was Dan's whisky by way of thanks. Some young guy was also at the table, wolfing down food, and from what Allan told them, he was a very distant relative of his wife's, who was quarter Maori. Vadim still

wasn't quite clear on how the New Zealand natives were organized, he only knew it had something to do with their ships and ancestry that reached past white relations.

The boy was maybe twenty, tall and muscular, but looked just like any other Kiwi; Vadim couldn't see any Maori traits in him – unlike Allan's wife, who had dark eyes and very curly hair and a darker skin tone. The kid had just returned from the New Zealand Maori Arts and Crafts Institute in Rotorua, as he proudly stated, where he had studied Maori carvings, and he was planning to make a living from that, somehow. He seemed very intense, this tall, broad kid with the shoulder-length, wavy brown-blond hair and the light eyes. Not one Maori trait on him, yet he claimed a distant, very distant ancestor had been Maori, which, apparently, gave him all the credentials with the guy who had taught him carving. Outsiders apparently were not welcome, unless they shared at least a drop of that blood. Even if it was just a droplet, like in this case.

Intrigued, Vadim asked to see some carvings, and they all headed over to the outer farm buildings. When Allan had switched on the light, Vadim could see a slab of wood that he was working on, carving out ornate lines and patterns – he could already guess what it would look like. The kid then seemed to thaw, stroking the lines with his long, powerful fingers, speaking about traditional designs and that it took him anything between a month and three months to finish a piece like this, keeping his eyes on the wood like that was who he was talking to.

Vadim glanced at Dan, then moved closer. “What does my art budget look like?” he asked, softly, more a joke than anything else.

“I haven't got a fucking clue.” Dan murmured, turning his head to smile at Vadim. “No idea about money, but I wager the art budget for *this* sort of art is substantial.” He winked, giving Vadim's shoulder a quick squeeze.

Vadim smiled. He wasn't quite sure how to act, chances were that people were relaxed as always and knew that Dan and he were a gay couple, but he didn't want to make the kid feel uncomfortable. “Do you think you could do something for us?” he asked.

The young carver looked at him, then Dan, and nodded. “Of course. Traditional, or more modern? Or should I come over tomorrow and you tell me what you want for your house? I could draw you a couple designs.”

Vadim smiled. “That works for me. I don't want to distract you from this, but this is an opportunity I can't pass on.” He didn't realise immediately that the word ‘opportunity’ held a double meaning these days, and he shrugged and grinned, while Dan let out an ill disguised cough, and they returned to the house for desserts.

They came home quite late after an evening that Dan enjoyed more than he'd ever thought.

\* \* \*

Despite being filled with good food and rather tired, Dan sat down that night in his study. Not to dwell alone and drown himself in booze, like he used to, but to do his round of calls. His brother first, and it was easy – easy because Duncan made it so. Dan was on the phone with him for close to an hour, and he didn't care how much it cost. Duncan asked many questions, and Dan told him everything. Told him what had happened and the truth of it all, as much as he could understand it himself. Told him about his plans and what they were both doing. Ending with the promise that they really, truly and definitely, would fly across soon and visit for a holiday.

After the phone call to his brother Dan sat for a while, smiling and shaking his head, wondering where the hell Mad Dog had vanished to. "I'm getting fucking old," he murmured to himself with a rueful grin.

Next on the list was Jean. Dialling the number and hoping that Jean was either home or that Solange knew how to reach him.

It took several rings, but the house was huge, and eventually a voice answered in French: "Yes?" Jean. Himself.

"Thank fuck." Dan took a fortifying breath. "Jean? It's Dan ..." waiting to gauge the reaction.

"Dan. Wow. Good ... good to hear from you. How are you?"

A huge wave of relief washed over Dan and he relaxed back into the seat. "Living, as opposed to alive. Listen, I've been a really shit friend, haven't contacted you in a year and I'm sorry."

"You can say that again."

Dan lit a fag, "how are you? How is Solange?"

"At the moment we're both here, she's done shooting and I'm currently ... out of a job. No, that's not strictly true, I turned one down when things got bad, and I'm not sure when I can go out there again."

"What do you mean, when things turned bad?" From relaxed to alert within a second.

"I thought I'd told you." Jean said, voice betraying a little strain. "Pascal? Released from prison? Two months ago."

"What? No, fuck, I didn't know. What the fuck happened?" Sitting up straight now, Dan took a deep drag from the cigarette. "I'm sorry, I don't know anything, I wasn't really ... with it. Shit."

"Okay, I'll start at the beginning, okay. Give me a second." Jean took a sip of something, might be wine or something stronger, it didn't sound like something to do with thirst. "Pascal ... after he got back from the last job, he went to meet his girlfriend or whatever, and trouble was, she was already with some other guy. So, he walks into this bar, sees them together, puts two and two together and loses it, completely. From what I heard, he was on the guy like a rabid dog, took out several of his teeth, very nearly kills him before the rest of the bar or club can react, his ex-girlfriend screaming for help at the top of her voice, stupid bitch, and the flics arrive and get him. The police. Needless to say, they aren't MPs, and he gives them a run for their money. He's a menace to

society, gets locked up for aggravated assault – only thing that helped him was that he was piss drunk when it happened.”

“Fuck.” Dan was shocked to the core. “That’s not like Pascal.” But what was? What the fuck did he know about him? He’d been making fun of the guy and he had liked him, but otherwise? “And now? How is he?”

“He’s dead.” Jean’s voice choked. “Sorry. Give me ... a moment.”

“Fuck!” Dan almost shouted into the phone. Jumping up from the chair, he clutched the phone. This couldn’t be. All wrong, fucking wrong.

Jean’s breathing was forced now, and it took several long, anguished minutes before he could speak again. “He went to prison. Bad place, but ... you know, not undeserved. It’s not like the taule, where Legionnaires get straightened out. That was a bad place, I’m not even sure what happened exactly, only that he must have started with drugs. Hard stuff. Some guy works out he’s ex-Legion, tells somebody else who’s ex-Legion, the story somehow gets to the Legion, then back to other ex-Legion boys. To me. It’s ‘Jean, you got some time on your hands, he’s your friend’, so, I drive there with another friend and pick him up, from the prison gates. He looked ... he looked like he was already dead. We put him up in a nice flat, but he’s not there, he’s ... like a goddamned junkie, then we work out what’s wrong, with the marks in his skin and the fact he’s not doing anything. So we decided to fix him. I swear that was what it was, what we’d planned, and we do it the Legion way.” Jean was openly crying now.

Dan’s hand was shaking as he stood in the middle of the room. The full force hitting him. Other veterans. Other soldiers. Lives destroyed, lives lost. Lost in a world that wasn’t theirs and that they had no place in anymore. A place he’d found – and nearly lost – with Vadim. His family. His friends. Fuck. He’d been one of the lucky ones. Forcing himself to calm, he lowered his voice. Tenderness, for the man who was crying on the other end of the phone. “Take your time.” Not asking anything else, just waiting for the rest of the story to unfold. “I’m here, Jean.” I am now.

“Yeah.” Jean swallowed something again, a drink, or just the pain. “So, we put him through the cold turkey stuff, we were there all the time, through all that ... that ... Pascal wasn’t himself. He was ... violent and screaming, he was like a wild animal. How much he hated us, that he wanted to die ...” Jean choked up again. “As we thought the worst was over, he’s all placid and good, almost ... almost there, we let caution slip. We were just so goddamned relieved it was over. Next thing he does is ... escape from the flat and ... it’s the top floor ... he went through the window. He was alive when he was down there, broken ... broken in too many ways. Didn’t ... speak when I got there, just looked like ... like he was glad it was over. Died in the ambulance.” Jean’s voice was so broken he was almost impossible to understand, and he seemed to realize that, and paused, struggling to recover his voice. “Rumour has it the bitch told him she’d been pregnant and had killed the child ... but it was a lie. She didn’t. But he didn’t believe me when I told him. He said why the fuck would she lie.”

Dan didn't say anything for a moment, just couldn't. Pascal, it seemed like a month or so ago, when he'd been at the wedding, and they'd taken the piss out of the man. Pascal. Damn. "I am so sorry." Dan's voice was as dead as the cigarette ash on the floor. "I am so sorry I wasn't there, but I am now. Is there anything I can do? Meet you, perhaps?" To be the fucking friend that he hadn't been.

"I'd ... yeah, that would be good. Won't be working for a few months, I could ... meet you somewhere. I'm sure Solange would be good with that."

"Aye, any time. You go talk to Solange, and I check with Vadim what sort of jobs we have lined up. We'll make it soon, aye? I promised my brother we'd show up around Christmas or New Year, we could combine that."

"Yes. Make it soon. Just call me when you've worked something out. I'm here. The cellar and swimming pool and all that is pretty much finished, too."

"Do you want to see me alone?" A lot unsaid, and it wasn't about sex.

"Bring Vadim if you want to, that's fine. I'm good with anything. If you want to stay for Christmas, that would be great too. Just ..." Jean made an almost comical sound. "Let's just meet, okay?"

"Okay, we will. I get back to you tomorrow, I send you a mail when I've figured out what Vadim has planned work-wise. You go and talk to your good lady." Dan was still standing in the middle of the room, eyes closed. "Take care, Jean." His voice had turned soft, "I mean it. You take care of yourself and of Solange, and allow her to take care of you, too. I'll be there soon. Promised."

"Thank you. Thank you, Dan. Good ... good hearing your voice. Call me, whenever, I'm here."

Vadim was there with two steaming mugs of tea when Dan opened his eyes again and switched the phone off. "Bad news?"

Dan just nodded. Reaching for the mug, he curled his hand around the heat. "Pascal is dead. Suicide." He shuddered violently, spilling some of the tea. "Fuck." Toneless.

"Fuck." Vadim closed the distance, set the tea down, hands on Dan's shoulders.

Dan looked up, glad when Vadim took the mug out of his hand. "Jean's in a bad way. Really bad, never heard him that shaken. I'm worried, Vadim. Because I ... damn." Leaning his head against Vadim's shoulder, and Vadim embraced him, held him, just that. "I need to see him, and Duncan. Any chance we can get across over Christmas and New Year?"

"Let's drive into Palmy tomorrow and see what flights they have. I wouldn't mind seeing Duncan, and Jean, too. And their families."

"What about work? Anything booked? I haven't got a clue."

"I'm not going to Rio, and that's really the main one before Christmas. The whole thing starts again in January, and if you want more time in Europe, I can do the talks and you take care of our friends."

"Aye." Dan lifted his head and smiled. "We'll do that. We could fly across as soon as possible. The way Jean sounded, the sooner we head off, the better. We'll book tomorrow, aye? And I do some more emails and phone calls."

“You do that ...and I’ll go to bed, because it’s been a long day for me. You might find me lubed up and on my belly.”

“And you might find me falling asleep.” Dan flashed a tired grin.

Vadim was grinning as he leaned in for a kiss. “Give them greetings.”

“I’ll be with you as soon as I can, just can’t stop now. Have to try ... have to talk to people.” Kissing back, Dan finally settled in the chair once more, leg raised and resting. Tea nearby, he started to call. Meticulously keeping track of time zones, he went through the list. The baroness, after all, because how could he not call her. Talking to her for a while, he said a lot more than he’d ever meant to. She had that effect, and since he’d once cried in her presence, there was nothing he did not trust her with. Talking about the past year, Vadim, the house, his daughter, his life, his friends and the loss. Nelson, too, and she promised she would look into this. He knew he could count on her, the way her voice had hardened into crystal sharpness, and despite the distance they trusted each other. It was over an hour when he put the phone down again, yawning, but he wasn’t done yet, would at least have to leave messages if he couldn’t get into contact.

Reluctant to send email, he worked through the list of phone numbers, contacting Markus, and with Markus Dima, talking for a while, and he ended up smiling. Especially when Markus mentioned something off-hand, that got Dan to think. A thought was slowly forming in his mind that might become the basis of an idea. An idea about people, friends, veterans, mates, safety and understanding.

Calling Matt, the kid had him laugh within a few minutes, and Dan decided not to tell him anything about the darkness of the last year. Sticking to the excuses, and enjoying the banter. Light-hearted, each word made him feel better, and part of a network, with an understanding that only the same irreverence born out of a similar job could bring. Sometime later, when Dan was about to sign off, he asked Matt to tell Hooch he should call Vadim.

Getting hold of Beauvais was the trickiest bit. But he felt it was paramount that he tried. For Jean, to keep him safe – unlike Pascal. It took almost an hour of internet searches and phoning from one place to another, when he finally, on a crackling line, had the Capitan on the phone.

“Yes?” The line sounded like it could go any minute. “Speaking?”

“Dan McFadyen here, best man at Jean’s wedding. You remember me?” Stupid question, but fuck he couldn’t assume anything. Least of all that Beauvais *wanted* to remember him.

“I do.” A small pause, maybe slightly guarded, like the man was. “And you remember me. I hope you are good? Healthy?”

“I’m okay.” Yes, he was. “Out of the job, had to get an artificial knee, but I’m alright. That’s not why I call.” The line was bad enough that he didn’t have time for beating around the bush. “I’m calling about Jean. I’m worried about him. Pascal is dead. Awful story. Jean tried to help, but failed. I’ve been out of touch for a year I ...” frowning, “was not a good friend. The legion is the family,

aye? Can you help? Have an eye on him somehow, have someone contact him. Vadim and I will be flying across as soon as possible, but it's not the same."

"Calm down." Beauvais spoke that like an order, then remained silent while thinking.

"I'm fucking ..." Dan hissed his retort, but swallowed the rest of what he wanted to say.

"He's at home? I'll make some phone calls. I can't be there, I'm in Chad, it's busy, but I can find a former Legionnaire or two to keep an eye on the boy." Sounding almost fatherly.

"Aye, he's at home."

"Good. I'll tell them where to find him. Shame about Pascal, he was a good one. No wonder Jean takes it hard."

"So much for the safety net." Dan snorted, but what the fuck had he expected? His own reaction was tainted, and he knew it. Because he'd almost been there. Almost.

"We do what we can. If he'd sought help, people would have tried to help. Was it suicide?"

"Aye. Threw himself out of a window." The bile was rising in Dan's throat. "Was still alive when Jean got to him."

"That's bad news," Beauvais sounded thoughtful. "I'll take it from here. Thank you for calling. Somebody will be with Jean very shortly, I think I can find someone Jean knows, that might help."

"Thank you. It's appreciated. Jean means a lot to me." Adding, a heartbeat later, "as a friend."

"I know. He's my friend, too. Different story, but ... nonetheless."

Dan took in a breath, "Beauvais, if you ever need anything," no hesitation this time, "call us." He proceeded to give the number. "Until then." He switched the phone off, deeply in thought. It wasn't enough. Not enough to have to actively seek help. There was the pride, and pride was often all that still mattered. He knew that too damn well.

But right now that was all he could do, and if he didn't get any sleep he would be useless for anyone. Popping a pill on his way to the bathroom, just to ease the discomfort, he was soon showered and padding quietly into the bedroom. Trying not to disturb Vadim, who lay in bed, on his belly, naked, covered up to his waist, face hidden away in the cushions.

Dan sat down on the bed, on 'his' side, which had never become nor really been his, and looked down. Vadim lay almost in the middle, proof to his own absence in the bed, but he would change that. Leaning down, he placed a light and careful kiss on the bit of face that he could reach, before trying to get under the covers and to fit onto that narrow strip of bed that was free. He didn't mind, on the contrary. Smiling to himself when he squeezed in, touching Vadim almost all the way. His hand came to rest on the bare back, with scars and smooth skin under his fingertips, and he knew that it could have been different. Hair's breadth for him. No more.



Vadim shifted, half-turned, looked at him, eyes blurred with sleep, and smiled, then turned around to make room and offer his back for spooning, soon drifting away completely.

Dan held him close and switched off the light. He was one of the lucky ones, and he almost hadn't realised it.

\* \* \*

The next day, they drove into Palmy to check for tickets and do some food shopping, before Dan called Jean to set dates, then the travel agent to go ahead with the booking.

The young carver arrived in the afternoon, in time for tea, while Dan was in the garage, working out on the exercise bike. The young man had brought a folder with patterns he had drawn or copied. He had a great appreciation for Szandor's sword that sat on its stand, and Vadim watched him – after his permission – take it and examine the work and the balance. Vadim had decided he liked the young guy, even if he made him tread carefully about the fact that he and Dan shared a house and were clearly – well, clearly to anybody but the most innocent onlooker – an item.

“So, what do you want?” asked the carver after some chit-chat and after Vadim had looked at all the patterns, intrigued by the spirals and the ancestor figures and the magic of making something so artful and attractive out of a slab of wood.

“One of those panels,” Vadim said.

“Which room?” The carver was getting up, expecting to be brought there.

Vadim paused for a second. “Bedroom.”

“Show me.”

Vadim inhaled, but assumed that it was important, somehow. He led the young guy up the stairs and opened the door. “We're getting rid of the paintings, and it's going to hang there. I thought.” Pointing to where the large acrylic painting had been.

The carver nodded, doubtlessly seeing the fact that two people slept in that bed. “Modern or more traditional?”

Vadim shrugged. “I have no idea.”

“Anything you liked?”

“The ... figure with the face tattoo.”

“The war chief?” The carver smiled. “You were a soldier, once.”

“Yes. Dan, too.”

“That would make it two war chiefs. In one panel.” The carver nodded to himself, walked back downstairs, back to his folder, where he pulled a pencil from his pocket and a worn piece of paper, quickly sketching the bare minimum – a panel, more or less square, with two humanoid figures taking the centre, spirals just hinted at around them. The kid worked fully concentrated for a little, until the figures seemed entwined, like in a dance, or a fight. Or indeed, Vadim thought, sex. He glanced at the carver, who looked back at him.

“Like this?”

Vadim inhaled. “That looks good.” He wasn’t sure what to say, what to ask.

“These are from two different tribes, you’ll be able to see that from the tattoos in their faces, when I’m done. They are both armed with great spiritual power. See the clubs?”

Vadim nodded, then smiled. “You do know what you’re doing, yes?”

“What? That you’re takatapui?”

The word didn’t sound nasty, and Vadim shrugged, not quite sure. He’d come across that before, that some Maori used words of their own language when they talked about concepts that English either didn’t have or that required more importance and gravity than English had. “Takatapui?”

“Queer. Not heterosexual.” The carver said it like it was perfectly natural.

“Yes. That’s us.” Vadim didn’t see any flinching, and thought, how extraordinary. He didn’t get any vibes from the young guy that he was similarly inclined, but he’d just said this word that didn’t seem negative at all.

The carver worked on the background, not looking up. “Who were your ancestors? Your family?”

“I don’t speak much to my family.”

The carver looked up, studied him, and Vadim was now far more willing to see a shadow of Maori traits in him. Maybe the slant of the eyes, the cut of the nose. Or his general height and width. And Vadim thought, that this guy was looking back to hundreds of years of history, ranging from which ship had brought his ancestors here, back to a time as primitive and primal, and as honourable, maybe, as fierce, to today, where his people were called lazy bastards that took the social benefits and were too stupid to hold down proper work. This guy knew about dishonour, and kept every droplet of Maori blood alive even though he could easily fit in with the colonists.

“I’ll think of something,” the carver said. “Most will be traditional, but I’ll try and find a new take on it. Okay?”

“How long will it take?”

“I’ll work on it over spring and summer. Allan said I can stay with them – he has a good place for a workshop, I just get a decent sized kauri slab and get it ready.”

“Okay.” Vadim had another look at the sketch, and it seemed there were other figures in the background of one of the figures, while the other half seemed filled with waves and spirals. He couldn’t wait to see the finished piece. “And charge what it’s worth, okay? No discounts.”

The carver smiled and shrugged. “You’ll see it when it’s done. We’ll talk about the money then. But a reference would be great, maybe you know some other people that like ‘ethnic crafts.’” He said that without bitterness, a kind of amused pride instead that made Vadim like him even more.

In the end, he was really glad that the painting had been ripped.

29<sup>th</sup> November 1994

Dan was half asleep despite the sunlight that filtered through the thin curtains. Arm thrown over his eyes, he was taking up most of the bed. He'd went to sleep late, having searched the net for far more interesting places than he used to frequent, and had barely noticed that Vadim got up.

Vadim had prepared breakfast – the full English – and trusted in the smells to travel upwards before he came up with a tablet where the food was piled, orange juice and coffee. And there was a long, ominous box he had under his arm, wrapped up like a birthday present. Because, yes, he hadn't forgotten.

Dan, arm still across his eyes, was sniffing like a rabbit when Vadim stepped into the bedroom. "I'm not dreaming this, am I?" He sounded mostly awake by now, daring to blink at Vadim with one eye. "Death-defying fry-up?"

"Coronary special." Vadim grinned and set it down on the bed.

"How did I deserve that?" Fully awake, Dan flung his arm off and scooted up the bed, grinning at Vadim, who placed the box onto the bed as well.

"And this arrived just in time, too."

"What for?"

"I'll let you guess."

"For giving world class blow-jobs, which you've missed enough to give me a present for?" Dan pulled the tray closer and revelled in the long-lost sensation of being famished. "And fuck, if I had known you are such a good cook I'd have kept you for myself in a cave somewhere." Grinning from ear to ear while tucking into the first bite of bacon and egg, followed by cholesterol-laden fried bread.

"Don't worry, I won't be opening a restaurant anytime soon." Vadim sat down, watching Dan. "I'll let you eat first, but then you open the *present*."

"Aye, I get it, a *present*." Stuffing himself with sausage and thickly buttered toast, Dan was about to wash it all down with black coffee, when he suddenly stalled. Looking at Vadim, wide-eyed. He tried to say something, but had to chew and swallow first. "You mean ..."

"You mysteriously aged one year over night. No idea how that happened."

"Holy fuck." Putting the cutlery down, Dan looked from the present to Vadim and back again. "How the hell did you manage to remember *that*? I sure as fuck didn't." But the grouching barely hid the genuine surprise and deeply pleased grin that tried to break through.

"It's just three sets of two-digit numbers, Dan. Doesn't make me a rocket scientist." He wasn't sure Dan still remembered his date, though. But that didn't matter. He'd just gently remind him when the 15th of August approached.

"Sorry, I'm shit at that. Dates, anniversaries, special days ... you got to remind me of Christmas, at times." Dan put the tray aside, still half-full, and reached for the present. "Let me do the maths ..." fumbling with the paper, "shit, I'm forty-five!" Looking impressively shocked, Dan started to rip the paper off, but stopped mid-way. "That means ... damn. You already *are* forty-five, aren't you?"

“Yes. Will you still continue dating me?”

“Guess it’s too late to decide otherwise, aye?” Dan cocked his head, suddenly serious. “I missed your birthday ...”

“I ignored it last time.”

“Okay, I won’t ignore it next time.”

Vadim motioned towards the long box. “Come on.”

“Alright, alright.” A long, narrow, dark green box came to view, which didn’t give any clues. Prying it open, Dan shook out the contents, and with a faint sound something slipped out of it. Long, elegant, and positively decadent. Finest, polished wood and exquisite silver, which topped the graceful cane. Dan stared at it while turning it slowly in his hands.

“I took the measurements from your old cane and faxed it over to the UK. They had a specialist there.”

“It’s ...” testament to what I am now, “... beautiful.” Turning it once again, Dan let his fingers stroke over the smoothly polished wood. Perfect, so perfect. How could anything for a cripple be so goddamned perfect. “It’s ...” unlike me.

“Just something to support the weight a bit if and when you have to stand for a while.” Vadim looked at the cane and smiled. It had turned out exactly as they’d promised. “Could just as well make it a bit nicer, hm?”

“Yeah, fuck.” Still stroking, cool silver and warm wood, “must have cost a fortune.” Dan was torn between a hell of a lot of emotions. He smiled, an entirely overwhelmed expression in his face, “you sure it’s not too sophisticated for me?”

Vadim shook his head. “No. It’s simple enough to work with whatever you’re wearing. Nobody sees it’s silver, unlike they look closely, and ...” He shrugged. “It goes with the suits and with whatever else. The beauty is in the simple things here. And since you keep saying you’re a simple man ...”

“Does that mean I’m beautiful?” Dan found the banter again, always the safest avenue, and winked.

Vadim laughed. “Yes. That means exactly that.” He leaned over to kiss Dan on the lips, who was grinning like a fool. “Happy birthday.”

“To you, too, just bloody belated.” Patting the space beside him, Dan put the cane down and picked up the food again, before it got cold.

“Still appreciated.” Vadim sat down on the bed, stretching his legs.

“Any more surprises for today?” Diminishing the bacon, eggs, sausages and bread once more. “Or is what you’ve decided with the sculptor not all that secret?”

“He’s working on a design for a panel that goes on the wall. It’s ... strange,” Vadim murmured.

“Strange? How?” Mopping up some of the egg yolk with a piece of bread.

“He asked about my ancestors.” Vadim shrugged. “Strange. Asking about family like that.”

“And?” Finishing off his plate, Dan had the rest of the coffee and orange juice and put the tray to the side. “Who are your ancestors?”

“Intellectuals. I’d have to ask my father about anything beyond my grandfather.” Vadim shrugged. “We’re not in touch.”

“Would you like to be?” Letting the question hang in the air, Dan knew enough to suspect the answer. Arm moving around Vadim’s waist and pull him closer.

Vadim shook his head. “Why should I hurt him more? We’re not compatible. It’s not working, Dan. I tried. He tried.”

“Okay, but I don’t get that hurting thing.” Slipping a hand underneath Vadim’s shirt, Dan was doing his best of wandering up and across. “You are who you are. You’re not hurting him by who you are, on the contrary, he’s hurting you by not getting it, that you’re not his. That you’re your own guy.” He shrugged, adding a second hand, which worked on the buttons.

“I’m forty-five ... I don’t need a father anymore. Probably never needed him,” Vadim murmured darkly. “Sounds bad, but ... I always stuck to ‘father types’ that were stronger than he ever was.” And how did I get rewarded?

“Like the spetsnaz Colonel?” One brow raised, Dan rolled over and on top of Vadim’s thighs. “Or the doctor?” Pushing the shirt apart.

Vadim looked up. “Yes. Figures of authority. I know the Colonel was a bastard, but I respected him in ways that I never respected my father. No, fear. Respect and fear. The Doctor ... I guess you could say he fits the type, too, but in a very understated English way.” He grinned. “But I can see you have something else on your mind ...”

“Only if you are interested.” Dan lifted his head. “I might not be a father figure, but I’m still the best cocksucker in both hemispheres, and it *is* my birthday, after all.”

Vadim laughed. “You are just the right age. Honest. Not too young, not fatherly, just right for me.” He bent forward and reached for Dan’s cock and balls, stroking them. “All yours ...”

It didn’t take more than a grin before Dan leaned down and with gusto and greed, proceeded to spend a long and utterly skilled time on tasting, licking, sucking and taking in Vadim’s cock. Because it was his, perhaps not his alone, but his. And the affirmation couldn’t happen often nor intense enough. Vadim in turn dropped all thoughts, all banter, and fully took anything Dan gave him, the pleasure, the game of need and desire that was playful these days, they knew each other so well and it was a lot like coming home, being home, as long as Dan was like this and not the bitter stranger he’d resented for so long.

They spent the day on the farm, with a quality that was special and kept reminding Dan that it was actually his *birthday*. A fact that was emphasised at night, when his brother called, and the Baroness, as well as – of all people – Matt, who let out a barrage of age-related banter, before handing the phone over to Hooch, who drawled out a few words, before Dan held the phone towards Vadim’s face.

Vadim glanced at him. “Yes?”

“Hooch.” That was all Dan said, before buggering off and into the kitchen, to wolf down the leftovers of the rather generous amount of strawberry tarts.

“Vadim?” Hooch’s voice, unmistakably.

Vadim glanced after Dan. “Hi. How ... how are you guys?”

“Good. Here for a few days. Better than camp.” A pause, the sound of shuffling, Hooch moving to another room. “How are you, buddy?”

“Yeah, we ... Dan and I just worked some things out. I’m okay. He’s ... he’s pretty good, too. The knee screwed him up a bit, but I think he’s finding his balance back.”

“Good, Matt told me he tried to contact Dan.” A pause, another sound, before Hooch stilled, then. “Any chance to meet?”

Vadim swallowed. He wanted the man, still. It was easier ignoring that when Hooch wasn’t there, when Dan filled up his life, his needs ... Hooch. Fuck. He’d promised he’d not do that again, promised not to fall for anybody else. It wasn’t just sex, it was a real thing, a connection, a feeling, a need, something deep and fairly strong. Dan didn’t love Jean, but he ... he ... “I’ll have to ask Dan. We’re ... we’re heading to Europe in a little, have to check what the plan is.”

Another pause, before Hooch’s voice was heard again. “Listen, buddy, I understand ...” Leaving the words standing between them. “Dan’s more important. Things really alright with him? You got your priorities.”

Vadim closed his eyes. This hurt. Unexpected how much it hurt. He closed the door, dropped his voice to a murmur. “You’re too ... too deep inside me, Bozic. I can’t ... I can’t love two men.” There. Out. “I’m sorry.”

“Fuck.” Just that, nothing for a long time, except for the sound of rustling, shuffling, and then a cigarette being lit. “I didn’t ...” Hooch never finished the sentence. Changed it instead to “how do you know my name?”

“Your passport. Your jacket. Sorry. Old habits.” Vadim breathed deeply. “Won’t tell anybody. Your secrets are safe with me.”

“And yours?”

“You know my name, Hooch.”

“Yeah, but is it a secret?” The sound of smoke being exhaled, “what you feel. Is it?”

“I think Dan knows, or guesses. I ... it’s between the three of us, now. That’s it.”

“Dan ...” Hooch’s voice softened, “but what do I do with it, Vadim?”

Vadim closed his eyes. Yeah. Pushing that onto the other man. What could Hooch do with it? Answer: ‘I don’t’ and hurt him, maybe lie? Say: ‘I do’ and make the situation even more impossible? Selfish, stupid, short-sighted, huge mistake. He felt a shudder rise from somewhere in his body, guilt, shame, pain, a deep horror that had only been sleeping. He couldn’t lose Dan, he couldn’t hurt Dan, yet he wanted this man, loved this man, could easily fall completely for him. Mad, stupid lust, friendship, and screw up everything he had, everything he wanted. “I don’t ... I don’t know. I’ve never been in this situation ... I have no idea what to do.” He’d been there, pretty close to ‘there’ anyway, when telling Katya he was leaving. Hurting one person he loved for another.

Again the sound of inhaling, then exhaling, slow and steady, a long pause. “I don’t.” Softly, carefully, and with a rare tenderness.

“Yeah. We’re friends.” It hurt, yes, on some level he’d known, but that didn’t change his feelings. “It’s good ... it’s good you don’t. I mean it. It’s ... it’s easier.”

“For whom?” Exhaling, then a rustling sound as Hooch extinguished his cigarette.

“Both?” Vadim was listening to everything, every breath, every small sound that betrayed anything.

“Or three?” Fingers moving along the receiver.

“Bastard,” Vadim muttered. “Easier for all of us, then.”

“And ... you want to meet me, or want me to fuck off?”

“What I want and what I can do are two different things ...” Vadim rubbed his face. “I want to meet you. And I ... can’t meet you, because ...” of Dan.

“The point is, what you really want. Not what you can’t. And not what you should. What do you *want*.” Pausing, “*who* do you want.”

“That’s not the point. If I’d always do what I wanted ...” Vadim groaned. “I want you. I fucking do. But I’ll get old with this guy, and Dan ... it hurts him. That’s the bottom line. I can’t, Hooch.”

“You love Dan. I don’t claim I know about love, but you love him, right?”

“I love him. And that means I can’t hurt him. It’s not about me, or you, it’s about him.” Vadim swallowed, shook his head, forced himself to breathe. Fuck, this was a complete pain. Just remembering Hooch’s grins or the way he grew peaceful when he’d been thoroughly abused and hurt ... Hooch wrestling and fucking him. “We’re friends.” Just my feelings are in the way, and Dan’s feelings, too.

“Okay.” After a moment. “Won’t meet then. I understand.” Slight pause, ominous to Vadim’s mind, who half expected a “Fuck you, too,” now, because that was what their whole connection was, wasn’t it? The sex, maybe the ease, but what was there that went beyond ... what they’d had. Then, Hooch said: “but we stay in touch. Alright, buddy?”

“Yes. We do. Take care ... and be safe.” He felt like a liar, knowing Hooch wasn’t safe when he was getting his fix elsewhere.

“I do my best.” There was a smile in Hooch’s voice, before the line went dead.

Vadim switched the handset off and leaned against the wall. It hurt. He hadn’t been in touch because he’d have left Dan at a drop of a hat. He’d been that close, and if Hooch had offered ... anything, an alternative, regular sex, being *close*, he wouldn’t have been able to resist. Good thing, he’d been busy the last months, always claimed to be busy so he didn’t have to think about it. Still, it hurt. His heart felt raw, like scraped, skinned, seared, it hurt. Not having the thing he wanted, not being loved by the man he loved, having to say no for the sake of something bigger and more important. He opened the door and walked back down to replace the handset.

Dan stood in the doorway from living room to hallway, looking at him with a slight smile on his face. Illuminated from the back, clear-cut silhouette of sharp angles and chiselled features, framed by wild, greying hair. Still dark, still stunning, yet lined.

Vadim smiled. "I'm not meeting him. We'll be friends."

Dan still didn't say anything, just nodded, the smile still there, then turned and walked through the living room and onto the patio, all the way through the French windows. Looking out over the old orchard and the mountains when Vadim got to his side, reaching over to take Dan's hand. Worth it. A thousand times. Any sacrifice, from the small ones to the big ones, and Dan turned his head, looking fully at him, while the smile grew. He didn't need to say anything, didn't have to voice the "I love you." It was there, unsaid, yet outspoken.

Fourteen years. They didn't come cheap.

### **1st December 1994, United States of America**

When he unlocked the door, the first thing Matt saw was the flashing red light of the answering machine. Dropping the gym bag, he picked it up, listening to the recording for no more than a couple of seconds, before he handed the receiver over to Hooch. "For you."

Hooch raised his brows, then listened, frowned, while Matt stood for another second, before turning and heading to the bathroom. They'd been to the gym, with Hooch using the one in Matt's camp, and they were both drenched in sweat. The story of Hooch being the ex-boyfriend of Matt's sister, who had dumped him but the two men stayed friends, had been swallowed hook line and sinker, and nobody queried the visits.

When Matt came back out of the bathroom, still damp from the shower, he knew immediately that something was wrong.

"Shit." Hooch frowned.

"What?" As if he didn't know.

"Job."

"When?"

"Immediately."

"Where to this time?"

Hooch gave a small smile and shrugged. Some things were so classified, it didn't matter that Matt wasn't a civilian. "Sunny."

Matt nodded, tried a grin, didn't quite succeed, then pulled in a deep breath, letting it out to mask a sigh. "How long?"

"Twenty-four hours."

"Well ..." Fingers on the towel around his hips, Matt stepped closer. "They're organising your flight?"

Hooch nodded.

"What time?"

"Eight hundred hours."



“Plenty of time.” Matt started to grin and Hooch rose a single brow.

“I think I never fucked you.” Stepping closer, Matt’s fingers loosened the towel.

Hooch’s brow was joined by the second one, both raising higher. “Yeah.”

“Been a while.”

The corner of Hooch’s lips twitched. “Yeah?”

“Three years?”

“Yeah.”

Matt grinned. “Think it’s time.”

“Yeah ...” the smirk that grew out of proportion on Hooch’s face was only cut short when a naked Matt pushed him against the front door. Hooch let it happen, and let a lot of other things happen after that.

It was good, damned good. It would have to get him through another hellhole.

## **6<sup>th</sup> December 1994, in the sky somewhere close to Europe**

Dan was yawning when he woke again. He’d managed to snooze for a couple of hours. Glad they had the money – even though it was prohibitively expensive – to fly a class that offered enough space for his legs. He’d be in utter agony by now if he would have had to sit with his knees bent. Rubbing his eyes, he stuck his head out from under the blanket and looked across to the neighbouring seat, studying Vadim’s face, half turned away, in three-quarter profile.

There was a steep line between Vadim’s eyebrows, and his sleep might have been mistaken for deep thought with eyes closed. He lay there, one shoulder covered by the blanket, the other bare except for his shirt.

Dan pushed himself up and across, to be able to lay his head lightly on the bare shoulder. Just being close, touching.

Vadim inhaled deeply, half sigh, and turned his head. “Hey. Good morning.”

“Or night, midday, evening, who the fuck knows.” Dan grinned tiredly, lifting his head to take a better look. “I think it won’t be long, a few hours or so?”

“Guess so.” The stewardesses began to make preparations for breakfast, and Vadim got up, still dazed and wanting the flight to be over. “How are you feeling?”

“Alright, just apprehensive and bloody stiff.” Dan sat up straight, then peeled himself out of the reclining seat to try stretch his leg and stand for a while. “I just don’t know what to expect with Jean.”

Vadim stretched and sat up, rubbing his face. “I wouldn’t know. I’ve never seen him out of his balance ...”

“True.” Dan sighed, stretched from head to toe and walked a few steps to and fro, before sitting back down to talk without being overheard by everybody. “Anyway, guess I just have to wait and see, aye?” He took in a slow, deep breath, keenly feeling the urge for a cigarette.

Vadim reached out and took Dan's shoulder. "Take as much time with him as you need. I can even get that lady of his out of the house."

"You think that would be a good idea?"

"Maybe. You might have to fuck him to remind him of a few things ..."

"What?" Dan nearly jumped out of his seat. Nicotine withdrawal and an uncharacteristic directness from Vadim were a combination that was hard to stomach. "Ha ha, Russkie, don't give me a heart attack." Dan shook his head, "besides, Jean's precious arse is a no-no, and even my charms won't change that."

"He has no idea what he's missing." Vadim grinned, a playful glee that betrayed he'd been coarse to shock Dan awake.

"You bastard." Dan murmured with a grin.

"Well, sex should be a nice distraction."

"I don't think he'll be in the mood ... and, damn, I'm not going there this time for sex, aye? Just to be a friend. That's what Jean needs if I'm not mistaken. That's what I needed, too. You just happened to be my lover as well."

"You're his lover, too, Dan. And it might be exactly what he needs." Vadim shrugged. "Take his mind off it."

"I wouldn't call myself his lover. It's a bit much."

Vadim seemed thoughtful at that. How weird, with the sex and the friendship ... granted, Jean wasn't as important as he was, but he was, technically and literally, Dan's lover. It had been going on for years, they were friends, they got off together. "I just wonder how much of a crush he did have on Pascal."

"Hm?" Dan looked up, a puzzled expression on his face. "You think so? Well he did make some weird comments, back in the Gulf ..." Mulling it over. "Damn, that would make things even harder, wouldn't it?"

Vadim shrugged. "I don't know, but I think so. That was just something I've been thinking about. What if. But you know him better than I do."

"I'm not sure that I do. We haven't been doing much of that talking thing. He's always been smooth, easy-going, fun." Dan shrugged, "I admit it, you've accused Jean of being shallow, and I guess that's what we've both been."

Vadim inhaled deeply. "He's hiding. Jean is a creation of himself. He has no past, no roots, no nothing. His Russian is from Moscow, I ... think I could pinpoint him, but he's acting as if he'd never been anything else. I find it hard to respect a man who doesn't look himself in the face." He looked closely at Dan.

"While I believe he has a damn good reason for it and just accept it."

"I might simply be envious of the ease he does things with. Plus, he's not fucked up like me, ten years younger, and ... I guess a great kisser."

Dan rolled his eyes. "Oh no, not that one. You sound like me when I worry about Hooch."

"You don't have to worry about him anymore."

"Why?"

"There won't be any more sex. We'll stick to being 'friends'."

"Shit." Dan frowned, "why?"

"Too close to the bone."

“Because of me? Because of my worries?”

“Both. Because he’s too close to the bone and because you worry, and you ... I guess you were right to worry, too.”

“But in that case, not having sex won’t make the fact go away that you are in love with him.” Dan kept his face fairly expressionless. “Do you think you can love more than one person? I always thought that having sex with lots of men is okay, but that love can only be for one.”

Vadim shook his head. “I love you, Dan. Nobody else. It’s too easy to fall for him, so I won’t. No sex. He’s not like the guys we had together, that’s just physical.”

“And what is Jean, then? He’s not just physical to me, he’s my friend. Or do you think I would otherwise fly across the globe to visit him when he’s in a shit place?” Dan was genuinely puzzled.

Vadim nodded. “Maybe you are just different. But ... if Solange wasn’t there and he was gay ...” Pausing to give the old joke a little room and Dan didn’t fail to grin, “and interested ... what would happen?”

“Nothing.” The answer came quickly. He was utterly convinced of it and didn’t need to think about the how and why. “You wear my scars and I wear yours. How could anyone ever be a threat?”

Vadim looked into Dan’s eyes and knew that stopping sex with Hooch had been the right decision, because Dan completely believed what he was saying. Jean didn’t rank anywhere near. He nodded, glanced up to the approaching stewardess. “Breakfast ...”

“Yeah.” Dan smiled, pushing the seat upright. “Time to get some scran down our necks.” The conversation had ended, and he was happy about it. No resentment, no residues of lingering disbelief, nothing.

They had their breakfast as they continued to fly across Europe, getting closer to France. Eventually, they approached Paris Charles de Gaulle and touched down. Dead tired on their feet and completely thrown by the change in season - cold, dreary and wintry instead of spring to early summer - they booked into an airport hotel to get some proper sleep in, before heading on with their hire car. A 4x4, because the seats were straight and more comfortable for Dan. The next morning they set off to continue their journey to Burgundy.

They arrived late lunchtime, and the ‘castle’ came into view amongst the grey clouds and the backdrop of stormy weather with threats of more rain or sleet.

There were three cars out there, a white convertible with leather seats, a heavier-going 4x4, and a beaten up brownish Volvo that had seen better days. When they got out of the car and towards the door, it was a stranger that opened, mid-thirties, sun-bleached hair, weathered face, pockmarked but seemingly friendly. “Yeah?”

“Is Jean around?” Dan offered a smile. “Or Solange? They are expecting us. Dan and Vadim.”

“Ah, yes.” The man, who had to have been Jean’s comrade at some point, opened the door further. “Come on in. They are both there. And another guy, from the village.”

Vadim took the bags and followed, only to find the ex-comrade take the bags from him. "I'll bring them upstairs, the room's been prepared. Jean says you know the place."

"Aye, we do. We were here for the wedding." Dan looked around, "where are they, living room or kitchen?"

"Living room. Fireplace. Want some drinks? I was getting something."

"Cheers, whisky if you got some." Dan nodded, then headed straight towards the living room, remembering the night Vadim had fallen asleep in front of the fireplace, while he'd 'fought' with Beauvais. He waited for Vadim, smiled at him, before they stepped through the door into the room.

Jean was leaning back, holding a glass of wine, legs up on the sofa, looking relaxed, but pale, even in the light from the fireplace. Solange was sitting there, too, and glanced up with a smile, while Jean was listening to a young guy who was breathtaking - strong, earthy, dark wavy hair, and he was talking animatedly in French, as if trying to convince Jean of something. At that moment, Jean looked up, too and looked at Dan, and a sense of relief washed over his face. He put down the wine glass and got up.

"Hey ..." Dan smiled, eyes first on Solange, then on Jean, as he stepped into the middle of the room. It had been too long, and what shit way to meet again. "Good to see you."

"Dan." Jean didn't seem to know what to do with his hands all of a sudden, and he looked at Vadim and gave him a smile, too. "You guys look well-rested. Well, apart from the flight, I guess. How ... how you been? Oh, this is, ah... Frederic, he's a vintner. Brought us this wine. Want some?"

"Aye." Dan grinned and suddenly it all came back. The ease of knowing where to go and what to do and he nodded to Frederic, and cast a brilliant smile at Solange. "Would you excuse me while I am terribly rude and take Jean outside before properly saying hello?" He even indicated a bow to Solange, "with your permission? I have to show Jean something."

Solange smiled. "If I get to keep Vadim?"

Vadim gave a soft laugh. "Yes, why not?"

Dan smiled at Vadim, and there was an understanding that no one else in the room could grasp. Clapping his hand on Jean's shoulder in a matey gesture, he guided him towards the door. "We'll be right back." Steering him outside, he murmured. "Where to?"

"The small house in the garden." The place where they'd celebrated the stag night. Jean led the way, the door wasn't locked, and it seemed to have become a place for guests, just in case they ran out of space in the main building. Jean flicked the heating on. "Thanks for ... coming."

"Aye." Dan didn't know what else to say, didn't think he needed to, really, because all he could do was be there. "I wanted to properly say 'hi'."

Jean nodded, gave a smile, was 'acting normal', but there was considerable strain and exhaustion visible. "Sorry, I'm not at my ... best at the moment." Pressing his lips together, he shook his head and moved closer, towards Dan, within touching distance. "Had a rough time."

“I know. Fuck, I do. I really do.” Leaning the cane against the wall, Dan stepped closer, opened his arms, bodies touching. “Can’t say I can change it, make it better.” Arms going around Jean, holding tight and strong. “But I can be here, aye?” Softly.

Jean nodded and gave a small sound, shuddering, face buried in Dan’s shoulder and neck. “The cops seemed to think ... I killed him, but they can’t prove shit. They’ve been all over ... his friends ... said it ... had to be a Legion connection, somewhere, so some ... showed up here and asked question. Whether I’d kidnapped and imprisoned him. And why.”

“Shit.” Heartfelt, while holding Jean close. “What did they come up with?”

“They got it ... spot on. They knew it was me and ... a friend. But they can’t prove it. Said I’d feel better if I’d turn myself in.” Jean shuddered violently. “Doesn’t bring him back, does it?”

“You did nothing.” Dan frowned, pulling his head back to look at Jean, who kept his face hidden. “It was *not* your fault. You tried all you could, all you knew, and *fuck* ...” Dan had to pause for a second, “it was suicide, Jean, suicide. Something I was fucking close to, too.” Feeling how Jean clutched him closer, like a drowning man at that confession. “Something that can happen ... like ... “ trailing off, Dan shook his head, “something that no one can stop.”

“It was fucking Pascal. Suicide? I don’t get it. I don’t want to get it. Fuck. I’d have done anything ...”

“Listen to me.” Dan pulled back again, “do you listen to me?” Shaking Jean. Once, twice, until Jean finally looked at him with a pained expression. “It happened. You were too late. You were too *fucking late*. You did anything you possibly could, but you have no idea what might have gone on inside Pascal. None. We don’t understand the ones closest to us, even the ones we love, the ones we sleep beside every single fucking night, how the hell did you believe you could know what was going on inside Pascal?”

Jean nodded, but he was so visibly in pain that the rational mind clearly was not in charge. Wordless, fingers digging into Dan’s arms, shoulders. “So ... fucking senseless,” he said, toneless, face distorting again.

“Aye. It was.” Holding close again, pulling Jean against him, whose fingers dug deep into muscle, like a feral animal. “It was.”

Jean stayed there, face once more against Dan’s neck. He was vibrating with pain, rock-hard muscles that somehow absorbed most of the agony. “Don’t ... don’t leave ... not like this, okay? Dan?”

“I won’t. I won’t ever. You get that? Not ever.” A vow, with more meaning than perhaps even Jean could understand. “I’ll be here, right here, no matter where, but always for you and always your friend, no matter what.” Waiting and holding, while soothing those muscles. Trying to coax them, to relent the pain and bend instead of break, but perhaps it wasn’t time yet. Jean exhaled, a pained sigh, and he pushed back to kiss Dan on the lips, still in that embrace, now face against face, about to say something, but he seemed not to know what it was.

Dan parted his lips, allowed anything to happen that Jean wanted. A receptacle, trying to absorb some of the pain. Jean took Dan’s head in his

hands, kissed him more deeply, but pulled away again. “Too ... suspicious,” he murmured.

“Okay.” Dan smiled. “Let’s get back then. Maybe later?”

Jean inhaled. “Yeah. I’m ... I don’t know what to think. Not sure what I’m feeling ...” He glanced back towards the direction of the house. “And Frederic keeps working on getting that vineyard. I ... don’t feel like I can make any kind of decision. I hardly get what he says.”

“Why don’t you forget about all this shit for a while? Tell him to come back later, it’s a really bad time right now, and give up all decision making for a while? Give us a couple of weeks, we have time, just stall everything.” Dan smiled.

Jean nodded. “Okay. Guess I ... liked his nice brown eyes too much.”

“Frederic? Doesn’t surprise me.”

“Good-looking, eh?”

“Aye.”

Jean shrugged, giving a tired grin. “I’ll tell him to leave. You have a few weeks? That ... sounds good. Fuck, I ... missed you.”

“I’m back now, even if it’s on the other side of the world.”

“That would be nice. Solange ... she’s really flustered, too, doesn’t want to work while I’m here.”

“We’re here now, we’ll take care of you.” Dan pulled a gentle grin. “We won’t let you do anything stupid.”

Jean nodded and took Dan’s shoulder, pressing it. “Go back? Before Vadim has scared the vintner off. How’s he doing?”

“Vadim? Alright.” Dan smiled. “He’s really been getting into the conference circus shit. Loves the stuff.” Dan led the way. “It’s good, because if he didn’t, we wouldn’t be able to afford our expenses.”

“Good to hear.” Jean again touched Dan’s shoulder, a similar ease and familiarity as he’d always had, but it was covering up the things that were really going on. He returned to his couch, close to Solange, and some nibbles and drinks had found their way to the table. Frederic had been talking to Solange, the Legionnaire had been talking to Vadim, carefully, guarded, but friendly enough.

All Dan wanted, though, was talk to Jean. *Really* talk. Couldn’t be helped right now, though, and he sat down next to Vadim, after properly greeting Solange, and had a couple of glasses of wine. He sat close, but wasn’t obvious, for whose sake even Dan didn’t know. Perhaps the Legionnaire’s and ultimately Jean’s. He was tired, the journey still in his bones, but when the Legionnaire got up to go to the kitchen and get some ice and vodka, Dan followed.

The Legionnaire was standing with his back to Dan, front towards the fridge, looking around, easy and confident like a man with few cares in the world.

“Hi.” Dan had made enough noise not to startle the man, who gave him a glance and a friendly raise of the eyebrow, took the vodka out of the fridge and gathered some water glasses.

“Hi. You’re Scots, right?”

“Aye, and you? Can’t quite place your accent.” Dan smiled, took the glasses to help carrying.

“Newcastle.” The man grinned. “Been around, guess the accent’s nearly gone.”

Dan broke into a fully-blown grin. “Looks like you’re as much of a ‘peasant’, as I am.” He winked. “I was Royal Scots, then SAS. I assume you’re legion?”

“Yes, regular forces, but I wanted more action.”

“Can’t get more than in La Legion.” Dan grinned. “Still in?”

“Oh yeah, I’m just on R&R, have three weeks to kill and thought why not visit Jean in his little house. So, you’re Regiment? Nice one, mate.” The man paused for a second when grabbing the bottle. “Ash.”

“Dan, and I’m retired now.” Giving a wry grin. “Ice?”

“Sure.”

“No hands free.” Dan shrugged with another grin, but went over to the freezer anyway, setting the glasses back down. “Afraid my balance is shot to shit, you better carry some of the glasses.” Digging into the freezer, he found the bag with ice cubes, adding a handful each to a glass. “I assume you are acquainted with Capitan Beauvais ...?”

“Oh yes. He called me ... we go way back, what, five years? Before I signed up for another stint.” Ash grinned. “He’s a motherfucker, but not a bad one. You’re a friend of his?”

“Wouldn’t quite call it friend, but aye, we met at Jean’s wedding. Good man, just a bit of a rod up his arse.” Dan grinned, “he wasn’t too impressed when I told him that. I had a black eye for days, thank fuck his jaw wasn’t any better.”

Ash laughed. “SAS must have been good for something. Getting one in on him must have been bad for his ego.”

“He gave as good as he got, and he did catch me by surprise, so all was well.” Dan bared all his teeth. The memory of quite *how* Beauvais ‘got one in’, was seriously classified. “Anyway, I called him about Jean, and it’s good to see you here. I’m damn worried. The job might not do the shit to us, but being out of the job can.”

“Anything for a mate.” Ash shrugged, like it was no big deal to sacrifice his R&R to keep an eye on Jean. “Wish I could help more.”

“Aye, I know. But I’ll do my best, too. Have a heart-to-heart, stuff like that. Perhaps you might want some days in the neighbourhood to actually get some R&R on R&R?”

“Sure. The Capitan said I was just holding out until you guys arrive. I can piss off back to Corsica, too. No problem.”

“Whatever you prefer. But we’re ready to take over if you’re happy with that.” Picking up the rest of the glasses. “Time to hit the vodka?”

“Yeah. Freezing my nipple off.” Ash gave a laugh and shifted the ice-cold bottle just a bit.

Laughing, Dan made his way out of the kitchen door and back into the living room. Handing out the vodka, with Frederic saying his goodbyes, and

only the four of them remaining, once Solange had bid them good night. Four men, all soldiers, at one time.

Jean poured himself a generous amount of vodka, drinking quite fast, with Ash almost matching him. Drinking games, getting pissed, that seemed very much what he'd expected and what he could deal with, while Vadim mostly watched, drinking in measured sips. Talk was about anything and everything, stupid pranks from army days, but Jean didn't talk about Pascal, instead, it was about the Legion, Kuwait, the desert. They danced around the subject, but it wasn't an elegant dance, more a deadly one, and equally awkward.

Eventually, neither Dan nor Vadim could stay awake any longer, and they made their way upstairs. At least knowing that Jean wasn't alone, with Ash still there. It was barely half an hour later when they were both asleep.

\* \* \*

Vadim noticed the movement first, somebody was in the room, somebody who locked the door behind him. All he could make out was a silhouette of a naked man, and it could have been either Ash or Jean, and the thought it might be Ash was captivating, because the man had a body to die for, from what he'd seen, at least, and he didn't come with any of the baggage.

The man moved close to the bed, and Vadim half-turned onto his back. Suddenly, the other body was on top of him, and he recognized Jean by smell and taste as he kissed him, but it wasn't raging passion, more one of those intimate, gentle, good kisses that Jean could dish out, as he moved over, rolled, and ended up between him and Dan, facing Dan, on his side. Vadim's hand moved towards Jean's groin, and sure enough, despite all the alcohol, Jean was half-hard. Well, quarter-hard, there was certainly life in that cock.

"Hm ...?" Drowsy, Dan had been in deep sleep, and was only now catching on that the movement wasn't just Vadim turning in his sleep, nor that the body that pressed against him was the one he'd been holding when he'd fallen asleep. "What the ..."

"Can't sleep," Jean murmured, reminding Vadim very much of a kid climbing in to mommy and daddy because of nightmares or something similar. He made some space, but had to lie very close and on his side or he'd fall out of bed. Dan had shuffled up all the way and claimed all the space. Which, of course, pressed him into Jean's arse, and Vadim felt himself harden. He stroked the other's body, flank, towards his cock, balls, rolling them in his hand. Sure enough, Jean reacted. He was drunk, but still functional.

"What do you want?" Murmured, Dan's hands soon joined Vadim's, exploring the body he'd got to know well throughout the last four years.

Jean pressed up to Dan, Vadim's hand was more insistent, more aggressive, taking his cock hard and pumping him until he moaned. Vadim moved his cock between Jean's arse cheeks, which made the ex-Legionnaire stiffen. "Just ..." Jean groaned as Vadim's thumb went across the tip of his cock. Losing words.



“Hold you?” Dan finished the sentence. Pressed close, only enough space between his body and Jean’s for Vadim’s hand to continue stroking, ever more insistent. Dan angled his head a fraction and captured Jean’s lips, swallowing a moan, as he coaxed those lips apart. His tongue followed, and Jean kissed him, tongue and lips, opening wide. Hands roaming wherever he could reach, the touches were firm and reassuring, adding to the lust that Vadim brought. Vadim pulled Jean’s hips back a little, paused just long enough to find some of the lube that he’d unpacked, and Jean shuddered hard as he applied it to Jean’s crack. He knew Jean wouldn’t resist much if he’d fuck him now, he knew he had him right there, where he’d had Platon and Vanya, both needy enough to allow him to do anything. Vadim would have killed to fuck Jean, Jean on hands and knees on top of Dan, their cocks rubbing with every of his thrusts, fucking both men at the same time. He teased Jean’s hole, who jerked like he’d never been touched there before.

That jerk brought Dan’s head up, and he broke the kiss. It took him a moment to catch on, and he lifted his head enough to look at Vadim, cradling Jean’s face and head in the crook of his neck. “No.” Mumbled, the shake of his head minimal. “No.”

Vadim bared his teeth, desire told him one thing, Dan another. He let go, just pushed his cock between Jean’s cheeks, sliding there, wrong angle, but still nice, but didn’t get enough friction like that. Jean held onto Dan, kissing his neck, throat, shoulder, as Vadim shifted again to place his cock between Jean’s legs, pumping him with every thrust.

Dan returned to kissing, demanding and giving Jean the edge, while Vadim’s stroking had become almost brutal, but Jean needed that extra to get off. The booze had dulled his senses. Jean came first, against Dan’s body, and Vadim again changed the angle, fucking Jean’s closed legs with a savage need that rocked Jean with every thrust, until, he, too, came with a loud groan and bit Jean in the shoulder for added need, and part frustration because he’d much preferred that tight arse.

Dan, against all odds and unlike himself, had not come, and had no need to. Holding Jean tight, bodies pressed close, he was kissing Jean’s lips, face, neck, until he trailed off. Breathing. Caressing the sweat-damp skin.

Jean kept kissing, but the alcohol made him drowsy, and he slowly drifted off, cuddling up and still in a mess. Vadim stroked the sweaty arse, but grinned when he noticed there was hardly a reaction in him. “How do we get him into the right bed?”

“The question is rather,” Dan whispered, “what the fuck were you thinking?” Caressing Jean’s hair with an oddly protective gesture. “Oh, and don’t forget to clean him up first.” Dan rolled his eyes.

Vadim gave a short laugh. “You don’t want to know what I was thinking ...”

“I do, actually.”

“Tomorrow.” Vadim got up, headed into the bathroom and soaked part of a towel with warm water, cleaning himself and then Jean, who was, by now, blissfully asleep.

“And what about me?” Dan had rolled onto his back. Sticky with Jean’s cum.

Vadim wiped him down, too, then kissed him, deeply. “Not interested at all?” he asked.

“Too worried.” His words surprised even Dan himself. “That’s not Jean, and you would have taken advantage of that.” And yes, he was pissed off about that. “Don’t you see he’s fucked up?”

“I think a good shag won’t make it worse. Probably better. Very likely better.” Vadim glanced at the sleeping man. “He came into our bed, and whatever his intentions, that wasn’t completely innocent.”

“No, but you don’t know that he really doesn’t want to get fucked.”

“Yeah, like he’s straight.”

Dan sat up and ran a hand through his wild hair. “If anyone ...” looking up, his expression was almost angry. “You’re just fucking greedy.”

Vadim laughed. “Maybe.” It wasn’t all sun and light what he was feeling for Jean. In a way, it was payback, he wanted to get Jean to lose it, to want to get fucked, wanted to humiliate him and fuck him raw. Plus, Jean had fucked him, so it seemed only fair. And thirdly, Jean wouldn’t have fought back. But yes, he’d wanted a brutal, intense fuck from the guy, and nothing much else.

“Maybe? You don’t give a shit, do you?” Dan frowned, standing up.

“Maybe as in ... good luck.”

“So much for friendship.”

“How do we get him into the right bed? Move him to the couch and act as if he’d fallen asleep there?”

“You really piss me off right now, Russkie.” Dan was pulling on his dressing gown. “Anyway, we can hardly put him back into Solange’s bed.”

“No, she’d get the shock of her life.” Vadim stood, too, rolled his shoulders. “I’ll carry him, you open the doors.” He pulled Jean closer, who softly protested, then loaded him onto his shoulders in a fireman’s grip. “I swear he got heavier,” Vadim murmured. Or he was getting older. He straightened with the load.

Dan shrugged, opened the door and led the way to the living room and the white leather couches. The fire was still burning in the fire place, albeit low, and there were blankets close.

Vadim lowered Jean onto the couch closest to the fire, got a pillow under his head and pulled one of the blankets up to cover him with that. Jean looked more peaceful, more vulnerable now, and he felt almost sorry for the fierce urge to hurt him. He’d never really understand how Jean managed to set him on edge like that - he guessed it was envy and jealousy.

“Right, he’s taken care off. Let’s go to bed.”

“Aye. I’ll be up shortly.”

Vadim shrugged and headed back upstairs.

Staying beside the couch for a while, Dan finally sat down, looking into the fire. One hand on Jean’s blanket-clad body, the other toying with a poker. “I’m sorry.” He finally murmured, turning towards Jean. Leaning down, he placed a

light kiss onto the face, and murmured once more, “so fucking sorry. At least it isn’t too late ...” At last Dan got up and made his way back upstairs. Silently cursing the stairs. He shrugged out of the dressing gown once he had closed the door.

Vadim glanced up and lifted the blanket for Dan to crawl under, which he did, silently. Lying on his back and staring at the ceiling.

Vadim was now awake, too. Feeling the silence, possibly brooding, anger. “He’ll be okay. He’s going through a rough patch, but he’ll be okay.”

“I just don’t get it.” Dan turned his head to look at Vadim. “I really don’t. The man’s fucked up. Drunk. Not himself. And you want to fuck him? Because he’s not going to say no? Bloody hell, Vadim, that’s low.” Dan shook his head. “I know you had your differences in the past, all the way since the Gulf, but would you do the same if it were Hooch and not Jean?”

“Hooch could take it,” Vadim murmured. “So that’s not really the same thing. I didn’t think about it. And I didn’t do it.”

“Aye, Hooch could take it. I bet Hooch can take anything. And if Hooch’s mate threw himself out of a window, that wouldn’t affect him, aye? Because Hooch is different. Hooch isn’t such a soft shite as Jean, no?” Dan realised he was getting into a rage and shook his head, taking a deep breath. “Fuck. I’m rattled. Have you got any idea how close I must have been to offing myself? Because I don’t have a clue.”

“We’ve all had people die. Hooch’s team mate had been killed when we met in Berlin.” Vadim reached over and touched Dan’s chest. “There was a kid ... a driver, he got shot in the throat in an ambush. Nothing anybody could have done. Platon. Good boy.”

“They were both killed in action.” Dan frowned. “And that makes you think less of Jean, somehow? Enough to figure, hey, he’s out of it, so let’s fuck the guy? You didn’t do it to me in the cave ... would you do it now, because I turned out to be a weakling? Because I couldn’t deal with having lost who I was? Is that why you were embarrassed?”

Vadim pulled his hand back. “Guess I shouldn’t have come.” He got up, reached for his briefs, pulled them on.

“And your solution is to run away and sulk?” Sitting up as well, Dan reached for his own trousers. Vadim wasn’t going to get away this time.

“War fucks people up, Dan. It’s nothing new. It’s what we sign up for when we do this job. Comrades die, lives get lost, people break. It’s natural. It’s the price we pay for killing.”

“The price for doing the job is to get fucked up? That’s not good enough.” Dan frowned. “No, not good enough at all.”

Vadim shook his head. “That’s why the Legion keeps an eye on its people. There are veteran organizations. Even the Afghanets have organized.” He was getting angry himself, a low-level resentment that drove him away.

“And what did they do for you? Huh?” Dan stood, “besides, what good do they do if you actively have to seek help? What about pride? What about not realising you need help? What if not seeking help is the last and only thing that

remains? Because if you did, then you'd really prove that you've become weak and useless?"

"Dan, please, I'm tired and jetlagged and I don't want to discuss all this right now. I want to fucking sleep."

Dan was about to say something, but didn't, just shook his head and buttoned the trousers, reaching for his jumper.

Vadim groaned, felt that he'd get chased wherever he'd go to find some rest, because Dan just wouldn't let it go. He pulled a T-shirt on. "I'll sleep on the *other* couch." He grabbed his pillow and headed towards the door. "Won't touch him."

"No, stay here." Dan sat back down to pull on socks and tie his shoes. "I need to think. I need to ..." go into the mountains. "I'll be outside."

"Right. I'll just get something to drink, then." Vadim headed into the kitchen.

Dan watched him leave. Sometimes he wanted to kick Vadim, or punch his face until he actually listened, or behaved like ... aye, what? He wasn't sure, but felt that Vadim continued to be a slippery fish. Evading wherever possible. He shrugged in the end and put on his thickest parka, gloves, hat and all, and even took the cane, just in case. Cigarettes stashed in his pockets, he slowly made his way down the stairs.

The cold and damp outside hit him like a thick blanket, and he inhaled deeply. He didn't know this place all that well, but he hadn't been an ace at orienteering for nothing, and France was a piece of cake compared to the Afghan mountains. That comparison made him laugh, and he set off into the night. Deep in thought while letting the darkness, the silence and the solitariness soothe and guide his thinking. Short thoughts, like he'd once said, but many short thoughts could create a great long whole.

**December 1994, Burgundy, France**

When Dan returned to the house, he was in a good mood. His knee was sore from walking too much, but he didn't mind, because he had new ideas, new thoughts, and where those would take him and everyone else, he didn't know. But the idea that he had was so crazy, it might even work.

It was just about dawn when he went through the back gate and crossed the garden towards the kitchen. There was light on, and he craned his neck to see who was up already. Not that it was that early, December on the continent meant short days. Knocking on the back door before he entered, he smiled when he spotted Solange. Perfect. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Dan. You're up early. Do you want a coffee?" She was standing at the espresso machine, sorting breakfast. Even on her days 'off', she was dressed elegantly in earthy warm browns, with a long skirt and a cashmere V-necked jumper, a silk scarf hiding her throat.

"That would be brilliant, as strong as possible." Dan peeled out of hat, gloves and jacket.

She nodded and placed a small white cup under the nozzle, and the machine produced dark coffee with a layer of brown foam. "I was just about to properly wake Jean. He's fallen asleep on the couch." She set the cup, milk and sugar in front of him and started another one.

"I'm afraid we must have plied him with too much vodka last night." Smiling, he stepped closer to her. Looking tired, but there was a spark of excitement in his eyes that hadn't been there for a long time. "I'd like to ask you something, Solange." Using her name, a name that rolled off the tongue so smoothly, elegantly, just like her.

She looked at him. "Of course, what is it?"

Sitting down on the table, Dan prepared his espresso with a heap of sugar. "I was wondering if you let me take Jean away for a few days. Two or three. Perhaps in a caravan."

"I could go to Paris ... my agency is trying to place me for something." Solange sat down, had a sip from her coffee and looked at Dan, large dark eyes without a hint of mistrust or dislike, and she folded her hands on the table.

"No need to leave, I'd like to take him away from everyone and everything, including Ash, Vadim and this house." Dan took a sip of his coffee. It wasn't about deceiving, wasn't about sex. It truly and deeply was only about Jean. His friend. "I was wondering, has Jean ever talked about what he feels? What happened?"

"He blames himself for not realising how bad Pascal was, for not getting professional help, for allowing him to escape ..." She shook her head and cast down her eyes. "Like he's looking for something that was his fault, as if his guilt

would bring him back.” She shook her head again. “Almost as if ... as if suffering is his way to mourn.”

“I thought so.” Dan murmured, finishing his espresso. Watching her for a moment, and he didn’t know why, just that he wanted to reach out. Scarred left hand lightly covering hers on the table, and her thumb caught his thumb, holding him, too. “I don’t know if I can help, but maybe he’ll open up and talk to me, as a friend. I’d like to try, because I’ve been there myself, I was really down, too.”

“You’re his best friend, Dan.” She looked up again. “You don’t have to ask my permission to care for him.” She smiled. “He tries to act normally, if you take ... the rest away, maybe it makes a difference. I’m not sure what else we could try, I’m a very traditional kind of woman, you know, I’m not sure I could force him to do anything, including face those feelings.”

“You’re his wife, of course I ask your permission.” Dan smiled and squeezed her hand. “I’ll try and get him to face them.” Standing up he took hold of his jacket and kit. “I’ll organise everything today. You just go wake up your husband.” With that and a last smile he took his cane and made his way upstairs to the room.

Vadim was getting out of the shower, towelling himself, water running from his hair over his back. “You were out all night?”

“Aye.” Dan flung jacket and cane onto the bed and sat down on the chair close to the corner table. He grinned, albeit tiredly. “Thinking my small thoughts takes some time if I want to get to the big ones.”

Vadim ran the towel across his scalp and face. “Okay. You look like you found a solution ...”

“I’m not sure if it is a solution, but it’s at least a plan.” Taking his boots off with a sigh of pleasure, Dan rubbed his socked feet together. “The straightforward one is this: I take Jean out in a caravan and see if I can get him to talk. Solange’s happy with this and hopes it will work. Two or three days, that should be fine.” Looking at Vadim, who was drying his feet now, but paying attention. “Hope you don’t mind me doing that. Jean’s my friend ... and it worked with me when you did it.” Trailing off, Dan busied himself with his socks for a moment. “The other plan is bigger, and so fucked up, it might actually work.” Flashing a grin before his face vanished inside the jumper as he flung it off.

“Put things into perspective ...” Vadim nodded and started to get dressed. “What is that big plan?”

Dan got up to stretch. “Remember what I told you last night? That it’s not enough to have to actively seek help, because most likely, the last scraps of pride are keeping you from doing that, or perhaps you are so down you don’t even realise you need help, because you can’t feel anymore, and all you want is that numbness to stop.”

“Yes.”

Dan nodded and gave a small smile. “What if it didn’t even have to come to that stage? What if there were a network, across the world, for ex-Special Forces

soldiers? Discreet, international, with a few rules that include no more enemies once you're out, if you have to sort things with a punch-up, do it amongst mates, and a place where all that shit we can never tell about, least of all to a civilian, is the most normal thing, because we all know and have all done it? Where 'killing in the name of' is just what we did, not what defines us?"

"To keep an eye on each other?" Vadim moved to Dan, standing close. "You can start with the people we do know. And those know others ... somebody would have to run this, though."

"You told me I needed to find myself a hobby." Dan tilted his head, grinning. "You'd think running this 'Special Forces Association' would give me some purpose, aye?" Placing a hand onto Vadim's shoulder. Damn, that felt good. Warm skin and muscle under his fingers.

"Good hunting ground, too. Ogling the super-fit and super-mean?" Vadim gave a laugh.

"Don't be silly," Dan grinned, "it'll be difficult enough to get potential members to accept that this thing is run by a gay couple." His other hand went into the back of Vadim's neck. "I guess that will be one of the rules: nationality, race, sexuality don't matter. If you can't solve disagreements with a simple punch-up, you're out." Taking the final step closer until their bodies touched. "I don't actually know if there are any female special forces anywhere in the world?"

"I heard female Israeli paratroopers are hard."

"Not *quite* like me." Dan winked. "Still, no-sex could be a rule as well." He grimaced, "or we just sod that one."

Vadim laughed and placed an arm around Dan's waist. "You'd get kicked out for breaking that rule, Dan. So better sod it." He kissed Dan on the lips, running his hand through Dan's hair. "Hmmm. Bed, or breakfast?"

"Bed, if you take me unshowered ...?"

"I'll take you any way I can have you."

"In that case, I am all yours." Dan took a step back towards the bed, taking Vadim with him. He managed to get onto the bed and on his back without any accidents, and was grinning when Vadim peeled his trousers off. Still grinning when he spread his arms, his legs, lifted his knees and flashed his teeth in a kick-arse smirk, demanding 'to be taken'. But Vadim was feeling mellow and started with thoroughly rimming him, until Dan's relaxed attitude had turned to zoned-out need, and only then fucked him just as thoroughly, taking his time, but giving no quarter. They'd be late for breakfast, but they had clear priorities. Priorities which left Dan so sated, he fell asleep almost straight after his orgasm. Lying sprawled across the bed, and nothing could rouse him. Not even the prospect of food, and Vadim had to go downstairs on his own.

\* \* \*

When Dan finally got up, he went out into town in their hire car, and organised everything he'd need for the next few days. It was easy, he wasn't going to go

off into the wilderness, after all. The rest was spent as a lazy day, the high point of which was a 'pool party' in the cellar 'spa area', and the high point of that was Ash stripping off, baring a tattooed, powerful body, which Vadim appreciated for a while. Then more alcohol and food and chilling in front of the fireplace, ending the day on a mellow note.

Ash went off to bed first, Solange had already started her beauty sleep, and Vadim was comfortably ensconced on the couch, gazing at the fire. With everyone else up to their beds, Dan went over to sit beside Jean on the opposite couch. "I'm going to take you away."

Jean looked at him. "Really? Where to?"

"We found some nice places when we were out with Beauvais." Leaning forward to refill his glass. "Doesn't really matter, though, because I'll put you into a camper van and we'll head off tomorrow morning." He grinned. "Three days with little old me will be survivable, aye?"

"Hmm." Jean glanced at Vadim. "Will you make sure Ash's keeping his fingers off Solange?"

"You think he's interested?"

"Just ..." Jean trailed off, frowning. "Just be careful."

"I don't think you need to worry. Ash said he'll be off to Corsica, and he's a mate. Besides, Vadim is here and when Vadim goes into protector mode, Ash won't get closer than ten feet." Dan glanced over at Vadim, "Am I right, Russkie?"

"Oh yeah. I think he needs to worry more." Vadim grinned. "I'll make sure everything's going just fine."

"Means you won't be coming?"

"No. I think you and Dan could use spending some time together."

"Okay."

Dan smiled at Jean. "Right, and that means you should get your arse into bed, because we're heading off early tomorrow. By the way, Solange is happy with us heading off for a wee while."

"Seems like it's decided then." Jean got to his feet, tired and alcohol-dazed. "Anything I should pack?"

"Clothes? Razor? I've got the rest. We'll be picking up supplies in the local supermarket tomorrow. I've bought them today, and the camper comes equipped with everything else. So ... just bring yourself, preferably without a hangover." Dan grinned, shooing Jean off, who nodded at that and waved good night.

Vadim watched him leave. "Take as much time as you need. Just call if it takes longer."

Dan got off the couch once Jean was gone, holding his hand out to Vadim. "You really think Ash's having an eye on Solange? I rather figure Jean's paranoid right now."

"I think Ash is an honourable guy who might be interested but wouldn't shag the wife of a comrade."



“Exactly.” Dan took hold of Vadim’s hand. “Time to head off to the land of nod. I better make sure that I really am awake and ready to go at the crack of dawn. Thank fuck dawn’s not that early.”

“Yes, I’m still jetlagged, too. This part of the world is on the wrong time.” Vadim stood, and yawned. “Just wake me before you leave ...”

“Promised.” They just about managed to get out of their clothes and into bed, and the moment their heads hit the pillows, they were both pretty much asleep.

\* \* \*

With the grey morning light not quite shining through the windows yet, Dan was leaning over Vadim the next morning. Fully dressed, a couple of coffees already down his neck, the camper van keys in his hand, cane under his arm. “Bye-bye, sleeping beauty.” He grinned.

Vadim glanced up, head halfway buried in the pillow. “Enjoy the holiday,” he murmured.

“It’s not so much about enjoying.” Dan murmured, leaning further down to place a kiss onto Vadim. “I’ll call you tonight.”

With that he was ready and out of the door, to make his way down to the kitchen, where Jean was waiting for him, bleary-eyed, over another coffee. “Good to go?”

Jean pointed at a packed backpack and a jacket sitting next to him. “I’m not recovering from vodka like I used to ... Yeah, good to go.”

Dan grinned, with less sympathy than amusement. “Tell me about it, when Vadim picked me up I vomited out of the car and was ill for two days.”

They got into the camper van and Dan drove off. Pretty quiet for the first hour, just driving along the countryside, looking for nothing in particular. Dan finally broke the silence. “When you’re done snoozing, want to find a café for a late breakfast or want to park somewhere and I cook the only thing that I can?”

“Breakfast.” Jean turned his head. “Maybe we find something more substantial than croissant and coffee.”

“Okay, I’ll have a look at the next village, if you don’t trust my cooking skills.” Dan indicated a sign to the right. “Wise decision, actually.”

They were lucky, they not only found parking in the small place, but also a cafe, for their caffeine fix, a butcher and a bakery, and all together they got a breakfast that was hot and while not healthy, certainly designed to wake the dead and to kill the living. Dan drove off to park a little bit away, out of sight and in a small road that led into a forest, where they sat down in the camper to eat. Dan didn’t say much, had his coffee, ate his food and smoked a fag, after offering one to Jean.

Jean wiped the crumbs off his front and legs. “Better.” He reached for a cigarette and let Dan light it for him, then leaned back to exhale the smoke and look at the sky. “Don’t know. I have no idea how that happened.”

“Which one of the many things that have happened?” Exhaling, Dan watched the smoke disappear.

“How I could lose him like that. Prison? Drugs?”

“You were not his minder. You were his friend, and friends can take care but not control.”

Jean exhaled smoke. “But I should have. I’m the only one who could have. I should have seen it coming.”

“How?”

“I knew him. He trusted me.”

“You knew him and that means that you knew every little thing that was going on in his head? You believe you knew absolutely everything including what might have triggered the violent reaction in the first place? You knew him so well that you could have stopped the things happening in prison?”

“No, but ...” Jean shook his head. “I got through that anger ... when I left the Legion, I was fucked-up. Told you, I almost killed Solange ...” He shook his head. “Should have known it was the same for Pascal, but no, he wasn’t that mild-mannered, not that gentle, not the butt of the joke. He had just as much ... shit inside him as I had.”

“But he’d already been out of the Legion for a while, isn’t that right?”

“Yeah.”

“How could you have known?”

“From experience. It took me a while to get anywhere with myself after the Legion. Any excuse for a fight, and good old Jean was right in the middle of it.”

“And that experience should have told you that *years* after leaving the Legion and years after the problems that you had, Pascal would suddenly flip? That’s bullshit, Jean, and you know it. You’re not superman.”

Jean rubbed his face. “Means it had to happen?” Jean looked at Dan, eyes wide with an angry, desperate, hurt expression. “You think he really wanted all that? Wanted to kill himself?”

“No, that’s bullshit as well. It means that maybe, if things had been different, and if he hadn’t met the woman he did, and if he hadn’t gone out that night, and if he hadn’t been drinking, and if the goddamned star constellation hadn’t been the way the moon was shining that goddamned night, then ... then maybe it hadn’t happened. What I mean is, that what happened was a tragedy, and if many things had been different, it could have been avoided, but *you*, Jean, in all those circumstances, you couldn’t have prevented what happened. You did what you could, to your best abilities, you took over responsibility, but you couldn’t have prevented it. It is not your responsibility that Pascal is dead.” Extinguishing the cigarette, Dan leant close. “It is not your fault. You are *not* guilty.”

“The police thinks that I am.”

“The police thinks you threw Pascal out of the window?”

“They think I did something to him. But most of all, that I kidnapped him and held him prisoner, and that while running away, Pascal killed himself. Maybe that he killed himself to escape me.” Jean’s voice was level, dry,

monotonous. "Could have helped him to put down roots ... like I did, wife, house, all that can help with some of those crazy thoughts."

"And how would you have done that? Would you have found a woman for him, bought a house for him and put him inside? It doesn't work like that." Dan stood up, to expend some of the energy. "We are not responsible for others, we cannot be. Not even for the ones we love."

"He was like a brother, Dan." Voice soft, eyes blurring.

"Aye." Dan said quietly. Hand on Jean's shoulder, he squeezed, then reached to pull him up and take him across to the bunk beds to sit down. "But sometimes, brothers can't help brothers, and not even lovers can't help lovers ..." Sitting down and taking Jean with him, Jean embraced him, held him, pulling him with him as he lay down, face against Dan's chest, breathing deeply.

"Stay here?"

"Aye, as long as you need me to." Dan held Jean close, stroking the blond hair. Nothing wrong with holding someone who was hurting, nothing at all. "Won't go anywhere."

Jean cuddled close, breathing against his chest, gradually relaxing a bit. "It's good having you," he murmured.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there for you earlier. Had a shit time myself." Turning his head to place a kiss wherever he could reach, one landed on Jean's hair.

"Just ... if you ever need help. Tell me. I'll do whatever." Jean shifted, rolled Dan over onto his back and looked down at him. "Don't piss off like he did. Okay, you have Vadim, but ... still."

"I won't piss off, I promise. I learned my lesson." Smiling up at Jean. "You're already doing a damn lot, you're my friend. That's more than most ex-soldiers have, especially special forces."

Jean gave a small smile. "Not completely selflessly, though." The smile became a smirk and he kissed Dan on the lips, tenderly, tongue following, fingers splayed on Dan's face and temple.

Dan broke the kiss after a moment, "you're not hearing me complain." Before pulling Jean back down. Hand at the back of his neck, feeling the strength beneath his fingers, and he shifted slightly, arranging his legs so that their groins pressed against each other, legs angled and thighs rubbing. Jean threw himself enthusiastically into the love-making, making Dan breathless with his recklessly sexy kisses, almost purring under the touches, taking it slow and intense, no reservation, whether he rubbed against him or opened his fly to kiss and lick Dan's cock. Sucking him before long, and touching himself, but not to get himself off, but, the way he did it, to show himself off and arouse Dan, who was blown away. Almost helpless under Jean's hands, lips, and body, and at some stage, he was so breathless and close to orgasm, he started to plead, unashamed, which was enough to get Jean off. When Jean finally made him come, Dan was pressing him close, erratically shuddering.

Jean grinned tiredly, face seemed sated and relaxed. "No, not selfless at all." Kissing Dan, who was grinning like a fool, while Jean lay half on top, half on his side. "But you're okay now?"

“Yeah ... very okay.” Not quite understanding the question, Dan was out in post orgasmic bliss. Not even realising his legs were trapped in the trousers around his ankles and his boots were still on. The top, thankfully, had been pulled off at some stage. “You?”

Jean nodded. “Getting there.” He grinned at Dan’s state of semi-dress and leaned back. “You got a cigarette?”

“Over there.” Pointing to the table, Dan made no attempts at getting up. “If you get them, bring them here, take my damned boots off, and clean me up, I’ll give you a blow job next time that you’ll never forget.” He grinned.

Jean laughed. “Kay.” He got up, shed the rest of his own clothes and returned with a towel and cigarettes, lighting one and starting it, before he stuck it between Dan’s lips, and then cleaned him up.

“I could get used to that service, you know.” Talking around his fag, Dan watched Jean take his boots, socks and trousers off. “Just hoping we won’t encounter a flic who wonders why we are parked here.” Grinning sharply, Dan patted the space beside him, when Jean was done.

Jean joined him, lighting his own cigarette. “Don’t care. I got nothing to hide.”

“Nor have I. Guess it would be difficult anyway, being naked, aye?” He rolled his eyes and grinned.

Jean huffed and studied Dan’s body. “I quite like you naked.”

“I figured that. Can’t say you’re too bad to look at either.” Lifting his right leg, Dan pointed at his knees and the fresh collection of scars. Not pretty, but functional. “That’s the latest one.”

Jean touched the scar, stroking it with his thumb. “Yeah, that’s impressive. Did that hurt bad?”

Dan pondered his answer for a moment, until he came out with simply the truth. “Aye. Like a motherfucker. The bones got infected and they had to take it back out again.” He shrugged, but he wasn’t all that good at playing it lightly. “Thanks to my brother it got all sorted in the end.” He reached across to the ashtray, placing it onto his abs. “I’ll never run again, but I can walk, and that’s all that matters.”

“Shit. I had no idea.”

“That’s alright, I wasn’t talking to anyone at the time.” Dan turned his head and looked at Jean with a small smile. “Remember what I told you earlier? Sometimes even a lover or a friend can’t make a difference to what is going on in one’s mind. I refused help, refused to talk, refused anything.”

“That’s why it was impossible to get to you?”

“Pretty much.” Reaching across, Dan touched Jean’s face, before putting the ashtray away when Jean had extinguished his own cigarette. “If I hadn’t been picked up just in time ...” leaving the rest unsaid. “Anyway, that’s why I had an idea last night and why I need your help.”

“Sure. Whatever you want.” Jean stretched out, idly scratching his abs.

“I was thinking of starting up a network. Club, or association. Special Forces association, aye. International and with only a few rules: if someone was your

former enemy, they aren't now. Gender, sexuality and race are to be disregarded, and if you can't solve an argument with a simple punch up, then stick your bloody head down a loo until you've calmed down." Dan flashed a sharp grin. "I know it sounds fucking crazy and might not work, but a discreet organisation, a loose network of ex soldiers, ex *special forces*, who can understand each other, and who can say what they want without having to censor themselves for the civilians, and who might provide enough of a safety net that its members don't drop off and do stupid shit ... maybe it'll work?"

Jean nodded, looking uncharacteristically thoughtful. "So they don't kill themselves?"

Dan took in a deep breath, exhaling slowly. "So that the aggression doesn't need an outlet, aye. I think what makes us dangerous at times is because we don't fit in, we deal with what we've done and what we've seen, and we can't talk about it. And ... suicide is an option."

"I'm game. Pretty sure Ash is, too. Thierry ..."

"I was wondering if it should be *ex-special forces*? What do you think?"

"Well, I'm still active. Sort of. Not sure when I'll take the next contract, haven't been feeling like it, lately."

"A private contract is different. You are no longer employed by any nation's military. You are not a soldier anymore, thus you have no affiliation, and thus you can't have enemies. Well ... officially." Dan grinned. "Anyway, what do you think? Should it be only *ex*?"

"Would make sense, but maybe allow for some flexibility, just in case somebody still active needs or wants to join. The guys who are still active have their units and the bigger whole."

"That's a good idea." Dan nodded, lazily pulling Jean close, who followed, stroking Dan's chest. "And who knows, if this whole crazy idea is successful, then maybe we can even get some funds and apply for charitable status and ... perhaps one day there will be a Pascal foundation." Turning his head, "and I don't actually know his last name."

"Durand." Jean murmured.

"Pascal Durand Foundation." Dan leaned across to gently touch Jean's face. "You think he would have liked that? A network that keeps us all going?"

Jean nodded, silently, pressing his lips together. "Yeah," he managed finally. "I think he would've."

"I'll work my arse off to achieve this, then." Placing a kiss on Jean's cheek, then lips.

"I'll help," said Jean. "Would be good to do something for him, too, even if ... it's a bit late."

"Aye, and I am sorry. Really am sorry." Kissing Jean again, Dan held him close. Just lying there, peacefully and dozing with open eyes.

Jean rested against his chest, idly stroking Dan's body, familiar, content and gentle. "You make it less bad," he murmured.

Dan smiled and leaned his head against Jean's. "That's what friends are for."

After finding themselves a nice restaurant and having plenty of good food, they returned to the caravan for the night, sitting outside for a while, despite the cold. Wrapped up, they enjoyed each other's company and a bottle of wine. Jean seemed better, more relaxed, and very thoughtful. "You know ... there's one thing I don't want. I don't want you to worry about me ... or, you know, worse. Because of Pascal."

"Does that mean I don't have to put the suicide watch onto you?" Dan glanced to the side, exhaling smoke into the cold night air.

"I wouldn't do that. Never. Just ..." he shrugged. "Drink too much, talk too little."

"Yeah, I did that, and it was shit." Dan took a sip of his wine. "Besides, you have Solange, and she loves you so very much, but as she told me, she feared she wasn't able to get you to open up." He smiled, "she's more passive, aye?"

"Yeah. It's usually me who takes care of her. Not sure she knew how to deal with the tables turned. I mean, she ... gives me peace and all that, but she's not the type who can bitchslap some sense into me."

"Must admit, I really can't imagine that either." Dan grinned, refilling Jean's glass. "Guess that's what I'm here for, bitchslapping you." Dan's smirk lit up his whole face. "So, consider yourself bitchslapped and if you don't stop drinking yourself into a stupor every night, I'll come to get your arse. A propos arse ..."

Jean glanced up. "Yeah?"

"If you're really that precious about it, then next time you're piss drunk and desperate, there might not be someone to say 'no'." Dan raised a brow and his glass.

"Oh." Jean seemed to realize what had happened that night. "Shit. I was just ... couldn't sleep and I'd missed you ..."

"That almost got you fucked." Clinking his glass against Jean's. "And since I am a selfish bastard, I figure that if anyone is ever going to fuck that arse of yours, then it's me." Grinning wildly to take any sting out of it.

"Oh. Vadim." Jean swallowed. "Fuck, he's big. That's a scary thought right there ..."

Dan laughed, "hey, he isn't *that* big. I can take him easily."

Jean shuddered. "Still. I mean ... probably shouldn't be that scared about it, enjoying all the other things I do, but ..." He shrugged. "Don't get my head around getting fucked."

"Eh, he is *not* bigger than I am, is that clear?" Dan winked.

Jean laughed. "No. No, he's not. Course not."

"And I know what you mean, I didn't allow him to fuck me for a long, long time, but then I had ..." trailing off quickly, Dan shrugged. "Anyway, you fucked me, and you know that I enjoy it."

"So does Solange ... good reason to marry, see? Somebody who loves getting fucked like that." Jean had another sip of wine and Dan laughed.

"Okay, means I better marry Vadim." Another bout of laughter followed.

"I promise, if I ever get my head around it, I'll let you know."

"Yeah, you know my number." Grinning, they sat side by side.

Companionable, shoulders touching, and sharing a bottle in the clear night, until it was time to go inside and warm up, and share more than just wine.

\* \* \*

When they eventually got back to the house, something had changed in Jean. While the sadness was still there, he allowed himself to grieve now, and to accept what had happened. The guilt had been replaced by a painful, yet growing understanding.

Ash had left a couple of days ago, and Solange had been the perfect hostess for Vadim, who had enjoyed himself in the company of the lady more than he had thought. Even when she took him shopping, something she truly was an expert at. The fact that he'd somehow grown a lot more of a wardrobe - and also, she assured him, a far more varied one - wouldn't necessarily lead to Dan appreciating it, but the money was flowing freely and she made shopping a breeze and thoroughly enjoyable.

They stayed for a couple of weeks longer, until it was close to Christmas. During that time Dan talked a lot with Jean, across in the garden house, about their jobs, their comrades, their lives, their lovers, and one of those nights, with Vadim and Solange in the main house, Dan was sitting with an enormous grin, waiting for Jean.

Jean was just coming back from the kitchen in the main house and brought with him some food and two bottles of wine. Seeing Dan grin at him, he sat the food down and smirked at him. "What's up, Dan?"

"I was wondering about your interesting Christmas decorations."

"What Christmas decoration? I don't think we have ..."

"That one." Dan pulled something out of his pocket and dangled it from between his fingers. A black leather collar, studded with silver.

Jean laughed. "Wouldn't fit you. Damn, the woman isn't tidy all the time."

"What, so it isn't you who is wearing it? You disappoint me." Placing the collar down onto the floor, Dan held his hand out for the plate with food instead.

"Do I?" Jean laughed. "No, I collared her a few months before the marriage ... but we figured authorities wouldn't see the collaring the same way we did, so we did the traditional thing as well."

"Collared?" Dan blinked, a sandwich hovering in mid air. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Solange is my slave." Jean grinned, somewhat self-consciously. "It's a pledge. I own her. It's ... it sounds weirder than it is, really. She likes it that way, it was really her idea, and most people would never notice, because ... well, it's mostly a thing when we are alone, or she wears it when she goes to Paris. Just so she remembers she belongs to me."

"She wears this when she goes out? Holy fuck."

“Yeah. That or a chastity belt.”

Dan had stuffed the sandwich into his mouth, spluttered and almost choked on it. “What? Chastity belt?” Reaching for the wine to wash it down quickly. “But what does it mean, her being your slave?”

“It means I call the shots. I make the decisions. Her body belongs to me. If I should decide, that, for example, Ash can fuck her, that is what happens, she doesn’t even get asked. On the other hand ...” Jean grinned. “It’s about working out what the slave wants but wouldn’t ask. I can push her and stretch her limits, but I can’t go too far. It’s ... a game. It keeps things interesting, and is especially helpful when either of us is away.” Jean looked at Dan. “Okay, now you think I’m a freak.”

Dan swallowed the last bit of his sandwich, staring at Jean with very dark eyes. Slowly chewing, until he swallowed it carefully. Taking his time to wash it all down with some more wine, before he finally answered: “No. On the contrary.”

“You think I’m completely normal?” Jean poured some wine. “What about this, then ... before you and Vadim came for the wedding, I made Solange blow Thierry, right there on the couch, and then she blew me, while he watched and that night, I bound and gagged her and Thierry fucked her ... we were taking turns until we couldn’t go on any longer ...”

Dan blinked again, about to say something, but he remained quiet. Finishing his wine instead. “I don’t know.” He finally admitted. “That ... I don’t know. Give me more wine and I might get my head around it.”

“There’s plenty of wine. Frederic keeps dropping off more.” Jean grinned and leaned back while Dan refilled his glass, which he half emptied straight away. “I think part of ... part of that fascination I had for Solange was that she’s like that. Remember how I told you how we met?” Dan nodded. “I could have killed her, just for deceiving me, and that turned her on, on some level, and I saw that, I saw that she wanted to be treated like that. And I really, really wanted to treat her like that. Sexually, we’re like hand and glove. It’s perfect. For her, for me ... well, if I could have a male slave, too, I guess...” Jean grinned.

“Not me.” Dan very quickly waved his hand. “Not my cuppa, and Vadim’s taken.”

“Taken? Is he?” Jean grinned.

Dan cocked his head when he realised what he’d said. The implications slowly filtering through. “I ...” finishing the wine, “I cut the Cyrillic first letter of ‘mine’ in his thigh. Does that count?” Slowly moistening his lips, new thoughts were taking him to places he hadn’t been to yet. Not quite.

“It does.” Jean shook his head. “Always wondered about that ... you have your masochistic moments, and you can also be sadistic, or ... dominant. Vadim, I’d have pegged him as a dom, but I’ve had too much sex with you guys to really believe that anymore. So, you’re taking turns?”

“Not ... really.” Dan rubbed his nose with the heel of his hand. “And I wouldn’t call what I do ‘masochistic’. I just play games, and sometimes it’s something of a re-enactment, perhaps. Exorcism.” He shrugged, “and I



wouldn't call what I've been doing sadistic, not when the guys are enjoying it, and they sure as fuck did." Refilling his glass yet again.

"Masochists ... or submissives, or whatever you call them, they do enjoy it. It's what they want. They are actually in charge and all that, because they allow it to happen. Forcing them, really forcing them would be rape and abuse, but it's not. It's fucking with their minds."

"I know the difference." Dan glanced towards the plate with food, but didn't take any. "With Vadim ... that's a different matter. He told me that something 'clicked' when I tortured him. And fuck, that *was* sadistic."

"Okay." Jean looked taken aback. "Torture. The real deal, I guess?"

"Aye, the real, goddamned motherfucking deal." Dan frowned, put the glass down. "It was revenge, fourteen years ago. I hated him. And that moment, up in the Afghan mountains, that moment he said something, something 'clicked' with me as well. I was the one who cut 'cunt' into his back." Dan looked at Jean, not blinking, open and honest. Expecting judgment, whatever the verdict. He wanted to add that there had been nothing sexual about it, but he remained silent, because ultimately, *everything* had been sexual about it.

"You marked him. That ... that's powerful stuff." Jean was visibly trying to get his head around it. "I never went that far, but my best guess is ..." Jean stared into the wine and chewed thoughtfully on his lip. "There's a point when they can't resist anymore. At some point, they give up, they open up, and then they are all yours. I'm not sure we can even use that to understand what you guys did, but ... something happens when that happens ... the submission. That's really strong stuff. Maybe, even though it was torture and even though it wasn't ... consenting adults and all that ... maybe that's exactly what happened?"

"It had never been about consenting adults with us." Dan looked at his left hand, studying the scars. "Not until he begged me to kill him with honour. I think ... I think he believed I would rape him with the knife." Staring at his hand as if he could decipher the past from the patterns of scars.

Jean jerked, muttering "shit" under his breath. He looked at Dan, almost if asking him to say 'but I wouldn't have', waiting for something like that for several long moments, until Dan finally looked up from his hand.

"It took me years to realise that that's what he thought I'd do." Quietly, dryly. "Hence his fascination for me with a knife, I guess." He shrugged, some self-deprecating humour about him. As dry and brittle as his words. "And I only wanted to finish the last letter." The huff that followed had a weary quality. "I never told him. Would you believe that? And now ... now you tell me about this fucking collaring and I want to carve my name into his flesh." Trailing off, Dan turned his gaze away, refilling his glass.

Jean had to clear his throat. "He wants it ... you want it ... what's the problem? It's not torture if you know what he wants ... and respect the limits. No ... no permanent damage. Keeping in control of what you're doing."

"How do you know that he wants it? That it isn't some fucked-up result of the *other* torture?" Dan lifted the glass to his lips, taking a large mouthful.

“It’s a hunch, but from what I’ve seen of Vadim, I’m pretty sure he enjoys some pain. And I don’t think torture can cause that ... I think that’s something you are or you aren’t, it’s not made, not triggered. I don’t think you made him enjoy pain.”

“Maybe not, but he sure as fuck enjoys giving out pain.” Another mouthful. “Not to me though. Not in that way. As I said, I play, but I’m not real. He’s got someone else for that. Well, had ...”

“Ah, I figured ...”

Dan pondered a moment. “It’s not the dishing out of pain for me that does it. That’s just a by-product. It happens. It’s the utter control. There’s this couple in Glasgow that we met and ... holy shit, controlling their every breath, every thought, made me drunk with it. And if it were Vadim ... it’d kill me. I think he ... he knows that.”

“Control?” Jean nodded. “I know exactly what you mean.” Eyes glowing with a fierce emotion. “There’s a lot of stuff you can do. Controlling his breath, his movement, collars ... control is an art form, and there are all the tools you could wish for. Solange ... I put chastity stuff on her. Just the thought that nobody else can fuck her kills me. That any step, any movement, she knows exactly that she’s mine.”

Dan nodded, moistening his lips again. “I like dildos, butt plugs, and gags. Blindfolds. Reducing the senses to nothing, except for touch. Watching, listening ... I’ve done that. Kept Vadim like that, tied up. But ... somehow I’ve always improvised. A collar would make things different.” Emptying the glass in one go, “I guess you know what I mean.”

“Yeah. You want to own him. Make him your slave, completely yours, your property.” Jean shifted. “Shit. Turns me on, too.”

“Aye, fuck.” Dan glanced at his crotch, which had been a lot more comfortable a while ago. “I’m fucking horny now.” Looking straight at Jean, very intensely so.

Jean laughed. “Either take that to your man, or we keep it here ... your choice.”

“I guess I do understand now why you’re so precious about your arse.” Dan made no attempt at getting up. Instead, he leaned closer.

“It’s ...” Jean tapped his temple, “weird for me. Mentally. I feel much better when I’m in charge, and getting fucked is like submission. I don’t do that. It doesn’t turn me on. Well, I like to blow you, I guess I’m not completely ... dominant with that, but fucking is five steps too far.”

“It’s bullshit that getting fucked is about submission.” Dan gave a quick, sharp grin. “But I guess I won’t ever sway you.”

Jean grinned, adjusting himself. “Or maybe it’s just because you are fucking gorgeous even for a straight eye.”

“And the straight eye is yours?” Dan snorted, shifting closer. “Get real, Frenchie, you want me, and you want me because I have hard angles where Solange is softer; because I am as strong as you are, where she is physically weaker; and because, in the back of your mind, you know that I *could* potentially

overpower and take you, because I am your equal ...” So close now, Dan could feel the heat from Jean’s body, “and ...” he murmured, “you like that gamble ...”

“But you wouldn’t ...” Jean grinned, kissing Dan’s throat. “However much I’d tease you and however horny you were, you’d never do it. That’s not a gamble, that’s a safe bet with money-back-guarantee.”

“You really are that goddamned sure?” Dan tilted his head to allow better access, while grinning. One hand sneaking towards Jean’s shoulder, the other caressing his chest, up towards the throat, while getting Jean out of his shirt.

“Yeah. I trust you, Dan ... that’s why you’re the first guy I did all that to, sober, I mean. You’re an honourable bastard, and I guess I was taking advantage of you in Kuwait, but fuck, I didn’t mean any harm, I always told you how it is, right?”

“Yeah, right, just like now.” Dan’s grin grew, pulling back a fraction, as if to look at Jean, but in the forward motion he suddenly twisted, pushed against the chest, pulled against the shoulder, forcing Jean out of balance, from a sitting position halfway sprawled onto his front.

Jean did trust Dan and his response wasn’t automatic and not fierce, merely somewhat resisting, but far from playing dirty or getting brutal. “What ... what’s the plan, Dan?” Glancing at Dan, some tension in him, but not much.

“To let me have *some* control.” Dan murmured close to Jean’s ear, his weight on top of the other man. “A taster, if you like ...”

Jean grinned. “Like? What do you want to do, Dan? Tie me up? Make me suck you?”

“If I told you that it wouldn’t be control, right?” Running a hand down along the side of Jean, back up along the spine, to rest between his shoulder blades.

Jean stayed close, pushing against him like he needed the touch. As much touch as he could get. “You didn’t get the part I told you about bottoms and subs.”

“Oh yes, I did ...” Leaning down, Dan placed a kiss at the base of Jean’s spine, slowly working his way upwards. “But how much did you get the part of me saying I wasn’t one?” Chuckling low, Dan had reached the shoulder blades, replacing his hand with his lips. “I figure ...” murmured, “that in all the time we have known each other, I always allowed myself to be passive, because Jean was straight ...” kissing, licking and lightly biting the neck, the side of the throat, the jaw, speeding up Jean’s breath like that, and the ex-Legionnaire kept pushing back. “Jean was just experimenting ... but I reckon you are a lot less straight than you’ve ever claimed to be.”

“I *was* experimenting,” murmured Jean. “All that stuff is very confusing ... didn’t want to have a go at it, because ... didn’t want to face it. A faggot in the Legion? There are some, more-or-less secret, whatever the rules say, but these guys are exponentially harder than anybody else. One guy I knew of... had the most amazing mismatched eyes, but fuck, he was hardly human anymore. I ... didn’t want all that pain.”

“Interesting ...” Dan nudged Jean to tip his head back and bare his throat, which made Jean shiver and give a small groan. “You never seemed to have thought about anything. Not back in Kuwait, not even when my best intentions of not bothering a straight mate came to ... getting fucked when I didn’t even want that.”

“You didn’t want me fucking you?” Jean reached for Dan’s chest, touching him. “I’m sorry. I did take advantage of you. And you’d just been fucked around by Vadim, too.”

Dan was about to grin and retort that what one wants and what one *really* wants wasn’t necessarily the same, when he captured Jean’s hand on his chest, “what do you mean, fucked around?”

“The way you were with each other. The split-up.”

“Ah, that. Aye.”

“Okay, I guess you weren’t innocent, either, but Vadim ... he’s the more vicious of you guys.”

“Is he?” Dan’s brows rose to his hairline, clearly remembering the ‘you are stronger, Dan’, which had confused him just as much.

“Yeah. If I’d get on your bad side, you’d just simply shoot me. If I’d get on Vadim’s bad side ... he’d eviscerate me. I think, deep down, I’m still fucking scared of him.”

Dan couldn’t help it, he burst into laughter. Destroying the mood he’d been in, but nothing a few well placed words, hands and lips couldn’t remedy. Rolling to the side, he faced Jean. Still grinning when he had himself enough under control to talk. “Does everyone think Vadim’s a psychopath? I must have missed something, in that case.”

“I think that’s the common assumption.” Jean reached for Dan’s hips, pulling him closer, flat hand finding his groin, and adding a little pressure. “Still, he’s sexy. Scary sexy, if that makes sense.”

“Do you want him?” Pushing harder into that hand. “Without me?” Something calculating about Dan, something that wasn’t as playful as his usual self.

“No.” Jean looked at him. “I don’t trust him the way I trust you. I wouldn’t be calling the shots.”

“Is that the only reason?”

Jean gave a laugh. “How many more reasons do you need? He fucked up my elbow in the tussle we had, and he could just as easily have turned me over and fucked me. And I’d have shot him for that.”

Dan leaned his head back, resting on his arm. “So that’s what it was. Neither of you ever told me why the fuck you hated each other’s guts, back in the Gulf.”

“It wasn’t ...” Jean grimaced. “Let’s say he tried to show me his appreciation and I ... didn’t appreciate that. We were halfway through the bonding shit when he decided he should take it to the next level ... guess he thought I was flirting. Don’t know. I think we could have ended up friends, but after he’d fucked up my elbow ...”

“... you decided that you’d get your revenge by fucking with his at-that-time ex-partner, instead.” Dan pulled a face, and Jean visibly winced, swallowing whatever defence came to him. “A reason that didn’t have to do with Vadim as a deterrent, but with *me*, would have been not too bad.” Dan gave a slight laugh.

Jean grinned. “I can only love two people, not three, honey. Three is a crowd.”

Blinking, Dan was about to say something, when he carefully closed his mouth again. ‘Love?’ There be dragons, and he’d been riding on one for too long. “In that case ...” clearing his throat, “pointing me to where I can find a blindfold and cuffs isn’t asking too much, aye?”

“The main bedroom has all the interesting toys, but there’s a blindfold in the nightstand over there ... Might even have cuffs.”

“Good thing you’ve upgraded since the airbeds.” Dan flashed a grin.

“That’s the South Africa money ...” Jean rolled over on his stomach to reach the nightstand. “Bingo.” He dropped blindfolds and proper metal cuffs on the bed. Not the flimsy ones that could be broken, but the jointed ones that police used, and Dan reached for them, weighing them in his hands like a familiar, long-missed item.

“Before you put those on me,” Jean murmured, “I’d figured the enemy of my enemy is my friend. But I liked you ... pretty much from the beginning. Got caught up in my own game, of sorts.”

“You worried I’m be pissed off with you now?” Dan smiled, reaching to stroke Jean’s face, down to his chest, where he lingered.

“Yeah.” Jean looked at him, eyes dark with concern. “I wouldn’t hurt you, Dan. I’m not tricking you. I’m serious.”

“It’s a bit too late for that.” Dan’s grin grew, “for the hurting. Whatever the reason why you started this whole thing with me, it’s too late to pretend it’s anything than what it is.” Whatever that was, and Dan wasn’t too keen on finding out every detail. Sitting up, he gestured towards Jean with that challenging grin of his. “You might already have your top off, but you’re otherwise entirely overdressed.”

“Okay.” Jean seemed somewhat less than convinced, but he pulled off his trousers, briefs, socks, then lay back, arms behind his head. He seemed more alert, watchful almost, trying to read Dan, but Dan only grinned at him.

“Didn’t you just say that you trusted me?” Leaning closer, Dan had a very good look at the body. A perfect body, no doubt. No blemishes, nothing that marred the perfection, apart from the scar on the outside of the thigh. “No need to look at me like a snake at the snake charmer.”

“Just ... the cuffs.” Jean straightened his arms and offered Dan his wrists, as if to contradict the nervousness.

Dan made a low hushing sound and shook his head. “On your front, please.” Uncommon courtesy, delivered with a mischievous grin.

“Okay.” Jean stretched out, but on his back for now, relaxing, but his stomach was taut. Idly reaching down to tug at his cock that was half-hard in

the blond hair. "If you keep looking at me like that I'll assume you want to photograph me, too ..." Slowly turning over until he lay prone.

Dan's voice had taken on a husky tone. "Vadim did say I should take on another hobby, but right now I wouldn't have a clue how to go about it." Reaching for Jean's hands, the cuffs snapped shut with a low, metallic click, circling the strong wrists, and Jean's back and shoulder muscles worked and displayed a sudden tension. "You think I should start taking pictures of naked, helpless men?" Murmured into Jean's ear, who shifted, pressing his forehead into the mattress.

"There are some black and white shots of me ... I can show them, later."

"Tied up?"

"No." Jean laughed, sounded nervous. "But naked."

"Taken by Chrestien?" Dan teased, while reaching for the blindfold in Jean's back.

"No. Fuck no." Jean shook his head. "Even though he'd have chewed off an arm to get me there."

"Does that mean I could have bought a magazine and found you as the centrefold?" Grinning, Dan reached forward, and in one swift motion slipped the blindfold over Jean's eyes.

"No. Strictly non-commer..." Jean faltered, and didn't get the last syllable out.

"For private entertainment, then?" Dan murmured, so close to Jean's ear, his lips almost touched it, as he fastened the blindfold securely in the back of Jean's head. "Just like now, aye?" His hand ran down the spine to touch the handcuffs, warming the steel.

"Yeah." The word was just an exhaled breath. Jean was silent, tensed up, but not freaking out. Passive, for once, because he had no other choice. No other options. He shifted his legs, which were slightly opened, even though that made him vulnerable.

Dan's hand left the steel, and then a shuffle and rustling of cloth as Dan took off his clothes, discarding them to the side. Naked like Jean, his body a very different picture to the one laid out before him. Watching Jean for a moment, without touching, until he positioned himself beside the body, which allowed him full access of hands and lips, without having to kneel. Dropping a hand between the slightly opened legs, he let his fingertips caress the flesh, drawing a shudder from Jean, but never touching the cock that was pressed into the mattress. "How are you feeling?"

"Calmer than I thought I'd be," Jean murmured. He opened his legs further, as if to underline his words.

"Good, because you were right in one thing: I never would overpower you. I guess I just am an honourable bastard." With a low chuckle, Dan proceeded to kiss and caress the body before him. Lightly biting, licking, touching with tender strokes, then harsher demands, before once again kissing. Taking his time with the whole body – as much as he could reach, but never getting beyond fondling the balls. The cock was off-limits for now. Jean relaxed under the caresses, but

at the same time was clearly aroused, the way his breathing shifted and how he responded with a hundred small signs, his strong body welcoming the attention, and he opened further when Dan did touch his balls, clearly asking for more touches there.

Dan shifted to reach for the bedside table. He knew he'd find lube there, and he managed to squeeze some into one hand, while the other kept rolling flesh and fondling balls. Getting himself part between Jean's legs, part outside, waiting for the lube to warm on his fingers. "You see ..." murmured, "I was told even straight men enjoy stimulation ..." poised, then moving and slipping a finger smoothly inside Jean, angling just right, "... there."

Jean almost jumped off the bed, the speed, the place unexpected, surprised at the finger and the violent shudder than raced through him when Dan hit the spot right away. His fingers closed, and he let out a groan that sounded nothing like him, struggling with the overpowering sensation.

"It seems the rumours are correct, then." Barely above a whisper, a very low chuckle accompanied Dan's words, as he pulled out again, only to smoothly push back in, finding the spot once more, which made Jean cry out. A choked sound somewhere between arousal and ... something else that Jean probably thought was discomfort, as he struggled to decide whether this felt incredibly good or just too fucking intense.

Dan pushed against Jean's leg, to make him lift his hips, and Jean managed to comply, shuddering body not completely in his control. His cock was hard, seemingly having decided the quandary for Jean.

One hand on Jean's cock, stroking in a leisurely way, the intensity lay in the finger that moved and searched, angled and pushed, until Dan sped up the stroking slightly, the moment a second finger joined the first. This made Jean groan out again, his lips were parted, and he was breathing fast, noisily. Blinded, helpless, but he didn't protest, didn't beg, struggling to come to terms with that intense sensation that seemed so powerful it was borderline pain. His weight on knees and shoulders, he pushed into the hand as much as he could in that position that opened him up even more, panting. In the low light, he was a strong blond body wrecked by need, and covered in a sheen of sweat. A body that had lost its distinguishing features, and Dan was fully aware that what he saw could have been another body – before hatred, love and pledges and without any scars.

Slowing down, Dan reached one-handed for the lube, while the two fingers were deeply embedded. Squeezing some onto his hand, he once again closed his fingers around the rock-hard cock, slick with precum already, now slippery and smooth while he stroked slowly. He pulled out his fingers, attempting to add a third, carefully pushing back in, widening slowly, waiting for acceptance, then angling sharply and touching just right, but with more intensity.

The sounds turned into something desperate, sounding like Jean was being tortured, but his cock left no doubt about the fact that it was lust. "D...dan," he panted against the mattress. "Fuck me, but ... make me ... come."

Dan almost jerked at these words, immediately transported from fascinated arousal to fully-fledged lust. Fuck Jean. Have his arse, at last. Fuck him and make him come and feel the body shudder under him, giving what he'd wanted for a long time. The stroking gained in intensity, and so did the thrusts of his fingers. "No ..." Dan murmured, holding himself back for a moment longer, "but I *will* make you come." True to his word, he increased the intensity of his stroking the next second, in sync now with the thrust of his fingers. Both designed to force Jean over the edge.

Jean tensed up, cried out, despair, relief, lust so intense he had no way to deal with it in any other way but to lose his mind, his control, his cool, and spilled across Dan's hand. He sounded like he was sobbing, clenching around the fingers, the whole man deeply shaken, helpless, the veins on his arms in stark relief, flushed and sweaty. Wrecked by spasms.

Dan watched him, painfully erect, but hell, this was more important, better, even, and he carefully withdrew, swiftly wiping his hands, when Jean crashed. He pulled the blindfold off, fingers carding through the short, sweaty hair, and he lay down beside him, caressing the body. Heated and damp, and shuddering.

Jean needed long minutes to stir again, during which Dan unlocked the cuffs and took them off. Jean then twisted around to turn onto his back, shifting away from the wet patch underneath. "You?" he asked with a raw voice.

"I'm okay. Watching you blew my mind if not my cock." Dan grinned, a warm, tender grin, reaching out to place his hand onto Jean's shoulder.

Jean kissed his fingers, then shuffled closer to kiss Dan's lips, hands reaching out to hold him close. "Want a hand ... or a blowjob?"

"I don't mind, what would you rather?" Pressed against Jean, bodies touching all the way.

Jean laughed. "Don't mind? Yeah, right." He pushed against Dan's shoulder, who was laughing, to make him stretch out on the bed, got on top of him, kissing him again and then kissing his way down the body. Taking his time to look at the cock, then up to Dan, grinning. Then he bent down, taking it between his lips, sucking and licking with abandon – heated up by what Dan had done to him, possibly as a way to say 'thank you', or maybe all inhibitions had been swept away by his own orgasm. Dan's reaction was almost instantaneous, as if he suddenly registered that he had been aroused for a long time. Release came swiftly, far sooner than expected, and with a suppressed groan, remembering how Jean had sounded, how he had begged, his desperate, breathless voice, and Jean didn't shy away, instead took him deeper, swallowing and licking him clean afterwards.

Dan lay panting, one arm flung above his head, the other loosely connected to Jean. Jean came up again and lay down right next to him, kissing his shoulder and arm. "Guess I get now why you and Solange and Vadim love getting fucked," he murmured.

Eyes still closed, Dan lay grinning for a while before he turned his head to look at Jean. "And? Does that change your mind?"

"Right now, my mind's not even there," Jean murmured, kissing his chest.



“Where is it?”

Jean reached up and touched Dan’s cheek, smiling. “Let me think about it,” he murmured, as if he’d realized it was a cop-out and Dan had seen right through it. “Shit, it does feel fucking amazing.”

Dan grinned, “it’s okay, you can think about it, as long as you like. Just don’t forget that it does feel good and that it isn’t about submitting, just about getting off, aye?”

“Yeah. That ... works.”

Twisting his head to kiss the hand that was caressing his cheek, Dan yawned. “Do you think they are coming to get us at some stage or can we risk a snooze?”

“I’ll risk it.” Jean nuzzled closer, resting his head on Dan’s shoulder, bodies touching, hand flat on the scars on his abs. “She knows this place is off limits.”

“And you are sure she has no idea?” Angling for a blanket, Dan managed to throw it over them.

“I sure as hell won’t ask her whether she knows.” Jean laughed softly.

“Damn good point.” Dan laughed, then yawned again, eyes falling shut. “Wake me when it’s time to shag Vadim.”

Jean laughed and relaxed at his side, drifting off with him.

\* \* \*

They returned to the main house later, deep in the night, to get cleaned up and rest some more, this time with their respective partners. When Solange went off to the long promised shoot for a few days, Dan, Vadim and Jean shared the same bed and when she returned, Jean had clearly regained most of his equilibrium, which made her hug Dan one night and kiss him, almost causing him to flush in return.

Saying their good-byes at last, under vows of not making it take that long before they’d meet again. Jean promised he would be drumming up interest amongst his former comrades for Dan’s idea. An idea which had over the course of their time together matured from Special Forces Association to Spa, the term invented by one of them, they couldn’t even remember, because SFA or Sfa sounded stupid, and Spa would be inconspicuous to civilian ears.

They arrived at Dan’s family just in time for Christmas Eve, laden with parcels and an overabundance of gifts, because Dan hadn’t been able to help himself. He’d gone on the first shopping spree in his life, when they’d arrived in Glasgow, and had spent a day buying too many gifts for Duncan, Mhairi and his nephews. Vadim said nothing, just smiled a little and indulged Dan, who didn’t have much of a clue what to get everyone and thus got one of everything that caught his interest, ‘just in case’.

They got into contact with the Glaswegian couple, still together and still living in the same flat with its impressive high ceilings, and who were delighted to hear from them again, making time in their pre-Christmas schedule for a little session of re-acquaintance. A session that left Dan hungry for more – but not

with anyone, only someone. And he was determined to set some ideas into motion.

Christmas turned out to be everything either of them could have hoped for, and there wasn't a single awkward moment when everyone retired the first night. It was just natural that Dan and Vadim had been placed in the guest room together, sharing the same double bed. A fact the nephews were glad about, because it meant they could all keep their rooms. Besides, they had been plied with a plethora of gifts – which had made Duncan and Mhairi cringe somewhat, but accept the abundance once they'd realised why Dan had gone so overboard.

New Year was a far more raucous affair than Vadim had imagined, the whole village celebrated Hogmanay with a band, plenty of whisky and haggis, neeps and tattis for all, singing Auld Lang Syne at the stroke of midnight and everyone seemingly hugging everyone else, while the fireworks went off into the clear cold sky above the majestic Highlands.

Dan had never thought that anything so domestic could feel so good, but when he went to sleep at the crack of dawn, filled with food and drink, he wrapped around Vadim and was simply happy. Once a peasant, always a peasant – and at one with his roots, for the first time in a lifetime.

**January 1995, Cape Town, South Africa**

The afternoon's Round Table had been the same as usual, apart from the most disturbing addition of a delegate from a certain resource-rich African country with 'interesting' human rights statistics and a propensity for military machinery. 'Re-structuring' as the man had called it.

Dan had been doing his best to appear politely interested, despite the never-ending palaver. The discussions had finally come to an end, like a painful abscess being removed in slow-motion, and the dignitaries and guests began to mingle. He was never quite sure what he hated more, the endless boredom of talks and counter-talks or the small talk and fake politeness afterwards. Still, he was doing his best to fit in. He had promised Vadim, and they did have to earn money, after all.

Despite his best behaviour, he'd have gladly killed that Colonel. The man had resumed flirting with Vadim, ostentatiously ignoring him while completely refusing to accept that Vadim was not interested and tried to get away. The man was like a leech. Once his jaws had closed into the flesh, he didn't let go. Vadim hadn't signed anything, nor replied to any of the countless emails and phone calls. It had become clear that Nelson simply ignored the fact that his attention was undesired.

Dan glanced over to the cosy little enclave of leather seats, next to the doors that led to the glass fronted balcony. The Colonel was leaning forward, touching Vadim's thigh, who not-so-subtly pulled his leg back, but Nelson simply leaned even closer. Dan's right fist curled beside him. He'd gladly amputate that bastard's hand, and he'd be happy to do it with a blunt knife.

He got up, dark eyes burning with anger. Walking towards the two men, he caught a glance from Vadim, who stood up, and in the motion the dark hand slid off the fine cloth of the suit. Vadim was making his excuses by the time Dan had arrived, and Dan watched Vadim leave for their hotel room. If he didn't know it better he'd have thought the Russian was escaping.

Damn. Alone with the fucker and unable to smash his arrogant face. Oxford education. Queen's English. University degrees and high-flying rank of some exotic country. Sex with Vadim. A goddamned stalker. Insane. Clearly. If only he could have met that man in the jungle, or desert, or in the mountains. He would have stripped the flesh from the bones.

Instead he was drawn into a conversation he didn't want. The 'few words' the Colonel asked for turned into the expected, when he elaborated on how Vadim had been offered a position he could not possibly refuse and he, Mr McFadyen should be reasonable and understand that their consultancy business was last decade if not century, and he was long overdue retirement, since his body had so obviously suffered that much physical trauma, he'd be no good to anyone anymore. It was all a matter of - short - time before the rag-bag of

ailments would fail, and he, Mr McFadyen, should have a serious word with Mr Krasnorada to ensure that he accepted the offer that was to everyone's benefit.

Dan was proud for not showing the wanker what that fucked-up hand could do and how much an artificial knee joint in the balls would hurt. He took a few deep drags from his cigarette and said nothing, not showing any reaction, until the Colonel added the sucker punch right below the belt.

"Mr McFadyen?" Lowered voice, dispassionate.

Dan looked up, the polite mask still on.

"In case you ever wondered, no, he did not call out your name while I fucked his tight white ass."

Violence surged into Dan. Bull's eye. But he now knew that nothing could destroy what he had with Vadim, no matter what this bastard said. He lowered his head for a moment, taking another deep drag of the fag, hiding the obvious emotions while knowing that the bastard knew he had won this round. But there'd be others. He exhaled the smoke into the Colonel's face. "You had his arse but you'll never have the man." He stubbed out the butt, turned and walked away without another word.

Dan went straight to the suite he shared with Vadim, grabbing one of the small bottles of beer from the mini fridge. He found his Russkie sitting in the study, flicking through one of the many newspapers and magazines.

Dan leaned against the wall, looking over to the leather suite, beer bottle dangling from the fingers of his fucked-up hand. "I was told I should have a word with you, to convince you that taking the job is for everyone's benefit."

Vadim looked up with a questioning face, folded the newspaper and put it on the glass table. "He doesn't get the message. I told him no. I'll keep telling him no." Vadim put the magazine down. "I'm sorry it got that far with him in the first place. But we were so far apart, and ..." He shrugged, not quite sure how to finish the sentence. "I just didn't want to beg you to have me back. All this guy needed was a nod. It was nice to be wanted. I couldn't know he was such a nutjob."

"Beg?" Dan stepped close and raised his hand, placing his fingertips on the old burn wound on Vadim's throat. "At the time I couldn't imagine you still wanted me." He gave a dry huff and wry smile.

"Wanted? Always." Vadim closed his eyes at the touch. "Especially as the farm is thirty minutes away from the nearest hooker."

"Cheers, wanker." Dan huffed a laugh, "that makes me feel so much better." Fingertips creeping along Vadim's jaw. "Mr Nelson pointed out I was a worn-out useless ex-grunt, ex-merc, ex-everything who belongs on the scrap heap."

Vadim flashed a grin at that. "He is wrong. You belong in my bed tonight. Or should we miss the evening networking occasion?"

"*Your* bed? I thought it's ours." Dan grinned, "We must not miss the networking event. This old battle horse 'enjoys' being blatantly ignored and besides, that old war horse," he prodded a finger at Vadim, "needs food or he won't perform tonight."

A dry laugh came from Vadim. “There is an invention called ‘room service’ and now I will spend the rest of the event thinking of sex. Much good that does me for networking.”

Dan smirked, “In that case, I should put a collar beneath that stupidly expensive shirt of yours. To make sure you remember you are mine while that fucker is flirting with you.”

“You didn’t actually bring any of those toys here?”

Dan’s fingers tightened on Vadim’s neck, the grin baring teeth and all, contorting the scar into interesting shapes. “You didn’t think I didn’t bring some of ‘these things’, did you? I might have had some interesting talks over the holidays in France and might have done a little shopping as a result of some of our shenanigans in Glasgow? I might be old, but I’m cunning.” He dropped the empty bottle onto the thickly carpeted floor, “and, of course, I am forever hopeful.” Moving his head closer, cheek against cheek, his own already stubbly again, waiting for its second shave. “I even let you pick my clothes tonight, if I have free reign on what I put you into.” Added, lower, “beneath the suit.”

“Don’t make me wonder what airport security thinks about your luggage x-ray,” said Vadim, tonelessly. Mail order made life simple, and sometimes very complicated indeed. He straightened, erection visible in that x-thousand dollar suit. He moved a little forward to cross all the distance that was left, could even be left now. Dan’s teeth found the side of his throat, hand on his shoulders, then around them; Vadim didn’t want to go to the dinner, fuck the next contract, the next fee, the next meeting.

“Nothing ... visible.” Vadim reiterated a rule that wouldn’t apply. A rule Hooch had set down with him. Everything was possible, as long as it wasn’t visible. Nevertheless, Dan made his skin burn, made him sweat with just words.

Dan nodded, agreed silently to rules they’d never set and wouldn’t need. It was a game, after all, but this was suddenly different, new, exciting. There was comfortable lust and sex that fit like a glove in well-known parameters of deepest intimacy, and then there was this. Something Vadim had said he wanted and that he was finally ready to give.

“Get yourself to the shower.” Dan stepped back reluctantly, the hard bulk in his black jeans a visible reminder of why he didn’t want to move away. “Tonight, Russkie, you’ll be *my* cunt, and you’ll remember that while the fucker is flirting.”

Vadim would have killed to open that fly and suck that cock, and the fact this was his first response, cut to the bone. It was just right, just the way he wanted that, there was the thought of punishment, well, yes, but more than that the deliciously evil glint in those dark eyes. Vadim looked pointedly down at the promise Dan was making. “Keep that thought,” he murmured, then managed to turn away, hard as hell, and headed into the bathroom of silver grey marble. He left the door open, grinned as he bent down to untie the laces. He never kicked the good shoes off like Dan did. Dan. Dan who had to be watching him.

Vadim prepared the enema, warm water, something ... everything always arousing about the preparations. Loved the feeling of being clean, even though

getting there took some getting used to. He then closed the door, didn't want to see Dan's preparations. He tried not to rush it, but it was difficult, warm water in his guts, the feeling of being full, stretched, then cleansed and cleaning, knowing Dan would fuck him and do more than that; he couldn't know what exactly, but he was ready.

He opened the door again, then stepped into the shower. Second part of getting clean. The shave was still fine, he had spent time in the bathroom just this morning. Plenty of time between five o' clock and the start of the conference, all the time in the world to be presentable.

He took a handful of the hotel's emerald green shower gel, quickly washed his short hair, one hand every now and then touching his cock, visible through the clear glass. He washed everything, though, arse, cock, foreskin – had never seen the point to get 'cut' as the Americans called it, even though he'd had his fair share of them by now. Especially Hooch. Always Hooch, Hooch who was suddenly in the forefront of his mind. Maybe because Dan had indicated the game was similar now.

He rinsed, then stepped out, hair and body wet, and returned to the suite. No towel. Just a little self-conscious about the things that weren't as perfect any more, a creeping softness around the waist as his body composition changed. Somehow, it wasn't as easy anymore to stay as defined as he'd been. Time was catching up with both of them, and however often he did those twisting crunches, he was no longer the Greek god. Ah, get over yourself. Or at least try, he thought.

Dan had only left his vantage point once the bathroom door had closed, before Vadim cleaned himself out. Couldn't claim that he liked the sensations himself, but had seen the point of 'fair was fair' and had got used to the occasional enema if what would follow was worth it. He still considered a night-long fist fuck as one of the highlights of his year.

He snatched a small square leather bag out of his suitcase, dropped it on the nearby glass table, having thrown his shoes and socks into one corner, jacket and fine shirt and token tie into three others. He stood in nothing but his jeans and waited until the door opened and Vadim stepped out. Water drops still clinging, glistening on skin that no man of forty-six should have, let alone one who'd been to hell and back, and who had the scars to prove it. Skin that was smooth and soft. Dan's legs were braced, and his face wore an evil grin. "Fucking hell, Russkie, you're not bad for an old war horse."

His body's reaction left no doubt about the sincerity. Forgetting about the discomfort of a prolonged hard-on in tight trousers, it would be hours, according to his plan, before he'd get rid of that. "Bend over," gesturing to the sofa. "I promised invisibility, and you'll get it, but your unruly cock is going to be your own problem." He took the bag and opened the zipper, spilling out its contents of toys. Some tried and tested, others his latest forage across those new internet adult shops. Pulling out something black and smooth, which belonged to the new and untested collection.

*Bend over.* Vadim stepped to the leather couch, expensive designer piece, caramel coloured Nubuck leather, stylish, with a good, firm back. He rested his arms on the back of the couch, forced his legs apart, feeling strange and erotic, mostly because Dan wasn't already pushing against him. Didn't really want to know or see what the thing was, wanted Dan's cock more than that, but then, he loved Dan getting into this mood, this light hearted and still very dark mood. Like with the Glasgow boys. He had used some Vaseline, slicked himself up like a whore, something that made his balls tighten every time.

"You're fucking perfect," Dan breathed out. That sight would never cease to steal his mind. The long, straight legs, massive thighs tapering towards narrow but strong hips. The powerful back, pronounced deltoid leading towards broad shoulders, and sculpted arms that had retained their chiselled shapes of muscles. The arse ...

He wanted to fuck him, so Very. Badly.

"What did he think when he saw your back." Dan murmured, stepping closer to run his hand over the landscape of scars. Tracing the letters. "Did he see what I see?"

Vadim shook his head. Nelson was the last thing he wanted to think about. The word. No way Nelson knew Russian.

"I want you to remember tonight," Dan quietly breathed those words close to Vadim's ear while brushing his fingertips over the scar on top of Vadim's inner thigh, "that you're mine, and I want you to feel that at every movement. When you stand, when you sit, when you walk." He stood so close, the dildo was more an extension of his trapped cock than an object in his hand. Smooth silicone, a size that would be felt for certain - discomfort, sensations, but never pain. He pushed with his hand trapped between Vadim and his own groin. "Consider this my cock, while the fucker is trying to get you, in front of my eyes."

Vadim closed his eyes, straightened the back, pushing against the thing invading him, could tell right away it wasn't fingers, too unyielding, felt it connect somewhere inside with his cock, and gave a low groan. Dan's words so erotic. Mine. Every moment. Shit. He'd be the ex-spetsnaz, the military advisor carrying that thing and being hard as rock. It should be humiliating. Mortifying. Instead it was as erotic as Dan's hand on his groin, in a restaurant, or a quick grope when people were close but ignorant. No, this was one step up. His face was burning, he wanted Dan close, inside, between his legs, in his hand, between his lips. Everywhere. "You think ..." Grammar leaving him, couldn't think in any structured way. "I should suck you?"

"No." Dan badly wanted Vadim's lips around his cock. "I want to." Truth, "want so badly, but no." He cleared his throat, could hardly see straight, let alone think. He stepped back, moved over to the bag and the faint sound of metal against metal was heard, before he returned to stand in Vadim's back. "Turn round."

Vadim straightened, felt that thing move inside him, and felt how his balls tightened, cock hard, twitching, every shifting of weight, every step. He'd go

'bonkers' tonight. He turned around to face his lover, looking oddly self-conscious. Feeling that thing there, and didn't dare check what it would do if he tensed his cheeks. It would move. Of course it would.

Dan smiled, said nothing, just moving his head to lick, suck and tease with teeth, lips and tongue those small nipples that never stopped to amaze him. Vadim was far more sensitive than he was, and he could spend hours laving and biting the minuscule focus of hardened flesh. He took his time, even though they had no more but twenty minutes.

Vadim moaned, hands running over Dan's head, his face, the small jolts of pain going to his heart, his throat, his groin, skin heating up, a hint of sweat forming, but above all, the sharp sensation of teeth, then tender again. He could never know what to expect, could never control it even if he pressed Dan's head against his chest. Wanted to pull Dan's head up to kiss him, only that that would make this teasing stop, and he didn't want that.

Dan looked back up, smiling. "I want you to remember the hours I'd spend with your nipples, and in return, the endless nights you'd take, fisting me."

Vadim grinned, then pulled up Dan's face and kissed him, open lips, hungry, but not claiming. Just a confirmation. Fisting. Unrestricted by his own endurance, test of stamina and trust more than tickling lust. He stared into Dan's eyes, nodding.

Dan took in an audible breath and positioned the small nipple clamps on the hardened flesh. Their effectiveness was increased by the moderate weights attached to them, which would make the metal tug and pull whenever Vadim moved.

A low hiss, body protesting, but then it was like biting, like a constant slow chewing. Which Vadim loved. Which would drive him up the walls in about five minutes. Vadim moved his right hand to touch the metal, just brushing it, and was surprised how much that changed. He looked at Dan, saw the rapt attention, the way Dan loved doing this.

Dan allowed him some time to adjust before producing the collar. Black leather, broad enough to make a statement that was beyond the physical sensation of restraint and belonging, and narrow enough to remain hidden beneath the shirt collar. "I want you to remember you're mine, and that you belong to me, as much as I belong to you, and none of that shit of last year will ever happen again. You truly are *mine*." Dan wound the black leather into a circle, letting out a dry laugh that transformed into a tender smile. "Consider it my wedding ring."

Vadim stared at the collar. Then blinked as the last word registered. Wedding. "Wouldn't ... there be some ... betrothal thing first?" Kept looking at the collar. Dark shirt. Definitely a dark shirt and the widest trousers he owned.

"I think we did the betrothal fifteen years ago." Dan smiled, saw the wide-eyed stare and sensed the reluctance. Tough shit. "You're mine, remember? Truly mine." He nudged Vadim to make him lower his head, so he could fasten the buckle. The collar sat tightly, not obstructing breathing, but making itself



known. Every. Single. Second, and with each breath. "I'd put you on a leash, if I could, to keep you from going off with anymore fuckers, but I guess that's out tonight." Dan smiled, taking a step back.

Vadim swallowed, felt the collar close enough to be there when he swallowed, when anything moved. It was like a strong hand around his neck. It shouldn't feel so fucking good. "It's ... a dinner, not a proper long party. Just ... stay close." Stay close so I can see how you're looking at me, knowing what's underneath. But you've always known what's underneath.

Dan glanced at the ormolu clock above the fire place. "Shit, ten minutes left. I guess you want me to wear the black tailored suit?"

"Yes."

Dan had to force himself away and hurry into the bathroom, to shed his trousers and jump under a cold shower. His hair would still be wet, couldn't be helped.

Vadim took the suit out and laid it on the bed, carefully selected his own, dark shirt, didn't want to risk the possibility the cloth might allow the leather to shine through. Dressed in his tight swimming trunks underneath, hoping that what was wrong with him wouldn't be so obvious then. He struggled with the cufflinks, Afghani lapis in silver, a private joke, he always carried some Afghanistan with him. Worked well with his usually blue shirts, which worked well with his eyes in the evening. Found the simple act of pulling a chain through a small square of silver impossibly complicated. Fuck, those cufflinks were a pain. He took the dark three piece suit he'd had tailored in Savile Row, London, checked the sheen on Dan's shoes, then his own, untied Dan's laces and put them in plain sight, then got dressed. Dinner. He didn't want to eat.

Dan managed to force his cock back down, and then a quick shave to be presentable. Once in the bedroom, he chose to wear tight briefs this time, his own state would be easier to bear if he didn't have to fear forming an embarrassing tent beneath the finely tailored cloth. Dressing within four minutes, even the bowtie was accurate after the first go, shoes polished and on his feet, he rummaged in his laptop bag before he left the room.

When he stepped out of the bedroom he looked worlds apart from his usual self: a middle aged man, grey temples and fit body, aging disgracefully, but right now immaculate and refined, superbly dressed in the most expensive suit that had been cut to show off in an understated way the maturing elegance of his body. Finest black cloth, chosen by Vadim.

Moving his hands, he wound the prayer beads of Afghani lapis lazuli around his wrist. The left one. The fucked one. He looked expectantly at Vadim. "Ready?"

Vadim heard the faint clicking of the deep blue polished rock around Dan's wrist, and thought that's it. Cufflinks for me these days, but you didn't change. Right now you're SAS in a suit. And you never realised how the tailor stared at you while taking measurements. Because you just don't get it, just don't understand what you're doing to innocent bystanders. "Copy, Sir," he said with

a smile. "I am, but you aren't." He indicated his own chest and nodded at Dan. "You said whatever I make you wear."

"I'm not?" Dan's eyes followed the hand, "you sure?" Stupid question, and Dan nodded, turning to retrieve the panel, fixing it in front of the mirror to the left of his chest at perfect height. It was strange to wear them, all those coloured ribbons, above the impressive collection of medals. Active service here there and everywhere, bravery and show of courage, enemy action and the Queen's thanks to one of her own, and, of course, the American Bronze Star with Valour Device. He smoothed them down and realised they meant nothing, but the man reflected in the mirror, he meant everything.

"Let's give them hell." Vadim stood, wanted to get closer and kiss Dan, but knew he'd push him against the wall and grind against him. Instead, he took Dan's scarred hand, and placed a kiss on the wrist, pressed it for a long moment, then took the keycard and opened the door, holding it open for Dan.

Dan looked at his hand with surprise, said nothing, just smiled and stepped through the door. Moving so close, his chest 'accidentally' brushed against Vadim's, manipulating the nipple clamps in the process. "Thirty seconds left, how fast can you walk?"

Vadim wouldn't have been able to lock the door. Sliding a keycard into a lock would have been too much. Catching his breath. What motherfuckers when they got touched. He blinked, staring at Dan, managed to move, feel the thing inside. He'd go insane before they had reached the elevator.

Fast ...? Not fast at all. Right now there was no strength left in his legs. He'd suffer a heart attack if Dan went on like that. He was approaching the age bracket for that kind of death. Oh fuck you, Dan. "We won't be the ... last to arrive."

"And neither the last ones to come." Dan grinned at his truly awful pun, stopping Vadim before he turned towards the elevator. "If military time keeping is not of importance, we have another moment." He looked along the deserted corridor before pushing Vadim's shirt collar down with two fingers hooked into the front. Revealing the collar but not the scar, hidden below the smooth leather. He leaned forward, kissed the edge where skin touched leather, lingering with his lips. "I hope you remember CPR." He had to adjust his groin after straightening the shirt collar.

Vadim closed his eyes, the thought shocking that the collar was visible, the cameras in this place might not pick it up, too grainy, he hoped. Please let it be too grainy. "You tease. You fucking tease," he breathed.

Taking in a deep breath, Dan ignored the flush of heat in his face. "Let's go," adding, "slowly." Walking towards the elevator he had his hand resting loosely on Vadim's hip, and he didn't give a shit if anyone was watching.

Hitting the button for the elevator, Vadim managed to breathe again. The door slid open, and there were General X and Advisor Y, he couldn't remember the names, not right now, greeting them with a smile and asking about the dinner's menu. One was concerned about the quality of the seafood, the other

punned on oysters, and Vadim saw Dan grin at that. Oversexed. Underfucked. Kinky. Those three words spelt hell.

Dan was his most charming self. A far cry from the usual irreverent former merc, he smiled at the General, made a small joke to the Advisor and chuckled duly at the pun about the oysters. It was easy to slip on the fake skin, when he was occupied with something very different. Suddenly all those old men in suits and uniforms didn't count, and couldn't annoy him.

His hand, hidden from view, pressed right against the mirrored elevator wall, slipped onto Vadim's arse, fingers moving down and pushing against the flat end of the dildo, creating tiny movements inside the body.

Vadim thought his knees would give. His arse tensed at that movement, and his face was flushed, always betraying what he felt, fucking pale skin. Mind drifted, cock hard, he felt like he had been hard all his life, all the time. Dan's hand between his arse and the smooth steel of the elevator cabin. Minuscule movements. His lips opened, he found it hard to pretend he was even there.

The elevator doors opened just in time, and they stepped out into the foyer of the glittering dining room. Dan let his hand slip away, the lapis lazuli making a faintly clinking noise.

Vadim brought his hand up to touch his face, no sweat yet, but he looked like he had spent a couple hours in the gym and then sauna and was trying to cool down. While he was still heating up, thanks to Dan.

It seemed the two gentleman were somewhat surprised at Vadim's quietness, but they left to mingle, like everyone else, with promises of meeting and talking and they could see some missions on the horizon that would require two specialist advisors and wouldn't it be beautiful in Madrid in spring, and the Seine was stunning in September, and the delights of Brussels should not be underestimated, and so on.

Vadim remained silent, focusing on not moving. His smile had to be weak, he thought, but he just felt the collar. And it was easier to ignore a bullet in the guts than that thing Dan had shoved into him. Thought everybody had to see what was wrong with him. What was right with him. He kept looking at Dan, who managed to do the movements; social graces rediscovered that Vadim had not been sure Dan possessed at all.

Dan turned to Vadim when they were alone, taking two glasses of French champagne from the waiter, he handed one across. "You know what they say about champagne, goes side by side with the oysters."

Vadim could see his hand was unsteady and he tossed the champagne back like it was vodka, only to get rid of the glass. Best way to keep up appearances. "No oysters. I hate those slimy bitches."

Dan grinned, took a sip from the champagne and spied a dark face and gold-glittering entrance. The anger was immediate, and he hissed through his teeth. "And here's the fucker. Right on cue."

Vadim half-turned, saw Nelson, who in turn saw him, and could feel his body constrict again, as Nelson moved over to greet them. Most probably to

only greet him and try to get into his pants again. "Don't use that word," he murmured in Russian. "Hard enough as it is."

"What, 'cue'?" Deliberately being obnoxious, "or 'fucker'?" Dan murmured while smiling his most charming smile - the one reserved for traitors, liars and bastards or bitches. He kept to Russian, the safest mode of communication. "I'll be on my best behaviour tonight, I promise I won't rip his balls off bare handed and stuff them down his throat."

His hand stayed connected with Vadim, a light - possessive - touch at the small of his back, when he decided that attack was the best defence. "Good to see you again, Colonel Nelson. I am sure you will be delighted at this evening's new developments."

"A fair evening to you." The tone of voice made it abundantly clear it was Vadim he had greeted, exclusively. Nelson glanced at Dan, a longer glance at Vadim, and the beginning of a smile, then, with an annoyed motion of his head, back to Dan. "New developments? Pray tell, Mr McFadyen. Did you take the advice on board?"

"Oh aye." Dan smiled incredibly politely, letting his hand slip lower for just a second, before too many in the room could detect the motion of his fingers that grabbed hold of Vadim's finely clad arse before moving back into position. "I have taken your advice into consideration. I have indeed, but it is up to Vadim to talk to you, is it not?" Dan nodded to Vadim, taking a step to the side and his hand slid off the suit fabric, the prayer beads flashing.

Nelson smiled, glad that Dan was making his excuses and made a gesture as if dismissing him and saying, no, I don't mind, not at all.

"I will be at the bar." Dan smiled, but it never hit his eyes. "I shall see you later." At Vadim, no second glance at Nelson, and he walked off to the bar at the other side of the room.

Nelson stepped closer, nearly within whispering range, that knowing smile on his features, knowing and sexy. Provocative. That thing in Vadim's body made him desperate to get fucked, desperate for release. Nelson's proximity was tantalising, he knew Nelson expected nothing but "yes please" and would fuck him right away, but the thing Dan had said helped him fend that thought off. *My cock. Dying to fuck you. I'll be dying to fuck you.*

"Did you think about my offer? I'm aware of your former attachments, but I do not think you bear any further obligations."

No, no longer obliged. No longer owing anything. Apart from his sanity. They'd come clean. "I did." Speaking wasn't easy. Vadim saw a question in Nelson's eyes, and it was not about his decision. It was probably why his breath was coming so hard. Both Nelson and Dan could rule, control his body. Right now, that collar was Dan's. Would always be Dan's. Shit, he'd come close enough to consider Nelson, but then the mountains. Don't forget the fucking mountains. And the fact the man was a freak. "I can't take the offer, I'm sorry. It was a ... gracious offer, but we are planning to retire fairly soon, and I'm ... not sure I can commit myself as much as the job demands. I can't start a restructuring and then leave because I'm getting too old and tired."

Nelson's lips twitched with anger, then curved into a dangerous smile. "Old and tired? Mr. Krasnorada, please." Like he'd been joking. Haha, very amusing; now, cut the crap. He moved even closer, so close Vadim could smell his breath. Spices, and the hot breath of a predator. "I'd enjoy showing you that you are neither old nor tired. What a misconception, but a delicious illusion to shatter." There were chains and leather in that voice, and Vadim's cock jumped. Shit. He got an inkling of what Nelson was into. Probably less playful than Dan, and a hell of a lot darker. Nelson wouldn't take a no. Nelson was set on his target, and whatever the target said was of no consequence. Fucking creep. "We could discuss this in my room."

"I'm actually quite hungry." What a fucking weak excuse. I'm horny as hell, but not quite enough to want anybody but Dan.

"Later, then?" It wasn't a question. It was an order. Only appearances kept Nelson civil.

"Did you understand anything I said?" asked Vadim, growing more desperate.

Nelson was close enough to sear his skin. "It's not your last word. I promise." He turned around and left, smiling. Vadim shivered. This was getting out of control. Seriously out of control.

Across the room, Dan was leaning against the bar, his eyes on the two men. One white. One black. One loved. One loathed. One his own and the other a loose cannon. Pretending to be interested in the canapés, Dan had been eating one after the other, barely recognising their taste. His eyes narrowed when he saw Nelson turn and leave, the facial expression on Vadim made him grow tense. He dropped his hand beside the plate and raised his head, looking straight across and right at Vadim. Brows raised. Eyes dark.

Vadim looked at Dan, and turned to join him at the bar. The expression in his eyes. He needed him, needed him badly. He moved close enough so his thigh touched Dan's. "Fucking creep. I'll tell you later." Half turned to look at Dan, his eyes spelt out need in the biggest letters possible.

Dan didn't move, just stood, felt Vadim's body close to his own, body heat and touch. "We're not done here." His lips slowly curved into a smile, the scar on his cheek twisting like a snake.

Vadim swallowed, nodded, had no idea how to survive the dinner with that thing in his body. Would try. Needed to try. No alternative.

"But I think I need to piss." Dan's hand that had lain beside the plate lifted, hovered, then brushed accidentally across Vadim's chest, touching one of the nipple clamps. "Don't you?"

Vadim nearly jumped, the sharp jolt of heat went straight to his groin. He nodded, breathless, couldn't breathe, needed, would suck Dan right here on the spot, anything, needed him worse than life. "Yeah. Too much ... drink." Didn't believe for a moment that he'd pulled it off convincingly, hoped he'd get fucked on the toilet, please, couldn't wait.

Dan turned casually, glancing over his shoulder. "Of course, in this fine establishment, one should behave impeccably at all times." Walking towards the

toilets, knowing Vadim was at his side. “Thus I will make sure I’ll behave perfectly, to make you proud. Not the scruffy, out-of-whack ex-squaddie, aye?”

Vadim hoped, prayed – and he still had nothing to pray to – that Dan was joking.

Dan held the door open that led to the gold and porcelain gleaming toilets. Stepping into Vadim’s way when he passed, to push his full body length into the other, which made Vadim groan, and bite back that sound when Dan whispered into his ear. “A squaddie would fuck you, bent over the loo, but a gentleman just watches you piss.”

“I can’t ...” Vadim looked at Dan, spied himself in the mirror, flushed, so clearly needy, if one cared to read the signs. He’d do anything to get Dan to do that, be the fucking dirty squaddie, fuck him right here, pull that thing out and fuck him till he screamed. “Can’t ... piss. Dan. Just block the door. Do it.” He reached for Dan’s chest, placed his flat hands against the fine cloth, felt the pecs vibrate underneath. “Stalls. Over there...” Nodded the direction.

“No.” Dan smiled, but it cost him a lot of self-control to say that word. He was hard and wanted nothing but the exact same thing that Vadim was begging for: to fuck him till he screamed. But the power was headier, and the control won. Control over himself and the other.

Vadim closed his eyes. Couldn’t bear it. Didn’t want to beg again.

“You won’t come. Not yet. You’ll come when I tell you.” Dan leaned against the door, hoping no one tried to enter in the next few minutes. “You’re mine.” Both hands grabbed Vadim’s arse, pulling him closer. Cock against cock, both trapped in finest cloth, and Vadim couldn’t breathe, just couldn’t, he pressed against him, felt Dan so hard, so hot, just as needy, only that Dan didn’t have that thing inside that drove him insane. And just as he’d thought that, Dan’s fingers were wandering lower, deeper, pressing into the cleft and applying pressure, which forced a sound out of Vadim, a needy groan, and he pushed against that hand, the dildo inside shifted, pressed against him now slightly differently, which was unbearable. Manipulating the power.

“You’ll come when I let you, do you copy, Major?” Dan had no idea where the last bit came from, grinding against Vadim’s groin. “Understood?”

Vadim’s eyes opened again, pupils like those of a junkie on a bad cocktail, he hardly managed to breathe. Major. So long ago, yet it still got under his skin. “Yessir.” Dan had no rank, no commission. Never had one, sergeant, no, staff sergeant. SAS didn’t use such high ranks. Nevertheless, Dan was “Sir” now. Worse, higher, more powerful than any Colonel. “Request ... permission to ...suck you, Sir.” What the fuck? Why? How? What? His body tensed, he didn’t actually want even *more* humiliation.

Yes he did.

“Permission granted.” Dan cursed himself, but pushed Vadim away and towards the stalls. Blowjob. From Vadim. Vadim begging for it. Holy fuck, he thought his mind was getting blown to bits, alongside his cock.

Vadim almost rushed to it, mind racing, the offer had been taken, fuck, he wasn't up to this, he wanted to come, didn't want Dan to come, it wasn't about him taking control, control was pure mockery now. What was going on?

Dan followed, slipped into the stall. The stalls were high enough, the doors and top panelling went up to the ceiling. No one would see if he had to climb onto the seat to get rid of a pair of legs that weren't supposed to be in there.

Vadim locked the door, flushed, burning, his balls so full and heavy, cock straining, he needed to come. But it was impossible. Into this suit? Here? On the fucking toilets? He faced Dan.

"Kneel." Dan opened his fly, all the time watching Vadim. Couldn't remember when last he'd been so desperate and so motherfucking horny.

Vadim stared, was about to kneel anyway, that was the way to do it, but Dan's tone of voice. Suggesting something much darker. Shit. No protest. Instead: "Yessir." Dan was as hard and ready as he felt: thick cock, the veins, so hard the foreskin was pulled back all the way, bared the head. Vadim knew it wouldn't take long, not the way Dan was tense. He knelt, eye to eye with Dan's cock, the thing he wanted, craved, inside, taking his sanity away. Opened his lips, tried to focus, then Dan's voice again, breathless, "suck me."

Vadim took the cock, took it in one swift motion, heat and fullness and throbbing strength. The taste, took it deeper, as if to defy himself, and how much he wanted to do this, suck Dan like a hooker on the toilet.

Dan didn't let out a sound, remained absolutely silent, but he lost all pretence of self-control when he stared down at the scene. Fuck. He needed to come, and it wasn't going to take more than a couple of minutes. No way he could deny himself.

Vadim opened his legs to steady himself, broad stance on his knees, and it never occurred to him to touch Dan – only with his mouth, his lips, his tongue. Eyes closed, but no focus coming, hoped he'd be allowed to come if he did well.

Dan tried to hold onto something, but Vadim's short-shorn hair was useless and the collar was hidden beneath the shirt, taking hold of the suit instead. "You'll wear a collar ... with metal rings." Breathless, staccato words, eyes as dark as they were narrowed, focussing on the sight of his cock pushing deeper and deeper into Vadim's mouth. "To hold onto when I fuck your throat," a twist of his hips and he forced his cock deeper, "my cunt."

Every word made Vadim tense more, he was trying to relax, but the mentioning of the collar tightened his throat. He wasn't in control. He couldn't relax. Instead, he tensed. The wrong thing. Completely the wrong thing. Felt the tightness of the suit, Dan's powerful hand, felt Dan breach and enter, force himself inside, against the constricting throat, and Vadim struggled to not panic. Closed his eyes, breath shut off as Dan got past, inside his throat, Vadim's hands formed fists, like a bloody beginner losing it, losing control, something in his throat, not a sound, like tension, maybe he did whimper, forced himself to suck, to comply, to accept, when he was sweating hard and nowhere near control or skill. Raw.

Dan was losing it, just seconds, not even minutes, no more than a few hard thrusts, fucking that throat as if pounding into Vadim's arse, and then he crushed Vadim's head and face against his groin as he came, groaning, biting his lip, shuddering, almost losing balance.

Vadim felt the pressure, the power, the strength, couldn't breathe, didn't quite panic, fought it, fought it like he was diving, struggled weakly, throat tightening uncontrollably as Dan's seed shot into it, ran straight down his throat. He could feel it like vodka, burning, hands found Dan's thighs, flat hands, fuck, and he wanted to come, could feel how close he was. Denied.

Too good feeling the tremors slowly subside while still lodged deep down the throat, but Dan moved and slid his cock out from between those lips, panting, shuddering, fighting every sound along the way.

Given breath, Vadim pulled back, panting, head resting against Dan's thigh.

"Oh fuck." Dan groaned out, unable to stall the trembling, not yet. "Stand. I can't allow you to come, if I did ..." He was cut off when the door to the toilets suddenly opened, and the sound of voices was heard. He tensed for a heartbeat, then quickly stepped onto the closed toilet seat, crouching and sitting on his heels. Two pairs of legs wouldn't do. His lips twitched as he mouthed, "Silence."

Vadim reached for the stall partition, steadied himself as he stood, could still smell, taste, feel the heat in his mouth, the need that raged on. He looked at Dan, didn't have the force left in his body to ask for release again, hoped Dan would show mercy. Humour crept into the need – what atrocious timing. Those guys would have noticed if the timing had been just a few seconds off.

A second voice started talking. Nelson. The fucking bastard. Reaching out, Dan cradled Vadim's head, pulling it closer until his lips touched the other's ear, murmuring, "You're mine."

Vadim leaned his head against Dan's shoulder, didn't want to hear the voices, but of course he did. The thought of Nelson was unbearable, that sphinx-like expression, the man just oozed confidence and aggression, and why had he ever thought that attractive? He looked at Dan's eyes, fierce now, and nodded. "Aye," he murmured, tonelessly.

Dan moved his head a fraction, and his lips covered the Vadim's. Tongue snaking between Vadim's lips, keeping it deep, making a silent statement with want and need. How fucking romantic, making out to the sound of pissing.

Vadim's hands moved over Dan's chest, the expensive cloth whispering, and his eyes were closed, shutting out everything and everybody but Dan. Dan, always Dan, who was there, who was everywhere around him, life, soul, essence.

The two men finally finished, water was flushing and then the sound of steps and taps running at the wash basins. Dan slowed the kiss, drank in Vadim's reckless distress through the heat of his lips, tongue, teeth and mouth, and then stilled when the door moved. First one, Nelson's voice again, then the other.

Dan's knees were killing him, crouched too long in the position, but the pain was worth it. "Time to head back to dinner." He broke the kiss and murmured. His face was flushed when he stepped less-than gracefully off the toilet seat.



“Time to keep up the pretence, time to show the asshole who you belong to, and time to let my decrepit old body get ready to fuck you.” Dan smirked, leaned closer, standing, hands brushing down over Vadim’s chest, touching nipple clamps while smoothing fabric. “I can’t let you come.” Murmured, head moving in, lips whispering along Vadim’s jaw. “Even if I wanted. If you came, the dildo inside you would kill you, and I’d rather have you gagging for my cock, coming without touching your own. I want to fuck you, bent over that sofa.”

Vadim groaned, closed his eyes, was sure he couldn’t move, wouldn’t move, would relieve himself if given half a chance. He hadn’t been so horny for something like twenty years. He nodded, dazed, couldn’t move, felt his lips burning and swollen, his throat raw. “Make it ... quick. Just ... make it quick, yes?”

Dan nodded. “Aye. As soon as possible, but you just brought this middle aged body over the edge, it’ll need some time.” He brought a hand between their bodies, palm flat against the outline of Vadim’s cock, which made the Russian shudder and press into his hand.

“Stop ... teasing. Need ...”

“I think you need some cold water.” Dan murmured, then shook his head with a wink while unlocking the stall door.

Water? Nothing made sense. Vadim needed to come, that was all he needed. Everything else was nonsense.

“Sucking cock in the loos, my, my, what has happened to you, Officer.” Dan’s head was snaking forward to lick once more across Vadim’s lips. He fucking loved and lusted and wanted that man so much right now, he wondered if he had it all written across his face I love you, Russkie. I fucking need you. Until I bloody well die.

“Major, in fact,” said Vadim, and wanted to say take me, finish me off, stay here, close that fucking door. The humour helped with pulling himself together. He adjusted himself, was tempted to do more, but he’d win the game. Or at least not lose it.

Pushing the door open, Dan’s voice rumbled as he whispered into Vadim’s ear. “Seems you prefer me as the reckless ex-squaddie and not the gentleman, eh?” He brought his palms lightly against the nipple clamps. “Shame I have to play the part of the latter right now.”

“Always did,” said Vadim, pressing down on the moans. His whole body felt raw, tensed to the max, reaching to touch those hands on his chest, hold them there for a moment – which kept Dan from torturing him more – and kissed him again. No thoughts. No thinking, just Dan, his own body, dying to come. He wasn’t hungry. No way he could sit down on that thing inside and pretend he was alright. Impossible that nobody would smell the frustrated lust by now.

A click and the sound of the door opening made Dan swiftly step back and half-turn towards the wash basin. The elderly man who stepped into the room looked somewhat taken aback, before quickly heading towards one of the stalls. Dan glanced at Vadim with a smirk, as he murmured under his breath, “you

think the smell reminded him of anything, or you think it's been too long ago since he 'got it'?"

Vadim shook his head, desperate to try and deal with the frustration. "Couldn't ... care less," he murmured, managing at least to head to the wash basin and wash his hands, looking in the mirror for a moment. That feverish look in his eyes. The flush. A slight sheen of sweat. It was so fucking obvious what was wrong with him.

Dan's face turned up in the mirror beside him, looking into his eyes through the reflection. Dark brown in pale blue, until Dan ran a caressing hand down Vadim's back and turned away, but not without murmuring, "I love you."

"Yeah. And I ... you." Vadim tried a brave smile, but it was pained.

Holding the door open, Dan waited until Vadim had stepped through. Together, side by side, walking back into the main area, where the illustrious assembly of men and a few women was ready to be seated at the table. Of course, as expected, Nelson had managed to get a seat next to Vadim, but Dan had ensured that he was sitting opposite to Vadim, and when it was time to take their seats, his eyes were only on the man in front of him. A small feral grin flashed across his face the moment Vadim sat down – knowing what that did to him and his body.

Vadim was sweating, lips tight as he pressed them together, to keep any sound from escaping.

"Are you alright, Mr Krasnorada?" Nelson asked softly, leaning in, hand on Vadim's arm.

"Yeah." Vadim's words were strained. He didn't meet Nelson's eyes, kept his gaze lowered as he shifted closer to the table, wincing again.

The table was broad enough to make it difficult to reach across and touch, with silverware and flower decorations between them, but Dan leaned slightly forward, inclining his head. "Vadim felt somewhat chilly earlier, perhaps he is getting a cold?" His leg stretched out until his foot touched Vadim's.

"You look positively ill," said Nelson, frowning with concern. His hand continued to be on Vadim's arm, then he leaned in to whisper something to him, while Dan's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing, because he knew that the collar was there and what it meant.

Vadim could smell him as Nelson breathed: "maybe you want to retire to ... a room?" The hand slipped off his arm, and landed on his thigh again, as if by accident. Vadim stiffened, didn't want Nelson to guess what that 'illness' was, then heard him whisper: "My god, you're shaking."

Vadim nodded again, didn't trust his voice enough. Thankfully, the first course arrived and Nelson had to take his hands off – at least for the moment.

"I must admit," Dan made conversation even though he was perfectly aware that the last thing Nelson wanted was to talk to him, and a clearly annoyed side glance verified that suspicion. "I have been feeling somewhat under the weather as well." Smiling as if he hadn't noticed anything, he nodded towards Vadim, making sure the pressure of his foot on Vadim's remained steady. A reassuring presence. "It must have been all that time spent in the hardware store. Have you

ever been to a hardware store?” Looking innocent-eyed at Nelson. “Do you know the different gauges of steel? The available thicknesses of chains?”

“Chains? What would you need chains for?”

“Oh, we have been redoing our house in New Zealand recently, and you’d be surprised to learn how many versatile uses chains can have.” Smiling politely, Dan raised his glass of white wine before taking a mouthful, then concentrating once more on his first course.

Nelson looked at Vadim, who’d flushed deeper red. That was all the clues Nelson needed. He wasn’t stupid, and he was into similar games. He grinned, predatorial, his attention on Vadim, then leaned in closer. “Cold blue steel on reddened heated skin,” he whispered, which made Vadim suppress a groan.

Dan watched the exchange, every reaction, while carefully keeping track of time. It wouldn’t do to make Vadim suffer for too long, but they did have to stay at least until the main course. “I see, you have been into DIY as well?” Addressing Nelson, with the same perfectly polite smile. The man was starting to give away some hints, and every little bit would help the Baroness to find the dirt that would break this bastard’s neck.

“Yes, that, and training.” Nelson gave him a bright smile. “Horses, dogs, men.” He gave a laugh, as if the last one had been a joke.

Dan smiled back. There! They were getting somewhere, and wouldn’t Maggie be interested in all those tidbits. “Men? Gosh, Colonel, what a remarkable pastime. I can see that you must be an extraordinary man. Wherever did you pick up such a hobby?” He chuckled, as if he had made an equally amusing joke, while the first course was taken off the table.

“The military is all about training men to override their natural responses.” Nelson smiled. “Of course, ex-practitioners like you gentlemen would know more about that than I do.”

“Indeed, but it does depend on the military, does it not?” Dan nodded towards Vadim. “And of course, the training can well extend above and beyond the military duty and service.” Dan held his glass up for a refill.

“Some see training as a way of life.” Nelson’s eyes were all over Vadim, who didn’t meet his gaze, and hardly managed to eat. Anything tasted like cardboard while there was a much stronger sensory input overriding everything.

Taking a sip, Dan’s eyes remained steady on Nelson. “I assume a man of your calibre, Colonel, would be more inclined towards the training.”

Nelson nodded, curtly. “Of course.”

“Good luck hunting, in that case.” Still smiling, Dan made a swift decision, and the next moment he exclaimed under his breath, “oh goodness, me.” Appearing flustered, he leaned across to Vadim. “I am afraid I forgot something vital and I need your assistance.”

Vadim nodded, lips pressed together. He was too far gone to even play that game, join the charade, when he got up and manoeuvred away from the table.

It was Dan, then, who met Nelson’s angry glare straight on, apologising with the choicest words he could find. “I am sure, Colonel, that you will enjoy your hunt. Question is, who will win.” He apologised left and right and headed out,

following Vadim. They had barely stepped out of the room, when Dan fell in stride with Vadim, despite the limp, commenting under his breath, “holy fuck, any more of this bullshitting and my head explodes.” Getting them towards the elevator.

“*Your* head?” Vadim managed to get out, quickly stepping into the elevator when the doors slid open.

Dan turned to grin ferally. “Don’t think it is your *head* that is about to explode.”

“Same ... no, worse, here. Don’t make me go back,” Vadim whispered.

The doors slid shut behind them. “No, I won’t.” The moment the elevator moved, Dan pulled Vadim close, crushing the nipple clamps between their bodies, his lips sought Vadim’s, his tongue demanded immediate entrance, and Vadim gave the groan of a dying man. Nelson hadn’t lied, he *was* shaking, with denial.

The minute it took to reach their level, Dan put everything there was into that kiss, pressing his groin against Vadim’s. His own urgency had been lessened, but the lust was there, simmering. He pulled away when the bell announced they’d reached their level, and took Vadim’s hand, pulling him into the deserted corridor. He said nothing until they’d reached their suite and he’d opened the door with the key card, and let Vadim in. Shutting the door behind them, he leaned against it. “Undress.”

Vadim fumbled with the clothes like a drunken man, his precision was gone, but he managed, no hesitation, no pause, pulling the fine tailored clothes off like they were enemies clinging to his body, and soon stood there, naked, flushed, desperately aroused.

Dan said nothing for a long time, just watching him, and taking in the sight. Perfection, no matter how many men he’d conquer, no one would be like Vadim. He’d always known that. “Come here.”

Vadim walked towards him, eyes dark with need and want. He opened his lips to say something, but didn’t. Didn’t have any words really for a moment like this.

Dan smiled, looking into the pale eyes, darker than usual, now wild with need. “You’re mine.” Fingertips caressing the black leather of the collar where it contrasted with the skin. “Turn. Then bend over.”

Vadim turned, bent over, glanced towards the couch, then looked behind himself at Dan, whose hand reached out for the dildo, the other hand steadying on the hip. Slowly and carefully twisting, then pulling out almost all the way before teasingly pushing it back in, which made Vadim groan and jerk back. “Do you want my cock?”

“Yes. Please.” Vadim swallowed dryly. “Have ... wanted nothing else all day.”

“Then what are you going to do to earn it?” The dildo poised, remaining inside for another moment.

Vadim groaned. “Whatever you want. Anything. Whatever. Please, Dan.”

“Do you know what it means that you’ve accepted the collar?”

Vadim reached up as if to pull at it. “Means ... I’m yours,” he whispered. “Please, Dan.”

The dildo finally moved, and Dan pulled it out, discarding it to the side. “You are mine, but it means even more than that.” Pulling Vadim back up to stand, Dan crushed him close, bare back pressed against the expensive suit, as his fingers lightly moved the clamps and touched the long-tortured nipples. “It means that if I told you not to touch your cock and not to come, you wouldn’t. It means that if I told you to go get yourself fucked by the next man who comes along, while I watch, then you would. And it means that if I tied you up and left you there, fucking your arse and throat whenever I pleased, for days in a row, then ... I would.”

Vadim shuddered, eyes closed. Any stranger. Control over his orgasm, his body. Tied up, left. Fucked and used. He groaned at that, his cock twitched. “Yes.” Licking his lips. “Sir.”

Dan shivered, the ‘Sir’ always did that, as long as it came from Vadim. And that was what he wanted, beginning to understand where those ‘games’ had led to, and that some of them, like this now, and like the letter carved into flesh and the collar around Vadim’s throat, were far more than games. As real and as intense as anything Vadim did with Hooch. “I want you bent over the couch, legs spread, arms wide.” Whispered into Vadim’s ear. “Understood?”

“Yessir.” Vadim headed to the couch, bent over it, shuddering hard, which made his muscles ripple. He spread his arms, taking hold of the back rest, then forced himself to step back, and bend in almost a 90 degree angle.

“I won’t be done with you after this.” Dan’s low voice had turned husky, taking in the sight and the knowledge that Vadim really and truly was his – as long as he wore the collar. Just a piece of leather? No, as much as a bullet and a string of lapis lazuli beads, and more beyond. Stepping close, he reached for the lube he’d left on the couch, squeezing a generous amount into his hand and warming it, before working three fingers without preliminaries into Vadim’s arse. Muscle loosened and ready from the dildo. “As long as you wear the collar you are mine. In every possible sense of the word. You understand?”

Vadim was shaking, his legs weak, and it took him too much focus to remain standing when the fingers were pushed in. “Yessir. I’m yours.” His knuckles paled from the force he used to hold onto the couch.

Unseen from Vadim, Dan’s lips parted, then moved into a smile, while pulling down his zipper and opening the button, pushing down the briefs. He stroked his cock a few times to full hardness. Pulling the fingers out, he swiftly coated his cock, tip touching the ring of muscle. Just staying there, waiting.

Vadim groaned, looked over his shoulder, when Dan hesitated, didn’t do what he’d anticipated, not as expected, then realized what it was. “Sir, Please ... would you fuck me? Use me, Sir.”

It was Dan’s turn then, to shudder and pull in a sharp, hissing breath. His cock jumped and his voice was breathless. “Aye, I will fuck you.” Pushing forward, he didn’t need brute force, just unyielding strength, to push all the way

in, until his groin touched Vadim's muscular buttocks, in one, long stroke. Letting out a groan when he was deeply embedded.

Vadim's response was beyond his control, his body tightening, tensing with force, as the stimulation very nearly tipped him over the edge, but he didn't quite get there.

Pulling out almost completely, Dan thrust back in, and the force of his body made the nipple clamps move and pull harshly on the oversensitive flesh. Pushing in hard enough to feel his balls slap against the tensed buttocks. Going from naught to full-out, Dan took a strong grip of Vadim's hips and started to fuck him with all his need, his stamina increased by having come before. Vadim clenched around him, suppressing groans, like his body was so tense that he could hardly breathe, and it shook him head to toe, when the onslaught finally did get him there, got him over the edge, and he came, knees very nearly buckling under his weight and the immense, blinding relief and near-anguish of climax.

Dan was almost there when Vadim's climax took him along, muscles clenching, the body under his hands shuddering without any control, and he almost came, too, but he pulled out, the effort almost painful. Standing, with legs braced, cock jutting hard and weeping. "Kneel and suck me dry." Forcing the words out when all he wanted was to groan with need.

It was easy going down on his knees. Vadim was dizzy, but followed the order, glad he could kneel because he didn't trust his knees to support him. Glad, at the same time, he'd been clean, so the only taste was that of lube and Dan, and Vadim could feel how close Dan was, forcing himself to take the cock deep, almost in one stride, into his throat, his body protesting as he was still panting and wanted the oxygen, which was now cut off. Vadim crossed his wrists behind his back, position upright, throat tight around Dan, then moving a bit, telling Dan without words he was ready for anything, including getting his throat fucked with all the fierceness Dan needed. They both needed.

And Dan did. Reasserting himself and each other, as he thrust deep and without mercy. Both hands on Vadim's head, holding him in a vice grip, driving into him a few times, before he came, too soon, deeply embedded down his throat, while Vadim was once more fighting the struggle to breathe and the gagging reflex, forcing himself to just take it.

Dan pulled out, still panting, looking down at Vadim with a strange smile. Tender, open, while inside he felt scraped raw in a painfully good way, a way that had him almost burst with emotion, need, gratitude, and that goddamned love, that had just found another manifestation. "You're mine," he murmured hoarsely, as he stroked Vadim's temple and face.

"Yours," Vadim croaked and cleared his throat, feeling weak and still so very strong on his knees. Something he'd wanted, and now that it had been granted. It seemed like a great idea, something to relish, and he understood more about Hooch, now. The gratification.

"You should take a bath." Holding his hand out, Dan pulled Vadim up, then gently took hold of the nipple clamps. "Brace yourself ..."  

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take a breath, he then swiftly removed both simultaneously, knowing the pain of blood flooding back into the sensitive flesh would hurt like a motherfucker, and Vadim gave a groan, feeling the pain shoot up towards his head and his guts, and he grimaced. “Fuck.”

“Aye ...” Dan held and touched, kissing Vadim, until he calmed, then placed his fingers on the collar. “But this stays.” Leaning in to kiss, lowering his head to carefully lave the raw and swollen nipples, which made Vadim inhale sharply. Dan then took him to the bathroom, where he ran a hot bath. The steam soothing, scents that were as light as his touches, and he shed his own clothes, joining Vadim in the large tub.

They stayed long enough to relax tensed muscles, and to feel the heat seep into their bodies, while Dan never ceased to kiss and touch, and to take care in the most tender way. Inside, he was still simultaneously raw and filled, and all those emotions were a tumble in his mind. Vadim, his. He’d known, but this, this ... this was different. This was mind-blowing, and he didn’t know where this would lead them.

Vadim stretched out, one hand on Dan’s thigh, resting, replaying the need in his mind, the details, of how Dan had sounded, how Dan had assumed control. It was what he’d wanted. All of it. More.

Rubbing Vadim dry, then himself, Dan was meticulous with the skin beneath the collar, then went back to the bedroom, where he told Vadim to lie down, and he lightly bound his wrists in front of him, keeping the bondage over night. A symbol, rather than discomfort, Vadim understood, and it seemed like yet another tenderness, about care, just like the spooning. Holding Vadim close, one hand on the leather cuffs that circled Vadim’s strong wrists, they fell asleep.

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Dan didn’t take the collar off Vadim the next morning. It wasn’t time yet to let go once more, holding onto the image for a while longer, and holding onto what it really meant; to have collared Vadim and that while he was wearing the symbol of leather and steel, he was truly his. And in return, Dan was entirely Vadim’s.

He didn’t put any of the toys on him, though, except for holding his wrists, looking down at the narrow cuffs of black leather, separated now, with discreet D-rings that folded flat against the cuffs, and he smiled. The decision was quick, because he had never seen anything so arousing as Vadim – with his collar, his cuffs and his scars. And Vadim didn’t feel shame wearing those, accepting the collar like Hooch had accepted, and it was a strange comfort to wear this. Not his decision, he understood that, and at the same time, he could always fight it, always stop the game that wasn’t.

All these symbols were once more hidden beneath the fine suit, the crisp shirt, the cufflinked sleeves and the exclusive tie. They had to face Nelson, and it was obvious that the Colonel was not willing to let go, fighting for his prize with soft words and an intriguing smile, hiding the madness of possessiveness

beneath. But Vadim was Dan's, and he was aware of this with every second that he could feel the collar around his throat and every moment that Dan was beside him, or just in the same room, somewhere close. Always, while he was confronted with the Colonel's obsession that grew ever more dangerous the more Vadim tried to extract himself out of the web. Nelson was simply not accepting a 'no', the man was so deluded that whatever Vadim said or did looked like encouragement to him. It was clear the man was not going to give up, and they needed to take counter measures. Trusting in the Baroness.

When they boarded the plane to London Heathrow, Vadim wore an open leisure shirt, no tie, and the collar and cuffs were once more safely stashed away with the other toys in Dan's luggage. The symbols might have been taken off, but the smile and the way Dan held his hand when he figured no one was watching, were proof of a new closeness.



**January/February 1995, London, United Kingdom**

From Heathrow, they took the train to Central London, checked into the Park Lane Hotel on Piccadilly, because it was close to where they were going to the meeting. The Baroness had arranged for them to meet somebody, and after a quickie and a shower, they got dressed again in nice suits. Vadim called the tailor on Savile Row, who assured him he'd have time for him the next morning, 'I'd be delighted, Sir', and went out into surprisingly nice weather.

They crossed Green Park, walked past Buckingham Palace and got to one of those light grey Victorian buildings. GCP stood there on a polished brass plate, which, Vadim soon learned, meant 'Grosvenor Capital Partners'. A pretty – wrong, stunning young woman greeted them. Blonde, good make-up, and one of the friendliest, most heart-warming smiles Vadim had ever seen. The woman introduced herself as Lynne, and she told them that George would be with them in a moment. She then ushered them into a very comfortable meeting room, offering tea, coffee, juice, water, sparking and non-sparking, and left them, telling them it would just be a minute, George was still on the phone.

Vadim stirred his coffee, glanced out of the window, which had a view over the garden behind the house. The faint rattle of trucks driving past, but otherwise, the place was serene, clean, open, a place for thinking, for precision. "Wonder what the dirt is," he murmured. "Nelson's money? Is that the lead? Can we get him for evading tax? Or laundering money?"

"Not sure, but Maggie mentioned that we should be extremely discreet and careful." Dan absentmindedly scratched the back of his scarred hand, when the door opened and a man entered in a damn *nice* suit, but the man still outshone the suit.

Vadim had very rarely seen hair that was dark red, a colour like blood, rich in ways that made the memory of carrot-head Mitch a caricature. The hair was relatively long by English standards, reaching the collar of that fabulous suit. The man wore a goatee, which stood out on his skin that was the clarity and colour of milk. The eyes, framed by dark red lashes, were light blue-grey, and reminded Vadim of spring in New Zealand. But the first impression was wrong, the man wasn't as young as he looked, rather somewhere in Nelson's generation, a few silver threads in that brilliant dark copper red, and lines around his mouth and nose. Yet, the man was strikingly beautiful, tall, but not bulky, and he didn't just have Vadim's appreciation. Dan had to keep himself from staring.

"Good afternoon," the man said, offering his hand. "George Holloway. Please."

"Vadim Krasnorada," said Vadim, before Dan shook the man's hand, introducing himself.

Vadim nodded. “We’re ...” Pausing when the man indicated the conference table and chairs, and they all sat down again. “We appreciate your time.”

“A friend of mine, Baroness de Vilde, assured me that you might be able to help us in an important and ... delicate matter.” Dan leaned back in the chair, watching the man from under his lashes.

“The Baroness,” George said, and his voice complemented his looks. He seemed sincere in an altogether friendly way. “I hope she is in good health? I’d be delighted to help her friends ... she has been nothing but the finest judge of character I’ve ever encountered.” Giving both Dan and Vadim a smile, very polite, but Vadim had the distinct feeling he could trust this man. George Holloway had to be a great salesman, Vadim thought. Whatever he did, whatever he made his money with. Something with finances. He’d buy a house or stock market option from him any time.

“She is very well indeed. I spoke to her only yesterday.” Dan smiled back, his own smile less polite than open. “May we be frank with you?”

“Please.” George leaned forward, folding his hands on the polished glass table. Manicured hands, no ring, and an understated gold and titanium watch.

“We,” Vadim cleared his throat, “Dan and I work as consultants in the security business.” Dan would have said ‘mercenaries’, most likely, which might have been the wrong way to go. “In that capacity, we have encountered somebody the Baroness told us you know as well. A certain Colonel Nelson.”

George visibly swallowed. Whatever he had expected, it hadn’t been this, and Vadim saw how the man’s calm and confidence took a hit from the mentioning of the name alone.

“We ...”

George held up his hand, head lowered, like he did not want to hear more. “In what ... relation are you to Nelson?” he asked, not meeting their eyes.

“None. Except for wanting to get rid of that creep. Once and for all.” Dan charged forward.

“Has he ... done it again?” George asked, still not meeting their eyes, but his body had tensed up, even his hands were tense, gripping each other like he was trying to crush his own bones. “What ... what has he done?”

Dan glanced intensely at Vadim, George’s reaction had been entirely unexpected. “I believe it is more of a matter of what he would like to do than what he has done, at the moment.” Checking with Vadim once more, to ensure he said the right things. “Vadim had one encounter with that man a few months ago, and now it turns out he is obsessive, a stalker, does not take no for an answer. If I am not mistaken – and trust me, I have a lot of experience in this – he is potentially dangerous.”

George gave a choked sound. He stood abruptly, fast enough to almost topple the chair. “Just ... give me a moment.” He left the room and Vadim was about to follow him, then decided he didn’t want to spook the man further. Instead, he placed a hand on Dan’s shoulder and remained standing, while Dan sat straight and alert.

“Now I really want to know what happened,” Vadim murmured in Russian.

“Shit.” Dan cursed under his breath. “I hope we didn’t go too far.” Looking up, he frowned. “Only few things that can create such a reaction.”

Vadim nodded. “I guess it was ‘not taking no for an answer.’” He said in Russian.

“Aye,” Dan murmured, “I should have guessed.”

The door opened again, and the beautiful blonde assistant came in. Vadim expected her to get them to the door and tell them in the friendliest way to get the fuck out, but instead she asked whether they wanted anything to drink. Vadim opted for another coffee and Dan went for tea. The beverages appeared just a little later.

“He must feel awful,” Vadim said quietly.

“I feel guilty. Damn.” Ladling sugar into his tea, Dan stirred it thoughtfully.

George eventually reappeared, pale, but collected. His smile, this time, had faded, he was clearly mustering his confidence, and he seemed vulnerable for the first time. “I have to apologise,” he said, voice betraying emotion. “It was ... a rather unexpected topic.” He sat down.

“We would have never breached it, if we hadn’t been desperate.” Dan reassured. “Nor would we have asked the Baroness for help in the first place, had we not exhausted all options and venues already.”

“I don’t know how the Baroness knew about it ... I imagine there were rumours. No cover-up is always complete, but it has been a while that I was ... confronted with the rumour.” George folded his hands on the table again, but Vadim could see how the glass misted where he touched it. The man was sweating.

“Mr Nelson ...” A faint smile, as if George was morbidly amused that he could speak the name at all. “We both studied at the same university. You could say we were friends. I was very flattered that such a well-bred gentleman would extend his hand in friendship to me. I was there on a stipend.” Telling the whole story just in hints there. He hadn’t been born to money and privilege. “Mr Nelson deemed it acceptable to avail himself of my body,” he said, saying this as if it meant nothing.

Dan sat as straight and stiff as a ramrod. He’d never met anyone before, not knowingly, with whom he shared more experiences than he’d wanted. “Was this an isolated incident?” He asked carefully, keeping his voice soft.

“He’d invited me to a house he owned at that time, to play Polo.” George stared at the table, his pale skin was translucent now. “I stayed there for a week, but only on the last two days did he cross the line between friendship and what he’d had in mind. I assume he was counting on my consent at first and then decided it wasn’t strictly necessary.” He exhaled, closed his eyes. “In the end, I did what he wanted. I thought I would never make it home if he suspected I’d turn against him. I had to fool him to live.”

Dan looked at Vadim, when a sudden thought entered his mind. “This is going further than we thought.” Quietly, he knew that Vadim would understand. “You were talking about a cover-up.” Dan returned his attention to

George. “I assume this means the police was never involved and thus no prosecution?”

“No. I tried to hide it, but I was injured and I needed help. The doctor was a friend of my father’s, and I didn’t have the strength to hide. My parents threatened legal action, but he bought his way out. We didn’t touch the money, it went to charity.”

Dan wanted to ask why he hadn’t pressed charges, but then he remembered how he’d hidden the pain and pretended he was fine. He just nodded, trying to smile a little to convey his understanding. The realisation hit him that he really did not want to deal with that confrontation. After all those years and the peace he’d made, he was still uncomfortable to the bone.

George was pallid, blue veins shining through the skin. “After the traces had gone, I changed courses and went to Harvard Business School. I honestly thought I’d never hear that name again. But that was not so. He called the firm I worked for and got me into an impossible situation there, so I quit and that was probably for the best.”

“Did he ever get into contact again?”

“No. He lost interest – or maybe he returned home. I didn’t ... inquire, but I counted my blessings that I was still alive and it had stopped. Work helped. I got into asset management and I had no time to face what had happened. I went out of my way not to have a life.” George shook his head. “I pay my therapist three hundred pounds an hour and haven’t told him this.”

“I am sorry.” Dan’s dark eyes rested on the other man. “I truly am, for bringing this up, and asking for your help.” He reached across to touch George’s suited arm, briefly and lightly, barely there.

George looked at him. “How can I help you deal with that man? With something that happened so long ago?”

“Would you be willing to make a statement?”

“In front of a judge?” George shook his head. “No. No. I have ... a career here, I can’t have people talk about me. I’ve built this for years ... If my clients hear what happened ... would you trust a man to be balanced and sane who ...” George faltered, too many thoughts, panicked.

“Yes, I would trust that man. Trust him for the strength and courage to stand up and do this: to prosecute a predator.” Dan’s attention was on George, while Vadim felt sorry for him, sorry for the man they’d bared, who was that naked emotionally that he lost his composure like this.

“You, maybe. The men I’m dealing with ... in this world. Here ...” George looked at Vadim, as if expecting help – or hoping for help.

Poor deluded fool, Vadim thought, because he could *see* what Nelson had seen in him. The confidence, that red hair, and he was sure Nelson must have, at some point, hit or bitten him and just watched the pale skin turn red and then white again, maybe had bruised him just to watch the colour change. And what a sick thought, but he could even imagine what this man looked like being raped – playing the captor to survive, maybe agree to whatever sick little game Nelson had wanted to play, only to escape alive. And it turned him on. He shook his

head, forcing himself to think something else, but the man was exquisitely beautiful, once he'd been shaken.

Dan continued after a moment, "I guess we might be asking too much. Even though I am convinced that it would not come to a trial, Threatening the bastard should be enough."

"I ... can't make that decision," George said, again not meeting Dan's eyes.

Dan nodded slowly. Damn, there went their chance, but he couldn't press the issue any further. "I admire you and what you have achieved." He paused, watching George, who didn't relax at the praise, expecting to be played. "Perhaps, if you can't make that decision, you could come to dinner with us?"

George considered that, then nodded, slowly regaining his cool, which, Vadim thought, was strangely attractive again. The man's fight between weakness and the façade was breathtaking. And Dan clearly thought so, too, why else the invitation.

"Of course." It was unlikely that he'd be able to continue with his usual work. "French, Italian, Japanese?"

"Whatever you prefer." Dan smiled, incredibly well behaved so far. "I, for one, eat anything. Especially if there is plenty of it, and a dessert. The sweeter the better." He leaned slightly forward with a grin, as if telling George a secret. "I am a peasant. Too many years as a soldier and then as a merc. It is Vadim who has the refined tastes. He is the cultured one."

George looked at Vadim, then at Dan, giving them a smile, almost back to his professional self again. "That sounds like Italian ... the Japanese aren't that good on desserts." He reached up to readjust his tie, even though there was no need to do that. "Where are you staying? I'll have a driver pick you up at your hotel, at eight?"

"The Park Lane Hotel on Piccadilly." Dan stood up, reaching for his cane. "I am looking forward to tonight." Smiling, he held out his hand, while he couldn't help but look at the man just that little bit too long and just a smidgen too appreciative.

"I will see you later, then." George, Vadim thought, probably got this kind of look a lot, or he trusted them, or he was oblivious. He shook Dan's hand, then Vadim's, who noticed that the hand was still a bit damp despite the re-won control.

Lynne saw them out of the door, polite and beautiful, and not much later they were back on the street.

"Can't say Nelson doesn't have a good taste in men," Vadim murmured in Russian.

"Damn." Dan exhaled, didn't say anything for a while, until they were far enough away. "I definitely agree. He wants you, after all."

"True."

"Nelson is more of a fucking bastard than I thought, and more dangerous. What the hell do we do if George doesn't want to help?"

Vadim smiled. "Never thought they made bankers this sexy."

Dan shook his head. "I want him to help us, and ... I guess his story just made me damn uncomfortable. I don't think the man's straight, but I do think he's been fucked up, and that gets to me. Because I can't imagine living a life as a victim."

"I didn't get any vibes from him. If he's a red-blooded male, he's certainly fucking the PA." Vadim smiled. "Both are outrageously good-looking. Damn. Wherever their clients come from, they must leave with a hard-on."

"Maybe he isn't fucking anything." Dan shrugged. "Only one way to find out, aye?"

"Absolutely."

They went back to the hotel, where Vadim had a shower and a full shave, every now and then thinking those thoughts. Of the redhead, suffering. They were only flashes across his mind, but they were distracting, and he was glad when reception called them to tell them that Mr Holloway's driver was waiting to pick them up.

Dan had refused to dress in a suit again, and was wearing prohibitively expensive but comfortable clothes in those desert colours that Vadim liked best on him. Brushed and spruced, his wildness tamed to within an inch, except for the scars he could not hide, and the lapis lazuli beads, wound around his wrist. Vadim had matched Dan's style, then had decided on a classical shirt and a grey waistcoat from one of his three piece suits, that matched the jeans in colour. The driver held their doors open – a very nice, shining limousine that even had a bar. While he drove them through London, the phone rang and the driver answered, listening to orders, then took a turn left, towards Kensington, past grandiose architecture that still very much proclaimed London to be the centre of an Empire.

"Mr Holloway asks whether you would accept an invitation to his house instead?" the driver asked, impeccably polite.

"Of course." Dan leaned forward, a miniature glass of beer in his hand. Impressed that there was such a profane drink in such a posh vehicle.

They arrived not much later at a walled villa that had a lot of security. The gates opened, and while the front court wasn't very spacious, it was impeccably groomed. The house behind was covered in evergreen creeper vines. The driver got out and opened their doors again.

Holloway himself opened the door. He, too, had dressed down, if in more businesslike trousers and shirt, but without a jacket and tie, which made all the difference. "Welcome," he said, and nodded to the driver. "My favourite Italian is booked for a birthday, and I didn't feel like dining in public today."

"Thank you for inviting us." Dan smiled, briefly touching Vadim's shoulder.

The hall was furnished with antiques. Vadim was sure that every piece had been chosen to complement another piece – the impression was that of unity, and elegance, and a lot of money. The oil paintings were genuine, too, he recognized a Canaletto – one of the guys who'd had several paintings in the National Gallery.

A winding staircase dominated the hall, and Holloway gently ushered them into a room with a fireplace. “Drinks?” he asked, and the fire made his hair come alive in a way that was breathtaking.

“Whisky?” Dan was looking around, just to keep his eyes from the man himself. “Single Malt Speyside, please.” Sitting down on one of the leather sofas, he placed the cane beside him and out of the way, before he stretched out to sit comfortably. “I must say, I am impressed. Aren’t you getting lost in here?”

“I know, it’s an outrageous property, in this location.” Holloway poured them drinks and handed them to Dan and Vadim, then poured himself another one. “Some rock star was going for it, too, I think they wanted me to buy it.” He shook his head. “I told the cook about the Italian, and the desserts – she selected the menu, I hope you’ll enjoy it.”

“A cook ... what I’d need.” Dan sighed, then flashed a grin at Vadim. Raising his glass for a toast. “Slainte.”

“Slainte.”

The door opened a crack, Holloway looked towards it, then nodded, and the door closed again. “Dinner is served. I hope you’re hungry.” He set the glass down and led them through another door to the dining room. He could probably have gone for the whole glass and silverware look, but this was, Vadim assumed, what he’d done as ‘low key’. The table was covered in small dishes, some kept hot, others were cold, fingerfood, a wide range of courses all served for ease and comfort, with the desserts set a little aside because there was no more space. “This was easier than having the cook or a serving girl around,” Holloway murmured.

“It certainly looks mouth-watering.” Dan glanced around, noticing the lack of personnel. They got seated, with George between them. There was even beer available, and Dan was thankful for the less than fancy beverage, even though it was from a specialised independent brewer.

Holloway ate, too, but didn’t appear hungry, even though each and every bite was excellent. Vadim thought it was probably generosity, or a strange notion of what was expected from him with that paycheck. “I assume you know the Baroness professionally?”

“Yes. I’m investing part of her assets,” George said, almost glad for somebody beginning a conversation. “Maybe she learned of that sordid story when she had me researched ... but over the years, we became friends, and I trust her assessment of character. That is why you are here, in this house, even though I hardly know you.”

Dan smiled. “Maggie is certainly thorough.” Realising what he had said, he corrected himself. “Her ladyship, of course. The Baroness.” He was eyeing the dessert, which was a selection of tiramisu, mousse au chocolat, crème brûlée and some other not quite Italian but French ones. “She is my friend, one of my best friends, in fact. No matter how odd that seems. A gay, scruffy ex-SAS soldier who was her bodyguard for a while, and an Ambassador? She never even managed to teach me chess properly, but she plays a mean poker hand.”

“Or his partner,” Vadim added, knowing exactly what Dan was getting at. Weaving things into conversation. And it was interesting to see that Holloway didn’t bolt and run.

Dan nodded. “She would not have told us to contact you, had she not understood the severity of our situation. You know that she never does anything lightly.”

“And this ... is the only sordid story she has on Mr Nelson.” Holloway had a way to say ‘Mr’ that condemned whatever man he called that. “He must be covering his tracks better these days.”

“Aye, it is the only evidence she has, that could destroy the bastard.” Dan’s eyes held George’s for a moment.

“I will show you something, but please have the dessert first. I don’t want you to lose your appetite.”

“Mr Holloway, both Vadim and I were soldiers, what we have seen and done can most likely not be imagined by a civilian. I think there is nothing that could shock us.” Dan kept his voice soft, but to Vadim’s eyes the sudden alertness and tension was obvious.

“Let me get them.” Holloway stood and left the room.

Vadim looked at Dan. “You think he’s cracking?” he asked in Russian.

Dan shook his head slightly, sticking to Russian. “I have no idea, and I don’t want to take advantage.”

Holloway came back, holding a file in his hand that had been pale blue and had faded further into grey. He placed it carefully at Dan’s side, who picked it up and opened it on his knees.

Inside were papers – medical reports, dated, signed, on injuries sustained by George Holloway. It listed, in meticulous detail, what had been done to George. The medical terms meant little, but each injury was photographed, and Dan saw Holloway as a much younger man, in his early twenties, but with the same hair, the same pearly skin. Only it had been blackened and bruised in far too many places. He looked like the victim of a car crash, if car crashes involved whipping and anal trauma. His chest was a mess, too, with one nipple blackened and swollen beyond anything Dan had ever seen.

Holloway didn’t look at the folder, but at Dan’s face, which remained stony. He then poured himself more of the dessert wine, a strong, clean, crisp and sweet taste.

Dan closed the folder and put it onto the chair beside him. “Mr Holloway ...” the decision was made within a split second. “Mr Holloway, I would like you to know that while your ordeal goes above and beyond anything I have experienced myself, that you are not alone. You are not the only man who became a victim.” He paused to take in a breath. “Fifteen years ago I was raped. In a country far away and in a situation that was entirely impossible. I killed my rapist.” Vanya, and the old Vadim was dead. He was not lying, because the Vadim who had raped him had died begging for a soldier’s death.

Holloway had become the same translucent white he’d been in the office after Dan had mentioned Nelson, and his eyes moved quickly over to Vadim



who seemed genuinely shocked that Dan would speak of it, and reached over to touch him, Dan's hand curling around his.

"I survived the assault without help, but I never told anyone about it, outside of my relationship. "A second's glance at Vadim. "I tell you now, because I want you to understand that I was an SAS soldier when it happened, at the pinnacle of my physical and mental strength. What I am trying to say, is that it can happen to anyone."

"I ... believe you," Holloway said, voice low, very nearly strangled off. "And you still ask me to testify? Would you testify if your ... if he was still alive? If he still had the means to destroy what is left of you? Would you want your SAS comrades to know what happened to you – for the rest of your life? The media to lay siege to your house and office, because you've accused a man of power and wealth and importance?"

Dan swallowed hard, and he knew he had been put to the spot. There was no escape. "No." Then, firmly, dark eyes on George. "No, I would not want my comrades to know. Everything else I could and would deal with, but I would not want my comrades to know." His hand tensed in Vadim's. "I am the last man on earth to blame you if you choose to remain silent."

"Destroying your life to become somebody new is not easy," Vadim murmured, both hands on Dan, soothing and relaxing him with his presence. Hoping, in a way, to apologize for what he'd done, but Dan smiled slightly and shook his head, as if to say that no apology was needed. Not anymore.

George looked at him. "What exactly is Mr Nelson doing? To you?"

"He has decided he wants me," Vadim said calmly. "We had sex, which was strictly mutual. But he must have decided he wants me as some kind of ... possession. Like a trophy."

"No. What he wants, Mr Krasnorada, is a slave. He'd make you scream his name. He'd make you throw up with his evil. He'd control every thought, every breath. He'd threaten to kill you, and then rape you in any way he can think of. I'd be surprised if he hasn't learned new ways since then." Holloway's voice was dead.

Dan's hand tensed in Vadim's. "I'll fucking kill that bastard." Hissed under his breath, but audible enough.

Holloway looked again at the folder. "I have a life. My job depends on my reputation, on the respect of the financial community. We are a small group ... everybody knows everybody else. We know the names and birthdays of each other's mistresses, in addition to the wife's, and we never slip up. They wouldn't say it, but everybody would *know*. They'd know, and I'd know that they know. My peers ... rich, white, old men."

"Then don't." Dan meant it. "We'll find another way, Mr Holloway. Even if that means to take him out of the equation before he does it to either of us." He shook his head.

Holloway looked at him, appearing suddenly forlorn, like he'd awoken from the nightmare of that weekend. "I will have to think about it. This is ... of too great an importance."

“Aye, it is, and you should not let yourself be guided by what we are asking for.” Dan kept his eyes in the other’s for a moment longer, while placing a kiss on Vadim’s hand, all the time watching George. “And what do *you* need?”

“Maybe win my honour back,” Holloway said. “Like you did.”

Dan was stunned by the answer. “You have never lost it, but you feel like you did, aye?” He let go of Vadim’s hand, reaching for George’s instead, merely covering the hand on the table. His scarred, tanned hand that had seen a life of work, lay on top of the fine, almost translucent, exquisitely manicured one. The touch reassuring.

“Do you have a partner, Mr Holloway?”

“Only as job lingo.” George kept looking at Dan.

“If we tried to seduce you,” Dan’s voice had taken on a deeper quality, “would you throw us out or trust us?”

Holloway glanced towards the folder, looking about to say “no thanks” – when Vadim left Dan’s side and moved behind him, hands open, as if cutting off the escape route of some wild animal. “Are you worried about the scars?” Vadim asked. “We’re soldiers. We know scars.”

“I ...” Holloway glanced at him, then at Dan, whose hand was still covering his own, almost missed the fact that Vadim stepped closer, then froze when Vadim touched his shoulder and murmured. “Just ‘stop’ will do it.”

Dan smiled, lifted the fine hand off the table, and lowered his head to kiss it in an old fashioned way, which seemed oddly appropriate. Lips lingering on the porcelain skin, while he opened the buttons of his shirt with his right. Pulling it apart, he bared his abs, the landscape of destruction and survival. George, who seemed too conflicted to be polite – stared at the scars, surprised, but not disgusted. “You’re not the only one, and neither is Vadim.”

Holloway nodded, his free hand reached out to touch Dan’s scar, the most vicious one that slashed upwards towards his chest. “I ... I usually pay ...”

“Lucky hookers,” said Vadim with humour, opening his waist coat and dropping it over one of the chairs.

Dan let go of George’s hand, but only to shrug out of his shirt, which he let fall onto the expensive Persian rug. “Lucky indeed.” He stood bared to his waist, leaned closer, and carefully slid the top button of George’s shirt out of the buttonhole. “You call the shots.” Dan smiled, “just like with a hooker, only that we are not for sale.”

The man was still petrified, but the way his pupils had diluted spoke of his desire, and Vadim stood behind him, touching his shoulders, his arms, pleasantly surprised how firm the muscles were, even though that also meant the man was very tense.

Holloway woke up from the haze when Dan opened his shirt to reveal his nipples. The left one was gone, simply gone, like it had been cut out, but Dan didn’t flinch, didn’t show any reaction. He had seen worse in his life.

“I would go on my knees,” Dan murmured, while pulling the shirt out of George’s trousers, then lifting it, to let Vadim slide it off the man. “But I’m a bit of a cripple.”

George got to his feet, and Vadim could see that the rest of his body had long healed, even though the man's back, with that white skin, still remembered the whipping. He noticed fine lines on the skin, and when he ran his fingertips across Holloway's shoulder blades, he could feel the scars. He had to fight the urge to hurt that skin, make the man shudder and scream.

Dan stepped closer, lifted George's hands to his own shoulders, leaving one there, right above the bullet scar, guiding the other towards his hip, placing it onto skin. Treating the man like a wounded animal, every movement was slow and deliberate. Leaning down, he lightly kissed the side of George's throat, then down the neck, while his hands travelled up the chest, over the nipple, towards the back and shoulders, meeting Vadim's hands there.

George's lips opened carefully, as if he was taking an enormous risk, his eyes closed when Dan continued to touch him, and Vadim was there, too. "Should we ... go up?" George asked, the first coherent sentence he'd spoken in minutes.

"Aye," Dan came back up to his full height, "that's a good idea. Let's take some drinks with us."

George nodded, reaching for the bottle of whisky. He led the way out of the room, the next one, up the staircase, towards the left on the landing, and Vadim exchanged a glance with Dan, who held his gaze for a moment, careful not to speak Russian, he didn't want to spook the man. Watching George walk through his house was like watching an impossibly lonely man get lost in his own world, furnished with all the trappings of power and success.

The master bedroom was vast, furnished in the same style as the rest of the house, the four poster bed an antique, dark wood, heavy fabrics. A small pile of books on the nightstand – all serious-looking text, nothing as frivolous as a novel.

Dan took the bottle out of George's hand and placed it onto a side table. He stood in front of the man, gently coaxing him backwards and towards the bed. Dan's hands were on the belt buckle, eyes searching for George's. "May I?"

George's lips moved into a smile, as if he'd been caught by the odd politeness. "Just ... you don't have to do this ... it's not ... won't influence my decision."

Dan opened the belt and button, "it's not about 'having', it is about wanting. You, Sir, you are breathtaking." He slid the trousers down, hands on the boxer shorts, fingers slipping into the waistband to push them down, making the man tremble and his abs tighten, flat stomach growing taut.

Vadim shed his own shirt now, and saw the appreciative look from George. It was nice being seen with those eyes – from a man who was easily more stunning than he was.

Baring George's cock, Dan moved his hands back to the hips and gently nudged him, so that both of them sat down. He leaned forward, placed his lips on George's cock, which made the redhead shudder and open his mouth. George reached for Dan's face, who's tongue was exploring the cock that began to show unmistakable interest.

Vadim moved closer, taking off George's shoes, socks, pulled the rest of his clothes off. It was the only thing he could do right now. Control. Control would be important.

Dan sucked down, but not with his usual greed, because this was about relaxing the man, trying to get him to stop thinking. Every touch, each movement of his head, tongue, lips, was designed to increase the arousal. Not using his hands, merely his mouth and occasionally as deep as his throat.

George soon squirmed, his responses uncoordinated, eyes closed, partly as if he didn't want to see and partly as if he trusted. Vadim joined him on the bed, naked himself, his cock rock hard. He moved his head down as well, sucked on George's balls, which made the man yelp and buck, almost unable to deal with the added stimulation.

Dan lifted his head, let go of the cock, and Vadim took over without any hesitation. Quickly taking off trousers, socks and shoes, Dan returned his attention once more onto George, whose face was beautifully flushed. The pale skin took on a rose hue and George's hands fluttered, as if he didn't know where and what to take hold of. Scooting up, Dan lifted himself onto one elbow and looked down at those long lashes and the parted lips. This man *was* delicious. "May I?" Dan didn't wait for an answer, capturing George's lips with his own.

George reached up to touch Dan's neck, kissing, but his focus shattered after a few seconds when Vadim did something clever with his lips. "Yes, yes, but don't ... don't ..." He couldn't say it, his lips so close to Dan's. "I ... can't ... do that, can't ..."

"Can't what?" Lips against lips, Dan caressed the one remaining nipple, which responded by turning into a hard bud. When he brushed over it once more, flicking it gently, George became even more desperate, repeating his stammer. It took a while before the desperate words clicked and made sense to Dan. "Can't get fucked?" When George nodded, Dan kissed him again, murmuring, "no one's going to fuck you. On the contrary. Would you like to fuck one of us?"

The redhead shook his head, but clung to Dan while Vadim continued to drive him up the wall, alternating quick, deep strokes with just licking and brushing the cock head.

"Can't ... can't hurt ... oh god," George groaned, forcing himself to focus. "... anyone ..."

"You won't. I promise. Just tell me who you want." Dan moved down, took the nipple between his lips, flicking with his tongue, gently using his teeth, then laving.

George was panting, mind very nearly blanked by what Vadim did, but then Vadim circled his cock in his hand, forming a tight ring to control him and pulled back. "Blond or dark, Sir?" he asked with a grin, but George was still reluctant, repulsed not only by the possibility of getting fucked, but as much by the thought of doing the fucking to somebody else. He broke away and glanced at Vadim.

“I’m sure you prefer blond,” Vadim ventured. “Your PA is beautiful, and I love getting fucked. What about that? No way you can hurt me.” You’re not fierce and strong enough, was what he was thinking, and at the same time, he wanted to fuck this guy, but he knew Dan wouldn’t let him. Dan kept his darkness under control.

“Yes ...”

George shuddered, face showing the conflict between need and fear, his own demons tangible in the room. Vadim was about to rummage through the guy’s nightstand, when Dan held him back. “Condoms and lube, in my trousers ...”

“Aye.” Vadim grinned, found the trousers, the lube – the usual minipack. Dan, ever hopeful, had planned ahead. He squeezed most of it into his hand, slicked his fingers, then pushed them into his arse, while Dan watched and kept stroking George’s cock. Adding more lube, Vadim opened the condom and pulled it down over George’s cock, using the rest of the lube on him. Nice and slick and safe.

“I want you to watch Vadim’s face closely, George.” Dan kept his voice soft. “The lust, the feeling, what it does to him, and what it does to you.” Dan sat up on his hip, right leg stretched out, reaching for Vadim’s nipple and twisting it the way he knew would affect him, making Vadim gasp and shudder. George watched, licking his lips, which made Vadim almost self-conscious as he straddled the man, took his cock and positioned himself. George stared at him, wide-eyed, but very aroused. Vadim took him slowly, making the man squirm with the slow, controlled tightness.

“Yeah,” Vadim said, sinking down further, feeling the man’s cock go deeper and deeper, until he’d taken all of it, and George was sweating, that brilliant red hair now damp.

“You think you are hurting Vadim?” Dan asked George, while reaching out to caress Vadim’s arse, then moved his hand towards the front, taking the balls and squeezing them. “Does he look as if he’s in pain?”

George shook his head, groaning when Vadim shifted and bent forward, kissing him, before he began to move. Slow, grinding motions that drove George up the wall, and Vadim relished it. A different kind of power, he *was* fucking this guy, mentally, emotionally, in all ways that counted. Pushing and thrusting, stopping when he felt George got too far, feeding on the desperation and need much like Hooch did to him.

Dan kept watching and touching, but not interfering. Stroking himself, he didn’t want to stoke the fire too quickly.

Vadim’s muscles stood out in stark relief as he moved slowly, weight fully on his thighs, grinding and shifting until he found the best angle for himself. He began to ride George, making more of a show of it than usual, for Dan, groaning, hissing with the thrusts. When George got to the edge again, Vadim mercilessly drove him over it, feeling the man buck beneath him, groaning like he was being tortured. That agony showed Vadim exactly what he’d looked like when he had been tortured. Small wonder Nelson had needed two days to get

his fill. Vadim bent down, kissed the man, relishing the feeling of the beard, running a hand through the damp red hair.

Dan watched for a moment longer. He could do with release, but he merely rolled onto his side, looking at Vadim.

Vadim gave him a sideways glance, his eyes very blue in the low light, his face flushed, and a strange smirk on his lips, which told Dan he'd enjoyed that power enormously. He shifted, slid off George, plucking off the condom and knotted it, then stretched out right next to Dan, kissing him, still tasting of the other man.

Dan broke the kiss after a while, hands on Vadim's muscular buttocks, as he lifted his head to look at George with a smile.

"I ..." The man visibly forced himself to string a sentence together, his pride demanded it. "Don't even know what to say." He studied them, his eyes roaming across muscles and hard angles, flushed skin, and scars. Scars that made his body next to them look like it fitted in, like it was nothing special, maimed as it was. "I don't normally ... entertain guests over night. I pay them and they leave, but ..." He carefully asked permission, as if all that touching and kissing hadn't happened. "I have a guest room. If you want to stay the night."

Dan sat up on his hip, hand on Vadim's shoulder. "I would like to stay. Vadim, what do you think?"

Vadim shrugged, turned to lie on his back, yawning. "Why not. This bed seems a bit small for three. Guess in that century people weren't quite that tall or adventurous." He grinned.

George smiled. "No. Allow me to show you the room." He stood and found his boxers, slipping into them, decidedly ill-at-ease with being completely bared. He stepped into the bathroom attached to this room, with a bathrobe covering most of him. It was the nipples, Vadim assumed. He was squeamish about showing any area that had been tortured, and he wondered just exactly what Nelson had done to ruin that area of his body so completely. The scar was too precise, it hadn't been biting.

They picked up their clothes, following their host. When George led them across the landing, the whole archaic splendour of the house was visible – it seemed it had never changed from somewhere around the beginning of the nineteenth century, which, with the blood red hair and all, gave George a decidedly gothic touch. As if Count Dracula had joined the banking world. Vadim grinned at that thought, wondered why on earth anybody would want to live in a mausoleum. Especially since the office had been old from the outside and modern on the inside.

The guest room was hardly any different from the master bedroom, but it had a view out over the street, which served almost as a reminder of the world outside. "It has a small bathroom, but the larger bathroom is across the hall. Please feel at home." George tactfully retreated.

Dan dumped his clothes over a chair and sat down on the bed. "Well." Leaning back and looking up at Vadim. "What do you think? I've certainly never met anyone like him. Poor bastard."

“I can see why Nelson was fascinated.” Vadim joined him on the bed. “He has ‘victim’ written all across his forehead.” Vadim stretched out. “And if he does what we want him to do, he’s ruining the rest of his life. All this ...” He gestured, including the house. “That’s protecting him. If people begin hounding him ... I don’t think he can cope. He’s too fucking scared to touch a guy.”

“Aye, and that’s why I think we need to find a different way of getting rid of Nelson.” Dan shrugged. “I’m sure Maggie didn’t know the full extent of what happened and the consequences to this man, or she wouldn’t have sent us here.”

“You think we should drop it ... I mean, this angle, and ...” Vadim pondered. “You mean, kill him?”

“It’s the only option isn’t it? The question is just how. How to achieve this without getting caught.” Not a shred of doubt was visible in Dan’s face, not a moment of moral pondering. He’d taken many lives, and this, too, was combat – only of a different kind.

Vadim nodded. “Good alibi, make it look like an accident.” He turned onto his side, kissing Dan’s biceps. “I’ll think about it. I have ...” done this before, he thought, in this city, long ago. The thought brought back the memory, of the two guys in Soho, and the shame and guilt he’d felt. “... my best ideas in the morning.”

“Okay.” Dan smiled, then scooted up the bed to get under the covers. “And I promise I *will* fuck you raw until you scream. Tomorrow.” He winked, then waited for Vadim to come close, so they could fall asleep in their usual embrace.

\* \* \*

When Dan woke up, it was to rare sunlight streaming through the windows. They hadn’t drawn the heavy curtains, and a patch of light hit his eyes. Reaching out for Vadim, he patted the empty sheet. Blinking a couple of times, Dan groaned while stretching, allowing himself the luxury of not having to be awake from one heartbeat to the next. Civilian life did have its perks, after all.

Getting up was always a struggle in the morning, his knee more sore than ever, but he stretched once he stood, trusting he’d get into gear soon enough. The sound of water running from the adjacent bathroom told him it was occupied, and Dan padded over, opened it to snatch his towel and tell Vadim he’d be in the master bathroom, figuring since it was only seven AM, their host might still be asleep.

Scratching his neatly trimmed groin, stark naked, the towel slung over one shoulder, he found his way to the main bathroom. Still bleary-eyed, he stepped into the large room, closing the door behind him.

He noticed the humid air before he noticed the man, and looking around, he saw a free-standing bathtub – with lion feet – with a small table next to it. The bathtub was occupied by George. His hair plastered to the back of his head, revealing the downright aristocratic profile. “Good morning, Dan.” George

looked at him, then shifted in the bath, dried his fingers on a towel, and changed razor blades for an old-fashioned razor.

“Oh, hell,” Dan grinned, “I’m sorry. Didn’t think you were awake yet and Vadim’s taking a shower.”

“That’s fine. Call of nature.” George smiled at him. “Early morning baths help softening the stubble. I don’t always have time for a barber.”

“Nothing’s better than a hot shave, aye? Was one of the greatest luxuries in Kabul.” Walking over to the bathtub, Dan leaned against it and looked down at the other man. “Do you want some help with that?” Pointing to the razor. “I seem to have a history of shaving good looking men.” He winked, then dropped his towel over a cast iron towel stand.

George paused, thinking, then slowly nodded. “I believe I can trust an ex-SAS soldier with a blade.” Dan laughed, while George handed the razor over. “I am wondering about the goatee ... any kind of statement? Off or on?”

“That depends on if you want to hide. You are stunning, but while the goatee suits you, I wonder what lies beneath.” Pulling a stool across, Dan sat down and busied himself with preparing the lather.

“A chin.” George took two handfuls of water, rubbing it into his beard.

Dan grinned, “a particularly regal one.”

“Hiding? Yes. That’s what my therapist says, too. Maybe I pay him too much, if that’s so obvious.” George gave a laugh. “But the boy is trying to fix me. I look at him and the sentence is right there, but I can’t speak it. I’m not handing him the key but I ask him to open the door for me.”

Meticulously working the lather into the other’s face, Dan included the goatee, and George did not protest. “You were able to say it yesterday, perhaps you could say it to your therapist as well?” he smiled. “I know, it’s hard. For me the most difficult thing of all was to acknowledge that I had been a victim. I refused to accept that. Still don’t.”

“I was fooling myself, all those years.”

“Fooling? I would say you were finding a way to live, but not to heal.”

George tilted his head, offering Dan the far side to start with. “I found it hard to sleep last night, even though I was tired ... I thought of your partner, Vadim. How I do not want that the same happens to him ... I don’t want him to become ... what I was. Maybe still am.” His face twitched.

Dan stalled, hand hovering over the other’s face. “He won’t. Whatever happens, he won’t. We kill that bastard before he can do anything like that.” He offered a smile to reassure, and began shaving the skin. Smooth, precise strokes, in between swilling out the lather in the bath.

“I was not perfectly honest yesterday, but I hope you forgive me. I was infatuated with Mr Nelson. It wasn’t just friendship. But that is the official story. I’ve never left the closet. My peers believe I’m sleeping with my PA.”

“Are you blaming yourself for that? Did you ever believe that because you had been infatuated, it was somehow your fault?” Dan’s brows rose and his hand stalled again, close to the goatee.



“Let’s say it made the whole business of falling in love very risky indeed.” George followed the strokes, meeting his eyes again. “I’m avoiding that risk, and by avoiding risk, I’ve put other men at risk of losing their health and their sanity.”

“How?” Dan began shaving again and George allowed him to scrape off the beard, not speaking when the blade was anywhere near his skin. He brought a hand up to touch the side where the beard was gone.

“You were so courageous, honest, and gentle. You put me to shame, Dan.”

“No.” Dan’s protest was vehement. “Never think such a thing. I am not a good man, Mr Holloway,” another echo from long ago, “and I have done things to avenge myself that I am ashamed to tell. I am less honest and less gentle than you might think. I have mellowed, but don’t forget what I did for a living.” Dan carefully tilted George’s head. “In fact,” Dan mused, “it is you who puts me to shame here. We requested something impossible, and I’d like you to know that both Vadim and I have decided to find a different solution. We are not asking you anymore to put yourself out there.”

George paused, “Another reason why I didn’t sleep last night – I was busy calculating what I own. Making money can become its own fascination, adding it all up was never my primary concern. I have the money to retire, my portfolio has never looked better, there is a young hungry partner in the firm who’d love to take my chair in the board meetings.” George looked straight at Dan, while Dan finished the shave, the face smooth and even younger looking. Perfect features, simply beautiful. George continued, “If worst comes to worst, I can retire. It can’t be worse than vanishing because of drug problems.” He took two handfuls of water again and washed away the rest of the soap.

“What are you saying?” Dan cleaned the razor and put it away.

“I am ready to testify against Mr Nelson. I’m ready to get dragged through the dirt by our lovely British media, if that is what it takes to stop Mr Nelson from doing the same thing to anybody, ever, again. In fact, I will have lunch with my lawyer, I’m sure she’ll appreciate knowing beforehand.”

Dan stared at the man. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. And scared.” George pushed himself up, reached for the towel and began to dry himself, then stepped out of the tub and slipped into his bathrobe, wiping his forehead with its sleeve. “But I can’t be scared for the rest of my life ... maybe I’ll even keep one client. Or do you think the Baroness would withdraw her support?”

“No, she never would.” Dan smiled.

George shook his head. “Sorry. I am rattled. I don’t know the details yet, but this is the plan. If you wish, we can discuss the details with my lawyer at lunch. I cancelled my meetings for the morning, too, so we could go somewhere and have a civilized breakfast.”

“That sounds like a great idea. I’ll just tell Vadim, I’m sure he will be out of the bathroom by now. We’ll see you shortly. Half an hour?”

“Take your time.” George smiled at him. “I will be downstairs in the library.”

Dan cast a last smile, before he left and went back to the room. Still naked, the towel in his hand, he called out, "Vadim? You are never going to believe this."

Vadim was just closing the last button of his shirt. "Do you leave me guessing or will you tell?" His gaze travelled down Dan's naked form, and a smile formed on his lips.

"George is going to do it. He will give a testimonial if necessary. He asked us to meet him for breakfast and then lunch with his lawyer."

Vadim whistled. "Interesting. He found ..." a spine last night. It took effort to bite the sentence off before it could slip out. "His courage? That actually settles an itch I had at the back of my mind. I wouldn't have thought he's Nelson's type."

*Do you like them white?*

*I like them strong.*

"Why? What do you mean?" Dan was at the bathroom door.

"He told me he likes strong men. This guy isn't ... wasn't. Nelson was looking for a strong guy, like an equal. He's not interested in victims."

"You mean George didn't use to be a victim? He used to be strong and this is why he fought, and because he fought Nelson went as far as he did?" Dan stood, thinking, "Nelson went too far, and broke him."

"Possible. He's smart, I give him that, but ..." Vadim shrugged. "He doesn't turn me on the way he turns you on ... or he does, but not in ways he'd like."

"Huh? Who said he turns me on? George is good looking, but ... and what way does he like what?" Dan shrugged, "Stupid Scottish peasant, here, you got to explain to me step by step what on earth you were talking about." He flashed a grin.

Vadim laughed. "Fuck, Dan, we had sex with this guy, and he *doesn't* turn you on? What was that, then? A mercy fuck? A good way to get another redhead for the statistics?" Smiling to take the sting out.

"I'd have sex with a robot if it were good looking and responsive." Dan shrugged. "But what does that have to do with what you said earlier? You are confusing me, and I don't like to be confused."

Vadim sobered. "He ... turns me on in a bad way. In a way we both don't like ... It's a deep response, something ... like the man I was. Something about him says 'hurt me'."

"Right." Dan came back from the door and sat down to the bed. "let's unravel that. You say this man *is* a born victim, and that this doesn't go with what you know of Nelson. Then you say because that man is a victim, you want to hurt him, too, want to destroy him, because that would turn you on. Is that it?" Dan didn't look any less confused.

"I didn't say he's a born victim, maybe he's become one after what Nelson did to him. The guy unnerves me, Nelson, I mean, and I'm a lot tougher mentally than a banker or asset manager or whatever." Vadim sat down.

“Then you are saying the same as I was saying.” The confusion lifted from Dan’s face and he nodded slowly. “But what was that about turning you on the bad way?”

“In bed, I want to hurt him. I wanted to fuck him, and I ... I thought I knew exactly what Nelson must have felt ... wanting to mark him, wanting to make him suffer.” He shook his head. “I’m a sick fuck.”

Dan inhaled deeply. “Shit.” Had he thought it had just gone away, the darkness, because Vadim wore his collar and he’d changed? “I know you’re a switch.” He took another deep breath, shaking his head. “Difference is, in moments like this I realise it isn’t a game for you. You really do want to hurt that guy, aye?” The way Vadim inhaled told him, yes, exactly. Looking at his hand, Dan figured that he was a piss poor judge, of all men. “You miss Hooch?”

“No.” Yes. Vadim shook his head. “I’m done fucking people up. I’m not Nelson. But there is an urge ... an impulse, and all I can do is control it. Having you there helps. I know you’d stop me.” Vadim rubbed his face. “Konstantinov knew. He knew that inside me. He told me I’m a monster, Dan. I don’t think he was all wrong in that. I can still do the things I did. I’m still capable to break a man like that. Part of me wants to, and it freaks me out when I’m sober.”

“You’re not a monster. Monsters follow their urges.” But he knew that Vadim had done exactly that, once upon a time. “Shit.” Dan shook his head again, until the unruly hair hung in front of his face. “You are holding yourself back, you are aware of this, you ...” Trailing off. “Shit, Vadim, you think I am so much better? Let’s face it, I’d kill that Nelson without a second thought and I’d do it slowly. And if he ever hurt you? I’d torture him, worse than I ever tortured you. What does that make me? No better, in my books. No remorse. No guilt.” He looked straight at Vadim, who reached over and pulled him close, exhaling deeply, heads touching.

“We’re still doing alright. We gave this poor bastard something, even though he has no idea what we truly are. If that makes him face Nelson, great. Mission accomplished. If Nelson recovers from the blow, we take him down. This is Nelson’s last chance to live.”

Dan wrapped his arm around Vadim. “Deal. One last chance. You never know, George might not even have to testify if Nelson gets his tail between his legs and slinks off into his rat hole.” Dan smiled, ever hopeful. “For now, let me get ready so we can grab breakfast and meet that lawyer of Mr Holloway’s.”

\* \* \*

George took them to a private club for breakfast, the location exquisite, but despite it being so refined it was also effortless to enjoy oneself, and they had small talk and less small talk, exchanging stories and anecdotes. George did everything to entertain them, polite, a good listener, and he did look both younger and less severe with the rest of his face bared.

The lawyer joined them later, and she, too, was exceedingly pleasant, but paled slightly when George told her what he was planning to do. He'd written a statement, telling the whole sordid story, as he called it, and she raised several good questions. In so many words warning him that the media backlash could be enormous, but she said that she understood the cathartic need and would be happy to assist him as to limit any damage that could result from the fallout. Her professional and human touch were amazingly precise and gentle, helping and guiding George all the way, keeping him relaxed despite the huge emotional burden.

Two hours later, the asset manager looked drained and exhausted as if he'd worked seventy-two hours straight, but he was smiling. The lawyer promised she'd sent copies of the papers to the hotel, and she also started her own research on Mr Nelson – promising to keep them updated.

In the end, the lawyer left with handshakes and smiles, confident as if they would definitely and without the shadow of a doubt remain victorious.

Dan had been fairly quiet throughout all of this, listening and remaining in the background. When the lady was gone, he leaned across the table, smiling at George. "Is there anything we can do for you? To ... relax you?"

George looked from one to the other, and leaned conspiratorially closer. "What do you have in mind?" he asked.

"Sex." Dan grinned broadly, from ear to ear. "Beats everything else for relaxation."

"And I thought I'd take you out to a West End show." George inhaled, interest clearly there. "I better ask for my driver, then."

Dan glanced at Vadim, then winked at George. "It's medicinal, you know? Perhaps we could go to a West End show later. After all, we're not that young anymore ..." he sat back, remembering his comment about robots, but hell, this man was a rather good looking 'robot', and one never knew, with a lot of coaxing, he might even become interesting in bed.

That was exactly where they spent the afternoon, until George fell asleep, completely relaxed for a couple of hours. Dan and Vadim returned to their hotel and their clothes and they were picked up that evening to exclusive seats at a West End show. They spent that night once more in George's house, being spoiled by a man who lavished his attention, wit and humour on them, and didn't spare any costs to please and feed them. Halfway between guests and friends and lovers, a confusing triangle that he still manoeuvred with grace. Taking what they offered, and just as gracefully bidding them goodbye – in possession of the signed, legally watertight papers, photos, and medical reports. Their liaison was the lawyer, who asked to be consulted about any steps they were taking, as she understood that an "amiable settlement" might be reached before she had to ride into battle. Nevertheless, the asset manager had handed them a loaded gun – to use at their discretion.

\* \* \*

They spent six weeks in Britain, while the Baroness and Mr Holloway's lawyer were working on tracing and tracking and finally pinning down Nelson. Some time was spent with Dan's family, and the rest back in London, where the Baroness had access to an apartment near the V&A museum, which was more comfortable than a hotel room. Vadim managed to visit the museums, some several times, while Dan found to his surprise that he actually enjoyed some of them. His favourite was the Natural History museum, where he got lost for half a day, eventually meeting Vadim at Covent Garden for a pint.

Throughout all of this he was busy, working on his idea for the unofficial international group of ex Special Forces soldiers, and no place was better than London to do so. The capital of Britain, and a gateway for the British Forces. It was Vadim who came up with an inconspicuous name for the group, the 'Spa', and Dan liked it so much, he used it straight away, when contacting his former mates. He got Jean to contact his, and asked Hooch via Matt, and from there on snowballing across the Forces and across the countries.

They got a phone call from the Baroness that Nelson was in London, and the lawyer had pinpointed the time and place. This would be a 'surprise' for the man, and no back exit to slink out of.

A couple of days before that day, Dan planned the first meeting of the 'Spa'. He booked a conference room in a hotel, right in the centre of London, with access to a bar, not knowing how many ex-soldiers would turn up and how this crazy idea would work out.

He was surprised when a dozen men arrived, and the night ended long after the bar had closed at 2 AM. There were no fights, except for a few 'almost' ones, and only one man left when he realised that Dan and Vadim were a couple. The others cared less about that than the opportunity to be themselves, talk about things a civilian would run away from screaming, and get pissed while being once more together with those of their own ilk.

It was a roaring success, and the word spread from there on, Dan said, when he raised a glass to Pascal in the early hours of the morning.

Two days later, after they'd recuperated from the event, they were ready to face Nelson.

\* \* \*

The hotel lobby was a vision of beauty and splendour, polished brass, elegant marble and glittering crystal everywhere. Only the crème de la crème – or those who believed they were – frequented the place as guests.

Both Dan and Vadim fitted amongst the exquisitely dressed clientele in their dark tailored suits, and if it hadn't been for Dan's slight limp, the cane and the longer hair, they would have blended in even more. Two gentlemen, well groomed, expensively dressed and certainly well kept and extremely fit for their late forties. They turned more than just a few heads.

They headed straight for the tea room, speaking quietly to the waiter, who led them to one of the small tables, set in an alcove in the splendidly decorated art nouveau establishment.

Nelson did not wear the uniform when he showed up, but the expensive suit still worked to highlight his importance, and Vadim thought, damn, he was gorgeous. If he hadn't been such a freak ... and if he hadn't heard the stories - and seen the evidence - he'd be too tempted to burn his fingers again.

Dan stood, drew himself up to his full height, and looked straight on at Nelson. He had the big guns the lawyer had prepared for him in the briefcase. Nelson turned his head and looked over, his eyes narrowing. Then he looked at Vadim, who stood up too and invited him over with a gesture. Nelson squared his broad shoulders and came over. "I was supposed to meet a lawyer here ..." he said.

"She arranged this for us," said Vadim.

"I see." Nelson seemed taken aback.

"Please, sit with us for a few minutes."

Nelson sat down, but Vadim could see he wasn't comfortable. The man didn't like surprises.

"Colonel," Vadim opened the conversation once they were all seated, "as you might imagine this is not a social call. We have a proposition to make, a deal, if you like."

"Oh?" Nelson was, again fixated on Vadim, studying his face, trying to read warnings or what all this was about, and Vadim answered the gaze levelly. His best Soviet officer mask. The man had fucked him, but that was it. It had been nice enough, at a point in time when he'd needed it, and Nelson had been obliging, but in the end, he'd been nothing but a tool. Nelson only turned to Dan when he couldn't read Vadim. "What is this proposition?"

"That you will never contact Vadim again, never pester any of us, never come near either of us or anyone we know. Nor that any of your 'affiliates' should ever have anything to do with us." Dan looked at Nelson without a twitch. "In return, we will not expose you."

"Ex..." Nelson laughed, incredulous. "Excuse me, but that is very amusing. What can you possibly expose apart from your pathetic, drunken self?"

Dan leaned forward, only slightly, a mere angle of his upper body. He pulled his lips into a smile which never reached his eyes, while Vadim was on the edge of simply jumping over the table and strangling the man.

"We happen to be able to expose the crime you inflicted on a British citizen, twenty years ago. Said gentleman is willing to testify in court." Dan kept that fake smile on his face as he continued to talk, keeping his voice low throughout. "I am sure this would not sit well with your position in politics and military. They do have draconian punishments for rapists and torturers in most countries."

What was probably the most fearsome thing now was that ... it was obvious that Nelson had to actively think about *which* British citizen Dan meant. Were there more than one? Or had Holloway simply slipped from his mind?

“Testify? Who are you talking about?”

“Would you like us to dig any further to find other victims of your crimes? Very interesting, Colonel.” Dan leaned back. “Perhaps I should remind you of this particular case.” Reaching over, he snapped the briefcase open and took out copies of the medical report photos. The first three didn’t show the face, but they clearly showed the extent of damage on the body. Dan placed them in front of Nelson, keeping the other two in his hand.

Nelson looked at the photos, and especially at the one that showed the mess of the chest, the swollen, bloody, discoloured area where the nipple had been. He stared at it, his face showing half hunger, half disgust, in one long, unguarded moment. He then looked at Dan again. “There was a settlement. They took the money.”

“I’m afraid there was never any legally valid settlement. This argument won’t uphold in court, while there is evidence for the settlement having been give to charitable purposes. Besides,” Dan glanced at Vadim, “every court would believe the matter of coercion.” He’d carefully remembered the right words, practising like an actor. “Apart from that, paying money to hush a crime does not make the crime disappear. You are a rapist, a torturer and a sadist, Colonel, and we will make this public, and trust me, we will make the public listen.”

Nelson’s jaw muscles tightened visibly, up to his temples. He looked at Vadim. “You talked to George?”

“Not long ago,” said Vadim. “But it doesn’t matter, because he’ll back us up as a witness. As will his doctor, his parents, and anybody else who knew of this. There is no way this was done consensually ... and everybody will see what happened. You paid once before ... I don’t think you have a leg to stand on in your defence.”

“And the deal is ... I let you go.”

“Both of us. No contact. Vanish out of my life, Dan’s life, and don’t even approach anybody we know.”

“How can I know you’ll keep your word?”

“You can’t. Call it deterrence.”

Dan shuffled the photos together. The bastard had remembered after all. He hadn’t even needed to show the face shots. “You got one chance, Nelson. I suggest you take it, even though it comes from ...” he smirked, “a ‘pathetic, drunken’ man.”

Nelson’s jaw muscles didn’t seem to relax, he was clearly worried. Crimes against British citizens weren’t taken lightly, everybody knew that. He stood. “Mr Krasnorada, it was a pleasure knowing you.”

“I won’t say anything now to encourage your obsession, Colonel. Have a good life, and if I hear of our mutual red-headed friend being harmed or pestered, we will bring you down.”

Nelson’s face was pinched. “I understand.” He turned around to leave.

“In fact,” Dan gave the parting shot, “if we ever hear that you harm *anyone* again, we will bring you down. And don’t underestimate our resources. You are not safe anywhere.”

Nelson gave him a baleful stare, then walked away.

Vadim exhaled. "Fuck."

"Was that it?" Dan stared at the retreating back. "Feels like I would have missed it if I had blinked. Could it have been that easy?"

"Easy? George was the real piece of work ... but I guess Nelson has a lot of things to lose."

"Aye." Dan nodded, then looked at Vadim. "It's time to make a few phone calls." He smiled. "I know someone who will be very relieved."

Vadim reached over and pressed Dan's arm. "Yeah. Somehow ... I thought he'd fight back."

"You never know what other skeletons he has in his closet. Smacks to me of trying to hide potentially more." Dan closed the briefcase and reached for Vadim's hand to squeeze it briefly. "Come on, Russkie, let's phone George."

"I think we could tell him the good news over dinner." Vadim grinned. "Maybe he gets a bit more interesting if he comes out of his reserve often enough ..." George took their call, and they met for dinner a few hours later, to celebrate. The rest of the evening went as foreseen - George trusted them more now. It seemed like a massive weight had been lifted off him, and he appeared more relaxed and less scared. Which, thought Vadim, was almost the same level of reward as the fact that Nelson would stop sending him emails and calling him.



### **March 1995 to January 1996**

Just as Vadim had promised, they went to Kashmir that autumn, so that Dan could see the mountains again. This time from the safe side, but even though he could not stop thinking about the tea house in Kabul, wondering if it still existed, it was the past. Done and over with, just like the many safe houses they had used, every street corner, hidden market place and the hamam.

It was good to see the mountains again, and they spent three weeks touring the area. It had a strange effect on Dan, mellowing him, and while Vadim would never love mountains as much as Dan did, he appreciated the sense of freedom, calm, and simple satisfaction that they gave Dan. Finally, the loss was laid to rest. The loss of Dan's functioning body, the loss of who he had been all his life. Acceptance was finally there, and when they took a helicopter ride into the mountains, camping for a few days in the silence and majesty, it healed the last ache in Dan's soul, and the last sorrow for the life he had lost.

When they got back, they threw themselves into the consulting work, making a name for themselves in the conference circle, and by the end of the year they had to reject invitations and job offers, or they would not have been able to spend time on the farm.

That year, Dan remembered Vadim's birthday, and he organised a party that took place in the famous grill in town, with beer and neighbours, and a lot of laughter. They'd been taken in and welcomed by everyone, and at last the farm had become a true home. Dan carefully divided the gifts into those that could be shown and those that ... were only for their own eyes and for games they 'played', that night and many more that followed. Games that went deeper each time, and bound them ever tighter. Some of these 'games' they played in the bedroom, where the Maori carving told their story: two war chiefs embracing, weapons at their sides, both aroused and savage and proud.

They stayed on the farm for the Christmas holidays, and by January they had the money spare to invest in a swimming pool. They left the builders to their work while they headed for a conference in Europe, which promised a lot of kudos and not an unsubstantial amount of money.

### **February 1996, Lisbon, Portugal**

The first two days of the conference had been exhausting, but immensely successful. The panel sessions had been well attended and in return, even Dan had to admit that he'd enjoyed some of the talks.

Vadim mingled with the participants, sharing a bit of wisdom here, a quip there, clarified a point he'd made, when he suddenly saw something. It wasn't so much seeing as feeling, a strange sense that the world wasn't right anymore, that

something had happened, and he found himself staring at a tall, thin man who'd just entered the room. The man seemed as well-known to him as his own father, but in the split second that it took him to place the sharp features and the dark amber eyes - not a soldier, not an ordinary politico or adviser - dread came up, with the force of a geyser, bursting, hissing, a fear so pure that Vadim tasted blood.

The man's eyes met his, and he came closer, weaving his way through groups of talking people, and it felt unreal. A nightmare come true. Vadim stumbled backwards, didn't even realize he'd dropped his glass. Staring at the man, he felt his mind shatter. He was back there, a bloody pulp of what was left of the man he'd been, a prisoner, half-insane with deprivation, pain, and this man's mindrape.

"Mr Krasnorada."

The voice made Vadim sweat.

The amber eyes ate up his world, and when the man touched his arm, Vadim simply couldn't bear it - he wanted to strangle him, but he was too scared. Something deep inside allowed only one reaction, and he bolted, running, stomach heaving, and he made it into the corridor, blinded, confused, it was like any of those nightmares, only worse, and he went to his knees, retching.

"There, there, let me help you."

Konstantinov had followed him. Vadim didn't hear his own sounds of despair, hopeless, broken. He knew he wasn't in prison, yet with this man, he'd never be anywhere else.

"Please ..."

"Why is it, Vadim Petrovich, that whenever we meet, you are on your knees? Are you feeling alright? I bet you don't. I bet I was with you all these years. You'd rather forget yourself than me."

Dan had been up to the rooms to take a couple of pain killers, and was on his way back to the conference rooms. Turning a corner, he stopped, taken aback at the sight at the other end of the corridor.

"Vadim!" Calling out, Dan picked up his pace.

The other man looked up, looked at Dan, who met his eyes, then pulled back, his hands slipping from Vadim's shoulders, while he murmured, "you are an animal, Vadim Petrovich, and you know it."

Dan was confused, concerned, but thankful for this gentleman who seemed to take care of Vadim. He was about to say something, when he saw that Vadim was sick.

Vadim was retching, not in control of his body, too weak to escape, too panicked to think one clear thought. Only that: that Konstantinov was just as bad as he'd remembered. No embellishments.

"Vadim!" Getting down on the good knee, Dan was on the floor in front of him, hand on Vadim's shoulder. "What the fuck happened? Shit, Vadim, I get you a doctor."

"Get me ... out." Vadim managed.

Konstantinov was standing. He did nothing but watch, and that already felt to Vadim like being flayed alive.

“Okay, okay.” Dan pushed himself back up again, taking Vadim’s hand to pull him up. “Let’s get up to the room and you lie down a moment. Must be something you ate.” Dan shook his head with a frown, his arm around Vadim’s shoulder when he stood. Turning towards the gentleman in his sixties, with the grey hair and amber eyes, “thank you for trying to help.”

The man smiled – it wasn’t a nasty smile, it seemed nice enough. “Entirely my pleasure, Mr McFadyen. Good evening.” He turned and headed back into the main room.

Dan was surprised for a moment, then realised the man had to have seen his name in the program, and he nodded at him when he left.

Managing to get Vadim into the room wasn’t easy, and it took them a while. Vadim was dripping with sweat when they arrived in the room; he was mostly dead weight, tensed up, heavy, like drunk. He managed to stumble into the bathroom where he vomited again, the retching and dry heaving painful now.

“What the hell happened to you?” Dan closed the door, following into the bathroom. “I call reception now. You’re sick.”

“No! No. It’s ... it’s him. No.” Vadim clung to the toilet. He felt sick. Sick in his soul, his mind, his body, everywhere. “Can’t say ... the name. It’s him.”

“Who?” Dan shook his head, nothing made sense, and least of all Vadim’s reaction. Staring helplessly down, one hand on Vadim’s shoulder, when it suddenly hit him. The last time Vadim had been that sick was in Rome ... stress. Mental stress. Nightmares. And ... “Fuck.” Dan slumped onto the edge of the bathtub, immediately followed by a violent reaction, when he shouted. “Fuck!”

Konstantinov.

Back up again, he stood, from naught to rage. “I’ll kill that fucking bastard.” He was already turning.

“No! No, Dan!” Vadim’s body still didn’t react. He had to, had to stop Dan. “No.”

“Why not?” Dan’s voice came down like a whiplash. “What did he do, what did that fucker say to you?” Fists clenched, he was brimming with rage. All those helpless nights, waking from Vadim’s screams, watching him suffer, and being able to do exactly *nothing*. The knowledge, buried far away, of being a carer rather than a lover, that knowledge that he didn’t want to see, couldn’t bear looking at, and it was all down to that torturous bastard. “Why the fuck not?”

“Can’t ... murder him. He won, Dan. Let’s go away ... away from here. I’ll be okay. Don’t let him fuck you up.”

“Shit.” Defeated, the rage was still there, but Dan’s mind for once won over the instinct. Civilians. No more war, even though he felt as if the war was very much raging right now. A different one, worse, with his hands bound. A war where he wasn’t allowed to kill the enemy. “How can that man freely walk around here, he is a goddamned motherfucking torturer!”

Vadim felt the sweat run down his body, and it was cold sweat, fear, terror, weakness. “Psychologist. He’s ... a psychologist.”

“He’s a fucking torturer! I don’t give a shit what he claims to be.” With no outlet for his rage, Dan hit the bathroom wall with his fist. At least the pain gave him something else to concentrate on. “You really want to leave?” Turning round, and seeing Vadim on the floor, nodding miserably, all he could was add, “Okay. I organise it.”

“Thank you.” Vadim rested his head against the wall, feeling the nausea come and go, unable to do much more than wait for his body to calm down. But his mind didn’t. It was like his life had suddenly *become* the nightmare. Konstantinov was there, and he’d always be there.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can. I explain to the organisers that you’re ill. I might have to take over, but I try to get us out.” Dan lingered for a moment longer. This was wrong. Horribly wrong, and he didn’t have a fucking clue what to do about it. Except for revenge, but that was out.

“I can ...” But Vadim knew that he couldn’t. He couldn’t talk about disproportionate warfare while Konstantinov was anywhere close. He’d simply ... go insane? Again. “You know ... the stuff as well as I do. Maybe I got some ... food poisoning.”

“Okay.” Dan frowned, valiantly keeping the ever growing worry at bay. Wouldn’t do to crack in the face of the old helplessness. “I’ll be right back.”

He made his way downstairs soon after, trying to find an organiser, or at least one of the admins, who could initiate a change in programme. The conference rooms were bustling, and after a while he had to admit to himself that he was far less searching for any of the organisers than for one particular man. A tall, grey haired man who should be screaming in terror, with hands around his throat, instead of walking around.

He found him, more by accident than design, in the hotel’s restaurant, where Konstantinov was eating. He was alone and looked perfectly harmless, just finishing up a minestrone soup.

Despite his threats, his hatred, his sudden all encompassing need to break that bastard’s neck – Dan froze. He stood in the doorway, just one step into the room, staring at the man’s back. Man? Beast. Torturer.

Torturer.

And it all came back. The heat of the sun in the Afghan mountains. The glint of steel in his hand, and the yielding flesh beneath him. Dark red blood that had bled out his hatred, and the screams in his ears. Then sobbing. A plea. To kill. Kill cleanly. Because he had been a soldier.

Not a torturer.

He suddenly felt a gaze on him from across the room, when Konstantinov turned. Looking at him with one slightly raised brow, as if the man tried to express amusement. But it didn’t matter, nor did the hatred, and least of all the fervent wish to kill that beast and crush its bleeding face into the ground. Obliterated.

Dan met the look, his face hard, unyielding, unlike the flesh had once been. Unfeeling, unlike that day in the mountains. Unwilling to listen, nor see, nor breathe the same air as that thing.

He was Dan McFadyen, ex-SAS soldier, and he was not a torturer.

He turned and walked out of the room, tall, squared back, and even the limp was barely visible. He couldn't remember afterwards how he found one of the organisers, nor what he explained, he was only aware that he would take over the panel the next day, and that they would be able to leave after that.

With the taste of ashes in his mouth, which had nothing to do with any cigarette, he returned to the room as quickly as he could.

Vadim had undressed, showered, and was lying on the bed, the hotel room brightly lit around him. He wasn't cold, not hungry, wasn't hurting. Yet he knew Konstantinov was down there, somewhere. Accident? As KGB - or ex KGB, what was Konstantinov doing here? He wouldn't travel all that way to see him crumble? And why was there nothing he could do to resist the man? He knew exactly where the wounds were, and there was no forgiveness, no mercy, nothing. Konstantinov despised him like on the first day, and there was nothing that Vadim felt but dread.

"Vadim?" Closing the door behind him, Dan stepped into the room and sat down on the bed. "You feel any better?" What a pathetic, useless thing to ask.

Vadim turned to look at him. "Yeah. I was just ... shocked to see him." He sat up, leaning with his back against the head of the bed. "He's ... like he was."

Dan looked down at his hand for a moment, "I never asked. I never *really* asked what he did."

Vadim shook his head. "I can't. It was ... a matter of pride to him. He enjoyed it."

Dan slowly nodded. "Did you tell Dr Williams?"

"He knows. Bastard's been writing about torture for ... medical journals."

"What? You telling me Konstantinov writes about how to torture successfully? And that's getting published?"

"He makes it sound legitimate, Dr Williams said. But yeah, he's gloating about what he did to me. My mind." Vadim felt weak, angry, deep down, helpless. "Guess he was just checking ... whether the damage is permanent. Guess I made him happy."

"But he *didn't* win." Dan shook his head violently.

Vadim's face twisted with anguish. "Fuck, Dan, he broke me. Okay? All I'm doing is manage the fucking damage."

Dan twitched, had the sudden urge to shout at Vadim, shake him, try to negate anything he'd ever said, and most of all the poisoned barb that was still stuck in his mind: carer. But he did nothing, just swallowed hard, hiding the clenched fist. "You should call Dr Williams."

"I'm okay. I got this far. I can hold it together. I have to." Vadim was starting to sweat again and his heart had been pounding all the time.

"I could do it for you. We're not that far away from the UK, we could stop over." Dan leaned closer, reaching out to touch Vadim's face.

Vadim shuddered. “Maybe. Let me ... let it calm down, okay? I don’t know why ... this cut so deep.”

Dan’s hand stalled, never touching. “Okay. Guess it’s because the bastard’s suddenly here.” Not knowing what else to say, he stood up. “I’ll stay here. You want anything? Anything I can do?” Feeling as useless and as inadequate as a rifle without bullets.

Vadim leaned his head back, baring his throat. “Stay close.” He reached over and took Dan’s hand. “Not in the mood for sex, just ... stay close.” Because I can’t lose you, he thought. I can’t allow this to pull us apart.

“Fucking hell, Vadim, you really think I’d want sex right now?” Dan frowned, but toed his shoes off before scooting onto the bed. “Of course I stay. As long as you want me to, and as long as I get a bite to eat.” He tried a grin, but it turned out miserable. Holding Vadim close, once he sat beside him. As close as he could, as if his arm around the other could ward off any evil.

Vadim leaned his head against Dan’s shoulder. “Just ... because it takes my mind away from ... this.” He closed his eyes, breathing against Dan’s throat. “Room service. Menu is on the nightstand. We just call the kitchen and ... eat up here.”

“Sure, anything you want.” Dan sat, staring into the room, while holding onto Vadim. He didn’t check how long they sat like this, but he eventually ran out of cigarettes to smoke, and the water bottle beside the bed was empty as well. He had to get up eventually, but not before looking at Vadim and placing a hand on his shoulder, then heading into the bathroom. He hurried and it took no longer than five minutes before he came back out. Freshly showered, still damp. He didn’t ask for room service, even though he was getting hungry. A couple of chocolate bars had to do, especially since Vadim wouldn’t, or rather, couldn’t eat anything. He settled back in, under the blanket this time, resting against Vadim’s shoulder while holding him close. With the light dimmed, Dan began to drift off, even though he’d meant to stay awake.

All Vadim could do was sit there, eyes half-closed, staring into nothingness. Like the darkness in the Lubyanka. Endless nights spent standing, chained up, hurting in every muscle, every bone from the beatings. Wanting to meet Konstantinov, because Konstantinov *talked* to him, acknowledged that he was a person. Despite the poison, the accusations, the way the man had skilfully dismantled his mind, dug at his secrets, and pulled them out of his mind - each and every one of his monsters. He knew he’d have nightmares. And he knew they’d be the worst he’d had in ages. And he couldn’t give up control, just couldn’t face the nightmares. He got up, waking Dan in the process. “I ... can’t sleep. No way. Just can’t.”

Awake from one second to the next, Dan had been worried enough for the old instinct to function. “We could ... I don’t know, talk? Or take a bath? Maybe you’d be tired enough then?”

“Don’t want to. He’ll be waiting there.” Vadim shook his head. “Did you ... did you ever dream of me, right at the beginning? Nightmares, I mean?”

For a moment completely taken aback, Dan stared at Vadim, before he caught himself and shook his head. An aborted movement, no more. “I can’t remember.” Yes, he could, but he didn’t want to, but he added, quietly, “for months afterwards I caught myself suddenly feeling a stab of panic, if I saw a movement in the corner of my eyes, or an unexpected touch. I was like a skittish horse, but I hid it.”

“He didn’t rape me. But he’s in my head. He’s right there, and he did that on purpose. He said he’d always be there. Well, maybe he did rape me. My mind. Sometimes I can forget that, but other ... other days, I can hear his voice, and then I think I’m going insane.”

“The mind is worse.” Sitting up now, Dan lit a cigarette. “I think he did rape you, your mind ... something tearing into you, violating who you are.” He stared down at the glowing end of the fag. “I just don’t know what to do about it, how to help.”

Vadim swallowed. Rape. That was what it felt like then. Dan had nailed it, and Dan knew what he was talking about. “I can’t ... I want to kill him, but I can’t ... no way I can face him again. He makes me sick, takes everything, I just can’t.”

“You don’t have to. We’re out of here once I’ve done the panel. You just stay in the room and we’ll get an earlier flight back home. The bastard won’t reach you at home, aye? Too far away.”

“Don’t think he knows where we live.” Vadim got back onto the bed and rubbed his face against Dan’s chest. “I feel like shit. He’s just ... an old man. Why the fuck am I so scared ...”

“I don’t know.” Dan’s voice was quiet, “I don’t know because I don’t ... don’t understand. Bloody peasant, eh?” Self-deprecating, as he stroked Vadim’s back. “I just don’t understand.”

“And I can’t explain. I can explain what he did, but not what it did to me. Beatings, interrogations, isolation. You know all that. I do. I know it was just that, but it scares me still and I really don’t want to remember. It’s ...” Vadim shrugged. “Having been there. Two years. Losing my... myself.”

Dan nodded slowly. He felt out of his depth, but he was used to that. “Why don’t you call Dr Williams?” Quietly, again, while stubbing out his cigarette.

“I can deal with this. I don’t need drugs. I can live with this. I don’t need ... I just want to forget it happened.” And I don’t want to lose you, Vadim thought, but couldn’t say it.

“Okay.” Dan knew he was pacifying Vadim too quickly, but he was so far out of his depth right now, he’d never been so far from the shore before. “Why don’t you just lie back down and I hold you. You can put on the TV if you want to, and just stay awake. I’ll catch a wink or two, so that I’m not a complete zombie tomorrow at the panel.”

“Okay.” Vadim lay back, checked the time. Agonizing quarter past two. Long, long hours to go. And even while his eyes were burning and he felt sore and tired, with his stomach full of acid and his throat raw, it was so much better than closing his eyes and giving in to Konstantinov.

The next morning, quarter to ten, Dan was in the conference room to prepare for the lecture and the following discussion. He'd got it wrong, he was on his own. No panel discussion. He didn't like giving presentations, wasn't fond of standing there on his own, without back-up, but he knew the material, even though he'd always left the finer points and the more intricate argumentation to Vadim. Vadim, who was in their room, upstairs, with dark shadows under his eyes, which were visibly burning with tiredness.

Dan hoped the questions wouldn't be too tricky, and that his guts would simply carry him through. It was five to ten when he had finished checking that his presentation was running smoothly and the data projector was in focus, when the first participants were sitting down. His back to the audience, Dan picked up the notes from the briefcase, shuffling through them, and at two minutes to ten he turned around.

He almost froze again. There. How could he not have been prepared for this. Of course. The bastard was probably hoping to dance on Vadim's grave. He got him instead, Dan McFadyen, the bait, the weapon and the evidence at the same time.

Third row, the outmost seat, a perfect place to survey most of the room, and the speaker, of course. A man, grey hair, amber eyes. Distinguished and smooth on the surface, a beast underneath.

Konstantinov.

During the presentation, Konstantinov had his arms crossed, touching his chin thoughtfully, like he was weighing and considering every word Dan said, and the way he said it, down to his softened Scottish accent. Every detail was under scrutiny, every time Dan halted or spoke too fast, when he chose to move the presentation on and whether his trail of thought was there all the time. The man was watching him with an intensity Dan wasn't used to anymore.

He had to fight not to be irritated by the scrutiny, and it took him at least halfway into the presentation before he regained his equilibrium, by using an old trick. He imaged the man to be one of his poncy officers, way back in the old days, who would sit like that, trying to take a man apart during debriefings, especially those men, like himself, who were quicker with the weapon than the mind.

Dan finished the presentation on guerrilla warfare on a calm note, and the chair invited questions.

Konstantinov allowed a few questions before he raised his hand just to shoulder-level. "Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada ... is he unwell?"

Dan was prepared, he knew the moment the beast had appeared that he'd bury his claws into his prey. "If you have any questions for Mr Krasnorada, I am happy to relay them." Dan managed a smile that never touched his eyes.



“There is a matter of counterterrorism that I’m greatly interested in, from a psychologist’s viewpoint. If you had caught a terrorist ... or a traitor ... or a double agent ... what would be your recommended cause of action?”

“That entirely depends on the circumstances.” Dan retorted, no hesitation. Inwardly feeling a knot of hatred twist his stomach, but he fell back onto the man he’d once been. Remembering, using the strength, the training, the tactics, while showing no feelings. “Are you referring to the context of this talk: guerrilla warfare?” *Traitor*. The word was stuck in Dan’s mind, reverberating. *Traitor*. Perhaps this man was far more dangerous than he’d thought – perhaps this beast had any means to get his hands on Vadim. The USSR was gone, but the men in the grey suits were still there. Still in power.

“Yes. If you were the occupying force, and you took control of a collaborator who has been aiding the guerrilla ... what is your recommended course of action?”

“First of, I would ensure that the evidence is substantial, non negotiable, foolproof. Not just an isolated incident that lends itself to interpretation.” They weren’t taking about guerrilla warfare anymore, but about a war of a very personal kind.

“Assume it is. And assume that some of your most loyal men died to provide the evidence.”

“I would recommend to ascertain the reasons why.” Big words, echoes from those who’d used them before him.

“Surely, if the traitor was part of the military, his motives wouldn’t matter?”

“Why would they not?” Dan let his brows rise as he leaned against the podium. Casual, seemingly relaxed, as if he wasn’t on razor’s edge. “Or would you be too frightened to find out that you didn’t have your machine as much under your control as you believed?”

“You are implying a fault in discipline. Now, if you ascertained the reason and these were personal ... emotional, even, how would you go about dealing with him?”

“Who said it was a him?” Dan smiled, glanced into the round as if he were amused, while he actually wanted to be sick. Bile in his throat, choking on the ‘him’. Yes, him. Only one.

“I’m assuming, as part of the military, it would be a male, but you may assume that traitor to be a female, if you prefer.”

“We are, after all, in the nineties.” Some of the people in the audience were chuckling at the mild joke, while inwardly, Dan’s anger and anxiety rose. He’d just manoeuvred himself into a trap, a trap in which this bastard implied Vadim – and there was no way they were talking about anyone else – was ‘female’. Dan remembered all too well that last night in Kabul and the tape, while knowing that he was no intellectual match for this man in a verbal sparring. If only he could get his hands around the throat, but ... he’d walked away before, and he would walk away again. “In answer to your question, I would suggest to weigh carefully the pros and cons of the situation. Calmly, and with an eye on nothing but the greatest advantage, if you must. Are you inclined to go down the path of

revenge? Or are you determined to enter negotiations with the other side – if there *is* another side.” It was hard to stick to this fanciful language, “or, indeed, are you willing to forego any of those steps and simply look for your personal gains? Say, for example, a quarter of a million pounds, perhaps.” He managed a laugh, which sounded convincing enough for a few people to laugh in the audience, who got the ‘joke’ all too well. The Cold War hadn’t ceased that long ago, after all.

“A very interesting question. Would I not attempt all of these, plus make an example of the man - or woman - and also teach her - or him - a lesson about loyalty? After all, they are not exclusive of each other, and it would be largely a matter of timing.”

“Then ...” Dan leaned forward, even producing a wink into the audience, “then you really are a master of your *persuasive* profession ... and don’t require my expertise. After all, I was a soldier.” Not a torturer. “I fought with bullets and knives, not with *persuasion*, and I killed cleanly.” He smiled, yet he felt sick, but his tanned skin did not show the pallor and his hands remained steady. Training, control. The audience was silent for a moment, until they finally applauded, finishing a session that had nearly cost Dan’s soul.

Konstantinov smiled, even raised his hands to clap them together, once, twice. He could have been in the audience merely as a way to allow Dan to look good in their spar - but the truth was far more sinister than that. When people got up, shuffled out, some talking, others approaching Dan to ask a question or shake his hand, Konstantinov remained sitting there for longer.

Finally everyone left, even the last ones, after Dan had answered all their questions. He picked up the briefcase with the notes and stooped to get the cane before heading out. Looking stoically straight ahead and towards the door, and yet the man remained in his peripheral vision.

“I can only hope that it was worth it for you,” Konstantinov said, softly, thoughtfully.

Dan stopped, turning slowly, measuring the man with dark eyes that betrayed nothing. They were alone, but he kept his voice low. “No, you don’t.”

“No I don’t what?”

“You don’t hope for *anything* for my sake. Spare us the pleasantries.”

Konstantinov didn’t move, didn’t shift. “We both know what it costs you to keep your promises. I can only hope that Vadim Petrovich returns enough on that emotional and financial investment.”

“Do we?” Dan’s brows rose. “Do *we* know what anything costs me? You might call yourself a psychologist, but I doubt you are a mind reader.” His distaste was all too evident.

“Experience.” Konstantinov smiled thinly. “Case studies. Histories. Projections and outcomes.”

“Of course. How could I forget. You pride yourself on these. Which makes me think that you certainly don’t hope for anything on Vadim’s behalf, either.”

“There is nothing to hope for him. There is only one likely outcome, with a few variations.”

“This is where you are wrong.” Dan straightened up and a slight smile crossed his face. It almost touched his eyes, but he didn’t allow it to, lest the thought and the emotion got tainted by the presence of the beast. “As I said to your Colonel when I killed him, I love Vadim.” A small shrug of his shoulder. He knew he sounded naive, but he did not care. “You’d be surprised what that means, but then, how would you know.” How would this bastard know what he was willing to do, what he had done, what he’d been living with, against, and for, and what he would give in the future. There were no limits to the price he’d pay, and that was something this man would never comprehend.

“That means two things ... either, you are very much like Vadim Petrovich, in which case you deserve the pain. Or you are truly in love, in which case it is regrettable that you have to suffer so much. It takes a courageous man to love.” Konstantinov stood. “Thank you for the presentation, I found it very enlightening.”

“So did I.” Dan’s face was stoic once more, as he fought with a surge of anger. He turned without another glance nor word, and walked out of the room, not bothering to keep the limp in check, because such a minor irritation truly did not matter. Not with a beast like that.

He was soon back in the room, calling out for Vadim, who had been watching TV and was lying on the bed, in his bathrobe, freshly showered. “What happened?”

“Nothing. It was a good presentation.” Dan was a shit liar, but damn, it had to do this time. “I even remembered to talk like Maggie.” He put the briefcase down and sat down on the bed to lean closer. Now that he knew, now that he finally understood what it did mean to love, the anger, the hatred, and even the helplessness had lost some of their sharpness. “How are you?” He smiled slightly, placing a kiss onto Vadim’s lips. “Ready to head home?”

“More than ready.” Vadim yawned. “I could try to sleep. Maybe just for an hour.” He placed his forehead against Dan’s, but the terror was still coiling inside. Maybe he’d lose the man’s shadow once he was at the far end of the globe.

“Or we could grab a taxi now and head to the airport. There’s a flight in four hours, we could spend the time in the lounge or do some shopping.” Anything, anything to get away. Even shopping.

“Yes.” Vadim looked up as if he’d never have thought of that idea, then got dressed. They packed and checked out, and it felt like flight, but Vadim breathed a sigh of relief once they were in the taxi, heading towards the airport, which felt like a shelter.

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They got through check-in relatively painlessly, heading towards the lounge, where Dan was hoping to get some food. Skipping dinner the night before and with lunch on the fly, he was already famished. With two hours to kill he opted to get himself some proper food.

“I’m off to find a fry-up or something. You hungry?” Looking down at Vadim who had made himself comfortable in one of the club chairs.

“No, I’ll just close my eyes for a bit. Get me some nuts or dried fruit for later.” Vadim leaned back, head resting so he was baring his throat, and arms crossed over his chest.

“Sure, and some peanut butter energy bars.” Dan grinned and made his way back out, to forage for food that would satisfy his appetite. He went looking from vendor to vendor, until he settled on a grill, after buying Vadim’s nibbles, and had steak with potatoes and salad and a quite drinkable beer.

He cursed himself mildly when walking back without the cane. When he got closer he heard crashing noises and somebody screaming in pain. Forgetting about the knee, Dan started to run as fast as he could and soon burst into the lounge.

Vadim was kneeling on top of a security guy and somebody else was cradling what looked like a dislocated shoulder. Vadim was wild-eyed, face twisted into a monstrous grimace, and he was snarling. Security began to pile in, the man underneath Vadim was shaking with terror, and tried to break open Vadim’s grip around his throat.

“Vadim!” Dan shouted. He was close with only a few strides, but he didn’t touch him. Too dangerous. “Vadim!” The same voice he’d used in Rome. “Listen to me!”

Vadim’s white knuckles relaxed, and he let go of the man, shaking his head like he’d woken from a nightmare - only then did security move closer, and somebody said something about “police”. Vadim was breathing hard, positively panting, sweating, pale, drifting slowly back to sanity.

“No, please!” Dan cast a frantic glance at security. “Don’t come closer.” Yet he did, carefully. Recognising the physical reaction, and the smell of stale sweat, cold panic. All those nights of terror, he’d never forget a single one of them. “Vadim, listen to me.” He placed his hand on Vadim’s shoulder in a firm grip. “It’s alright. Listen to me. I’m here.” Trying to hold off security with a pleading look, he had to concentrate on Vadim first and foremost.

Vadim closed his eyes, the terrible tension in him slowly leaked away, breath went shuddering, while his victim crawled away and was helped up by somebody. Coughing and shocked, staring at the madman in the middle of the room.

Vadim looked around quickly, as if he was expecting an enemy. “Nightmare?” he asked. “Not ... it’s real.”

“No, it isn’t. Listen to me, Vadim. It’s me, Dan.” Getting down onto his good knee, he needed to make Vadim see, had to make him look at himself. Both hands on Vadim’s shoulders now, he felt the tension brimming and the uncontrollable tremors beneath his hands. “You’re in Lisbon airport. We are about to fly back home to New Zealand.” Dan saw someone come towards them, and he shook his head, trying to keep them away. How the hell would they get out of this mess? Vadim had just assaulted a civilian. If that shoulder was dislocated ... oh shit. Surely the police was already on their way.

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Vadim nodded slowly. "I dreamt. Somebody ..." He frowned, not sure he knew what had happened through the haze and the sheer overwhelming terror. "Attacked me. I think."

"No one attacked you. You must have fallen asleep, perhaps someone touched you." Dan let his hands wander to the back of Vadim's neck, applying a reassuring pressure. "Sit down, okay? You got to be calm now. I'm here, I'll help with the explaining." Dan was too shocked to know what he was doing. As usual, reacting by instinct, and all he could hope for was that he was doing the right things.

Vadim nodded and sat down, looking confused, then looked at the man he'd strangled and the other guy whose shoulder looked horrible and who was brought outside. People kept staring at him, while Dan pushed himself back off the floor with considerable effort, then stood beside Vadim, his hand on his shoulder. That was when the police arrived.

"Please," Dan greeted them, raising his hands in a placating gesture. "Would you listen to me first? I can explain. Do you speak English?"

"Yes, senor." Both cops nodded. "What happened here?"

"I don't know all of it. I wasn't here. You have to ask the witnesses, but please, believe me, Vadim is not a homicidal maniac." No? Fuck! "Vadim is my partner. We are both veterans, and Vadim ..." searching for an explanation, word, anything that could describe ... and then he got it. Of course. "Vadim suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He was a Prisoner of War." Slight lie, a white one. "Something happened at the conference we spoke at, something which triggered the trauma. Please, I need to get Vadim to ..." and he knew, all of a sudden, "his therapist. Dr Williams. Please let me call him. Please." He had never in his life begged like this, and couldn't have done it for himself.

The policemen talked among themselves, while Vadim sat silent, staring ahead, not reacting to anything, not even when Dan asked him quietly what had happened, the mobile phone in hand. He had Dr William's number, and there was nothing else he could think of to do. The police officers continued to debate, one seemed to be reluctant, but at some point, the first man nodded and stepped back to talk to a witness. "Well, senor, it depends on whether they will press charges. We need your details, and you will likely have to compensate."

"Of course. I understand, but may we leave the country?" Glancing towards the airline personnel, he wasn't even sure how to get Vadim onto the plane after this serious incident.

"It is likely you will be banned from using this airline," the cop said, helpfully. "Could I have your passports, please?"

"Yes, of course." Fuck. But the inconvenience paled in comparison to the magnitude of what had happened. Konstantinov. He wouldn't let that bastard win. He just wouldn't. He'd never gone down without a fight and he wouldn't this time either. "Vadim, where did you put the passports?" It had always been Vadim to take care of such things.

Vadim patted the inside of his jacket and pulled them out. "I'm sorry," he murmured, seemed far calmer now, more *there*.

"It's okay, it's not your fault." Dan said quietly, "but you have to tell me what happened." Holding the passports out to the cops.

"I must have fallen asleep. I don't remember. Just ... wanted to kill." He shuddered, but kept his voice down. "Rage. Shit. I could have killed someone. I ... nearly did."

"I know, but you didn't." Murmured, Dan watched the police officers run checks on their passports. One of them nodded when Dan held up the mobile phone, to indicate he wanted to make a call. "I call Dr Williams now, okay, Vadim?"

"Okay." Vadim inhaled. "I'll get some water. Just from over there." He nodded towards a water cooler, then got up, and when he moved, people gave him a lot of room. He stood silently in the corner, drinking water, one plastic cup after the other. Only keen eyes could see that his hands were shaking.

Dan was praying that Dr Williams was available, only letting out his breath when the phone was picked up.

"Dr Williams? Dan McFadyen here."

"Mr McFadyen?" The voice at the other end sounded surprised.

"Doctor ... I am sorry to call out of the blue, but I really haven't got time for pleasantries right now." Talking quietly, Dan turned away from the people. "Something awful happened. We are at Lisbon airport, in the airline's lounge, and currently apprehended. Vadim attacked two innocent people, he must have fallen asleep, I wasn't there." Bitterness in his voice, anger at his stupidity. He should have taken better care. "We were at a conference, doing our job, and Vadim saw Konstantinov." Almost spitting the name out, but quietly enough so that Vadim couldn't hear it.

"Konstantinov?" The voice at the other end betrayed Dr William's shock. "Konstantinov is in Portugal?"

"Aye, in Portugal, at a conference. Approaching Vadim, and gloating." And I wanted to kill that bastard. "Vadim ... lost it. I don't know what to do, Doctor. I might need you to speak to the officials. I want to get Vadim home, but it seems they won't let him onto the flight."

"Of course, Mr McFadyen." Dr William's voice had calmed and was once more back to its distinguished Englishness. "Could I have a word with Mr Krasnorada?"

"Just a moment." Dan held the mobile out to Vadim, nodding to him and waving him over.

Vadim crushed the plastic cup in his fist, which was enough to make some people step back even further, like he was a tiger that had just growled. He took the phone. "Yes?"

"Mr Krasnorada, this is Charles Williams. How do you feel right now?"

"Doctor." Vadim felt embarrassment about all, and some relief. "I feel ... like I'm trapped. I didn't do it on purpose, I was startled ..." And how pathetic are you that you're making excuses? "Angry. Ashamed."

“I understand, but please don’t blame yourself. It is an episode that was triggered by the sudden confrontation. I will have a word with the authorities, if you’d like me to and if I can be of any help.”

“Yes, sir.” Vadim closed his eyes briefly.

“You have my number.” The offer open, honest, given with a gentle but firm voice. “Please call me as soon as you feel able to.”

“Yes, sir, I’ll call you once ... we’re out of the airport.” Vadim handed the phone back.

Dan took it and exchanged a few more words with the doctor, before walking over to what appeared to be the person in charge of the airline, trying to sway them to take Vadim, after all, and of listening to Vadim’s doctor, who could explain the situation and that no harm would come out of this. The man talked in hushed voices with the Doctor, and the main point seemed to be whether Vadim would turn violent again, which, apparently, the Doctor could not guarantee.

When the manager handed Dan the phone, he shook his head. Explaining that in the circumstances he could not let a potentially dangerous passenger on board, and that the doctor could not guarantee that such behaviour would not happen again. Furthermore, on top of the possible charges and the compensation money to be paid, the airline would press for compensation as well with a lifetime ban for the perpetrator. Dan could do nothing but nod mutely. He wouldn’t let the beast win, no matter what, and whatever price he would have to pay, he’d pay it.

After an eternity of form filling, with their names and addresses lodged with several authorities, they were finally let out of the lounge and back into the main airport building. Having been blacklisted, they had to wait for their luggage to be unchecked and brought out once more.

“And now?” Dan smiled a little at Vadim, at least he tried to. “I could give my brother a ring, perhaps stay for a while on the farm? There are always trains if we have problems with airlines right now.”

Vadim nodded, his face betrayed the humiliation and shame. “He shouldn’t have fucking touched me,” he said, but sounded miserable. “I wasn’t in control. I was ... asleep. I didn’t ...” He exhaled and rubbed his face. “Scotland. Good ... good idea.”

Dan stood close, briefly touching Vadim’s face. “He won’t win, okay?” Murmured. “You just have to find your control, and Dr Williams ... he’ll help, aye?” Nodding slightly, he had to believe it. Had to trust that despite all those years of merely functioning, there had to be a solution after all. More than simply keeping the status quo. “Let’s get to Scotland, then.”

After a phone call to his brother, which took no longer than five minutes, and a brief explanation, they headed across to the BA desk, where they thankfully got a flight out to Glasgow later that day. Arriving late at night, they got a hire car and Dan, who’d been sleeping on the plane, drove them up into the Highlands. It was worth navigating through the night rather than staying in yet another hotel room. Vadim especially seemed anxious to get to familiar

surroundings, and the further they got into the wilderness, the more he seemed to relax.

## February 1996, Scottish Highlands

When they arrived in the early hours, both Duncan and Mhairi came out in their dressing gowns, insisting on making them comfortable, which included food and whisky, but when Duncan asked Dan to explain, he told him he couldn't, not yet. He had to be on guard duty, he called it, and that he had neglected it, but would never again.

Early that morning, after just two or three hours of uneasy sleep, Vadim called Dr Williams. He was nervous and felt even more ashamed than at the airport, like he'd been lying to the man whenever he'd said he was okay.

The voice on the other end sounded as ever: cultured, calm, and with that unmistakable upper class accent. "Mr Krasnorada, I am glad you called."

"Dr Williams - I ... am asking about your offer. About ... fixing this. The ... therapy." It would be just another form of torture, with all the dangers involved, but he felt he'd run out of strength. He'd been lying to himself, and to Dan, about his sanity. It was and always would be fragile. For Dan's sake, and his own, he had to try it at least. "Whatever you think needs to be done, I ... ask that you do it."

"'Fixing' things ... I am afraid it is not that easy." The voice was compassionate but firm. "I must ask you, you really are certain this time?" the doctor paused for a moment. "It will be a long process, but I believe that you have the strength and the stamina to get through it." Another pause, then, "it would take at least three months, three very intensive months, and regular check-up sessions afterwards. I have retired from the Forces, Mr Krasnorada, and I would gladly take this time."

"I'll pay whatever it costs. We're financially comfortable, I ... just don't want to go insane."

"Goodness, no, Mr Krasnorada, you misunderstand. I do not wish to gain financial advantage from this, my interest is purely medical, and my reward will be to help a patient. No, what I was trying to say was that the therapy is intensive and long-term, and, this is the most important point, I do believe that it should take place away from any of your supports. Especially your partner."

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone." Dr William's voice kept its same quality of understanding and firmness.

The thought was terrifying. Who'd wake him up when he was screaming? Then it hit him. Carer, not lover. Dan had become the man who'd wake him - and hold him - after these nightmares. "I ... see. I still ... want to cover the cost. I don't want to cost you anything, sir. Please."

"That would be agreeable." There was a faint hint of a smile in the doctor's voice. "The next question is, where this will take place?"



“We have a ... a lot of space in New Zealand. If Dan agrees ...” Three months, kicking Dan out of the house. “I would have to ask him, but there’s the farm. It’s close to Palmerston North. A long flight, but it’s ... well, it’s New Zealand.” Which meant it was beautiful, the most beautiful place on earth.

“And Mr McFadyen?”

“I’d have to ask. There’s always spaces to rent, too. Wellington, maybe, which is close.”

There was a silence at the other end for a moment. “I am happy to make the travel arrangements. Perhaps you could call me back once you have received an answer.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you. I ... will call you back.” Vadim put the phone down, then rubbed his face. Three months. He headed upstairs and back to their usual room. Dan had been still in bed when he’d gone downstairs, and that’s where he was, burrowed into the blankets . “Dan?”

There was movement inside the blankets and a pillow was lifted off a bleary-eyed face. “Aye?”

“Doctor Williams. He says he has time for therapy, estimates about three months.” Vadim sat down on the bed.

“Oh ... that is good.” Dan forced himself awake, then pushed up until he sat, looking for his cigarettes on the nightstand. “Three months? Hell of a long time.” He smiled, feeling guilty for a moment for the relief he felt. Relief that someone else, a professional, was going to take over. Someone who knew what he was doing.

“Yeah. He said ... I should be alone.” Vadim winced. “It’s part of the therapy.”

“Alone?” Lighter forgotten, the cigarette remained unlit. “What do you mean?”

“He said I should be without my usual support.” Vadim swallowed. “That means, you might have to do something else. Visit friends.”

“Three fucking months?”

“I don’t like this, but ... if that’s part of the therapy. I want to get sane, Dan. So I don’t embarrass you or wear you out ... I don’t want to be a nutcase you have to watch 24/7.”

“First of, you are not a nutcase, and secondly, you don’t embarrass me.” Dan frowned, remembered the cigarette at last and lit it.

*We both know what it costs you to keep your promises.*

Fuck you. Fuck you, Konstantinov. Dan took a deep breath and remembered that he’d pay any price. “Okay.” He lifted his head. “If this is what you have to do, then this is what you’ll do. You fly back home, with Dr Williams, I stay here. Travel. Whatever. Maggie, Jean, maybe a conference or two.” He shrugged, trying to make light of the dread.

Vadim took his hand and pressed it. “I’ll call. Could ... use the farm, or the nice apartment in Wellington we rented when we went there last time. I ... want

to put this behind me ... the nightmares, the ... fear. I want to be free in my own head again.”

“Use the farm, it is big enough. You go and call, okay?”

“Okay.” Vadim went back downstairs and called again, to confirm. He felt his pulse hammer in his throat, when Dr Williams said yes, he could meet him as early as he wished, and they agreed on a flight back to Auckland from Heathrow, which Vadim booked the same day, sending Dr Williams the details straight away.

Dan said very little throughout the day, keeping his thoughts to himself until Duncan finally collared him and Dan tried to explain what had happened and what was going to happen. Separation. Three months. He was nauseous at the mere thought of it. Three fucking months. It'd be worse than the nine months in the mountains. Duncan was supportive, listened, and offered Dan to stay with his family on the farm as long as he needed to.

Vadim stayed for another four days, before it was time for him to take a flight to Heathrow, to meet Dr Williams on the way out. Dan had remained quiet, but as attentive as he could ever be, but during the nights he felt unsure for the first time. Wanting Vadim, needing his reassurance, or whatever else sex was meant to be, but he didn't dare to initiate it.

During the last night, Vadim lay at his shoulder, wide awake, worrying, but he knew it was for the best. It had to be. He'd have to take the risk. “I'll miss you,” he murmured. “Already do.”

Dan craned his head, catching a glimpse of the blond hair. “It's going to be hard as fuck, but it's not about me.” Murmured, reaching out to caress Vadim's shoulder. “It never was.”

Vadim closed his eyes. “I'm sorry. I ... want to fix this so ... you don't have to do all this anymore. No longer be ... anything but my lover and partner.”

“No, don't do it because of me. Do it because of yourself. That's the only reason that counts.” And the beast won't win. “Just ...” Dan trailed off, couldn't put his worries into words. Would he still be wanted when he wasn't needed anymore?

“Just?” Vadim turned his head to kiss Dan's temple. “If anybody can fix me, then Dr Williams.”

“What ...” Dan hesitated once more, feeling like a right idiot for thinking this, but he'd learned the hard way that shutting the fuck up wasn't going to help. “You said once that you don't know any more if you love me, because you need me. What ... what if you ... I mean ... fuck!” He huffed with frustration, “this is hard, I sound like a right fucking idiot.”

“It's just ...” Vadim inhaled deeply. “Like I don't feel very much these days.” A feeling of separation, distance, aloofness, most of the time. Definitely to everybody else, like there was a big sheet of glass between him and the world. Dan got through there, often, but other times, he felt like he was watching himself go through the motions. Like it wasn't real. “I hope he can fix that.”

Dan caressed the back of Vadim's head, fingertips carding through the short hair. “I hope so, too. Whatever happens don't forget I love you, aye?”

“Of course not.” Vadim’s lips moved down the side of Dan’s neck, to the collar bone, the hollow of the throat, and, by reflex, Dan bared his throat. “Don’t be afraid of this. We’ll be good.”

“Can I tell you something?” Dan murmured, eyes closed, concentrating on the feeling of Vadim’s lips on the sensitive skin. Three months. Three fucking months. “I’m so glad that Dr Williams ... that he ... takes over. And I feel like a right shit for that.”

Vadim paused when Dan’s words sank in; too busy with his nightmares and pains to realise how much it took from Dan. “I’ll make it worth it for you. I promise. I’ll be stronger.”

“You don’t need to make anything up to me.” Dan let out a soft huff, “You’re not a 24/7 patient, aye?” A pause, a breath, “and I love you. It’s that simple. I pay any price.”

“I ... love you, too.” Vadim shifted his weight on top, legs left and right of Dan’s torso, his weight on the legs as he slid down Dan’s body, kisses trailing, but he stopped to lick, too, tasting Dan’s skin, feeling the shuddering breaths against his face.

“Would you make love to me?” Dan’s voice was barely audible. Request and question.

“This night has to last me a while,” Vadim smiled, moving deeper. “I can sleep on the plane.”

“I can sleep for three months ...” Dan trailed off, torn between closing his eyes and concentrating on nothing but the sensations, and propping his head up on a pillow and watching Vadim, to take in each sight and sound. The latter won.

There was no urgency, Vadim was more concerned with taking his fill than make Dan come. It was stroking and teasing and licking, tasting Dan’s cock more than giving him a blowjob, not finishing the job in any case, deliberate and intense, stoking the fire very slowly and with all the restraint he’d learnt over the years. In the end, he fucked Dan, pausing when he felt he was going too fast, and returning to kisses and touches and gentle promises until Dan had recovered enough to fuck him. Three months. Half the planet apart.

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Vadim had checked in for the long flight via Dubai; with his boarding pass and passport in a thigh pocket - he was wearing casual clothes for the flight, and that meant outdoor trousers, shirt, and a light jacket - he went through security and then headed for the lounge. He’d used up most of his air miles to upgrade again - using the flights to conferences to make his private flights more pleasant. In the business class lounge, he located the doctor right away. He was reading, and it was almost strange to see him in a civilian setting, but not unpleasant. He fitted in there, a friendly older guy who seemed thoughtful, polite, and fairly unremarkable.

Vadim headed towards him. “Dr Williams. I’m glad you came.”

“Mr Krasnorada.” Dr Williams smiled and stood up. “So good to see you.” He shook hands, then indicated the seat beside him. “I believe we have another couple of hours to ‘kill’.”

“The joys of long-distance flights.” Vadim settled and stretched his legs out. “Greetings from Dan, by the way. He’s staying with his family in Scotland.”

“I am glad to hear. I must admit, I was a bit worried.” Folding the newspaper he had been reading, the doctor placed it in his lap.

“He’ll be fine. He has many friends all over the planet ... they should be able to keep him busy for three months.”

“I guess ‘busy’ is an interesting word.” The doctor smiled slightly, then turned his head fully to look at Vadim. “And how do *you* feel about it?”

“I just want to be sane again,” Vadim said. “Whatever it takes. Meeting ... him again I thought I would just go insane or die.”

The doctor nodded slowly, before taking his specs off to polish them with a handkerchief he produced from his blazer pocket. “Understandable.” Nodding once more, he turned his head to look at Vadim. “You see, when you experience a traumatic event you have three choices: first of, die, which is highly unlikely because the physical entity aims with every fibre towards the main genetic goal of staying alive. Secondly, to go insane, or, since the second option is not an option either because the mind protects itself as well as the body, the third option, which is to dissociate. However, when you learned to dissociate, your mind disconnects from your body. What I mean with this is, that your mind and your thoughts disconnect from your feelings. For all this time since the trauma, you have been ‘living in your head,’ experiencing life intellectually, not emotionally.” He put the specs back on, giving an understanding smile. “Your unexpected encounter with Konstantinov threw you out of your ability to dissociate, and thus you experience the fear of going insane.”

Vadim nodded, feeling a slow darkness creep up. Disconnected. The glass wall. The darkness, kept only in check by willpower and discipline. Tension, inside and outside, wrapping steel around a vessel that was under pressure and had many, many cracks already. Keeping it together so he could do his job, be functional. Lately, though, the cracks had been widening. “It doesn’t help I’m an atheist, doctor. Other men kid themselves that there will be something else after death. The end of suffering means the end of everything else. Anything that is me. I’m not ... ready to give up.”

“Good.” The doctor nodded once more, the smile still in place. “I am glad that you say this, because, sadly, too often the ultimate step is suicide, if the sufferer does not seek and receive help.” Those grey eyes, wise and kind, rested with an intelligent scrutiny on Vadim. “The next three months will be very hard. Do you realise that, Mr Krasnorada? Are you aware that you will get much worse, before you get better?”

“I’m an ex-athlete. I know suffering.” Vadim met the gaze full-on, open and determined. “I have staying power. I can do this.” If I could live with Konstantinov in my head for the last years, I can go through everything.

The doctor shook his head gently. “This is not about staying power, this is not about control. This is about the exact opposite. You will break down, you will be sick, and you will be weak. You will cry and you will shake, and you will wish that you had never started this journey to recovery.”

“But there’s no alternative.”

“You are right, there is no alternative.”

Vadim inhaled deeply and lowered his gaze for a moment. “Unless I go insane or kill myself. Rock and a hard place. I will go through this.”

“I believe in you.” The doctor reached out for the lightest of touch on Vadim’s sleeve. “Will you be alright for a moment? I need to head to the gents.”

Vadim nodded. “Of course, sir.” *I believe in you.* It touched him, strangely. The man had been nothing but kind to him, yet, he knew the darkness inside, and didn’t shy back.

Dr Williams stayed for a short while, and on his way back, he took a bottle of carbonated mineral water from a tray. He sat down once more. “I believe it would be beneficial if I tried to explain to you why you reacted as violently as you did, in Lisbon airport.” Pouring himself a glass.

Vadim pressed his lips together, but nodded. He’d been startled. Somebody had touched him, and his soldier reflexes had gone berserk. That was his explanation. It didn’t account for the hazy feeling, of being in a dream and having no control. “That’s another reason. I don’t want to end up in prison if I happen to ... kill.”

“Have you ever been close to attacking your partner?”

Vadim stared at him, but then realized he had. The need to get away. Rome. When Dan was getting too close and he couldn’t bear it. “Sometimes, he didn’t give me ... space.” Vadim kept his gaze on the ground. “After the nightmares, it’s hard to have anybody close.” Hitting him in the Balkans ... that was a different matter. That had had nothing to do with Konstantinov. “It’s ... a tightrope. Aggression, yes. Quite a bit of it, but it’s ... fear, terror, I need space, and sometimes he cornered me. He’s changed that, but at the beginning ...”

“Did you ever explain that you could not bear the closeness? You see, the relatives and loved ones of PTSD sufferers and trauma victims do not know how to deal with their loved ones, who are suddenly different to what they used to be. Many state that they don’t know this person anymore, and they don’t know how to get close, how to make them see that they are still loved. As a consequence, there might be the attempt to get physically close when the mental closeness is being rejected.” Dr Williams took a sip of his water.

“I think, I ...” Had he? Vadim paused, thinking, trying to remember. He had no idea what he’d said and just imagined, what had been thought or actual words. “Closeness ... sex, if you will, used to fix everything. If I’d told him to not touch me ...” he’d have gone to Jean. The thought bit deep. Somebody who was comfortable with touch all the time, who sought it, who’d never say no.

“Did you fear that if you told him he would have taken it badly and possibly even left you?”

“It was the only thing that always worked. Different form of communication. Even when we weren’t ... partners. It goes too far back.” I wanted his touch even when I hated him. When he hated me. Konstantinov had gone deeper than that, right to the core.

“So you kept quiet and went along.” Looking at the water in his hand, then back at Vadim. “Did this ever make you resent him?”

“Yes.” Vadim felt a pressure on his chest. He had. No doubt about it.

Dr Williams merely nodded, quiet for a long time. “I believe, when you can, you should explain this to him. What do you think?”

“I think Dan wouldn’t understand it, and it would hurt him.” Vadim shook his head. “He’s ... very much about what you see is what you get. I’m not the same ... he wouldn’t get that all these ... emotions are at odds with each other.”

“Well, we shall see, then. After all, this is all about *you* and no one else.” The doctor smiled. “Not your partner, not your friends nor family. Only about you.” Finishing off his water. “What I mentioned earlier, the sudden aggression and the over-reaction, are you familiar with the three-cup model?”

“No, sir.”

“You, I assume, like many other sufferers from PTSD struggle to understand why you tend to become disproportionately aggressive at small things. For example, you might get disproportionately aggressive when someone walks too slowly in front of you, or a stranger looks at you, or, perhaps, a sudden noise, an unexpected touch and a joke that does not seem funny to you. The reason is quite simple. Imagine three cups. Everyone constantly deals with things that we call ‘good stress’. This can be simple tasks and chores as washing the dishes, going to work, getting up early, shaving. Now imagine this first cup. It has a small amount of ‘good stress’ in the bottom, and everyone has this.” Dr Williams put the empty glass onto the narrow table beside him. “Imagine the second cup, and you see it fill with a certain amount of ‘bad stress’. These are the things that go wrong. For example, the car doesn’t start, the train is missed, money is tight, the partner does not do what one wishes and one gets upset. Everyone gets such bad stress. As you can picture, there is still a lot of space in the cup and thus the person who does not suffer from PTSD is unlikely to have their cup overflow and fly into a rage. Most people can take a lot of ‘bad stress’ before they are being pushed over the edge. Does this make sense so far?”

“Are you saying my cup is already full and *then* something comes in from outside?”

“Indeed, you got it straight away. What you have in your cup is a large amount of ‘PTSD’, which contains all of your trauma and more. While there is still the ‘good stress’, and you have been admirably functioning, there is very little room for the ‘bad stress’ to fit in on top of the PTSD. Therefore the control needed to deal with the constant threat of overflowing is great, and this is why something seemingly small and insignificant can make a PTSD sufferer ‘fly off the handle’ so quickly. A little ‘bad stress’ makes the cup overflow and the person flies into a rage.”

Like Dan having slept with Katya. “Yes. I’ve done that ...” And how *good* it had felt, going on that killing rampage. To let the beast out and revel in destruction. “I did ... some extreme things in the Balkans. When the cup overflowed.”

The doctor nodded. “I think we should be lucky that you are here now, safe and sound. It could have had worse consequences.” Nodding to an attendant who came past, he got a couple more bottles of water, one with and one without fizz. “I’d also like to explain the kind of therapy we will work on.”

Vadim nodded and motioned for him to continue.

“It is a combination of CBT and Exposure therapy. Or rather, Exposure therapy is part of CBT and CBT stands for Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. What this means is the following: the events are not necessarily what traumatises someone, but the views that the person is taking of them. The implications of this are that situations, like real world objects, are better viewed from certain angles than from others. CBT takes the stance that people have a degree of choice in the point of view they take. Does this make sense?”

“I ... think.”

Dr Williams handed Vadim one of the bottles, and opened his own. “What this means for practice is that CBT emphasises the importance of breaking out of negative chains by changing thoughts and actions.”

“Okay. So working with the rational mind, emotions, and the body to get this under control.”

“Yes, and since we are dealing with emotions, we can only break the cycle through a rational approach.” The doctor took another sip of his water. “The next thing you need to know about is Exposure therapy, which is the largest part of CBT, and the most important one to deal with the trauma healing process.” He turned his intelligent eyes onto Vadim. “Do you have ‘blackouts’ or memory losses from your time in prison?”

“It’s hard to remember all of it. It was very monotonous. I was left alone most of the time, but then there were beatings, and interrogation, and ...” Humiliation. “He toyed with me. A few things, scenes, conversations we’ve had ... more beatings. I ...” Vadim frowned. “I don’t know. I couldn’t tell. How do you remember two years?”

The look on Dr William’s face was compassionate and knowing. “I understand, and the Exposure therapy is doing exactly that: helping you to remember. You are an intelligent man, Mr Krasnorada, I believe you can imagine that remembering will be extremely painful. Still, it is vital for the healing process. Talking and writing about the trauma, about each incident and its effects are absolutely critical to the recovery of lost memories and to be able to piece the whole picture together. If you try and block memories when they arise, the more you think about them. In a nutshell, Exposure therapy is a deliberate method designed to expose the mind in controlled doses to your past trauma, which you experience as intense emotional fear. It is aimed at teaching your body that it no longer needs to be disturbed by traumatic memories, as

they are just *memories*. Exposure therapy is a learning strategy designed to separate *then*, the past, from *now*, the present.”

“Does that mean I get Konstantinov out of my head? He’ll be gone?”

“It means that you will be able to see what he did as a part of your past. As something that happened, but that no longer happens. In that sense, yes, he will be gone.” Dr Williams was about to say more, when the attendant returned, to tell the waiting passengers in the lounge that the flight was ready for boarding.

Vadim nodded, took his bottle and jacket and stood. “That would be good,” he said. At least he could deny Konstantinov room in his head. His voice. *You will never forget what I did to you*, Konstantinov had said. *You’ll never be able to pass for normal, or human*. “That’s a lot of things to think through.”

“We’ll have a lot of hours.” Dr Williams smiled, picked up his hand luggage and stood as well. They got into the plane and seated in the comfortable business area, to get through an uneventful but terribly long flight, during which Dr Williams explained some more and asked a few questions. The flight was too long anyway to keep an intense conversation; instead, Vadim slept and read, and worked a little, answering letters, which was slow, diligent work.



### March 1996, New Zealand

When they arrived much, much later in New Zealand, the island was lush and green with late summer, and Vadim took a deep breath of the pure air. Nothing quite like it. He picked up the car where they'd left it, and drove the half hour to the farm.

Dr Williams was suffering more from jet lag and change of seasons than Vadim, even though he was valiantly battling on. He hadn't been an officer all his life for nothing. Still, when they arrived at the farm he was very glad to be shown to the guest room, where he retired to soon thereafter.

Vadim called Dan, told them they'd just arrived, then went for a bout of exercise to help his body work off the flight. After that he slept for a while, having told the neighbours they were back and he appreciated that they'd filled up the fridge and freezer with food, since their housekeeper was on holiday.

The doctor did not emerge before the next twelve hours, which still played havoc with his body clock, but at least he was refreshed and ready to start. He suggested to Vadim to choose a particular area in the house where they worked. An area that was not full of connotations and not laden with images and memories, least of all of his partner.

Vadim chose the large living room – the most memory-laden thing there was Szandor's antique sword on the stand, but that was such an old memory that he didn't think it would do any harm.

When they settled down on the leather sofas with the couch table between them, Dr Williams handed Vadim a simple pad of lined paper and a pen. "You might prefer a laptop, but I don't own one."

"No, I ... I am fairly old-fashioned, too. Writing by hand is more deliberate." Vadim placed the pad down on the table, sliding forward on the sofa. "What now?"

Dr Williams smiled and settled back. "I gave you the paper so that you may write down your experiences and your memories. As much as comes to mind. What we are trying to do is create a timeline, without any gaps."

"All memories? My whole life, or the two years?"

"Mainly the two years, and, if it has an impact on what happened, we need to fill in the background from your life before. Who you were, what you did, who you liaised with, that sort of thing. However, first of all we need to concentrate on the trauma. You need to come to terms with the full reality of it, and no longer believe that you have it under control with your current coping strategies. We should start by you telling me what coping strategies you have been using."

"I just ... ignored it. Tried to." Vadim looked at the pad. "Kept my distance. Tried to stay in control."

Dr Williams nodded. “You need to accept that this strategy was not actually a coping mechanism at all. If you’re still having nightmares, still having flashbacks, and still suffering symptoms arising from PTSD, then your strategies are not working for you. You must push yourself past your comfort zone, into an area you have avoided for so long. Imagine it like this: your memories are attached to a rubber band, and the more you push the memories away, the more they spring back at you. Your strategies have tightened the rubber band, and make it pull back more each time you push it away from you. Memories are concrete, they are lodged in your brain and they cannot be erased, nor are they going anywhere. The exposure therapy will turn these painful memories into what they actually are, just memories of bad things. You will no longer ignore them, but accept them and come to terms with them being part of your past, but without the fear and pain associated with them.” He gestured towards the notebook. “You will write about your trauma each day at set times for a few minutes, or as long as you can bear, and we will talk after you have written. You will also read what you have written, several times over, until the horror slowly recedes, before relaxing for a while. In addition, you will set yourself ‘dares’ that go beyond your comfort level.” He tilted his head upwards, “tell me, what are you the least comfortable with?”

“Of the memories?” Vadim felt a sudden, painful tensing in his chest. “How I ... submitted. How I broke.” On my knees, his hand patting my head like that of a dog.

“I see, and what situations are you least comfortable with since then? In your life?”

“Losing control.” Vadim thought, eyes fixed on the pad. “And, ah, when Dan is moving to get another guy ... sexually, I mean. It’s awkward.”

Dr Williams made a note on his own pad. “What do you mean, ‘moving’? And what does it make you feel?”

“The flirting ... the seduction ...” Jean, Beauvais, George. “Anger towards the other man. I guess I am jealous, or ... that I’m not enough, maybe that these men are ... better in a way, that they are less broken than I am. I feel awkward dealing with them. I don’t want them in my life ... they don’t become friends like they do with Dan.”

“When you feel angry and jealous, or awkward, what do you think is the cause of those feelings?”

“Envy, maybe. Maybe just what it is, jealousy. That he could leave me for somebody else. You know, he’s ‘friends’ with a guy who’s ... younger, more joyful ... more like him in many ways. They’d be a good match, too.”

“And you never told him?” Anything the doctor said was a careful question, non judgmental and leaving the answer open.

“It’s pointless. We never were monogamous. It doesn’t work like a marriage ... and my marriage was a mess, too. There’s no point accusing him of anything, he swears it’s just physical, and I know it is for him, and, well, often enough, it’s actually us and the third guy.” Vadim didn’t meet the doctor’s eyes. Discussing his sex life – the threesomes, or even just the sex – felt strange. He really didn’t

want to disgust this man. A woman might have been easier. “He doesn’t get it, and I’ve never told him I am uncomfortable. It’s like taking a risk ... an unnecessary risk. And in many cases, I’m the third wheel, too. These guys are in lust with Dan, not me. I’m ... I’m never getting emotionally involved – they don’t become my friends. I often feel I’m not really there.”

“But you will have to take some risks, to be authentic to your feelings and to give those you deal with a chance to respond to those feelings. This is something you will have to learn: to express what you feel, negative feelings, as well as positive feelings. You will have to learn to set boundaries, but you will also have to understand that your carer needs to set boundaries, too.”

“My what?”

“Yes, sorry, I should have explained. Partners of sufferers are usually called carers.”

“Oh.” Vadim looked up, smiling slightly. “He’d hate that term. He says he doesn’t want to be my carer, but my lover. But ... it’s not easy, is it? I ... need both. And when I feel especially bad, I really just need a carer, because there’s ... no room for anything else.”

“No, it is not easy, not easy at all, and we are asking an incredible lot of your partner. This is why communication is so important. In fact, I do believe it would be helpful if, at the end of this, you let Mr McFadyen read through the diary.”

“Detailed account of how I was tortured? Could ... could anybody want to read that?”

“Do you think Mr McFadyen would not be able to stomach that?” The doctor raised his eyes. “It is asking a lot from anyone to take care of a PTSD sufferer, but I am confident that after these three months you will be able to deal with the effects so much better.” The doctor smiled, “if you would like me to, I am happy to call Mr McFadyen and explain a few things to him.”

“That ... sounds like a good idea, sir. I don’t think I’ve succeeded in telling him what it feels like ... not that I actually tried. I didn’t ... push the issue. I just wanted to move on.”

“Do you blame him?” The question came out of the blue and as sharply as a sniper’s bullet.

“Blame him for what?”

“For not understanding.”

“Nobody can understand that. Nobody gets torture. I wish he’d read me better, yes, and leave me alone, but it’s not his fault. He just ... wants me to be his partner, and sometimes I just ... can’t.”

Dr Williams smiled slightly, making a few notes. “Well, let us get onto the exposure therapy. We will get back to what we have just talked about later.” He nodded. “During exposure therapy, expect to have an increase in symptoms. This is short term pain, for long term gain. It is effective, it is proven, and it factually lessens the effect of trauma upon the mind and body.”

“Okay.” Vadim looked at the pad. “Writing?”

“Yes. What you do is pick the worst trauma you have, and write about it first. You might get scared, but if you don’t go with the worst one first, then you might talk yourself out of writing about it. You can write for a few minutes, or you can write for half an hour if you desire. Only you know how much you can take. If you feel uncomfortable, don’t stop at that point. Only stop when you get truly distressed.” Dr Williams made a few bold strokes on his pad and turned the drawing over for Vadim to look at. “You see this scale? This is the so-called SUDS scale. SUDS stands for Subjective Units of Disturbance. It is a scale of one to ten, with ten being the worst. You must write until you reach the levels of distress around seven to eight. Do not stop before that, but neither overextend yourself into a nine or ten, which could mean critical breakdown.” The doctor smiled. “Does this make sense?”

“I couldn’t write at ... higher levels,” Vadim murmured. In that much distress he lost control of his body. Shaking. Vomiting. Wanting to fight, punch ... He inhaled and reached for the pen, concentrating not on his fear but the rules the doctor had set, and the movement, the feeling of the pen. “Short bursts.” He took the pad and rested it on his knees. The worst trauma. Being alone, chained up, in a dark room, feeling very clearly that he was going insane. No. Konstantinov having broken him. How he’d let him inside, how he’d wanted Konstantinov to finish the job. Kneeling at his feet. Grateful it was over. Grateful he’d be killed now, or sent to a regular prison. He’d wanted to die. He’d wanted nothing else but to die.

“Take your time.” The doctor’s voice was quiet and understanding. “We have all the time you need. Would you like me to stay or to leave you alone?”

Vadim shook his head, noticed his knuckles were white. The words were awkward, each one forced, feeling much like barbed wire slipping through his balled fists. *He made me want to die. I wanted him to kill me. I thought that would be mercy. He made me beg for death, and I truly wanted it. I felt unworthy when he didn't give me death. I'd have killed myself given half a chance. Maybe he waited for that to happen.* He inhaled again, feeling breathless, and his fist was clenched so hard he wasn’t sure he could open it again. Shame, anguish, pain. Revulsion.

“Breathe.” Dr Williams said quietly.

Vadim tried, and it felt like there was no space in his lungs, like they’d collapsed. It took him forever to remember that exhaling was always the best way to go, exhale. He’d held his breath, and exhaling was far easier. The inhale then followed naturally.

“Start again when you are ready.” The doctor looked at Vadim, nodding slightly. “You’re not alone, and you can do this. Give yourself time, because this is what we have: time. When you are done, you reread everything you have written until it no longer seems threatening to the point of nausea and panic. This is when you begin seeing those words for what they are: memories.”

“You’ll put me off writing forever,” Vadim remarked wryly, forcing himself to breathe. Time. As much time as it took.

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Later that day, as promised, Dr Williams called Dan, who was immediately apprehensive, but hid the reaction when he took the phone through to the lounge. His family respected privacy, but he somehow felt he needed to close the door behind him.

“How is Vadim?” Nothing else mattered to him.

“This is why I am calling.” The doctor’s voice was kind, and Dan’s alertness went back down a notch. “As Vadim’s partner, I would like to explain to you what we are working on over the next three months and what you can expect.”

Dan frowned, searched for a cigarette, while concentrating on the conversation. “What do you mean, ‘expect?’”

“That will become clear shortly. First off, I’d like to explain the therapy that Vadim is going through, so that you have an idea of what is happening. Would you like to know?”

“Of course!” Dan lit the cigarette.

“I can only tell you generically what the therapy entails, but cannot give you any detailed information. What Mr Krasnorada tells me is confidential between doctor and patient. I would hope, though, that in the end he might decide to share what he has learned with you.”

Inhaling deeply, Dan leaned back. He’d take anything as it came, as long as he could stop living the life of a carer who did not know what and who he was caring for. Helplessness, how much he’d always hated that. “I don’t expect you to breach your confidentiality.”

The doctor then proceeded to explain to Dan what the therapy entailed. Dan was frowning throughout, sitting up straighter when Dr Williams came to the part about symptoms and emotions getting much worse during the therapy, before the eventual long term gain would pay off the short term pain. Dan made very few comments, mainly listening and committing everything the doctor said to his memory. Asking, then, what PTSD actually was from the doctor’s point of view, and he received a thorough explanation, which finally made sense to him. At last he began to understand why Vadim reacted the way he did. Why he usually seemed to cope well and almost appeared as ‘if nothing had ever happened’, until either the rage hit, or another low. Dan had a feeling the conversation was about to end, when Dr Williams paused for a moment.

“Mr McFadyen, I have to tell you something that you might not wish to hear.”

Dan sat up ramrod straight and the dread was coming back like an old foe. “Aye?”

“You have to understand, Mr McFadyen, that you should not waste time in thinking and hoping that your partner will ever be cured and that he will return to the person he was before the trauma. One does not ‘get over’ PTSD, it is a lifelong condition. What Mr Krasnorada *will* achieve, though, and I do my utmost that this will be the case, is being able to manage the trauma and lead a fulfilling life. However, he will always need to work on himself to stay healthy, and there will always be some matters that he will need to avoid.”

Dan sat in silence, tense, just listening to the words. Not seeing anything, even though he stared out of the window.

“I realise that you do not wish to be a lifelong carer, and no partner and lover would want to be that, but, you have to realise, that this *is* what you are. I am being cruel now, I know, but I assume that a man like you prefers the straightforward truth. Do you, Mr McFadyen?”

“Aye.” Dan’s voice was pressed, hard to form thoughts, let alone words.

“Good, because you have to ask yourself if you can be both: the lover and the carer, because Mr Krasnorada will always need both. Can you live with that?”

Dan shuddered, he didn’t know what to say. All his hopes and wishes came crashing down in the reality check the doctor forced upon him. Never again. Never how it had been. Never again the lover, the partner, the ... but could he even remember what that was like? A short time, back in Kabul, before the KGB destroyed them, and it felt like a lifetime ago. Now, they had a house together, a business, family and friends. A life. Every day, every night. Was it worth being both? Was it worth re-evaluating his entire life and accept the truth?

“Aye.” Dan cleared his throat, his voice quiet. “I want to.” Want to try.

“I am glad to hear.” Dr William’s voice was warm. “I’d also like to tell you that as the carer, you will have to learn some behaviour measures as well. With a PTSD sufferer the rage might still happen at times, despite the therapy, when the fight or flight reaction is triggered. The same goes for the depression and the anger and seclusion. If the mind falls into familiar thought patterns, they spin out of control, and out it flows. This means that you will have to deal with this by setting boundaries. I will be able to give you further help. The most important issue here is that PTSD is not an excuse to abuse anyone. Everyone should have, keep and enforce boundaries, no matter what, and everyone is responsible for their actions. The sufferer, as well as the carer.”

Dan twitched at the word, holding the phone in a death grip. That word was hard to accept, and so was the concept. But he’d be working on handling it, he had no other choice. “Boundaries ... will Vadim need to set his own as well?”

“Yes, I should think so, but all of this should be discussed after the intense therapy is over.”

Three months, an eternity, and Dan felt nauseous. Finally asking the question that was more crucial than all of the others. “But will he love me?”

“That, Mr McFadyen, I can’t answer.” The doctor spoke quietly, with compassion in his voice. “Only Mr Krasnorada will have the answer to this.”

“Aye ...” Dan swallowed hard. “Thank you, doctor.” He put the phone down and sat in silence for a long while.

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Writing. It felt like he had to skin his arms to get to the blood, then use that to put words down. The words were all about shame, death, fear. They were about

being helpless, about wanting to kill, maim, rape in revenge, and sometimes it got so bad that he barely managed it to the bathroom before he threw up. Ending up, again and again, on his knees, vomiting out everything he'd ever eaten and could remember to have ever eaten. It was a fine line to watch, and it was hard, very hard, to stay within the manageable parameters.

Sometimes, it was like he couldn't stop and triggered himself over the edge, other times, he miscalculated the amount he could take. He cried a lot, which was fucking embarrassing. It was like there was still Major Krasnorada, somewhere, and he was disgusted at himself for the weakness. How mere memories could hurt him, how deep they cut, and how impossible it was that they were just memories.

One day, Vadim flushed the toilet, spit out bile into the wash basin and opened the tap, filling his hands with the cold water. Relieved that it was over, his stomach only churning now, not heaving, knowing he'd be better once he'd rested. Half bent over, he brought his wet hands up to his face, and suddenly it hit him.

#### *Madness*

His mind derailed fully, he could feel insanity, because suddenly he remembered something that hadn't happened, but he remembered it with complete clarity. Drowning.

*Men that wrestled him down, dunked his head under, he was swallowing the dirty water, their jeering blanked out from his ears by the water.*

Vadim's knees gave in, like they had in prison, and he stared against the wall, mind undecided whether *this* was real, now, whether he was sitting here or was somewhere else entirely, because he couldn't trust his memories at all.

Dr Williams knocked on the door and peered in. He was always hovering close when Vadim rushed to the bathroom, always made sure that he never dehydrated, gently berated him at times that he should listen more carefully to the warning signs of overstepping the SUDs, and always had an isotonic drink at hand and some food. He was a medical doctor, after all.

"Mr Krasnorada?" he stepped inside, concern evident in his face.

Vadim knew the doctor was real, even though he doubted himself. "I'm ... they ... drowned me. I didn't remember," he stammered.

A sudden hardness flashed across the doctor's face, before he came closer, and his hand merely hovered above a shoulder. Always giving distance while being available. "Do you feel you can write down what they did, or can you tell me? Whichever one is easier."

"The men who beat me. The water ... they used it to bring me round." Vadim was shaking violently, felt his teeth chatter. "They drowned me in it. Again ..." His stomach heaved. "And again. Ko..." Vadim gestured, didn't want to say the name, "He had a stop watch. Said ..."

*I'm just taking your time, you are familiar with the concept.*

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"It's alright, breathe first, then try to tell me, explain to me what happened."

“I didn’t remember! I didn’t remember this!” Vadim shook his head. “I don’t ... what else can I not remember? What ... what can I trust down there?”

“Down there? Do you mean your core, your memories?” The doctor smiled a little, holding a hand out to Vadim to help him up, if he wanted to. “You will be able to trust all of this, when you do remember. I suggest right now for you to come back into the living room, take a blanket to keep warm and I prepare a tea. Then I’ll sit with you while you try to write down what you just remembered.”

Vadim reached up and took the hand. He didn’t actually need help, but having some form of touch ... it helped make him feel real. He stood, feeling how weak his body was, like he had actually barely escaped a drowning. “Tea ... good approach to anything.” He gave a weak smile, but he could still feel the rough hands on him, the sheer force that had overpowered his strength. Those guys had been very, very strong. And he’d been weakened and hurting from the beating.

Vadim sat down and wrapped himself in the blanket, sitting on the couch where he usually sat, then reached for the pad. He hated the writing, but he’d stopped fighting it. Too much soldier still to not follow orders, he thought. Or maybe he just trusted Dr Williams more than his own responses. The man was becoming more to him than his father had ever been ... or rather, somewhere in the same category, like his father in a time when they’d trusted and loved each other. When his father’s opinion had been welcome guidance, in the time before rebellion and the fights, the intellectual sparring that they’d done all the time. Like his father, but without the problems.

Vadim set pen to paper. Drowning. It was really hard to describe. It made him shake and sweat, but he did it.

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Dan stayed with his brother for over three weeks, until he was slowly going insane. No contact with Vadim, the doctor had called once more and explained that it would be better that way and that distance was what Vadim needed. For just one moment the thought had flashed through Dan’s mind, if anyone cared what *he* needed, but he discarded it, didn’t allow it to settle. He might be fucked up, physically, but he was lucky enough to be able to deal with everything that had happened to him mentally.

So he had settled in, pretending that the forced lack of contact wasn’t making him feel like shit, and trying to keep busy; trying to be as good a brother and uncle, as he could be. He sensed that he failed miserably, but his family didn’t let him feel it. They didn’t tell him that he was tense and irritated most of the time, didn’t mention anything about the hours he spent driving up into the Highlands to remain in solitude amongst the windswept mountains. They didn’t even say a word about the fact that after one of Dr William’s weekly calls, he didn’t speak to anyone for hours and just stared out of the window.



Dan couldn't work, didn't have the nerves to settle down and try string thoughts together for a presentation, and when one day Jean called, Dan asked him if he minded a visit, and he would explain what was going on, but not on the phone.

It was in the fourth week that Dan left for France, hoping to somehow stop himself from going slowly insane with worry, and to soothe the dread and fear.

### **March 1996, France**

On the journey to France Dan swore to himself that he would try to cast all his worries aside. Jean was his best friend beside the Baroness, but he didn't want to put a burden on him. Stupid, perhaps, but he hadn't spoken to anyone else, not even Maggie, and everything the doctor had told him was still bottled up. He didn't know how to deal with it, and least of all with the notion of being a carer. Carer *and* lover, the doctor had said, but what did that mean? To give up – forever – on the notion that Vadim would ever be the man again he had once loved ... but then again, was he the man he'd been in Kabul? Perhaps, at the core, but would he want to be the man he was when they'd first 'met'? He didn't have any answers, and the thoughts and worries remained stuck in his mind, unable to voice them and share his fears with anyone, while trying to come to an understanding. Perhaps being with an old friend would help.

Dan took the train from Charles de Gaulle airport, but when he arrived at the station, there was no Jean. With a shrug, wondering if he got the timings wrong, he found himself a taxi and managed in his rusty French to find his way to the village and the house. Leaning on the cane while the driver helped with the –Spartan – luggage. No more than one large backpack. Not a military bergan anymore, but a state of the art, expensive one, from an exclusive outdoor shop. Some things had changed, after all.

It was Solange who opened the door and Dan smiled at her, thinking for a moment that she really was a vision to behold and if he were still into ladies he could have been tempted by her androgynous beauty. But as it was, he was more keen on her husband.

"Solange, you look more beautiful every time I see you." Dan smiled his best and most charming smile.

She gave a sweet laugh and actually blushed. "And you are still drop dead gorgeous."

"Let me kiss your hand, my lady, before I deliver a kick to that husband of yours for having forgotten all about me."

"Oh dear, he raced off not long ago, he must have got the time wrong. We should give him a call." Solange extended her hand and smiled, allowing Dan to take hold of her hand and kiss it. "Not every man here has your gentle manners. But men are sometimes cuter without them, anyway." She winked and Dan grinned. He really did have a soft spot for that lady.

“It’s your presence that has this effect on me.” Dan came up from the kiss and smiled. Quite enjoying a spade of the old manners. He turned his head when he heard the sound of a car approaching.

It was Jean, with a flushed face and an apologetic grin. “I fell asleep after lunch.”

“You are getting old, mate.” Dan laughed and went to pull Jean into a tight embrace. It was good to feel the solidity of his body, the physical presence was comforting. Dan hadn’t realised how much he really starved.

Solange smiled at the two men. “I hope you won’t miss me, but I have to be at a shoot today. I am sure you two boys can entertain yourselves.”

“I will do my very best.” Dan grinned, when she went to kiss her husband, before she returned into the hallway to pick up a bag. She gave a small wave and walked to the big shining car in the driveway, where she fussed around a bit and then got in to head to the city. Another small wave, then the Mercedes was gone.

Jean turned and looked at Dan with a face-splitting grin. “There. You’re on your own, and so am I. What’s on the menu?”

Dan hid the sudden twitch at the ‘on your own’, then shrugged, “That depends on one question: you still interested in a romp with a decrepit old man?” He smirked, shades-shielded eyes looking Jean up and down.

Jean grinned. “With your heartbreaker-shades on? Anytime.” He glanced towards the road, then nodded towards the house. “Unless you object to double adultery?”

“Not adultery.” Dan followed Jean’s glance, “I’d call it wife-swapping. Just that Vadim would probably kill me if he heard me say that.” Vadim. Would he? Would he do any of that sort of thing to his ... carer?

“Wrong gender. Wrong ... everything. I doubt Solange would have been Vadim’s type ... before.” Jean pondered that for a while. “No. Doesn’t work. Makes me feel all protective.”

“Vadim’s nothing but a gentleman around her.”

“A propos Vadim, why did he stay in New Zealand while you’re gallivanting about Europe?”

Dan made an evasive gesture, his face suddenly serious, and even Jean, who was about to pick up Dan’s backpack, seemed to notice.

“Everything alright with you guys?”

“Vadim’s at home with a doctor, shrink, whatever, and in therapy. Intensive therapy. He ... had an incident at the airport, a month ago.” Dan didn’t look at Jean, but at the house. “It’ll be at least three months. I ... haven’t spoken to him for a month, but the doctor gave me a call each week.”

“Oh damn. That doesn’t sound too good. You must be going mad.”

“I don’t want to talk about it right now, okay? But I wouldn’t mind it if you took my mind off it.”

“Sure. That’s what friends are for, right?”

“Aye.” Dan made his way up the steps. “Anyway, you tell me, since I haven’t seen you for, what, forever, how the fuck are you? Got your sporadic emails

alright, but was wondering, didn't sound all that perky. You thinking of dropping the job?"

"Was just ... close that last time. Friendly fire kind of stuff, makes you wonder where they train the kids these days." Jean shrugged.

Dan stopped, leaned against the wall at the entrance and pushed the shades off his eyes, finally looking at Jean without the dark tinted barrier, "you're getting old, mate. I've been saying it's time to quit this shit and come join the Spa, and not just as an ex-Legionnaire now Merc. I could do with a club secretary." He smiled.

"See this house? Give me another year or so I can manage the costs better. I was thinking to maybe restart the vineyard, but that would take years and years, and I'm not quite sure I'm enough of a farming type to follow through with it. And, who knows, maybe a family to top it all off before I retire. But not quite yet."

Dan shook his head, "You're thirty-four, mate. You're still tough, fit, can do anything you like, but I warn you, the closer you get to forty, the longer every injury takes to heal, and every pain aches threefold." He pushed himself off the wall and walked through the door, holding it open for Jean and his luggage. He'd long given up the need to demonstrate that he could carry it on his own.

"Thanks for keeping count." Jean winced. "Shit, where did all that time go? I feel like, what, twenty-four?"

"What if next time you're just this one smidgen too slow, or the kid is this one bit too stupid. You want to go down in a blaze of glory? Or do you want to spend the rest of your life with your wife? Remember Pascal ..."

"Yeah, I hear you. I know the theory. The practice is the hard bit."

Entering the vast living room, Dan stopped at one of the white leather couches and leaned against it. He looked at Jean with a serious expression. "Are you worried you end up a burnt out adrenaline junkie like me? Bored with life?"

"I ..." Jean pressed his lips together, thinking, or maybe fighting the first response. "You are not bored with life. You have that consulting stuff going. You're living with Vadim," he smiled, decidedly playfully, "that should keep you on your toes. For me ... I don't know. I know when I'm here, I'm itching to go back, when I'm there, I want to be here. There are other things I could be, like, you know, a father. Solange's gig is paying better and better, if she goes on like that, she'll make more than I do, and I'm not sure I could live that down."

Dan shook his head. "Don't be such a stupid arsehole. You know that I was fucked up for a year and almost lost everything. You have the chance to make a change before you get to the stage where you still function, have shitloads of experience, but every job hurts. Besides, if you want to go for a family, do it now. You're thirty-four, and Solange is ... what?"

"Twenty-six." Jean moved a few steps and pulled out a wine bottle, glancing at the label, but listening intently.

"Perfect age, then. Just the right time to go for the big change and become all domestic before it gets too difficult to take the step and leave the adrenaline and the 'easy life' behind." Dan sat down on the sofa, placed the cane onto the

floor and stretched out his legs. “I hated being out, because I hadn’t adjusted my attitude, while Vadim had over-adjusted his own.”

Jean selected two red wine glasses, placed them on the couch table and opened the bottle, then set it down to allow the wine some time while Dan continued.

“What I’m trying to say is that if you continue seeing yourself as the cool dude with the dangerous job, then you won’t get to have a family. Not everyone has an ‘immaculate conception’ like me, aye?” Joking about it was the best way to deal with it, and the little girl *was* damn cute. “Hell, you might not even make fifty, and I’d be bloody pissed off if you fucked yourself out of this world.”

“Don’t worry, the last thing I am is suicidal.” Jean grinned. “Granted, I never thought I’d make it past thirty, and now it seems pretty likely I actually grow old enough to pay off the house and all the other stuff. Just – what to do with the time, that’s the question.”

“Why don’t you start your own business? You’re not cut out to stay here, I’m not either. If you started your own security company, small but exclusive, with ex-special forces contacts all over the world, you could use the Spa for that. You could run the business till you’re old and decrepit.” Dan grinned while casually dropping his shades from his hair onto the table.

Jean poured the wine and offered one glass, as casual as he’d offered a whisky tumbler, and touched Dan’s fingers as he did. “Me in a business suit? Damn. And I thought her shows and shootings were bad.”

Dan took the wine. “A security company that actually offers close security. Like Armoured Group, for example. I know a guy who’s working for them, used to be a Royal Green Jackets RSM, and he is raking in the money, doing close security runs in Iraq. Six weeks on, three weeks off. However, what do you think the company owners earn?”

“Guess as much as a pimp makes off his whores. Cut of the money and no risk.” Jean grinned, gently touching his glass to Dan’s, complete with a deep look into his eyes. “How long does it take to set something up like that? A couple years? It would be more competition for you, don’t forget that.”

Dan took a mouthful of the wine while Jean sat down on the couch, extending an arm behind Dan, and sipping on the wine. “No competition at all, completely different business. In fact, you could profit from us and we could profit from you.” Taking another sip before leaning his head against the arm in his back. “What do you think?”

Jean let his fingers make contact with the place between Dan’s shoulder blades, slowly circling there, touch light but noticeable. “Wouldn’t mind making a fortune. CNN looks like there’s more action, and definitely enough people that are scared the world goes to shit.”

“Or you could become a vintner.” Dan laughed and let his head fall back. It was good not to think, just for a little while, not to think and not to worry. He grinned with closed eyes, moving into the touch like a cat stretching along a hand. “Plenty of wars, and that’s one thing that’s secure: we’ll never run out of

wars and thus you'll never run out of business. Then again, the world won't run out of people who drink wine, either."

Jean leaned in a bit closer. "Means I wouldn't have to hire out my ass anymore."

Rolling his head to the side, Dan opened his eyes. "As far as I remember, that was a rather nice arse."

Jean grinned. "So far, nobody complained."

Dan winked, "I think I should reacquaint myself with it." Raising his glass to his lips he took a large sip, relishing the taste. There was something about the taste of red wine and Jean.

Jean pursed his lips, smirking to himself. "Still the same sexy bastard. I guess you'll never change." He placed his hand on Dan's thigh and leaned in to kiss Dan, tasting and smelling of wine, playfully licking his lips. "Anything you have in mind, Mad Dog?"

"Not Mad Dog any longer." Dan smiled, breathing in Jean's scent. He blinked once, slowly. "In all the time that I've known you, have I ever fucked your arse with my tongue?" He flashed a grin.

Jean inhaled sharply, surprised at the question – and clearly, that was something that was actually new to him. "Fuck," he said, voice thick. "And here I was, planning to go slowly and give you time."

"Time?" Dan laughed, the lines around his dark eyes crinkled, gleaming with amusement. "I am forty-seven, I don't think you need to give me time."

"They call that courting, Dan. You know? Raising the stakes. Like a game of poker." Jean looked at Dan. "You ... want to do that? As in ... seriously?"

"That depends on how clean your arse is." Dan raised his glass once more, swirling the ruby liquid in a thoughtful gesture.

"Well, I am showered, but we could check out the new hot tub in the cellar."

"Courting ..." Dan grinned, took a large gulp from his wine. "In that case, consider the hot tub your courting. You should know by now that I'm crap at that courting thing most of the time."

"Well, I have a national honour to uphold. Good food and good manners, and of course good sex."

Dan finished the wine, moved his arms to the side, and tipped his head back as if crucified. "Just snog me and I'm anybody's."

Jean moved closer, hand running up to Dan's chest as he leaned in to kiss Dan's lips, gentle, tender, with all the time in the world, just relishing kissing.

Dan sighed, too content to do anything else. "It's good to see you again. Very good." Pulling back from the kiss for a moment, he smiled.

"And you." Jean's hands roaming across Dan's body, chest and thigh, he broke the kiss to murmur, "Well, in that case ..." and dipped in again, tongue running over Dan's teeth.

"In that case feed me, undress me, wine me, bathe me, and indulge my every whim." Dan chuckled in the back of his throat, hand going to Jean's shoulder, neck. "The order's negotiable."

“I’ll feed you, Dan, don’t worry.” Jean gave a husky laugh and got up, hand still on Dan’s chest before he could reply to the innuendo. “Stay there.” He pulled the shirt over his head and discarded it on the couch – chest lean, less tanned these days, which suited him, skin smooth but for a few blonde hairs on his chest. “Just want to get closer.” He opened his legs, left and right of Dan’s, and sat down on his thighs, knees digging into the back of the overstuffed couch. “Sometimes, I make her sit on me like that. I open my legs and just touch her. Nothing more. No underwear helps there.” Solange loved wearing skirts.

“Mmmm ...” Dan let out a sound that came suspiciously close to a purr. “Don’t you think that trousers in that case are overrated?” His hands on Jean’s hips, they made their way up along the sides, towards arms, then shoulders.

“Are they?” Jean’s hands moved behind Dan’s back, pulled the shirt free, began to unbutton it on the front, then leaned in to kiss Dan’s chest, smooth and carefully groomed, while pulling the shirt down over his shoulders. Momentarily implying restraints, he kissed the warm skin of one shoulder, tracing his tongue down, close to where the cloth began.

Dan murmured with growing huskiness, “I doubt you’d want to *sit* on me ....”

Jean glanced up. It was a speculative curiosity more than revulsion or want.

Dan’s grin had a few more dimensions to it. “In all those years you were never interested in having anything more than a finger ...” Dan waggled his brows, “or a tongue up your arse. You have been very vocal about this, many times. In fact, I remember a certain hotel room in Italy, where you were rather adamant ...”

“Hey, finger I know.” Jean kissed Dan’s throat now, gentle, sucking kisses that didn’t let on more than respect and tenderness. The need to taste and smell above anything else, and it also gave him time to think. “I did wonder about the rest ... but then, virgins are bothersome. They can’t really let go.”

Dan moved his head forward, caught some of Jean’s skin, trailing his tongue up an arm, until he was eye to eye, “well, you know, being trapped in my shirt is kind of ... interesting.”

“Oh?” Jean grinned. “I was about to say the same. Mind some leather around the wrists? I’d even pull down your trousers for you.”

Dan tilted his head, glanced up, pondering. “If you did, that wouldn’t be the first time in my life.”

“You weirdo.” Jean teased.

Dan winked, “not a weirdo, just ex-SAS.”

“SAS are a bunch of kinky bastards, then.” Jean stretched out and dug behind the couch, pulling out a set of leather cuffs that could be linked through steel rings. “Guess that tells you a lot about the history of this couch,” he murmured, grinning.

Dan eyed the implements with one raised brow. “I have the funny feeling it isn’t you who wears them.” Of course not, he remembered the collar he’d found very well.

“I don’t wear them because you started it.” Jean smirked.

“I didn’t.” Dan grinned, “you trapped my arms.” But he allowed Jean to manhandle his body as if it belonged to a puppet, because it was so good to give over control and not to think.

“Apart from that ...” Jean finished pulling the shirt off Dan, then opened the first cuff, placed it around Dan’s left wrist, and closed it, as casual as checking webbing for full magazines. “The hook in the wall isn’t much of a challenge. Granted, Solange can struggle as much as she likes, but you ...” Second cuff, and closed. “Probably only tense once, or maybe twice, and the hook comes out.” He connected the cuffs in front of Dan, and gave another grin.

Dan’s locked wrists fell into his lap. “Vadim told me once that I’d still be lethal with my legs cut off.” Rattling the metal links between the cuffs, he tensed his muscles, starting with shoulders then arms, running down across pecs to abs. “Though I’ll protest if you try cut my legs off. They’re fucked up, but I quite like the look of them. Make me taller.”

Jean grinned and leaned in to kiss Dan’s throat again, taking hold of the ring between the cuffs.

Dan raised his brows, “If you tie me to that hook over there I might have to test if I really am still lethal.”

“Just want to see you stretched out,” murmured Jean, and pushed Dan’s arms up, until the cuffs clicked into place with a hook that the couch’s back usually hid.

“Hey!” Dan tensed suddenly. “I thought it was a joke.” He tilted his head, didn’t realise the motion was stretching his body further, displaying smooth and scarred skin alike over a still-muscular frame.

“The hook’s a joke. Yes.” Jean regarded Dan’s body with clear desire.

“Is it?” Dan eyed Jean suspiciously, testing the hook with a swift movement, and suddenly grinned. He could feel it move; decoration, no more. “In that case I won’t have to kill you.”

“Much obliged.” Jean’s hands slid down to take Dan’s trousers and pull them off. Taking his time and making this as luxurious as anything else. Removing shoes and socks, baring Dan completely. Stretched Dan. He loved the sight.

“You have no right to be this sexy,” Jean quipped and reached for the bottle that still held a couple glasses worth of red wine. He took a thoughtful sip, then grinned sharply, and offered the bottle to Dan, by accident or design spilling wine over Dan’s chin, then trying to catch the wine with his tongue.

Jean poured more wine down Dan’s chin, let it run down his chest, over his shoulder, risking to stain the couch. Then moved in, licking the wine off from where it started. Dan’s lips, down the throat and chest, kissing and licking, showing hunger now, one hand on Dan’s thigh steadying his body.

“Oh shit.” Dan groaned, rolled his head with the movement, arched up towards Jean’s lips. He didn’t seem to be able to remain still, a strumming tension consuming him, residing deep within his stomach. He wasn’t that quick

anymore with the old comrade lust, but he was definitely saluting a greeting. “Don’t do that.”

Jean glanced up, grinning. “What? You ticklish?”

“No, just ...” Dan felt stupid the moment he said it, and grinned. “Don’t mind me.”

Jean gave a dry chuckle against Dan’s side. “I think this Chateau Whatever just gets better from your skin.” He reached for the bottle again to take a mouthful, swallowed a small amount of it, then placed his lips to Dan’s, offering. No sooner did Jean’s lips touch his own, when Dan’s head moved forward, tasting, searching and seeking with parted lips. Bitter-sweet taste of wine, mixed with male, man, body and touch, taste, heat.

Dan closed his eyes, didn’t hear the sound from the back of his throat, as his mind finally and mercifully went blank.

Jean moved back on Dan’s thighs, knees left and right of his hips, naked now as well, skin on skin on leather. He kept kissing, devouring, building up more passion, one arm around Dan’s shoulders, the free hand moving south, running over heated skin down to Dan’s cock.

The build-up was intoxicating, Dan’s mind not there, not clear, arching towards the hand, he wanted more, yet less, and he barely noticed his whimper.

Jean reached out to find the strategically placed bottle of lube and a condom. Nervous, oh yes, he needed the passion mainly for himself. To turn an idle thought into reality. One chance now, and he’d act on it, simple. He opened the foil pack and slid the condom down Dan’s cock, then squeezed lube into his hand and warmed it, while keeping Dan’s mind in that happy space of kissing and wanting. He added more lube, then shifted his weight, much the way Solange did, used to do and still sometimes did. Didn’t matter. But she had stoked his curiosity. He moved over Dan’s cock, kept it in place with a hand, then tried to press down on it, remembered to press and relax, and part of it actually got through the muscle, much bigger, much more substantial than a finger. Damn. That would burn. Relax.

“Fuck,” Dan’s head lifted and his eyes flew open. Lips parted, he stared at Jean. “You ...” he couldn’t talk anymore, too much sensation and his body tensed, arched, moved, wild yet tamed.

Jean kept himself steady on Dan’s shoulder, lips opened when Dan moved, and he lowered more weight down, breaching himself. “Shit. Burns. Like a fucking ... virgin,” he cursed, forcing himself to relax again, breathing.

“That’s because ...” Dan’s breath came in erratic gasps. “... you are one.”

“Told you ... virgins aren’t worth the fucking trouble.” Jean paused, gathering his courage. It was meant to be good if he got deep enough. It was the getting there that was a pain. “If you thrust, I’ll kill you.” Jean grinned, closed his eyes and moved into another kiss, allowing gravity to do some of the work. “Shit ... G...guess I’m getting somewhere ...” His body tensed at the intrusion, the heat and size, cock jumping against his front. Going slowly, then pushed himself, hissing.



“Fuck, yes, you are.” Dan was strumming with tension, desperately fighting to keep himself from moving.

Jean reached for the wine, taking several deep gulps, hoped the alcohol would help, knew with the rational rest of his brain that he could drink several bottles before losing any control. Accepting Dan inside, knowing it would hurt tomorrow, but hey, he’d been in so many firefights, and it always hurt the next morning. No reason whatsoever to not do it. Getting used to it – was just stretching and a slight burn, and he was in control. It was alright. It was pretty good, judging from Dan’s face.

“Okay.” He rested on Dan’s lap, feeling the full length inside now, and relaxing, breathing. Solange could drive him insane like this. He lifted a bit, then pushed down again, slowly moving that cock inside, not sure whether he liked this, but loving what it did to Dan. Liked Dan stretched out like this, the stricken expression. “Ah ... you can move, if you want to ...”

“No.” Dan barely managed to gasp out the one syllable. A sheen of sweat gathered on his body, turning his skin into a gleaming plane of darkly tanned and deeply scarred landscapes across tensed muscles. A body on edge, this was mindblowingly, excruciatingly, torturously good. “Thought I was your ... captive.”

Jean laughed and leaned in for another kiss, moving his hips slightly, just tilting them and grinding, like Solange did, feeling something like a pressure/heat/burn/fullness. Not unpleasant, somehow, but nothing that would make him scream his head off. “Captive? Okay, if you ... want to.”

“I think ...” Dan gasped at a particularly clever movement that shot silver bullets from his cock through torn-up guts right into his brain. “I think I do. Want this.”

“Well ... would be a bad moment ... to say stop, I guess.” Jean grinned, idly running his hands down Dan’s body, aged as well as that wine, an acquired taste much like wine, and definitely worth getting used to. Ages ago. He didn’t actually want to play the hardcore prisoner game, but that was probably not what Dan meant. Or was it?

Lips parting, Dan’s head moved forward as much as he could, before another movement made him groan. This was good, so goddamned easy and light and without any extremes, and no spikes nor blades of lust and greed. And no thinking. Just no thinking. “Vadim ... never ...” Shut up, Dan, shut the fuck up! Don’t think! Scrunching his eyes shut for a moment, he took in a sharp breath.

“No, I imagine that bastard is quite a bit heavier,” quipped Jean, causing Dan to let out a huff of laughter. Leaning his elbows on Dan’s shoulders for a little more support as he was starting to move more rhythmically. It got better, still much preferred fucking an arse than getting fucked, but it wasn’t too bad. Moving just that bit closer to trap his cock against Dan’s stomach, cursing under his breath as that started to work on him, the sweat and the strength under that damp skin. Thinking, suddenly, just how much Dan had to love the Russian – the other Russian – that he’d think of him even now. Strangely glad

for Dan. Whatever their life together was like, he'd always known that Vadim didn't quite feed all hungers ... not the one for good old fashioned courting and romance.

"If you keep that up ..." Dan's voice sounded as if he had run a marathon, "you'll kill me." Didn't want it any different. The slow build-up of pressure and lust was cruel, but he had learned that quality knocked out quantity a thousand times over.

"Last time I checked, captives can't file complaints," murmured Jean into Dan's ear, snaking his tongue into it as he moved with a touch more force, which made him groan and close his eyes. Damn. Keep it slow and steady, or rush on. Fucked if he cared. But determined to make the most of it. "What ... kind of captor ... would I be, huh?"

"Fuck that." Breathed out, Dan shuddered at touch and movement. Didn't know what he was saying, didn't matter either. "I just can't believe you really ... are doing this." Tipping his head back into his neck, throat bared, lying against the couch, he lifted his hips, as far as he could, attempting to get more friction. He chuckled breathlessly, "but I guess you really are ..." he twisted his hips suddenly, sharply, "coz I can feel my cock ..." groaned, pushed upwards once more, "right up your virginal arse."

Jean shuddered hard, felt the motions, the strength in Dan's body, and got an inkling of an idea what it might be like if Dan was in control. "Yes, fuck, I am." Didn't trust his voice, didn't trust his body, like it was taken over by somebody else, something else. Control became precarious at best, even though, damn, he wanted it to last, to go slow. Pressed his cock against Dan's straining body and dipped in for an open-mouthed, hungry kiss. "And what a big fucking ... cock that is."

Dan's eyes widened for a split second at the dirty talk, before breaking into a grin that was swallowed by the kiss. Passive, yet in control, heady concoction of conflicting sensations. He broke the kiss, and murmured against Jean's lips, "Big enough for that virgin arse of yours, soldier?"

Jean gave a short laugh, shit, he loved talking like that to Solange, loved how she squirmed when he made her talk about how fucking good it was. Sometimes, he made her call him 'daddy', or something like that. They had a whole library of fantasies. "Yeah, just ... about big enough, sir. Thank you, sir." Natural, military talk, kind of, sir-ing Dan was alright, and funny, but in a good way. "Give me more cock, sir."

Eyes half-closed, Dan raised one brow. Tied up, interesting. Playful, different this time. Different to Vadim calling him 'sir' in the very depths of a scene. With Vadim nothing went ever less than down to the marrow of their bones, and he'd be damned if he let the thoughts, worry and fear, take over again. "Lift up, soldier." Fuck, how right that felt, the Army was still in his blood. "Lift up and take my cock deep. Slowly. Don't you dare move too fast."

Jean groaned, body tensed, his mind responding, body falling in line, holy fuck, and he usually was in charge. Feeling Dan's light, secure touch in this game was very different. His own style was often humorous, dirty, but Dan's

was very interesting. "Like this, sir?" He moved up, wanted to speed up, now, need growing.

Eyes almost closing again, Dan nodded, his voice barely more than a murmur, "Fuck yourself on my cock, like a good little soldier, and I'll reward you." Parting his lips, tongue darting out for a brief moment.

Jean felt himself getting close, holy fuck, from this game. The burn, the fullness, Dan's sweat under his hands, and the exact same thing he made Solange do, but now with tables turned, with Dan, far more male than Solange had ever possibly been. He rested his hands on Dan's shoulders, legs working to do exactly that. Fucking himself slowly, he clenched his arse as much as possible, which fucking burnt again, but by now, that feeling was just part of it. "Shit. I'm... think I'm getting there. Feels ... weird, good weird. Make me come, sir."

"You're too impatient, soldier." Hands bound, he should feel helpless, but Dan felt nothing but steadily rising lust. "Remember the first prerogative ..." another twist of his hips, managing to change the angle of penetration the moment Jean came back down on his cock. Steeper, more intense, "you must fulfil your duties. No questions asked. No pleading."

"No ... pleading," echoed Jean, mind emptying. The rogue soldier getting close to the point where he would do anything, follow any order.

Taking in a sharp breath between his teeth, Dan's head moved forward, finding Jean's lips, and his tongue slid between them and into the heat, eagerly greeted, sucked on. Voice almost swallowed in the kiss, "I will blow you, if you suck me dry with your arse."

"How, sir." Tensing on that cock, fucking difficult, and speeding up, almost punishing himself. The pain was unimportant now, Jean's lean body tense and gleaming with sweat. Thrusting down hard, groaning, loudly, louder than Vadim would be, deep, sexy sounds that didn't care if anybody listened.

"Just ..." Dan broke the kiss, "like that." Head moving again, tongue searching for lips, teeth, taste. Wanting to swallow those sounds, those fucking sounds of a man who didn't give a shit about anything, who had never been forced to shut up and eat the silence, who'd never been tortured, never been broken, never been turned into a fucked-up mess that was so fucking hard to live with at times, and it fucking hurt, and ...

"Shit!" With a sharp intake of breath, Dan shook his head, as if getting rid of a bad dream. Then pushed, twisted, moved in the confines of his bonds. Body gleaming with sweat, closer. With every thrust getting closer. Deeper. "Harder. Fuck yourself harder. You want to hurt, soldier. Tell me you want to feel."

"... want to. Feel. You!" groaned Jean, moving more fiercely now, tense, body feeling so much he was starting to spin out of control. Pain sought now, challenge, taken in, ripped apart and swallowed with abandon. "Make me ... fuck! ... hurt!"

Dan's voice suddenly snapped into something harder, "Do it!" Breathless, but the order was unmistakable. "Harder! Faster!" Hitting his head against the sofa, lips parting, eyes closed, body strained and stretched, slippery with sweat

and need, and the friction was getting too much. Dan came with a low growl and throaty cry. “Fuck!” Shuddering and jerking upwards, hips jutting with sharp stabs while he was filling that untouched arse.

Jean met those thrusts with all the fierceness that the pain had stoked, giving no quarter, not to himself, not to Dan. He felt Dan’s cock pulse, what a weird feeling, riding a man, feeling all that, but not able to follow Dan there. Pain and wonder and a breathless need keeping him tethered. Gasping, panting, he tried to move off, but his legs felt weak, and he held onto Dan, wanting to come, too.

“Come.” Dan gasped out. Head lifted. Two meanings, and his lips parted, eyes half-glazed. “Your cock.”

It was a struggle to stand on the couch, dizzy as Jean was, arse hurting, as he took Dan’s head with both hands and moved it forward onto his straining cock, body impossibly tense.

Dan let out a faint groan, pure hunger. Hands still bound, he moved his head forward, straining, sucking the cock deep down, opening his throat, ignoring the gagging reflex. Come for me, he suddenly thought. Come for me.

Jean held Dan’s head, fingers digging into the mane of dark and grey, not thrusting as much as being taken in. Pain and need and closeness, and it was really only that which brought him over the edge, losing himself. Fuck, that became a habit with Dan.

He pulled back, while Dan was still swallowing, intending to take his time, licking-cleaning, lapping. Finally, Jean stepped off the couch, legs weak, slightly shaky, and wiped his face. Woah. Fucking woah. Shit.

“Uhm ... you okay?” Jean grinned while Dan looked up, head tilted, licking his lips. Jean felt it was a little forced, maybe embarrassment, no idea, just felt weird suddenly. “I’ll have a quick shower, then I sort us some food, how does that sound?”

“Hey!” Dan rattled lightly on the chain that held his wrists. “You’re not going to leave me like that, eh?” Waiting for Jean to come closer, head tilting into the back of his neck, he looked straight up. “The question is, if *you* are Okay, mate.”

Jean grinned and leaned over to unhook Dan, then opened the handcuffs, and leaned down for a kiss. Strange feeling, still, growing even stronger. “I’m fine. My ass hurts, and I’d like to ... ah, get clean. Fucking weird feeling there.”

Flexing his wrists, Dan kept his hands where they were. Good kisses. He liked them, a goddamned lot. “Sure.” Nodding when Jean broke the kiss. “I understand. Know what that feels like.”

Jean licked his lips and stepped back. “Be back later.” With that, he left the living room, feeling every step, still the burn, he really needed to check whether he had injured himself, fuck, now, that would be just too amusing. Tapping into a masochistic side he hadn’t thought he possessed.

He had a shower, leaning against the tiles, letting hot water run over his neck and back, checking his body, and washing out what he could reach. Didn’t seem to be injured. Still, something about it made him shudder. Something about Dan. Something cut deep to the bone, in a good and bad way, something that

had never happened before. Maybe because of the arse fucking. Shit. It all circled around Dan. How Dan laughed, and mocked, and kissed.

“What are you doing?” he muttered, stepped out and towelled himself down. Checked on himself in the mirror. Reddened, stretched, but nothing else. Should be alright in a bit. He wrapped himself into a robe and returned.

Dan had left the couch in the meantime, standing in front of the panorama window, smoking. Naked, presenting his back to the room. Dark skin glowing in the milky sunlight that streamed into the room, he was looking at the garden, still barren in early spring. He didn't seem to have heard Jean, just standing and staring.

Jean was about to say something as he entered, but his voice faltered. Shit. He stepped closer, feeling oddly conscious as he placed his hands on Dan's shoulders and kissed his neck, enjoying the broad back, the smell of his skin. Don't think, just take as much as you can have, and give as much as you can, because it would be over when Solange returned.

Dan rolled his head before dropping it for a moment, allowing better access to his neck.

“Good news, I don't think I'll get pregnant.” Jean murmured.

Dan laughed quietly, under his breath. “Good to know. One daughter is enough. Couldn't do with another one.” Craning his head back to catch a glimpse. “Besides, I'm getting old.”

“You're getting shit, Dan. Bullshit.” Jean shook his head, hands moved to Dan's arms, stayed there, lips against the taut skin under Dan's left ear.

“Thanks, bastard.” Dan chuckled, leaning against Jean.

“Did you ever think about kids? I mean, actually raise them? We're sending some money to some place in Sierra Leone ...” where Jean had worked and made contact with the natives, appalled at the cruelty and need, “but that's it.”

Feeling Jean's lips move against his skin, Dan relished the sensation. “No. Never. As the bitch said so eloquently, my life was one of destruction, not creation.” One shouldered shrug, eyes fixed on the garden outside. “I was a tool all my life, and I couldn't have carried a foetus in my ammo pouch.”

Jean breathed laughter against Dan's skin.

“And you? Do you regret it?”

“Sometimes, I do. Yeah. The only way for us to have kids is grab a handful, kidnap them and keep them hidden for the rest of our lives.” Jean laughed. “Can't even mention it when she's around. She'd take it personal, you know?” Precious Solange, she'd suffer for that, and that was something Jean just couldn't watch. “So I pretend I don't. Easier. Ah, shit. I guess I ruined our romantic mood. Don't mind me. Fucking Russian blood, wants to go all death and gloom if I don't pull together.”

“I thought you were French by blood, of a different type.” Dan smiled, turning in Jean's arms until they stood face to face. “Not much that can ruin my mood. I'm the hardy peasant.”

Jean laughed again. “Aye.”

“Aye?” Dan raised his brows, “that’s my line. I’m Scottish, have you already forgotten?” He winked, his smile widening. “There simply are some things that we can’t have. But is adoption really out with your lifestyle?”

“Not sure. I was wondering, you know. But that would mean officials looking too closely at us. Bad karma.”

Dan shrugged, leant closer, “We just have to get on with life, eh?” No matter how much it cost.

“Well, nothing eloping together could solve. You’re getting too old to have my babies.” Jean slapped Dan’s arse and laughed.

“Moment ago you claimed I was getting shit.” Dan’s brows danced up and down his forehead. “Not sure where your thoughts have buggered off to, but hell, Jean, you’re damn strange today.”

True, thought Jean and gave an innocent grin, as if he had no idea in hell what Dan was talking about. His normal light heartedness felt like an act now. Which was weird, because it wasn’t.

Tilting his head, Dan half-smiled. “Eloping’s right out, but not because of the babies. There’s that little matter of our partners, hm?”

“Yes ... that wouldn’t be a good idea. Vadim’s a good tracker, and Solange has the legal power to shut down my bank accounts.” Jean smirked. “Seems we’re the tragic love story that can never happen, huh?”

“Are we?” Dan’s smile was still in place. “Are we, Jean?”

Jean paused, felt his heart race all of a sudden. What the fuck are you doing? Found no clever comment that quickly, not quick enough by far. “Comrades,” he said, first thing that came to his blank mind. Good start. “Right? We’ll always be that.”

Dan nodded, with that same smile. “Aye, comrades. Friends. We’ll always be friends.” Gesturing with his chin over to the couch. “And you’d be an even better friend and comrade for sitting down there and talking for, say, five minutes.”

Jean glanced at the couch, ran a hand through his hair, still damp, then walked over and sat down. Okay. He’d feel his arse for a while longer. He idly capped the lube again and put it away, where he usually kept it. To give his hands something to do.

Dan flopped himself down on the wine-stained leather couch beside Jean. “Right, then.” The fingers of his left rested lightly on Jean’s robe-clad shoulders. “Spill the beans. What’s up, Frenchie?” Tilting his head until it lay on the top of the couch’s back. “Was the fucking a big mistake? Gone all weird in your head? It did that to me, you know. Ages ago.”

“Yes? Weird ... in what way?” Jean shook his head. “I can’t make anything out of it. It’s just ...” He raised his shoulders. “Hell, I ... just don’t know.”

Dan rubbed his nose with the heel of his hand. “You and Solange alright?” Echoing Jean’s earlier question.

“Maybe I’m just taking her for granted. She sometimes says I do, but that’s when she’s ... feeling down. She has times like that, we call that her PMS.” He gave a small laugh. Ups and downs. Who didn’t have them? “You get used to

somebody after that time. You're some ... kind of holiday, I guess. Something she isn't. I'm faithful, that's weird, too, nothing I really, lack, but ... I do mean it. When I kiss you."

"Aye, you do mean it." Dan nodded, "I do, too." He smiled, poking a finger into Jean's solar plexus, right above where the bathrobe opened. "Are you going to tell me now that you've fallen in love with me? However stupid that may sound." He grinned, taking the piss.

Jean grinned sharply. "Yes, it sounds stupid. So I won't say it. I'll keep it to myself. The whole opera about how much I fucking wanted you, and that I ... I ..." Jean paused, struggling. "Yeah, shit, I ... guess I love you – so what? Won't change a thing, and it shouldn't really, we're both adults, we have ... people around, and commitments. Just ... you know, take that feeling and, I don't know, 'cherish' sounds like from a bad song. You're a guy, and I still love you when you're here. I never did that with another guy, and Solange never really was male, so ... shit ... I just love being around you, touching you and making you smile. I feel like a complete pussy for that, weird, that I can do all that with a girl, but I feel strange when I do it with you, but it feels good."

"Oh." The breathed out syllable was all that Dan brought out. Gone the bravado, the jokes and piss-taking. Gone, too, his belief he'd known what Jean was going to say. Wrong. No, not wrong, just nowhere near the level of truth.

Jean swallowed. "Yeah, 'oh'. It's alright. It really is. Just ... good I said it, I guess."

Dan swallowed, hand moved off Jean's shoulder to rub once, twice over his face before he cleared his throat, looking back up. "Fact is, I sometimes wish Vadim was you. Just sometimes, you know?" He shouldn't be saying that, should have never even felt it, but sometimes, like now, with Vadim far away and all that pain and fear and loneliness, with nowhere and nothing to soothe the worry, it was just *there*. That feeling. "The lightness between us. There's no pain. The way you kiss and touch and all that, but then ..." shaking his head, smiling.

"... then I'm not him." Jean gave a grin and reached out to raise Dan's chin, moving close as if for a kiss. "That's alright. Maybe some weird part of me is jealous. Does that make sense?"

"Aye. Makes sense." Dan felt strange for a moment, the tender gesture. The way Jean treated him, different to any man he'd ever been with. There was a gentleness about him that had always somehow resonated with him. "A request, perhaps?"

"Of course."

"Now that that 'talking' is done and over with, and since I obviously can't get it up again that quickly, any chance for a kiss and touch fest? You mentioned a hot tub and some food. You know I do extremely depraved things for - and to - a piece of baklava."

Jean grinned. "Grapes and cheese and more wine? Sounds like a start?" He ran fingers along Dan's jaw line, tracing the bone underneath. "Just head downstairs. I'll bring the food and wine."

Dan got up while Jean headed into the kitchen, to fetch the prepared food from the fridge, baguette mainly for cleaning up the taste between the cheese and wine, glasses, a couple bottles.

“Got any baklava after all?” Dan called, “or any other sweets?”

“Hang on.” Jean gave a laugh. “I have to hide that stuff. Solange gets really upset if she finds sugar or chocolate in the house.”

Dan was making his way with the help of his cane down the stairs. Stairs would always be a bit of a bastard. The hot tub sat at one end of the sauna, swimming pool, steam room ensemble that took up the old building’s cellar. Everything was pristine, neatly tiled, decorated with potted plants and indirect light filtered in from the ceiling.

He was looking for the switch to turn it on, when Jean returned.

“Over there, near the steps.” Jean came with the platter, food precariously piled up, wine bottles under his arm, wine glasses dangling from his fingers. Carefully setting everything down, he’d broken glasses here before, and cleaning that up ruined the mood.

“Ah, I see.” Spotting the control panel, Dan set the whirl tub into motion, satisfied at the bubbles. “Does she ever eat anything?” Dan glanced at Jean who was arranging the food and drink. “Other than a piece of celery, that is. Would drive me mental if I had to watch what I eat.”

Jean laughed. “Her main counts as my side salad. She knows the calorie content of just about everything. But we work out together. Of course, different sets of weights, but she is a mean runner.”

Dan flashed a grin and looked around, wondering how the hell to best get into the tub. Their own had a special set of steps built in, to make it easier for him to get in.

Jean looked at Dan’s knee, then the tub. “Ah. Want my shoulder? Carrying you in might be a bit ... embarrassing, huh?”

“Damned cheeky bastard, I don’t need anyone to carry me, I could carry you, if the knee didn’t play up.” Mock-punching Jean, “but a shoulder’s appreciated.”

“No doubt.” Jean opened the robe and shed it, then moved close to Dan, offering his shoulder, sliding an arm around his waist.

All Dan needed was that bit of support for balance. Once in the water, he sunk under for a while, before coming back up, grinning and shaking his hair, water flying everywhere.

Jean settled near the wine, pouring it lazily while Dan fooled around. Feeling the bite of the hot water. Still strange, but alright. What made him think more was the angle of pain in that. Was it that different from Solange raking his back with fingernails?

“Right, Jean, I expect you to make good your Frenchman’s reputation and feed me with good wine, food, and an afternoon of *l’amour, l’amour, l’amour.*”

Jean laughed and offered a glass, and a kiss right after that. “Baklava and Italian biscotti. Should serve a dessert wine rather than this stuff, but I like this white.”



Taking glass, kiss, and most of all a mouthful of wine, Dan settled back, comfortable and weightless in the water. He'd learned to love water almost as much as Vadim did. It took the strain off his knees, kept his body in shape and allowed him to expend his energy as he used to do in running.

Jean pushed the plate closer to Dan, then selected a couple grapes, teased Dan's lips with the smooth, chilled skin of the fruit, and pushed them in, gingerly, opening his own lips as he did, eyes gleaming.

Lips closing around the grape, Dan bit down on it, tangy juice running down his throat and his chin, before sucking the fruit in fully. "Good start. I can feel the *savoir vivre*." He grinned.

Jean gave a laugh. "Let's see if we can hold that level." He discarded the thoughts what it all meant and caused and did, just taking what he knew was true. That he enjoyed immensely being with Dan, love or comradeship, no matter, Solange thought it had some 'father & son' vibes, or definitely something like family, which was a strange thought, but touched the core of it. He felt at ease and comfortable with this man. Whatever they did was alright.

And that was kissing and feeding each other, holding and touching and more kissing, stroking, touch and feeling because they could have it, and forget time and everything outside the Jacuzzi for a long while.

They stayed until the late afternoon, then got out and dressed, and into the village to the local bar. Wine and freshly baked bread with garlic, rosemary and produce from the surrounding countryside. Dan was laughing with the locals, Jean was playing *pétanque* with the older men, while Dan watched, until he gave it a go.

Filled with wine and food, strawberry quiche and a helping of several cups of coffee, good company, and most of all the comfortable ease of being around Jean, they were finally making their way back up to the house, when it was after eleven. Walking this time, too much wine for both. Talking on the way, smiling. Another day was drawing to an end; another time with Jean. It had kept him from thinking and had filled the loneliness.

There was light when they arrived, and Solange opened the door when Jean rang. She smiled and hugged, and Jean kissed her, with the same tenderness and seriousness that he always kissed with.

"Did you have a good day?" asked Jean between kisses, while Dan stood, leaning against the wall of the house, smiling.

"Oh yes." She laughed, trying to push Jean back, but he unbalanced her, and she clung to him, laughing. "Manners, *mon chérie*, manners."

Dan shook his head, "It's alright, Solange, I have a funny feeling your husband has missed you."

"I ... guess so, but he shouldn't be so rude ..." She tried in vain to free herself from Jean's arms, then resigned to the fact. "You're terrible, Jean."

"What else is new?" asked Jean, and carried her off.

Dan was smiling as he watched them leave. He stayed in the kitchen for another hour, raiding the fridge and making himself a coffee or two, while smoking, deep in thoughts.

March 1996, France

The next day Solange joined them when they all went sightseeing, followed by excellent food in one of the many local restaurants. The weather was kind to them, and while it was cold, the sun had come out, giving the countryside a warm glow. It was still early evening when they returned, and they had hardly made it to the door, when they heard the phone ringing.

Solange hurried inside, while Jean and Dan brought the coats out of the car. When Dan stepped inside, Solange held the phone out to him with a smile. “For you. Dr Williams.”

Dan immediately tensed, but took the wireless phone, stepping into the front room when Jean gestured to him he’d have privacy in there. Sitting in the last light of the day, he listened to the doctor’s account of the week, while leaning against the back of the chair, eyes closed. This time, after over a month, it wasn’t enough, though.

“Can I talk to Vadim?”

“Mr McFadyen, this would not be a good idea.”

“Why?” Sudden aggression rose to the surface, which had simmered for a while. Helplessness, fear, and that goddamned loneliness, a feeling not even Jean could ease. “I am sick and tired of being told that this isn’t a good idea. I am bloody well old enough to decide what is a good idea or not, and so is Vadim!”

“Mr McFadyen ...” the doctor’s voice remained as calm as ever. “As I explained to you right from the start, it is important that Mr Krasnorada severs all of his ties and his old coping mechanisms.”

“That’s what I bloody well am, aye? Coping mechanism, ties, carer. Don’t worry, doctor, I haven’t forgotten.” Rubbing the heel of his hand over his face, Dan scrunched his eyes shut.

“Mr McFadyen, I thought we had agreed that this was all about Mr Krasnorada.”

“I know that. I *know* that. How stupid do you think I am?” Dan shook his head violently. “It’s not about me and never has been, so bloody well stop patronising me.”

“I am sorry, I never meant to come across as patronising.” Dr William’s voice was still quiet. “And I apologise profusely if I came across as disbelieving in regards to your acceptance of the situation.”

“No.” Dan shook his head again. “You don’t get it, do you? You don’t understand that I’d do anything to stop Vadim from suffering, and if that means letting him go then I will.” The sudden pain in his chest constricted his breathing, and he struggled for air, even discarding the cigarette he’d been about to smoke. “But the not-knowing is what kills me. If I could just have a word or two with Vadim, that’s all I ask for. Or are you keeping him locked up?”

“Of course not. Mr Krasnorada is a free man.”

“Then why doesn’t he talk to me? For five fucking weeks?”

“Mr Krasnorada is not able to deal with anything other than the therapy right now. You have to understand that.”

“And what is so difficult about me? Can you explain that to me? What’s so hard about just saying ‘hello’ to me?”

“Because it is not ‘just hello’, can’t you see this?”

“No, seems I can’t. Seems I’m the bloody stupid Scottish peasant who just doesn’t get it. Seems I’m the fucking idiot who doesn’t even have a fucking clue if he’ll ever get his partner back!” Dan was breathing hard. He knew, somewhere in his mind, that he was completely irrational, and that he should stop himself, now, right now, but he couldn’t.

There was a long pause on the other end, before the doctor’s quiet voice was heard again. “I understand how hard all this is for you, but ...”

Dan cut in, sharply. “You understand *jack shit!*”

“Mr McFadyen, please ...”

“Please what? I miss Vadim, and how could you understand that?” Dan was shaking.

“Mr McFadyen ...”

“I want to speak to him, *now!*”

Vadim heard the roar even through the phone and saw the doctor’s face. He shuddered, still shaken up by the session less than half an hour ago. His hands formed fists but he nodded. “Let him. Give me the phone.”

“Vadim?” Dan froze, sitting ramrod straight, eyes open in the darkness of the room.

“Yes.” Vadim inhaled deeply, turned to face the windows, staring out into the green. Dan pushing for contact. Dan demanding and shouting, yet the voice at the other end was everything but loud now.

“How are you?” Dan was trying to crawl into the phone, just to hear ... anything. The spoken, the unspoken, each breath, any movement. “I ... I just wanted to hear you. Just for an minute. I ... fucking miss you.” And since when had he turned into a stammering wreck?

Vadim shuddered. “I’m ... not good, Dan.” I vomit and I cry, I scream at night, I write things that make me nauseous. I examine everything I did, and wonder if I fucking deserved all this. All that is bad enough without ... without ... closeness. “I’m in a lot of ... pain.”

“I’m sorry. I wish I could ...” do what. Do what, exactly? “I wish I could just hold you.” Quietly, hardly more than a murmur. Holding. Touching. Wrapping his arms around Vadim and spooning close. It had always made them feel better, had always helped. Closeness, knowing the other was there.

“I can’t have anything touch me.” Vadim knew his words sounded cold, but they were the truth. “No sex, no touch, nothing. I don’t want anybody near. I can’t have anybody ... can’t stand anybody right now. I don’t feel anything ... just pain. I don’t need anything but for this to stop, or I’m going insane. I’m

halfway there, but I don't want to fall, I have to get through this, and I have to do it alone, because everything's drowning me."

"I'm sorry." Toneless. "So sorry." Vadim's words had reached Dan's mind, but their meaning was filtering through slowly. "I ..." Shut up. The pain in Dan's chest travelled upwards, downwards, and outwards. "I'm sorry. I won't call again. It's all in ... in your court. The ball. Yes." Shut up. Shut the fuck up! But he couldn't. "I'm really sorry. I was selfish. Didn't understand. I ...." So sorry. All he could do was push the button that cancelled the call and let the phone clatter to the floor.

The pain was like a sudden fist, hitting right into his solar plexus. Robbing his breath, thoughts, heartbeat alike. He hadn't understood, all these years, even though he'd thought he had. He did now, at last. Eyes open, he stared, unseeing, completely numb, and nothing was left in his mind. No questions, no words, no queries. Nothing. Except ...

*Nothing.*

He sat in the darkness, his face in his hands.

\* \* \*

Vadim put the phone down and looked at the doctor. "He's hurting, but ..." He rubbed his face. "I can't ... can't care. I don't care. I need that space. I hope he gets it now. That I need room to breathe. It's not like I'm cheating on him with you. You help me, and he still has to have it his way. Bastard."

"Is that what it feels to you? That 'he has his way'? And what does it make you feel in return?" The doctor regarded Vadim, before turning to go back into the living room.

"You told him I need the distance. And he forced it."

"He has as much a right to feel as you have, don't you think?" The doctor challenged quietly.

"He doesn't get it. He doesn't get I'm fighting for my sanity here. All he wants is that I'm his, and his world is fine. *Fuck!*"

"Is that what you believe?"

"Yes." Vadim felt the rage boil up, sudden, unexpected, like heated milk suddenly spilled all over the cooker. Feeling a pure rage that made him feel *good*, that dark red crimson flood that came up and made him capable of anything.

"Where are you now?" Unafraid, unfazed, the doctor stood in front of Vadim. "What do you feel? And why do you feel what you feel?"

"I am ... strong," Vadim murmured, feeling the rage like a current, and reason was the rocks he stood on, feeling the pull. "I could ... just ... let it go and ... destroy something ..." He wanted to. He wanted to let the rage take him, and felt it pulse high up in his throat. "Kill ... somebody." Like in a war. "Helps ... with the motherfucking pain."

The doctor nodded slowly and pointed to the table and the writing pads. "Write it down. Write down what you feel and how you feel it. Write down when you felt it last, and your memories connected with it. The context, the

physical sensations and the mental impressions.” The ghost of a smile crossed his otherwise serious face. “Write, so you can understand and handle it.”

Vadim forced himself to sit down, inhale, gulp down air. Writing. He hated it by now, but forming letters on the paper - they looked shaky, chased, untidy, blurred and jagged and not like his writing at all - forced the rage down. It was hard to sustain the anger while he was writing, and it seemed to make all the finer, smaller muscles in his body useless, but he obeyed, and he wrote.

Dr Williams quietly went to make a tea, and when Vadim was finished for that time, he let him read out what he’d written and they talked about it. The feelings, the reactions, the reasons why – overblown and realistic alike.

\* \* \*

*Nothing.* The word kept echoing in Dan’s mind. Unlike another ‘Nothing’ that he had eradicated, a long time ago, this one he could not deal with.

He was still sitting in the darkness, his face in his hands, when the door opened.

“That didn’t sound good,” Jean murmured, a bottle of wine in his hand. He sat down in the darkness, lighting a cigarette.

“How much did you hear?” Dan lifted his head and wiped at his face. Strange, where the hell was the moisture coming from? Itched like hell, too. He reached for the cigarette and took it out of Jean’s hand, inhaling deeply.

“Just that you were shouting.” Jean lit another one and inhaled. “I didn’t listen at the door or something. But I got worried when I heard you shout.” He had his elbows on his knees. “Want to come over to my couch?”

“I fucked it up, Jean.” Dan stood up, took the step to make it across and sat down beside Jean. “I really fucked it up.”

Jean reached up and placed an arm across Dan’s shoulder. “Hey.” He turned his head to kiss Dan on the temple. “What happened? What went wrong?”

“I forced Vadim to talk to me. I missed him, just wanted to know how he was, only a few words, that sort of thing. He couldn’t bear it. He said he can’t stand anyone right now. Can’t feel anything, just pain. Can’t bear touch, can’t stand closeness, can’t stand me, and can’t ... just nothing.” He inhaled another deep drag from the cigarette. “I shouldn’t have. I made such a mistake.” A shrug, “I’m a selfish bastard.”

“Hey,” Jean murmured. “You’re not. Okay? Trust me on that one, you’re everything but selfish. This ... this isn’t easy for either of you. The least ... fuck, the least you can demand is hear whether he’s okay, or ... less bad or whatever. Aw, shit, Dan.” He moved closer, holding him tight.

“No.” Dan shook his head. “You don’t understand. I can’t demand anything and I shouldn’t demand anything. I should have known, I just ... just wanted it anyway, because I miss him so much.” Dan reached for the ashtray, found its outline in the dark and he extinguished the butt. “The whole thing is a lot bigger than I told you, but I had hoped I could just stop thinking about it for a while, because I can’t do anything right now anyway, and have some fun with you. But

..." Turning his head, until he could glance at Jean. "PTSD is chronic. It will never go away, he'll only learn to manage it. And if ... if he wants me back I ..."

Dan trailed off, shaking his head vigorously, as if he could stop all those feelings. "Carer." Pressed out. "That's what I'll be."

"Shit." Jean remained close. "Any ... any-fucking-thing I can do?"

Dan shook his head again, wanted to say something, but the words got stuck in his throat. He finally managed to press out, "just ... be here?" Hold me, it said. Be my friend. Just hold me.

Jean nodded and took hold of Dan's head, pressing him close. "Yeah. I'm here. And I won't go away."

Dan wrapped his arms around Jean and buried his face in the crook of Jean's neck. He didn't say anything for a long time. Words didn't change anything, and no one would help him understand what it all meant for his life. For *their* lives. Nor what the future would be like.

If he and Vadim had one.

\* \* \*

Jean stayed with Dan through almost all of the night, except for a few minutes of explaining the situation to Solange, then returning and sitting with him, just holding. Listening when Dan wanted to talk, but mostly they just sat in silence.

He and Solange did their best to keep Dan occupied and entertained. Something they fairly succeeded in, until, a week later, Dr Williams called again but Dan refused to take the call. Refused the second and third attempt as well, until both Solange and Jean were instructed that no matter what, Dan was not going to talk to the doctor, because he had nothing to say, nothing to add, and could not bear to listen. Dr Williams kept trying, though, each week of the whole month that Dan stayed in France. Time spent in the acceptance of friends. While Jean showed a side of himself, unknown to most, of altruism, of caring and of understanding. Of true friendship.

It was at the end of the second and into the third month, when the Baroness' calls got more insistent. Dan had kept her vaguely up-to-date and she kept asking him to stay with her and to have a heart-to-heart, and finally, Dan accepted. He couldn't remain in France forever, didn't feel that he could stretch the friendship too far, especially not when knowing what Jean felt for him.

While he'd never seen a hint that he was becoming a burden, it was time to leave and let Jean and Solange live their own lives. A life that might change, soon, since Dan had been talking with Jean about the possibility to adopt kids. The weeks had not just been spent with 'moping', as Dan called his state of mind, but with business plans and concrete ideas for the future. Dan helped where he could, trying to get Jean into the network. The busier he was, and the more distracted, the less it hurt.

But it still hurt a fucking lot.

Dan flew from France to London, meeting Her Ladyship in her country manor house in Surrey that had been her family's seat since the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

She was, it seemed, taking a holiday herself, and Dan had the strange feeling that she might have done that for him. Or perhaps he had just become over-sensitive and couldn't read people anymore the way he had been able to, before his world had become too complicated to grasp.

She was sixty-three now, could retire if she wished to, but he somehow doubted she ever would. Not a formidable lady like her.

Formidable, indeed, when she stood on top of the wide, sweeping stairs, at the impressive entrance door, smiling at him. Tiny as ever, deceptively slim and fragile yet he knew she was made out of steel. The bomb proof hairdo as unmoving as ever, and her smile as warm as during the best games of chess he'd ever managed.

He should have known, though, that staying with the Baroness, no matter the warmth, the friendliness and the welcome, wouldn't be all that easy. They talked for many hours. At night, sitting in front of the large fire in the main room, filled with the finest artefacts; or during the day, strolling through the beautiful countryside that surrounded her property.

She helped him understand that he needed to make a decision, once and for all, and that he had to come to terms with whatever that decision entailed. But, she pointed out to him, not many people received a gift like he had, and despite all the pain, he should very carefully wager his options.

Options that Dan felt he didn't really have. He couldn't leave Vadim, unless Vadim wanted him to, a possibility that was too dreadful to imagine, and yet he had to get his head and his heart around all of the possibilities.

If the worst happened, the Spa, she said, was a purpose to go on, just like his friends and, yes, his daughter.

In the end, Dan trusted her wisdom and her friendship, and eventually, he let her convince him that he should get in contact with Dr Williams once more, before he returned to Scotland to stay with his brother again. The doctor sounded a lot more positive than he ever had before. Dan, though, did not dare to hope, but he dared to believe.

In his friends, and most of all himself.

Because when it came down to it, it was all he could always count on.

\* \* \*

After three months, it was like coming out at the end of a deep, dark tunnel, claustrophobic and terrifying. There was an overwhelming sense of clarity, like Vadim knew what he was doing, some sense of calm, emptiness, maybe control. The dreams had been far less bad, less shaking, less vomiting, like he felt very nearly sane again, if he'd ever really been sane to begin with. Somehow, time had moved on outside, the seasons were changing, and Vadim felt with a moment of guilt that he hadn't actually missed Dan. There had been no time to miss him, because, really, his own life and mind had been too full.

He called in the early evening, which was morning in Europe, waiting for the phone to be answered.

It was Dan himself who answered, rattling off his brother's phone number instead of a hello.

"It's me." Vadim ran his hand over the hilt of Szandor's sword. "I just booked Doctor Williams' flight back ..."

Dan didn't say anything. Nearly two months. Two fucking months since he'd last heard Vadim's voice. He hadn't forgotten the 'nothing', but neither his friends' advice. Yet he couldn't bring anything out, couldn't find any reply. This came too suddenly, and nearly shocked him to the core. What had he expected? Wine, roses and moonshine?

"Hope you're still there." Vadim listened intently. "I think we're done here. And I ..." How to put this? "I'm ready to risk it. To ... attempt ... feeling this ... and being close. If you are." Because suddenly he realized that he himself might be ready, but he had no idea what had happened to Dan in the last three months. "If you don't ... it's okay. What I mean is, we need to work that out ... if you aren't, we need to work that out, too. I can't demand you taking that role. You have a right to be happy, and if that has nothing to do with me ... it would just be good to know."

"Is that it? Good to know?" Dan's voice sounded forced, but it was hard to make a sound, when all he knew was that he was reeling. So many weeks, hoping, wondering, thinking, feeling, missing, and now? Now it was all too much, and it hurt that Vadim could just pick up the phone, say a couple of words, and with an 'it's me' expected he'd jump like Pavlov's dog. "I ..." I don't know. I want. Anything. But I don't know, because I am frightened. "I missed you." That, at least, was nothing but the truth.

"Yes. I'm sorry. I ... didn't feel very much of anything positive."

"I know. You told me." Dealing with Vadim and with his own feelings was like walking on a knife blade. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to come home," Vadim said, softly. "We could head to the south island, have a holiday together." Get out of the house, and remove the distractions. It might be easier to explain what needed explaining when they were alone with themselves and nature.

Home. What a painful, longed-for concept. Those three months had felt longer than the separation before. Or perhaps they'd really been separated for many years, ever since that dawn in Kabul, when the KGB had taken Vadim away. "I would like to." Dan closed his eyes, to keep every distraction away. "But I'm not sure if I can." Or dare. What was the difference. No matter, it had to be said. The truth, that old, faithless, painted crone that had always been his most despised and loved companion.

"Take your time. Just call me in advance so I can pick you up at the airport." Calm words, masking whatever went on in Vadim's mind.

"Do you *really* want me to come?" Dan's voice remained quiet, toneless even. "And do I really have a home?" Dan shook his head slowly, to no one there. "I am willing to be who you need me to be, but ... I can't do that and accept the consequences, unless I know that you are certain." He took a deep breath. "Is there love left for me, Vadim?"



“It won’t be easy, Dan, because, if I tell you to leave me alone, you ... you have to. Can you do that?”

“You haven’t answered my question.” Barely above a murmur. “I can do a lot, learn a lot, accept a lot, if I know the reason and if there is an unshakable core I can cling to.” Remembering the last phone conversation with the doctor, and the importance of boundaries and commitment – on both sides. “I have needs too, you know. I cannot ignore them, but I can and will adapt for you, if you really want me.”

“I love you, Dan, and I always will, even if there are times when I can’t feel it underneath everything else. When I turn numb. Or angry... then it’ll be difficult, then I need space. I will ... do my best to tell you what I feel, so you can ... monitor it.”

Dan smiled, to no one, because he only heard the first three words. The smile was just for himself, not even for Vadim. “Okay. I’ll take the next flight.”

“Yes. Let me know when you’ll arrive, I’ll be there.”

“Aye, I will.” Dan hung up. It wouldn’t be easy, but as long as there was love, he wouldn’t be merely a carer. He had to believe in that.

## **May 1996, New Zealand**

Five days later, after the gruelling flight, Dan was finally in the plane from Auckland to Palmerston North. He wasn’t sure what he felt, because the feeling was new, unknown. Anxiety, some ponce probably called it, or nervousness, or just plain old insecurity. Whatever it was, he kept fiddling with the packet of peanuts and the miniature beer, while surreptitiously glancing out of the window. Not much longer, and he didn’t know what the hell to expect.

Three months, over three months, and he couldn’t just go and embrace Vadim.

The plane finally landed, and it seemed like an eternity to Dan, before he got his luggage, found a trolley and piled it on. Customs had been done in Auckland. He was using the cane, sitting in the plane had played havoc with his knee, but right now, he didn’t care about the limp. Didn’t care about anything, except for the silhouette he could see against the light.

As promised, Vadim was there in the single hall that the airport building consisted of, and he smiled at him, then walked close to offer help with the luggage. Careful, too aware of space and distance to just hug him.

“Hi, Ruskie.” Dan stood, didn’t reach out and didn’t touch, but how much he wanted to. Forcing himself, with his entire willpower, not to try and touch but to stand still. Straight. Tall.

Vadim smiled warmly. “Yeah. I missed you. I did.”

“Really?” Tilting his head, Dan offered a tentative smile.

Vadim stepped closer and opened his arms, then embraced Dan, who kept standing still and unmoving for another moment, before he gave into the urge and wrapped his arms around Vadim. Inhaling the scent deeply, of body heat

and Vadim's favourite shower gel, his after shave and simply the essence of *him*, the combination of all the familiar smells. Holding onto him tightly, for a long time. "Are you going to take me home?"

"I will," Vadim murmured near Dan's ear, holding him for at least a minute, then kissed him on the side of the neck. "Car. Let me get those." He grabbed Dan's bags and headed out, with Dan following right behind. It was just a few steps outside and into the parking lot. Vadim tossed the bags into the car. "I got a lot of food from the supermarket ... I went a bit overboard ... and, well... you'll want to rest, I know, but I whipped up a chicken salad ... just something light."

Dan grinned. "You didn't think I'd come all the way from my brother's without Scottish fare from Mhari?" He got into the car. "Plus wine from Jean, the latest fashionable cufflinks and ties from Solange, and a few essential nicnacs, or whatever they are meant to be, from Maggie. And don't forget the whisky that my brother got you." He buckled up, while Vadim started the car. "I, though, I'm afraid I come empty handed."

Vadim smiled at him, and steered the car out of the parking lot. "No you don't. You've taken that awfully long flight."

Dan smiled and glanced to the side, his hand hovered for a moment, but then he didn't touch Vadim. Didn't dare to, too deeply embedded the worry of not initiating anything. How was he going to deal with it, though? Falling asleep, waking up, wanting sex, or just the casual touches. He'd always been tactile, how the hell was he going to learn to wait until he was invited to touch before touching? At least that was what he had figured out his life would be like. For a moment he faltered, tried to find a topic of conversation, and felt dreadfully awkward. "When ... when did Dr Williams leave?"

"Yesterday morning. Strange ... he was ..." Vadim frowned, trying to put his feelings into words. "He knows a lot about me now. Probably everything. Well, anything that's important. He just accepted it all. Not one bad word. First ... father figure that I get along with, I guess." He looked at Dan, then reached to touch Dan's thigh. "You don't like him, though?"

Dan's gaze went to the hand on his thigh, taking it as an invitation, and he touched the hand. Just a light touch, conscious and mindful of boundaries he had no idea of yet, and of rules he didn't know. "I don't know him. I have no reason not to like him." Except for the irrational rage that that man had taken Vadim away from him.

"Is that the whole story?" Vadim gave him a glance, then turned into the side street that would get them home.

"The whole rational story." Dan shrugged and searched for his cigarettes. Surprised himself that he hadn't lit up yet. "I'm afraid the irrational one would make me sound like an idiot."

"What's that?"

Dan looked at Vadim, then lit his cigarette, after opening the window for a bit despite the cold air. "I'd rather not tell."

“Okay.” Vadim drove on in silence for a while, then they crossed the little bridge and he pulled up in front of the house. “There.” Vadim exhaled and stretched. “Welcome back.”

Dan sat and looked at the house, his home, and it felt strange. “Doesn’t feel like it.” The words were out before his brain had engaged, but then he didn’t know the rules yet, did he? The house, at least the living room, still looked exactly as he remembered it, and yet, after all this time, it felt – once more – like a stranger’s place. Home ... Vadim had always been his home, since that goddamned fateful day in the bloody mountains.

“I have to show you something.” Vadim got out of the car and got the bags, then carried them over to the door. He’d left it open - there was simply no danger anybody would break in. He dropped the bags in the living room, waited for Dan to get in and closed the door. “After you’ve rested. You’ll ... understand. I hope. But not before you’ve rested.”

“Hm?” Confusion was written all over Dan’s face. “Do you want me to lie down now?”

“If you’re tired.”

“Not all that much, but I’m hungry.”

Vadim reached out again and pulled Dan closer. He felt awkward, too, but he was sure they’d be alright. He felt *sane*, saner than he’d been in a long time, and he’d get everything in order, too. “I want you to read the diaries ... the writing he made me do. What happened. And what’s in my head. What made me do the things I did, and kept me from doing things I wanted to do. What ... kept me silent and what made me go all wrong. Okay? If you want to. I’d understand if it’s too much, because it’s pretty fucking horrible.”

Dan lifted his head to look at Vadim, and all those pent-up emotions were playing out across his face. An open book: weathered and scarred. Looking for a long moment, until he smiled. “It won’t be too much, how could it be? No way, Russkie, I need to know. We’ve been through so much shit, we got to find a way to build this up again. Us, you, our lives. I just ...” he trailed off, shaking his head, “I just need to understand. Need to know the rules. Right now I bloody don’t know anything. May I touch you? May I not? Am I going to have to wait until you take the initiative all the time? Am I going to feel as fucking awkward as I feel now? Because I don’t know what I am supposed to do and what I am allowed to do, and because, until I know the rules, I can’t tell you if I can live like that.” He paused, leaned his head closer, until his cheek touched Vadim’s, and he murmured, “but I *will* read everything that you give me. Every single word.”

Vadim pressed him close, deeply inhaling the scent. “Touch me all you want,” he murmured, and it sounded strangely sexy, like something Jean would say. “I’ll say no if I don’t want you to be close. That’s something I have to learn. I’ll remember it, and I’ll do it. You can’t read my mind, and I need to accept that sometimes I just can’t ... but it won’t mess us up. I promise.”

“And kissing ... may I kiss you? Will you tell me if you don't want me to?” Dan's head moved a fraction, lips touching Vadim's jaw, the clean shaven cheek.

“Yeah. That's part of the touching.” Vadim turned his head to kiss Dan, gently, and full of longing, and it hurt in all the good ways to have Dan back. “And sex, too. That's ... included in the touching,” he murmured, feeling his body respond to the closeness.

“Right now?” Dan allowed his hand to run up and down Vadim's back, merely brushing the buttocks. No greed, no possessiveness, even though it all simmered somewhere. Pushed away, right now, with an all-encompassing sense of yearning. “It's been a bloody long time since I last ... Two ... two months.” He hadn't been able to, not even with Jean. “But it's not, you know, not a demand or anything. It's okay if ...” he knew he was babbling and he finally shut up. Pressing closer instead and opening his lips to invite, but Vadim grinned and pressed him closer, hands on Dan's arse.

“Upstairs now?”

“If you haven't turned the bedroom back into the unbearable pony place?” Dan's old irreverent humour made a peek appearance.

“Nah.” Vadim kissed him again. “I changed nothing. Let's go.”

Dan didn't need to hear the invitation twice and he followed.

The bedroom had not changed at all - and Vadim pulled his shirt off and dropped it on a chair, while Dan stood and watched, just taking in the sight. Vadim then started to undress Dan - all slowly and considerate, while Dan did nothing more than raise his arms to help with the baring of skin. It wasn't the consuming madness, it was tenderness and longing to feel the other's skin and closeness after three months apart. Vadim kicked off his shoes and then stepped out of his trousers, while Dan finished undressing himself, pushing the awkwardness away that tried to creep close all the time.

When they were finally lying on the bed, fully naked, bodies touching, the kisses were almost chaste, while nothing had ever been chaste about them. Fully grown, ex-killers, bound on destruction a long time ago, now rediscovering their bodies, their taste and touch, their scent and their desire, as if they'd met for the first time.

It ached, Dan thought, deep inside, but the ache was good. Vadim smiled at him, kissing his chest, hands running down his body to explore and stroke, body half on top, but he was keeping his weight off, didn't want to hurt the knees. “It feels all weird ...”

“Aye,” Dan smiled at him, relishing the arousal, but even more the feeling of closeness. He reached down, stroking through Vadim's hair, then cupping his face. Studying it intently. He had to clear his throat before he could talk. “You do realise that you are beautiful, even though no one in their right mind should ever call a man beautiful?” He quirked a grin, but his voice gave away the depth of emotion.

“Always good on camera ...” Vadim smiled and kissed Dan. “I'm a vain bastard, you know that.”

“Aye, I know you’re a bastard alright.” Dan murmured, “just good that I’m one, too.”

Vadim lay down, side by side with Dan, reaching for Dan’s cock and he stroked it while he kissed him again, deeply, and Dan shut up. So many things to say, to ask, to tell, to understand, but right now all that mattered were their bodies. Touching, stroking, reacquainting himself with the terrain of Vadim’s skin.

Scars that he knew so well: carved by his own hands. Scars that stood for terror, revenge and pain, and scars that spelled out their love. ‘Mine’. Possession. Yet ‘mine’ had meant to let go and let free.

Vadim pressed against him, their cocks in his hand as he pushed and pressed into Dan. Feverish and close, groaning, his eyes opened fully just before orgasm hit him, and he saw Dan, truly looked in his eyes, facial expression tender before climax washed over him, almost at the same time as Dan’s, and he rested right there, next to Dan, who was shuddering with the aftershocks, sweaty foreheads touching.

They were both silent for a long time, just breathing, taking in the other’s scent and heartbeat. The closeness, the heat, just feeling and being.

Home. That’s what it felt like, Dan thought. Home. At last. The awkwardness was gone for now, as he held and gently stroked Vadim’s back, his shoulder, his flank. “Hey, Russkie?” Dan smiled, his voice hoarse with the jetlag, perhaps, or the smoking, or the abundance of emotions.

Vadim looked up from his shoulder. “Hmm?”

“What about that promised food? I’m starving.” Leaning in for a light kiss.

Vadim smiled. “Okay. Yeah.” He stretched and half-turned. “I’ll get some.” He ran his hand down Dan’s cheek and stood. He located his shorts and put them on, then headed to the kitchen. Salad, fresh bread, some mango and papaya. He brought it all into the bedroom, but when he looked at the bed, he found Dan deep asleep. Lightly snoring, he lay sprawled on his back, fallen asleep from one minute to the next.

Vadim didn’t have the heart to wake him, and with a smile carried the food back down, letting Dan sleep, but not without pulling the blanket up first.

Dan slept for hours, the jet lag and worry had knocked him out, and he merely snuffled without rousing when Vadim came to bed later that night. He slept until the small hours of the morning when he woke at 2 AM, refreshed and still right in the middle of jet lag and the fact that his body clock knew nothing of New Zealand time right now.

He rubbed his face and looked at the sleeping man beside him for a while. Smiling, he leaned across for a light kiss on one bare shoulder, but Vadim slept on, and Dan got out of the bed. There was no point in trying to sleep now, and once he was up, a coffee wouldn’t go amiss. Enough time to readjust to the time zone later. He found his dressing gown still on its hook and slipped into it.

After making a strong coffee in triple measure, and raiding the fridge for the leftover food that Vadim had packed into tubs, Dan balanced a tray into the living room to settle on the couch and watch a video, when his eyes fell onto

the writing pads that Vadim had shown him earlier. He wasn't sure what to feel about it, but one thing he knew, there was no way he would shy away, and why not do it now, in the silence of the night.

He picked up the first one and started to read. He was still reading hours later, and just about finished reading around five-thirty. He'd felt cold, sometimes, hot at others, nauseous and plain sick at yet another. Guilty, pained and angry, shocked, hurt and taken aback. Unknown, betrayed, sad and full of rage, of love and of every single emotion under the sun – and those that only showed up at night.

He placed the last writing pad onto the table when he was done and quietly made his way back upstairs. Vadim was still asleep, and Dan carefully sat down on the bed beside him. Watching the sleeping man without touching. Watching and thinking. Short thoughts that needed digestion, long emotions, that needed clarification. He wanted to touch Vadim's face, to caress the cheek, the jaw line, but he didn't, merely waiting with infinite patience which had been hard-won in his life. He didn't even smoke, didn't want to disturb Vadim.

He smiled as he studied the face, devoid of a frown or lines of worry, and it was maybe the fact how Vadim slept - deep and peaceful, relaxed, not a hint of the darkness that claimed him and made him restless at night, that for this alone, Dan was grateful. The therapy must have had an effect, and maybe made the nights safer.

Vadim woke eventually, reaching over to Dan's side first, then, almost confused, turned and looked around, found the light switch. He smiled drowsily. "Can't sleep?"

"I fucked up my sleeping pattern." Dan smiled, reached out to stroke the face. "I was downstairs, reading." Fingertips resting lightly on the jaw bone, then tracing towards the temple, carding through the rasp and buzz of short hair. "I'll need time to digest and to understand, to fully understand what was done to you."

"Oh. You ... read them." Vadim looked at him, carefully judging Dan's expression, but Dan was still smiling, softly, then said, "I never knew you hated it so much that I had sex with others, even though I'd asked you a couple of times and you said you didn't, and I believed you. Nor did I ever realise that you resented my touch at times, and that you found me demanding."

"At times." Vadim sat up in bed and leaned against the wall, pulling a leg up to rest his elbows on. "And I could have told you, but I didn't. I thought ... I think it all comes down to the fear that you might decide I'm too much trouble to keep. If I'd pushed you away, I feared you might not come back, and that's ... that's something I couldn't deal with. The closest I've ever come to suicide was when you didn't come back. I couldn't go through that again, so I didn't tell you what I felt."

"When I didn't come back?" Dan frowned, pulled himself further up on the bed, to sit on his hip.

"When you didn't jump right into my arms in the Gulf, I guess." Vadim smiled ruefully. "Felt like you'd left me, but you hadn't. I had."

“Oh, aye ...” Dan trailed off, then smiled. “I had a lot of time to think, and even my short thoughts eventually made a big whole.” He reached out to touch Vadim’s knee. “What we have is, as you said once, non-negotiable. From the day you raped me, and the day I tortured you; from the pistol wound and the knife cuts, and from all the anger, pain and hatred onwards ... from that very first moment on we were fated. To die together – from each other’s hand, or to live together. And, I guess,” Dan cocked his head with another smile, “to die together, eventually. When we’re old and decrepit. There is nothing that could take me from you, nothing except for your own word, if you pushed me away.” Dan leaned forward, the scent and heat of his body close, and Vadim was suddenly breathless, whether from the words or the closeness or Dan’s knifeblade intensity, was impossible to say - and didn’t make any difference at all.

“I lost you, the man I knew in Kabul, on the morning the KGB took you away. That man is gone and will never return, I understand that now. It’s time I get to know *you*, the man you have become, once and for all. If that man does not want me to have sex with anyone else, then I won’t. You just need to tell me, truthfully. No more deflection, no more lies, because what we have is non-negotiable.”

Vadim reached and took Dan’s hand. With a word, he could sever what was going on between Dan and Jean. Dan and Matt. Dan and Beauvais. Dan and a dozen other men, past, present, future. That meant he was enough, didn’t it? “The man I was ... didn’t feel that fucking fragile,” Vadim murmured, throat tight.

“The man that was wouldn’t have admitted the truth in the first place.” Dan softly interjected.

“Aye. It’s like ... I can’t open to them. The others. They are always at arm’s length. Apart from Hooch, I guess.” He’d pushed this man away, but there was, sometimes, a faint echo of him, and regret. “Never felt much for them. They didn’t get to me. Like I couldn’t feel much of anything.” Vadim pressed his lips together, felt he was getting overly emotional, but he forced himself further. “Like a blind man remembering sun. You were still there. You were always right there, at the core, like my own heart, beating.” He swallowed, and it hurt, his throat was so tight. “I ... need to learn that the others don’t mean you’ll leave me. It’s just a fear I have, something that has to do with ... the thing they did.”

Dan shook his head gently, reaching once more for Vadim’s face. A light touch, almost chaste. “I understand now, I do. And I mean it, I will be monogamous if you want me to. Don’t tell me what you think I want to hear. We have been there before, more than once. Tell me what you truly feel and truly want me to do. I won’t hurt you anymore, I am through with that.”

“And I try not to hurt you. Like I used to do. I know I haven’t been easy for you to handle, and I’m so fucking sorry.”

“You are who you are. Trauma and all. I am not a victim, I’m not here because you forced me to. It is my decision to be with you and to accept the consequences.” Dan leaned closer, until his forehead touched Vadim’s. “And I

am who I am. Stubborn, peasant, kinky, stupid, tactile, smoker, all-round embarrassment to anyone with class,” Dan flashed a grin, “straightforward, crippled, dumb, honest, hard, annoying, selfish, hungry, and promiscuous. But the latter I’d change for you.”

Vadim smiled and kissed his hand. “I just don’t want to share. I don’t want these men, and I can’t let them close.” Did that include Jean? He wasn’t even sure, but making that decision meant Jean would leave that grey area in his mind where he was at turns annoying and welcome. “And I won’t. Unless we pay the guys, I won’t share anymore. But ... you can do whatever you want. If there’s somebody you want, go for him.”

“Are you sure? I mean ... about me going for it. Absolutely sure? Because I won’t ask again. I want to be able to believe your word from now on, and your feelings.”

“Aye.” Vadim looked Dan in the eye. “You’re different. Your emotions work differently. I know that now. But I won’t be there in bed with you and the other, I’ve shared too much already.” Katya, amongst other things.

Dan nodded and smiled - part ruefully and part amused. “There won’t be that many opportunities anymore. Even *I* am getting older.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it happening. And there’s one thing ... I want to get back in touch with Hooch. As a friend. Mostly, I think. I need to know if that is okay with you, because if it’s not, I won’t. I’m attracted to Hooch, but he’s not relationship material and no threat to you.”

Dan paused for a moment, listened to himself and his reactions, and in the end, after a silence, he nodded. “Aye, I’m fine with that. If I can trust your feelings and your word, because you can now trust them yourself, then I’m okay with that.”

Vadim exhaled, feeling relief, above all. This business of talking about his emotions - that deeply and truthfully, and carefully, because he had to inspect whatever he felt, and made sure he actually *communicated* what he felt - that was surprisingly hard work.

Dan leaned in once more, placing a kiss onto Vadim’s forehead, strangely chaste. “And now?” He murmured, “breakfast or a cuddle?”

“Cuddle, then breakfast.” Vadim pulled him closer and kissed him on the lips, less chaste, and more playful than he’d been in ages.

It didn’t lead to sex, but it led to a lot of touching and smiling, and when they kissed and held each other, it was like truly coming home.

\* \* \*

After breakfast, Vadim had a quick workout, a shower, and then dressed again. He didn’t close any doors anymore - there was no secret from Dan, nothing he was ashamed of, even with Hooch. He dialled the American’s number and waited, not quite sure how to start the ‘conversation’ or where Hooch actually was. For all he knew, Matt could be answering.

It was indeed Matt’s voice that came up with a breathless “hello?”



“Vadim Krasnorada here.” Vadim thought this did sound distanced, and forced himself to smile, and be polite. “How are you?”

“Oh, hi, Vadim.” A rustle, followed by a bang. “Sorry, I, like, just came running up the stairs. Heard the phone.” More rustling, then a muted thud of something being thrown onto the floor. “What’s up, buddy?”

“Just trying to keep in contact. We’re in New Zealand at the moment.”

“Yeah, that’s great. Dan’s alright?” After some more rustling with muffled curses, “you calling for Hooch?”

“Yes.” Vadim felt he’d exhausted his ability for smalltalk. “If he’s there.” And if he was, Matt and Hooch were an item and had continued on for months. Interesting thought.

“No, sorry, buddy, but you’re lucky, Hooch’s in Fort Bragg at the moment. Due out soon. I can give you his number. He’s got a cell now. Got anything to write?” The sound of something getting shuffled.

“Yeah.” Vadim reached for a pencil and a torn envelope. “Got you.” He noted down the number, checked that it was correct. “Dan’s here if you want to talk to him.”

“Thanks, bud, but we had a chat by mail a few days ago. Gotta take a piss, like, urgently.” A short huff of laughter, and then, “bye!” And Matt was gone.

Vadim called the cell phone number, which rang several times, until he wondered if anyone picked up. A click, at last, and a drawl. “Yeah?” Reserved, as if vetting the unknown number was of paramount importance.

“Hey, Hooch.” Vadim’s voice was lower, but not to be subtle, rather, it was a strange feeling of tenderness. “Vadim here. Can you talk?”

“Shit, Vadim!” Astonishment, joy, surprise, and a mix of things Hooch usually didn’t let slip, was audible in his voice. “Sure thing.” The sound of walking, echo of steps in a hallway. “You alright?”

“Much better. I had ... therapy.” Nothing to be ashamed of. Hooch knew he was fucked up, or had guessed it. In any case, Hooch had in all likelihood seen people with PTSD before. “Realized a few things ... the value of friendship, my own emotions. I’m good now. Scarred, but alive.”

The sound of a cigarette being lit, and if Vadim listened carefully, there was the sound of birds and the whistle of a breeze, as Hooch had moved outside. “That’s good. Been thinking about you. How you were. You and Dan. The lot. Been out and about several times. Doesn’t come close.” The sound of smoke exhaling.

“I’m here, Hooch. I’m here.” Vadim smiled softly, wondered what it meant; was ‘out and about’ Hooch’s quest for the nastiest, most brutal sex he could get, or a mission for his government? You and Dan. Was he looking for a lover that could carve out his heart, the same kind of madness that was always reminiscent of Afghanistan? “If you want to meet up, we can.”

“You sure?” Hooch inhaled, then nothing, finally the sound of a slow exhale. “Things the same with you? Not changed with me.”

“I didn’t expect you to change.” Vadim gave a short laugh.

“Yeah, unlikely.” The grin was evident in Hooch’s voice.

“I’d have to see what happens when I see you again. But there’s Dan for me, too.”

“He’s alright with us meeting up?”

“Yeah. We talked about it. I guess ... if you’re together that long, there are things that you just assume about the other, and they’re not necessarily true. He’ll be okay. We worked some things out between us.”

“Cool.” The sound of smoking, then, “I’ll be back July/August, if all goes according to plan.” A dry huff, “fucking unlikely, but it’s a working hypothesis. Meet then? Don’t mind where.”

“Out on a mission?”

“Yeah.”

A dozen places that looked likely, several where the US had interests or ‘friends’ to defend. Same old. “What about a trip to the Antipodes? Doesn’t have to be here, South Island is beautiful. Will be winter, but it’s great even in winter.”

“Sounds good. How long can you bear me?” Amusement coloured the voice, then an exhale again. “Could combine it with Australia. Promised Matt we’d go surfing in September. Got to be back for the second week.”

“Couple weeks? I’ll check the schedule, but I’ve been taking it easy.” He hadn’t been sure whether he could go back to work after the therapy. He had somehow expected he wouldn’t go back to work. Maybe it was time to re-think that career if he kept walking into bastards like Nelson and Konstantinov. “Heard Australia is good for surfing and diving, too.”

Hooch huffed a dry laugh. “Parcelling Dan off with Matt again?”

“I can try,” Vadim said. “Keeps them both busy.” He paused, listening to himself and his responses, but all emotions connected with Hooch were good. The trust far outweighed the regret, the friendship was far stronger than the danger to get confused about love and friendship and desire again.

“Too obvious.” A faint rustle and shifting, Hooch could be sitting down or standing up. “Leave them out.”

“How is it going with you guys?”

“Good. Matt’s still ‘pretty’. Turned into a regular thing.”

“Good for you.”

Another sound, this time voices in the distance, and then a change in Hooch’s voice, as if shielding his phone. “Look, Vadim, those two weeks, you looking for friendship, or sex, or both? I’m alright with any of the combinations. After the mission, I probably need to let off steam in August.”

“To be honest ...” That was one of the phrases he’d use a lot. To be honest. To be open. To communicate his feelings. Vital, with his condition. “I don’t know yet, but I’m hoping for both.” Despite everything that has happened, I can hold you through the darkness. I can keep you safe, because I’ve been there. I’ve been right there in the pit of darkness, and I’ve crawled out again. I survived. “I can give you both, too.”

“Good.” A pause, then, quieter, “I can’t find any longer what I need. You damn spoiled me.”

“Nobody else fills out that uniform like I do, eh?” Vadim smiled. The Soviet uniform. In a way, it was defiance of the past, and still truth, and it had no significance anymore, because the Soviet Empire had ceased to exist. And Major Krasnorada with it.

“Yeah ... nobody understands that part of me that well.” Another dry huff. “Anyway, I’ll let you know timings as soon as I can. You got a cell yet?”

“Yes, wait a second.” Vadim fished the annoying thing out of his pocket and skipped through the menu until he’d found his own number. He’d never had to remember the number, it was printed on his business card. He read it out to Hooch. Connection established. One major thing resolved. Dr Williams had encouraged him to slowly tackle all the open issues in his life. Evading those created negative stress, and negative stress was something he’d want to avoid piling on.

“Thanks, buddy.”

“Just let me know, I should be available. Be safe.”

The sound of a short, dry burst of laughter. “I try. Not sure if the enemy agrees.”

Vadim found himself smiling after the chat, warmed, somehow, relieved. It would be good - he knew that. There was no danger of madness with Hooch now, he knew what he was doing, and which parts of himself he accessed during their games. It was deliberate and controlled, and it was their way of being tender and caring, as absurd as that thought was. The moment Hooch became his prisoner, Vadim would have torn himself apart to protect him. Nothing evil about it.

He turned around when he heard a sound behind him. It was Dan, walking past and smiling at him. Naked, hair still wet, a few drops clinging to his dark skin, a soggy towel over his shoulder. He’d been swimming. “Everything alright?”

“Yeah. He’s very nearly out on a mission, but I thought we could meet up in August. South Island, a week.”

Dan nodded. No fear, now, and no jealousy. He did believe Vadim now, and trusted his words. Most of all, he understood. “How’s Matt?” As if he didn’t know.

Vadim brushed back some of the wet strands in Dan’s face, smiling. “He and Matt are regular by now. Seems even Deltas calm down.”

Dan grinned. “Matt’s a good guy, he’ll keep Hooch human.”

“Yeah, that combination works. Strange but true.”

\* \* \*

In the following weeks, they found their rhythm, worked a little, but mainly stayed home, talking, touching, spending time together without darkness. Vadim locked the diaries away - he was through with those and put the pile of notepads in storage, while still occasionally writing - he found it was a good way

to order his thoughts, discard baggage whenever it sprung up. The ups and downs had levelled off, it was all far more steady and calmer these days.

Life in the bedroom became interesting, too. After all the vanilla sex, stroking and kissing and getting to know each other again, Vadim one day found the collar and, on the way to bed, dropped it in Dan's lap, grinning, then awaited him naked on the bed, offering, his wrists crossed, on his knees. Things got very interesting from there, when Dan picked up his games again, and while intense, they were never destructive, never pushed Vadim over the edge. He could bear isolation and sensory deprivation much better now, and knew it, which made him far more confident, and Dan more courageous and reckless.

When Hooch arrived, sunburnt from some place in Africa he didn't talk about, the three of them spent an evening together, talking, and the next morning, Hooch and Vadim headed towards the South Island. Nature, a cabin out there in the wilds, and then it was their kinship and sex - no fear about it. Vadim knew he was in control, of the other, himself, and his own darkness. A week later, they returned to the farm, talking and being lazy - but no sex. Vadim didn't want to share Hooch - or Dan - and both respected that.

When Matt arrived, he had no eyes for anyone but Hooch, and Dan remarked to Vadim that those two men were the only ones who didn't realise how much in love the Jarhead really was. That much, in fact, that Dan didn't get to play with Matt at all, and merely spent a few hours talking, laughing, because the moment Hooch turned up, he was all Matt wanted - which was obvious to everyone, except Hooch.

The two Americans headed off a couple days later for some quality surfing, and time away from 'don't ask don't tell'. When they left, Hooch was mellow, relaxed, and plain fun to be with. The week spent with Vadim, locked away and suspended in time, had had a calming effect on him, and he was as attentive to Matt, without realising it, as the kid was devoted to him.

Dan and Vadim talked at great length about the job, Vadim's fears, and possible ways around it, to realise in the end that Vadim had become strong and centred enough in himself, and had - should he need to - the arsenal of tools to combat any mental downfall, that they would continue with their work.

In New Zealand's spring and Europe's autumn they flew across once more, touring the conference circuit, interspersed with Dan's ever flourishing Spa, which was growing into a close knit international community, a network that started to become essential to some and a safety net to a few, while providing friendship and fun to many. A place where they could let their proverbial hair down, as long as they abided to the few rules. It was during the time in Europe that Dan suggested to Vadim he might want to contact his ex-wife, after he received another update from his daughter.

Of course Katya had lingered in Vadim's mind - any time Dan mentioned Kisa, and Dr William's gentle hints. His past. Unfinished business. He didn't want to call her, instead he used the time spent at airports to write a long letter. It was a rambling piece of work, it seemingly just kept growing, until it was twenty pages, written on thin light blue air mail paper. After all the letters she'd

written him, he did his best to write her a good, long, proper letter, and, in this way, he thought, she couldn't unsettle him, couldn't stop him from saying things that had to be said. He didn't hear from her for a long time, but he thought she might be busy, or need time, or was still battling her own pride.

It was in Europe's winter and New Zealand's summer, after visiting friends and family: a week of Dan meeting Jean, on his own, Christmas spent with Dan's family, and New Year with the Baroness, that they headed back home. Dan returned with a plan to start the Pascal Durand Foundation, born out of the Spa, and financed initially with most of his own salary.

That February, Jean and Solange came for an extended visit, full of hopes and life and with the news, not all that surprising to Dan, that Jean had successfully started a new career as an independent supplier of ex-special forces soldiers to a large international PMC company, and that they were about to adopt twins. The children were Ukrainian, and the way things were going east of Europe, Ukraine seemed happy to accept Jean and Solange as adoptive parents - or maybe Jean had known exactly who to bribe. The fact he spoke Russian likely helped, and maybe he even drew on former contacts, but Jean never told the story. Vadim rather suspected something fishy, but then Solange was so happy about the prospect to have two little girls that anything else just faded.

Dan kept teasing Jean, telling him he had become a responsible middle aged man, who was about to turn father and should – just like him – grow up at last. A notion that Jean countered with taking Dan out to a few days snorkelling, while Solange stayed with Vadim and they explored the island. Dan and Jean did get some snorkelling in, but most of the time was spent in bed, or rather, on top of it, and eating good food, drinking, and smoking and talking. Intimate friends, just as much as Hooch and Vadim.

In the end, when Jean and Solange left for the Ukraine, life settled down once more for Dan and Vadim, interspersed with visits from friends, such as Markus and Dima, and with work, preparations, keeping up to date with news and current affairs, with exploring the island through camping, with exercise and swimming and working on the Spa.

Neither of them would have ever believed they could enjoy peace – of body, environment and mind – that deeply.

**November 1997, Rebel Stronghold**

The pain was like nothing ever before, as if his legs had been ripped off on impact, but worse, much worse, and Hooch knew that he was fucked. He tried to get out of the tangle of parachute and lines, but the pain from his hip and pelvis was so bad, he blackened out for a second.

Scrabbling against the ground, trying to pull away the moment he came to, he pushed himself up to look at his legs, expecting a mass of bones and gore, but nothing. Yet he couldn't use them to get up and when he tried again, he screamed in agony, nothing had prepared him for the onslaught of pain. He knew, then, that he'd got it this time.

Knew it for certain, when he heard voices and the sound of engines, getting rapidly closer. He frantically cut the entangled parachute ropes, managing to wriggle out of the harness. He could already make out individual voices, but he still tried to pull himself up to get out of there. Still pulled himself forward on his belly, using his hands, determined to never give up, when they broke through the thicket and a boot stamped onto his hand, amidst angry shouting. Others started to kick, again and again, his head, shoulders, legs, arms and finally his hips.

Then it went black, and the pain didn't matter anymore.

\* \* \*

“Bozic, Hubert, Sergeant First Class, 546798362.” Hooch forced out, for the tenth or twelfth time. He'd lost count. Lost count, too, of the number of times he'd blackened out when they dropped him, the excruciating pain in his pelvis too much to bear. Or the number of times he'd fought for his life, struggling for air, when his head had been pulled back out of the water butt. Or the number of blows and kicks that had pounded onto his defenceless body, rendering his face a bloodied and swollen mess. Worse than any session, anything he'd ever had done to him - in the name of lust. This was real, and more destructive than anything else in his life had ever been before.

*Don't antagonise your captor.*

He remembered, the mantra was stuck in his mind, but then the voice shouted once more in broken English: “why did you come here, what are your plans, who else is here, who has given the orders, what are your orders, who are you” and why and what and wherefore. All he could find in himself was the groaned, whimpered, cried out, screamed and whispered answer:

“Bozic, Hubert, Sergeant First Class, 546798362.”

\* \* \*

They couldn't get any of the information out of him that they were looking for. No matter how much they beat him, how many cigarettes they extinguished on his body, and how often he passed out from the unspeakable pain of being dropped onto a broken pelvis.

He didn't know most of those answers, couldn't tell, and wasn't sure if he would have, had he known. Nothing to say, nothing to admit to, except for:

"Bozic, Hubert, Sergeant First Class, 546798362."

Barely audible at times, and hardly human.

He had no idea how close he was to getting killed, didn't realise that the faction that had captured him was warring with another that wanted to see a better use of the resource: him. The resource that would humiliate the US further. Once they'd understood that he wouldn't talk – couldn't talk, he could still be useful. As long as he was alive.

They pulled him out of his stupor once more, and he didn't resist, knew it was useless anyway. He couldn't move his legs, didn't dare to twitch lest he fell unconscious again from the pain, and being unconscious meant another barrage of mindless beating. He hardly recognised the camera that was pointed at his face, but when he did, he defiantly raised his head, angry, snarling, but all that came out was a pathetic whimper before a boot impacted in his middle, once the camera was switched off, and he let out a hoarse scream, passing out again, cold, on the ground.

\* \* \*

Hundreds of bodies, a small room. One single source of air and light in a tiny, iron-clad window high above. Hundreds and hundreds of bodies, so crowded none of them could do anything but stand.

Hooch couldn't sit, couldn't lie, couldn't stand, the pain was unbearable. So was the stench, the filth, the heat and the smell of death and decay. Excrements, piss from the guards, shit and blood and fear from the prisoners. Hooch couldn't move, unable to get to the little water that was given out, brackish and teeming with parasites. But the only other option was death.

Death to stand and die of pain, death to lose the fight and be trampled underfoot, death to get to some of the contaminated food and water, death not to gain any, and death to go insane.

Pain was the best option. Pain didn't kill. If Hooch knew anything, he knew *that*. Had learned it scripted into his flesh and blood, and knew, too, that pain always brought relief in the end. Even if it was only the relief of its absence. Eventually.

He refused to be one of the corpses that were shuffled towards the front every morning. Those who had died in the night and whose bodies were handed from one to another, to be thrown outside. Somewhere. Anywhere, didn't matter, just corpses.

He mattered, though. Mattered to the memories of a young man who laughed and joked, who shared his bed and his thoughts, who touched him and kissed him, who sometimes fucked him but always offered his body. That perfect, sculpted, smooth body without a single scar. That man who'd told him he'd always be there, always be ready, always be waiting and would always want him. The man to whose image Hooch clung, every time he blackened out from the pain, pissed and shat into his torn uniform, and threw up from the stench and the little he managed to get into his stomach.

## **November 1997, United States of America**

6 AM and Matt sat bleary eyed at the breakfast counter in his kitchenette, shovelling corn flakes down his neck while watching CNN. Half-heartedly listening to whatever was going on on the screen, while reaching for the carton of milk to pour more into his cereal before it got soggy. The milk never hit the bowl.

US soldier. Special Forces. Captured. Video. Demands.

Matt put the carton back down onto the table, reached for the remote to up the volume, but stalled in mid-motion, when the badly done video flickered onto the screen, showing a soldier, soiled US uniform, no name tag, no rank nor affiliation insignia. Face bruised, bloodied, hardly resembling a man anymore, leg at a strange angle. The broken body was held up into the camera while the man's head threatened to roll back, but then he lifted it, opened his eyes and ...

"No!" Matt jumped up, the remote clattered across the table and onto the floor, followed by the bowl of cornflakes.

Hooch. Bloodied. Beaten. Injured. Tortured.

Hooch.

## **November 1997, Rebel Stronghold**

When Hooch was thrown back into the cell, he didn't have the strength to scream anymore. The pain had worn him down, out and gone, a shell that hardly managed to cling to those images that had kept him sane. Saw nothing in his memories but flashes of a smile, and a joke he could not remember anymore. Yet this time, before he hit the bulk of bodies, he was caught by arms that held him up, and dark eyes that searched his own ones, which could hardly see anymore, and lips that were cracked and had forgotten how to speak.

"American?" The voice asked, rough and worn, like his own. If only he hadn't screamed that much and still had the strength to speak.

He nodded.

Another hand pushed something against his lips. He wanted to turn his head away, but more hands held him steady and the first ones poured liquid down his throat. Liquid. Water. Or at least something akin to it, and he swallowed



greedily. Taste didn't matter anymore, he'd lost every care, every squeamishness. Survival. Life. Death, he had almost lost the zest for either. Existing, barely.

"We help."

He didn't question why they helped the foreigner; the prisoner with the fair skin, unlike any of them. He only knew that a pair of arms was holding him up, then three, four, and more, keeping his body off the ground, away from the feet that might trample him to death underneath, should he fall and give up from the pain of standing wedged in between hundreds of bodies; standing with a broken pelvis.

It was the first time he fell asleep for several minutes at a time, the first time in days and nights he kept the little strength he still had.

### **November 1997, United States of America**

"Please ..." Matt whispered to himself, dialling Dan's number. "Come on!" He had to do something, or he was going insane, and Dan was the first and only man who'd come to his mind. Dan with his connections; Dan with his Spa. It was well after 7 AM, but he didn't care that he'd get the bollocking of his career, for not turning up to work in time. Couldn't go in, couldn't explain, Hooch was not just a 'best buddy', but he could never admit to it. Matt's hands were shaking and he felt sick, barely keeping himself from throwing up.

It had hit him with a sledgehammer. All the way to the core, and the image of Hooch's broken body and disfigured face, barely alive, had imprinted itself on his mind, until he was unable to see nor smell nor feel anything else.

Finally, the ringing stopped and a faint snick told him the phone had been picked up. When a sleepy voice answered the phone, Matt blurted out, "Dan?"

"Aye?" Back in New Zealand, Dan was trying to wake up and make sense of the voice at the other end of the phone. Pushing himself up in bed, after a glance over at Vadim, he sat and rubbed his face. "Who is it?"

"Matt. Dan, I need your help. Hooch, captured. Video, CNN, and Hooch ..."

"Hold on!" Dan looked across at Vadim who'd rolled onto his side and blinked up at him. He mouthed 'Matt' to Vadim and shrugged. "One thing after the other, calm down. What's up with Hooch?"

Breathing hard, trying to get his thoughts back together, Matt forced himself to calm down. He was a soldier, he should be able to do that, but this time it was different. It was personal, and he didn't know how to deal with it. "I saw Hooch just now on CNN, there is no way I was mistaken. They didn't give out his name, like, but it absolutely was Hooch, even though he looked hardly human. He was captured, beaten, something wrong with his legs, looked close to death, and it's about some random shit from some godforsaken goddamned country!" Breathing again, against the anger, the nausea, and the unspeakable fear of losing Hooch.

“Fuck!” Dan was awake from one moment to the next, “do you know anything else?”

“No, that’s why I call. I don’t know what to do, Dan. No one to ask, no one to talk to, don’t even know his fucking family! You’re the only one I can think of who might be able to help. The Spa, stuff, you ...” Matt was desperate and when he trailed off, the pain was robbing his voice.

“Shit, aye, let me think.” Dan looked at Vadim, then, “Matt, send me all you know in an email, every detail from that video, and we get going. There might be someone ...” frantically thinking of all the men in the Spa, but none jumped at him with. “We do what we can, okay? I’ll get right onto it, you just send me everything you know. I’ll keep you up to date all the way.”

“Yes. Thanks, Dan.” Matt was too choked to speak and he hung up.

“Fuck.” Dan stared at the phone for a moment.

Vadim was fully awake now, sitting up and looked at him, the question across his face.

“They got Hooch. Matt saw him in a video. He’s in a bad state, captive.”

Vadim was not surprised. Or, yes, he was, but he wasn’t incredulous. He knew what Hooch looked like as a captive. He knew Hooch beyond the man’s silent superiority, his remote, aware state. “Markus,” he said. “He can make things happen. The Red Cross guys.”

“Aye, damn, you’re right. Have to find the number. He’s got too bloody many.”

Then the other reaction set in for Vadim. Worry. Captivity. What if there was a man like Konstantinov. “Oh fuck,” he murmured and leaned back against the wall. He didn’t doubt that Hooch was well prepared to survive the situation, unless, of course, he allowed that American superiority to shine through the mask. But he also knew that in the race between torturer and victim, the torturer always won.

“Yeah, fuck.” Dan frowned, pushing the duvet away to get up. “When I say ‘bad state’ I mean *bad* state. Apparently tortured, Matt hardly recognised him, and he said Hooch looked as if he’d had his legs broken or something.”

When Dan emerged in the kitchen half an hour later, he was partially dressed. No way he’d be able to go back to sleep. “Markus is on the trail. He promised to let us know anything he can but pointed out several times that he’s got to be careful. This is really unofficial, but he understands that Matt is going mad. I’ll call the kid now.”

“Do that. I’ll have a shower.” Vadim stood. Broken legs. Thinking of that body, broken, made him feel nauseous. A response to his own torture? Or pity. Compassion. He knew how strong Hooch was, how resilient. Mentally strong. If he managed not to piss off the torturer ... and Matt was the one who was in the position of helplessness and of being much closer to Hooch than he was. He needed whatever support they could give him. “You could invite him. Or we meet him. Help him ...” Being there.

“I’ll tell him that.” Dan emptied the mug of strong, black, over-sweetened coffee in on go, before heading for the phone, but he stopped mid-way and

turned back. "Thank you." He smiled slightly, "for thinking of the kid. Matt isn't made of the same stuff as ..." a slight hesitation, "us." He touched Vadim's shoulder. "Hooch is your friend, you know him better than I do, perhaps even better than Matt does. We both know he'll make it, if at all possible, but I'm not sure if Matt has the same trust."

Vadim smiled. "I don't think he'll be very rational about it. How could he." He touched Dan's hand on his shoulder. "Go, make that call."

When Dan returned from the phone call, he was deep in thoughts. Matt had sounded out of his mind, yet had to keep himself together and head into work. It was the not-knowing, the keeping up appearance and pretending to wear the mask, that was the worst. But Matt kept going, stuck in the US.

All they could do now, was wait.

### **November 1997, Rebel Stronghold**

Hooch's screams reverberated through the compound. The last man had found his worst weakness, and was manipulating his hips with both hands.

He couldn't breathe, think, couldn't faint, either, because every time the darkness swallowed him, he was beaten awake, and it was impossible to say which pain was the worst. Until it started all over again, those hands, his hips, and the movements that brought him out in cold, stinking sweat, made him foam and splutter and his eyes roll back as he forgot everything about himself and anything that had ever mattered. Forgot everything except for screaming, as if the sounds from his hoarse throat could alleviate the pain. Cut it open, tear it out and scatter it to the winds.

Never worked. Each scream returned to his body, this finite entity that was fragile, weak, and could hardly breathe, let alone force out those words, again and again: "Bozic, Hubert, Sergeant First Class, 546798362."

They broke his arm when he tried to protect himself, and he finally passed out. Nothing could wake him, he didn't hear the angry voices, nor witnessed the arguments, didn't feel the kick into his kidneys, and didn't know when he was thrown back into the other hell. The crowded cell that contained those inexplicable acts of human kindness.

### **November 1997, New Zealand**

That night, Dan was torn out of his sleep again, half-drunk with tiredness, he reached for the phone. "Aye?"

"Markus here."

Dan was awake from one second to the next. "Markus! Thank fuck." He pushed himself up in the bed, switching the phone onto loudspeaker for Vadim to listen in. "You got anything?"

“Yes ...” hesitating, “listen, Dan, what I tell you is a very careful balance act between the confidential and the really not official, you understand?”

“I do. Fuck, I do. Just, tell us. Anything you can tell us will help.”

“Okay.” The sound of a cigarette being lit and a voice in the background. Dima, no doubt. “Hubert Bozic was alive the last time the delegation had contact with the rebels, and that was a few hours ago.”

“Thank fuck!” Dan closed his eyes for a second. “And?”

“And now it gets tricky. The US sent off a rescue mission, as expected, but it failed. Unexpectedly, at least according to the US. Your friend Hooch wouldn’t know any of that and would probably have lost all hope by now.”

“Aye.” Dan nodded, listening intently. “It’s been how long?”

“Five days.”

“Shit.” Dan frowned. “What’s happening next?”

“Well, now here is the better looking part. The ICRC was contacted to negotiate on the behalf of the rebels. We can’t get into action before the US has agreed for negotiations on their behalf. We are now in limbo, but at least something is happening, and bearing in mind that their rescue operation fell flat, it can only be a matter of hours.”

Dan let out a sigh of relief, even a tiny bit of good news right now would make the world of difference to those to whom it really mattered. “Hang on, I give you Vadim.” Handing the phone across, Dan nodded to Vadim, already dialling Matt’s number on the mobile. He got Matt onto the line after a few rings and told him everything Markus had let him know.

“Vadim?” Markus’ voice. “I wanted to ask you something. When did you last see your friend, and do you have any idea in what physical shape Hooch was before he headed off?”

“Off to a mission? Hooch is tough, perfectly trained.” Vadim smiled. “Delta are supermen, well worth chasing. In all seriousness, they are the apex of what the American military can do with the male body.” Too tough for females, in any case, or at least none had made it yet. “Mentally, he’s strong. He’ll keep together, no doubt, unless he mocks them. Then he’s fucked.”

“Good. I was aware of the physical side of things, but it’s good to know the man’s mentally in peak shape. Is there anything the delegation might need to know about Hooch? We are hoping to be able to send someone in if not today, then tomorrow. I know they are frantically working, but as always, our hands are bound until both sides agree to negotiate and the US seems reluctant to lose more face than it already has. It’s a matter of hours, though, but the command chain isn’t always the fastest.”

“He’s living with a young US Marine, called Matt. Maybe, if your delegation can tell him that Matt’s been thinking of him or something ...” Were there words to make Hooch understand what those felt who were waiting and agonizing? “That his buddies have been thinking of him? That we’ll do whatever it takes to help him.” Maybe not the right thing to say. Depended on whether Hooch had accepted he’d need help. “Or something about our prayers

answered.” Americans did that, the praying thing. Talk about faith and prayers in such situations. No atheists in fox holes, wasn’t that an American saying?

“Yes, I’ll try, I’ll let them know. Every little helps, each connection to the outside world.” There was a sound in the background and Markus trailed off for a moment, “Dima wants me to send his best wishes and he’s saying something unintelligible in Russian that I don’t understand.” A smile in Markus’ voice, “but I think it’s meant to be a good thing.” The voice in the background again, then the sound of subdued laughter. “Yes, it is, a good thing. Anyway, I got to be off, expect a call as soon as I have more information.”

Vadim smiled. “It’s time to learn a civilised language, Markus. You’re missing out on half his obscene jokes if you don’t speak his peasant Russian. Will talk to you later.” He switched off the phone when Markus hung up after a short huff of laughter.

### **November 1997, Rebel Stronghold**

Hooch was cradling his broken arm, no strength, no voice left when he got kicked back into the cell once more. Didn’t fall - couldn’t fall. Too many bodies, those of the dead, the dying and those who were still living against all odds. He almost didn’t care anymore, except for those thoughts that kept him alive. The number. The name. The face, the body, the smile, even though he couldn’t remember the voice anymore.

He could no longer protect his head or face with his arm, and perhaps he should have simply let them kill him by smashing his face and grinding his brain into the ground, but he couldn’t. Just couldn’t allow it, not without trying ... for what? Living? In that hellhole that didn’t allow breathing, that had the guards above use the prisoners’ bodies as latrines, the unbelievable stench for which he had no words, no thoughts, except for ‘everything’. Since it was all and everything and everywhere around him, like a thick molasses that made it impossible to draw in air.

This time, he let himself fall back, back, into the bodies, not trying to find leverage nor hold himself, not fighting the pain nor the ultimate relief that would come once he’d slipped low enough, with enough bodies and weight on top of him, to stop breathing forever ... when those arms were back and pulled him up. He protested, didn’t want them, how dared they, how ... and something pushed against his lips. He opened them, no strength left to find out what it was, and simply swallowed. Whatever. Food. Water. Poison. Excrement, it didn’t matter. Liquid followed, and again he swallowed, head rolling from side to side, until he managed to focus, his eyes no more than swollen slits, met by another pair, so dark, before he lost his sight and slipped out of pain, fear, stench and filth, and whatever was crawling across his body, and living inside himself. Slack in the many arms that held him up once more, until the morning, when - against all odds - he was once again not amongst those who got shuffled towards the front, out of the door and onto the pile.

## November 1997, New Zealand

Dan was surfing the net for any scrap of information, but it seemed the CNN had had its knuckles rapped for showing the video, and the case of the missing US soldier had vanished from the screen and the web. Even his insider news sources were quiet about it.

None of the members of the Spa had any further information, except for background story, about the warring faction in that country, and who they were dealing with, and just what Hooch had meant to be doing in that country.

All they could do was wait. Dan kept in contact with Matt best he could, keeping him up to date with any scrap of information that Markus passed on.

## November 1997, Rebel Stronghold

Hooch almost passed out again when he was pushed through the bodies, towards the front. Clinging to consciousness with the thought that he would not be another corpse to be discarded. No. He wouldn't. He would survive another bout of torture. But instead of being pulled out and taken to be interrogated again, nothing happened. Partly being held up, partly leaning against the solid mass of bodies, he looked up eventually, blinking against the sudden light. It hurt. Hurt his eyes, astonished that anything could actually hurt in a new different way.

“Sergeant First Class Hubert Bozic, US Delta Force?” A female voice asked.

She was pretty, he thought, once his eyes had adjusted to the light, and he wondered why the hell the last shreds of his memories had been replaced with a woman. Blond. Face illuminated by something. Torch. Not sunlight. Hurting his eyes. Still.

“Do you understand me?”

He nodded, the question didn't require him to speak. The name and number were the only answers left in his mind anyway, everything else had been burnt away. Beaten and kicked, punched, drowned and smashed away. Or just died away, amongst the stench of decay and the agony that only those arms could alleviate.

“You have to tell me your name.” The voice insisted, the English ... foreign, and Hooch, unable to find one single clear thought, couldn't understand why he noticed the accent.

“Bozic, Hubert, Sergeant First Class, 546798362.” Name. Rank. Number. Hardly audible. That was it. Another round of interrogation, all a trick, but at least it didn't hurt right now. Not yet. No worse than every second, each breath and heartbeat.

Surprised that no pain followed, instead he felt himself moved, carefully, oh so carefully, and yet he cried out hoarsely. Hardly a sound came out, even

though his screams reverberated in his head, and he was placed onto something. Lying down. Flat. On his back. The moment he was horizontal on the stretcher and the pressure was taken off the broken pelvis, he passed out. Again.

When he came to, he was in a different place. A room. On the ground. Space. No stench. Lying still, and after a moment he made out the woman's face again, crouched beside him. Someone else, a man, touching him, and the touch felt strange. It took him a moment to realise the man was wearing rubber gloves.

"Can you understand me, Sgt Bozic?"

"Hooch," he whispered.

She smiled and nodded, "Hooch. Of course. Did you understand what I said earlier? I am a delegate from the International Committee of the Red Cross, and I brought a medical doctor with me, Dr Mirabeau. We are here to ensure that you are being taken care of, Sgt ..." she stopped herself, "Hooch."

"I ... don't ..." so hard to form words beyond name and number, "have to ... go back?"

"No, not if we can help it, and trust me, we *can* help it. The rebel force has contacted us to negotiate on their behalf and your country has agreed."

Hooch nodded.

"Tell me what happened, while Dr Mirabeau is working on making you more comfortable."

Hooch looked at her, hardly noticing how the soiled uniform was cut off him, and how he was cleaned down. Telling her, best he could, what had happened and what he knew; what had been done to him and how he'd survived. He was put on a drip, cleaned up and sponged down, fed water - clean, clear water - and given bites of food. Shot full with antibiotics, his arm was set and fixed with plaster, his wounds treated and bandaged, and powder and potions administered, to kill the parasites that had taken residence in his weakened body. His pelvis stabilised with a brace, after some clean and simple clothes were put onto him, Hooch was allowed to write an open letter. He hardly managed, his hand shook too badly, too weak to hold the pen, but she helped and they gave him time, precious time. A letter to his family, but how much he wanted to write to his lover instead. His family had to do, hoping that somehow, against all odds, it would reach the one to whom it really mattered if he lived or died.

She folded the sheet of paper, to show it to Hooch's captors for censor, before it was sent off to the American Red Cross. She briefly smiled down at him. "Hooch," it was comforting to hear his name, he thought, no longer a faceless number, "your friends are thinking of you." Non-committal, but then, "especially the Marines." This was all he needed to hear, and he knew and understood. Matt. Vadim. *Matt*.

A ghost of a smile crossed his face as painkillers were shot into his body. By that time he was drifting, barely taking in how she explained they would make sure he was treated right while they were going to work as neutral intermediaries. When they finally left he lay on his back, unmoving, floating, a

blanket over his body, and a bottle of water and edible food beside him. Clean. Lying down. *Lying*. No arms to hold him up, no fingers to feed him rotting scraps. No one. Just silence. Sleep. Exhaustion. The memory of someone so dear ... the only memory that had survived. He slept, undisturbed, without those who had saved his life by holding him up and who continued to fight on every day and night to stay on their feet and stay alive.

He didn't know that she was throwing up outside. Didn't hear her retch and didn't see the doctor wordlessly handing her a packet of tissues.

He was asleep, for the first time in an eternity in hell, and he knew that from now on he would not just vanish anymore. He had a name. A face, and a number that was known to the world, not just to his captors. No corpse to be shuffled out in the morning. No nameless body, burnt or ditched, and no faceless being, contorted in pain, dying without a name nor number, to be 'missing in action'.

He had a name. He had become part of the machinery. The old lady in Geneva, as she had called it, would take care of him. He trusted that old lady.

Because she was all he had.

\* \* \*

Hooch was not aware of the negotiations that happened outside. With the ICRC as neutral intermediary, the rebels had already gained what they wanted: the humiliation of the US, via its military, and that humiliation was broadcasted across the world on the news channels that had been greedy enough to ignore the rules of ethical behaviour.

It was push and pull for a while, until finally, the rebels agreed his release, under conditions and demands that never saw the light of day outside of some US headquarters.

## **November 1997, United States of America**

"Matt?"

With hardly any sleep in the last 72 hours, Matt had slowed down, reactions shot to shit, and it took him a moment to catch on.

"Dan! Any news?"

"Aye."

Matt desperately tried to figure out if he heard anything bad, or worried, or ... anything in Dan's voice.

"And?"

"Sorry," the sound of a cigarette being lit, "I was distracted by Vadim."

Matt was sure he could hear something ... a smile?

"I have good news from Markus."

"What is it?" Matt stood up, pacing the living room.



“Hooch is free.” The smile was now very audible. “He’s as we speak in a Red Cross medevac plane, being flown to the US base down there.”

“Fuck! Yes!” Matt suddenly shook, all the adrenaline of the past days and nights flooding out and he was trembling, feeling hot and cold at the same time. He had to sit down when his knees threatened to buckle. Hand shaking like a leaf, he had to concentrate to keep the phone close to his ear. “How is he? What else do you know? Tell me more!”

“Hang on, I don’t know much else, just that he’s alive and he’ll be alright. Whatever the fuck that means.” Dan was clearly grinning now, “they’ll sort out the surgery over at your place. Markus said he won’t be able to keep tabs on him the moment he’s handed over to the US military, but he gave me a couple of numbers for you to find out more. Hang on ...”

Matt was desperately scrabbling for a pen, but the damned thing kept falling out of his hand. He finally managed and with hardly legible script, he wrote the numbers down. US numbers.

“Markus said you should contact the family, since they’re the most likely ones to be up to date.”

“I know.” Matt shook his head, not sure if he wanted to cry or laugh. He’d hardly kept it together at work, how could he now? “I don’t have their fucking address. I’m just a buddy, remember?”

“Aye, shit, but you use those other numbers, they’ll help a mate.” The smile was back in Dan’s voice. “We’ll do the same, Vadim is already on the line. We’ll let you know anything we find out, okay?”

“Okay, buddy.” Matt felt something crawl up inside his chest and choke his throat. “Thanks. Thanks for ... for everything.”

“Don’t mention it. You’re a friend and Hooch’s a friend. I understand.”

The last did it for Matt, the ‘understand’, something Hoch had said so often in his Southern drawl. He couldn’t say anything else except for a choked “thanks” and switched the phone off. Leaning forward, elbows on his knees, he just let go. Burying his face in his hands the fear, worry, pain and horror of the last days were pushing their way to the surface and he sobbed with relief, until exhaustion took over.

## **December 1997, United States of America, Military Hospital**

Matt sat on the plastic chair beside the bed. Legs braced, knees open, his cap on the small side table. Hands trembling so hard, he’d been gripping his own thighs since he sat down, to keep himself from touching.

Hooch. Pale, thin and haggard, with buzz-cut head and badly shaved face. Lying on a water bed to keep the pressure off the pelvic area, supine and still, the lower left arm in plaster, and all Matt could think of was how much Hooch hated to sleep on his back.

The pelvic brace was just about visible under the sheet that had been draped over Hooch, and a drainage tube vanished beneath the cloth. Matt could see

glimpses of small burn wounds on the chest, looking closed but angry, and he wanted to hurt whoever had done that.

Hooch. Alive, against all odds, and all he could do was sit there, push a small portable DVD player into the other man's good hand and pretend he was just a buddy, paying a visit. He tried to come up with some stupid bullshit a buddy would utter – and failed. Miserably. Couldn't get a single word past that fucking lump in his throat that he couldn't swallow down, no matter how hard he tried, and it hurt like a motherfucker. Couldn't even look at Hooch, who was checking out the pack of DVDs by lifting each one to eye level. Looking at him caused the sting in Matt's eyes to get worse and he stared at his white-knuckled hands instead.

"Thanks." Hooch's husky drawl tore Matt out of his catatonic state. The voice sounded disused and coarse.

He wanted to touch, kiss, hold, reassure himself that Hooch really was there, alive, but all he did was press out a desperate "shit!" He couldn't keep it up anymore. Fuck the charade, he wanted to curse or cry, or maybe even laugh. Insanely.

Matt's trembling hand raised to his face, his head dropped, elbows on his thighs, and he covered his face with his hand when he couldn't stop the silent sobs that were heaving his chest and shaking his shoulders. He made no sound, except for one strangled choke. He couldn't stop, though. Couldn't get his goddamned act together again, despite being all too aware of having nothing but a thin cloth partition between Hooch's bed and the next. In a ward full of nurses, soldiers, and their visitors.

Hooch remained silent, left hand in his lap, the right lay on his chest. Silent, as long as it took Matt until he finally drew in a shaky breath, fighting out of the breakdown with all the strength he could muster. Too much truth, too raw, too open. He rubbed his face vigorously, realising that he couldn't go back to pretending he was nothing but a goddamned buddy. He looked up, eyes red rimmed, and studied Hooch's impassive face, the dark eyes, and the whole, silent, man. It had never been an issue before, until now. Now that he'd gone insane with the not-knowing and the fear of loss. Not just a buddy, not even a fuck-buddy. But the man he loved. He couldn't deal with the lie any more, but he was tied to its confines.

Matt shook his head, unable to say what he thought, let alone what he felt.

Hooch didn't say anything either, looking up at Matt in silence, without a twitch. Not that Matt had expected anything else and he shrugged, once again shaking his head. Suddenly feeling misplaced, as if this whole shit had happened to someone else and he had stumbled into a crazy soap opera.

He was about to get up and get away, when Hooch opened his mouth, and Matt stayed put, leaning down, to hear the quiet murmur.

"When it got really bad, when nothing else got me through, I was thinking of you. How you tilt your head when you laugh; the way you eat your cereal really fast so that it doesn't go soggy; how you squint your eyes and scrunch up your face into a grimace, every time anyone mentions eggs." Hooch dropped his

voice even more, until Matt had to lean closer to hear the whisper. “Your shit-eating grin when you wave your ass into my face, telling me to fuck you. The sound you make when you come, going straight to my cock and blowing my mind. The smell of your sweat right after sex ...” Hooch paused, pulling in a breath. “And when I wasn’t sure if I could make it through another hour, then I thought of your face that looks so damned young when you’re asleep, and I remembered how you sometimes say my name, and how the sound of your voice makes me ache inside.”

Hooch fell silent and Matt stared at him. Wide-eyed, frozen in shock. Insides churning, a pain he hadn’t known before, travelling from his heart throughout his body, and it felt so fucking good. Understanding with every fibre of his being what Hooch had said in too many words. More than he’d ever used before, and without those three simple ones that would have sufficed.

Matt felt his eyes sting again but a smile grew on his face. Too much, again, but of an entirely different kind. “I don’t ...” his voice trembled, “scrunch up my face.” Couldn’t trust his voice, as shaky as his hands.

Hooch grinned, he looked as if he had shrugged had that not hurt too badly.

“Alright, I do.” Matt whispered, “but it’s better than throwing your underwear onto the wet bathroom floor.”

Hooch let out a dry huff of laughter, grimacing at even the slight jostling of his body.

Matt fell quiet again. Companionable now in the silence, looking at Hooch while vigorously wiping his eyes, then settling into a shaky grin. They sat like that for a long while. Hooch checking out the small DVD player, Matt helping him, a damn fine excuse to touch now and then, while every movement could be overlooked by the nurses.

“Five more minutes.” One of them announced as she walked past and Matt sat down for the last time. Just a few more minutes before he had to leave and fly back to his own camp.

He smiled at Hooch, who unexpectedly murmured, “I want to hear that sound again.”

Words and voice twisting Matt’s guts in the most delicious way. “You will.” He whispered.

Hooch nodded, lips quirking up in the customary miniature grin, before he reached out with his good hand and took Matt’s hand for a moment. Grip almost as strong as ever, holding longer than a buddy should.

“Till then.”

## **February 1998, United States of America**

Several weeks later, Hooch was let out of hospital and subsequent aftercare. Refusing to go back to Fort Bragg, where he wouldn’t have anyone take care of him and would have to get ‘hospitalised’ again, and equally refusing to be taken to his family down south, he demanded to be sent to a friend instead. In his

special circumstances, the request had been granted. A friend who had a small apartment and time to take care, which he lied about, and who was willing to take over the task, which was nothing but the truth. And so he had been flown to the nearest town, then taken in an ambulance across to the local hospital.

After having been checked over, signed in as an outpatient for physiotherapy and set up with crutches, walker, and been put into a wheelchair, he was given transport, which took him to Matt's apartment. Matt was still on base, working, and would arrive an hour later. Hooch somehow managed to get into the elevator, and with the help of walker and crutches to somehow - and lord knew how - back out again, and then into the wheelchair. Being able to get about, no matter how laborious and painful, gave him a sense of freedom that was unparalleled to anything he'd experienced since the mission.

When Matt returned home, Hooch was lying flat on the bed, fully dressed, but with the remote in his hand and channel surfing. He was glad that Matt had no idea how he'd cried out when he'd got himself out of the wheelchair and onto the bed, for the first time on his own and without any supportive aids. He'd made it, though, and the independence had made up for all the pain. Even though he'd left the drugs in the living room and really couldn't face getting up, not even for a piss.

"Hooch?" Matt called out from the minuscule hallway.

"In the bedroom." Even shouting caused pain and Hooch rolled his eyes at the sheer annoyance of it all.

A couple of seconds later Matt stood in the doorway. Still in uniform, running a hand over his scalp. The smile in his face grew bigger and bigger until it lit up his whole face, grinning from ear to ear. "Shit, man. Never thought I'd be so glad to see you *dressed* on my bed."

"Yeah, you try taking the fucking socks off with that." Pointing at the pelvic brace over his jeans. When his shirt sleeve moved up, Matt saw that the plaster was gone.

"Can I?" If possible, Matt's grin grew.

"Take my socks off?" Hooch grouched, his eyes betraying what he felt, and that was everything but grumpiness.

"No, the brace. I promise to put it back on."

"You could start with the socks." Hooch grinned, peering up from his supine position, head raised with the two pillows on Matt's bed. "Or with yourself."

"Guess I could, like, do that, or I could kiss you."

"Not much I can do about that." Hooch's grin almost matched Matt's by the time Matt was beside the bed, kneeling on the floor, and proceeded to kiss Hooch until either of them gave up or gave in, but neither did, and so they kissed until they were both breathless.

"Shit." Hooch groaned.

"What, did I hurt you?" Matt's alarm was almost comical.

"No, just too horny."

Matt's grin was part relief and part wickedness. "I can do something about that ..." His hands were on the brace and then Hooch's trousers, before the other could say anything, but when Matt pulled on the jeans, Hooch got jostled and had to clench his teeth not to groan. Matt slowed down, and together they managed to get them off, same with the pants, until Matt could take off the socks while Hooch was getting out of the shirt himself. When Matt came back up to look down at Hooch's naked body, for the first time in months, he was shocked at what he saw. Trying valiantly to hide it, but too late.

"I know." Hooch drawled.

"Yeah." Nothing Matt could say, and so he ran his hand over the far too thin body that had lost muscle mass and definition, but none of its allure. Not all of the tan was gone, and the surgery scar, still fairly fresh, stood in stark relief. Not much better the burn wounds, those small round dots that were scattered across Hooch's upper body with no sense nor system.

"You'll get back into shape. I'll make you a recovery PT programme when you can use the gym." Matt looked up, smiling, and Hooch nodded.

"Eventually." Dryly.

"Well, at least we have proof you're alive." Matt cocked his head, flashed a grin and pointed at Hooch's erection. "Been a while, right, buddy?"

"Yeah. Lifetime."

"Best I remind you, then." Matt moved down, his lips touched Hooch's cock, tongue drawing out and lapping, eliciting the deep groan that Hooch had suppressed earlier. His lips closed around the cut head, intent on sucking down, when Hooch awkwardly batted at him.

"No."

"What?" Matt came up, surprised and confused, "why not?"

"I'm not tested."

"Huh?"

"HIV. Can't get tested yet."

"I don't understand ..." Shock, fear, worry and confusion warred in Matt's face. "But they didn't ... I mean ..."

"No. They didn't, but in that shithole ... I had open wounds. Anything could have gone in. Blood, saliva, shit, piss. Anything." Hooch's eyes were intense, haunted, and Matt twitched visibly. The glimpse of the horror was almost worse than knowing the full extent.

"The risk must be almost none."

"I had every other shit, though."

"But not that, come on, it's not possible."

"I don't care." Hooch reached for Matt's shoulder, managed to pull him closer and up. "I'm not going to risk you. You understand?"

Looking at Hooch for a moment, Matt nodded slowly, acknowledging the ache that was gripping his insides. Heart or guts, he wasn't sure, just this ache that intensified the longer he looked at Hooch. "Okay." He smiled.

"Handjob?"

"I'd suck you with a condom."

“No, no more goddamned rubber.” Too many gloves that had touched him in the hospital.

Matt nodded, getting up and onto the bed to very carefully stretch out beside Hooch, still in his full uniform, boots and all. Managing not to jostle the mattress too much, he propped himself up on his elbow, grinning down at Hooch while his free hand began to lightly stroke the cock that had lost its erection. “Let’s see how still you can lie ...”

He moved down to kiss Hooch again, whose hand found its way to Matt’s neck. Holding close, smelling, tasting, touching, and needing so goddamned much to feel alive, Hooch ignored the pain. Matt stroked faster, adding twists and using everything he’d ever known about his lover’s preferences, until Hooch felt his balls draw up and the pain of his orgasm almost blackened him out. He cried out, nearly a scream, which Matt swallowed in a deep kiss, not realising that part of Hooch’s desperate attempts to remain still - and his complete abandon - was the blinding pain in his pelvis, fuelling the orgasm itself.

Matt drew back, hand still on Hooch’s cock, as he grinned down on him, watching him pant for breath, face sweaty, but something in his expression that he’d never seen before. Something above and beyond mere lust. Alive, maybe that was it.

“You alright?” Matt murmured.

“Yeah, shit. Couldn’t be better.” Hooch grinned, started to laugh and stopped himself immediately. Laughing was torture. “You?”

“I’m alright.” Matt smiled, wiping his hand on the bed linen.

“Bullshit.” Hooch looked at him.

“Okay ... got me.” Matt laughed, “but how?”

“I want to watch. Stroke yourself.”

Matt nodded, eyes alight. “Guess I can do that.” He was soon kneeling on the bed, in full view, opening his BDUs and pushing down his briefs. Cock in hand, he began to stroke, all the time looking at Hooch, who didn’t take his eyes off him.

“Want to see you.” Hooch murmured, and Matt obliged immediately. Ripping the tunic off, the t-shirt flew to the ground straight after, he returned to stroking himself. Muscles rolling and bunching beneath smooth skin. Perfectly chiselled and still as unblemished as the first time they’d had sex, in a safe house in the Gulf. Matt craned his head back, being watched intensified every stroke, each sensation, and he slowed down for Hooch’s benefit, while tensing his abs and working with his body until each and every muscle stood out, as hard as his cock. When he sped up once more, his movements turned harsh, almost punishing, and his breath came fast and noisy.

He went over the edge with a strangled sound, cum splattering onto Hooch, panting, tensing, and catching himself in the last moment before he was about to let himself fall down onto the bed. On his knees instead, struggling for breath and grinning down at Hooch, who was still watching him with burning intensity in his dark eyes.

“I was right.” Hooch murmured.

“What?”

“The sound you make when you come.”

Matt stared at Hooch, remembering every word in the hospital.

“I ...”

But Hooch waved him down, pulling him into a kiss instead, only letting go of Matt’s neck when he broke the kiss and murmured, “You. You are quite something.”

Matt was confused, but Hooch said nothing else, too exhausted, and he let Matt take care of both of them, by getting out of the rest of his kit and wiping them down.

“Want to go onto the couch?” Matt smiled, his hand splayed out on Hooch’s chest, fingers covering two of the burns.

“Give me an hour? Pretty damn wiped.”

“Sure.” Matt looked for the blanket, “mind if I stay?”

Hooch just snorted softly and Matt lay down once more beside him, pulling the blanket over both of them. Lying close, he breathed in the scent that was Hooch and yet was different. He’d be back to the old Hooch, though, he’d make sure. He’d lose the clinical scent, the ... otherness.

When he lifted his head after listening to Hooch’s ever more regular breaths, he watched the face, relaxed in sleep. Forging this image over all of the ones of the past.

Hooch. Alive. Nothing else mattered.

\* \* \*

Over two hours later, Matt had managed to settle Hooch on the couch in the living room, in a pair of shorts underneath the brace, to watch a game on TV. The remains of a chicken dinner stood on the table beside him, and a couple of empty Buds right next to it.

Hooch looked up and grunted a nonsensical question as Matt came back from the kitchen, dropping a letter into his lap.

Matt shrugged, gestured towards the letter before wandering back into the kitchen to grab a couple of fresh Buds. He stalled midway, fridge door still open, inhaling deeply. Had he done the right thing? Fuck knew, but he’d gone with his gut instinct and his gut had twisted into a knot at the thought of staying any longer in the ‘don’t ask - don’t tell’ pit of lies. He shook himself out of his musings, pushed the fridge door shut with his elbow and opened the bottles. Leaving enough time for Hooch to read.

When he stepped back into the main room of his small apartment, Hooch was holding the letter in his hand, and looked up at him. “Why?”

Matt set the beer down onto the table and slouched on the chair which he’d pushed right next to the sofa. Feeling strangely reluctant to touch Hooch right now. ‘Why’, a good question. It had been perfectly clear in his mind at the time of making the decision. Putting it into words was suddenly a challenge and he

took a good swig from his bottle, stalling for time, before leaning his head back to look at Hooch.

“I had enough.”

“You loved it.”

“Yeah ...” Matt shrugged and pulled in a lungful of air. He had, being a Marine was what he’d always wanted. As a kid, playing soldier, as a teenager, and finally as a man. Young man. Before he realised how very much his sexuality was himself. Lying about that part of himself? He’d managed, until Hooch’s capture. Love was a strange and powerful thing, and entirely unplanned. “Had enough of the fucking lies,” he finally offered.

“Suddenly?”

“Yeah.” Wrong, and Matt drew in another breath, expelling it noisily. “No. Been a while, but, like, thought I’d gotten used to it.” He shrugged once more.

“Had something to do with me.” Hooch made it a statement not a question, and Matt grimaced, while Hooch’s expression remained completely neutral. At least Hooch didn’t ask him if he knew what he was doing, accepting Matt’s decision as what it was: final.

Matt shook his head, looked down at the Bud in his hand, then suddenly raised his head in anger. Aggression born out of frustration, but damn, Hooch had changed the rules of this game entirely. “Fucking yes! It has to do with you. Not knowing, not being able to ask, just lies. Lies and more lies. No grieving allowed, not a fucking thing. Couldn’t contact your family, haven’t got a fucking clue where they are, and the south is damned big. Couldn’t even pretend I was your buddy, in case anyone wondered why the fuck a Marine was buddies with a Delta. No messages, not a fucking thing and I was going insane!” Matt was getting more agitated, and stood up. “The only fucking way to find out anything at all, like, if you were even alive, was to phone Dan, hoping with his Spa he might have contacts. I was so fucking desperate, I would have tried anything. If he hadn’t known a Red Cross bigwig who fed him some information, how the fuck would I have ever found out anything? And even when Dan told me you got a visit from the Red Cross, you couldn’t fucking write to me, could you? Fucking hell, no! Only family, and who the fuck was I? Just some stupid fucking Marine who was going off the edge, not knowing if he’s lost the fucking man he fucking loves or not!”

Matt was fuming, but Hooch didn’t show a reaction, except for a quiet, “do you?”

“What?” Matt snapped.

“Do you?” Hooch calmly repeated, and Matt felt as if all air had been driven out of his lungs. Deflated, he sat back down on the sofa.

“Yeah.”

Hooch nodded, folded the letter and placed it back on the table. “Okay.”

Matt looked at him in confusion, then shook his head with a frustrated grunt. Hooch was still as exasperating at times as he’d always been, and Matt really didn’t appreciate feeling like an idiot right now. Sometimes the man



talked, but more often than not it was back to the one-syllable answers. “What the fuck does ‘Okay’ mean?”

“Got a job offer.”

“Huh?” Matt leaned closer, “what?”

“Promotion. They want me to train Delta. Stationed in Fort Bragg.” Hooch shrugged, “no more battlefields.”

Frowning, Matt tried to make sense and get an indication what Hooch thought about this, but no chance. “You’re not that old yet, you got some years left on active duty. Look at Dan and Vadim, they did crazy shit in their forties.” Pointing at Hooch’s pelvis, “and the injury’s not cause for retirement from active duty?”

“Probably not. They’ll know in a few months. Recovery can be up to a year, need to get my strength back as well.”

“Then what are you going to do? They can’t, like, force you, can they?”

Hooch shrugged, “no, not yet.”

“Well,” Matt drew in a breath, “that’s alright then. Back to normal when you’re back to health and strength.”

“No.”

“No?” Exasperation was creeping into Matt’s voice.

“I take it.”

“You ... what?” Matt leaned forward that abruptly, he almost slid off the chair.

“It’s time.”

“Why?” Painfully aware of how he echoed Hooch, whose lips quirked into the customary half-grin. Taking hold of the waistband of Matt’s shorts, Hooch twisted his fist into the fabric and pulled him up and close, while Matt could do nothing but follow the motion, letting himself drop onto his knees on the rug in front of the sofa.

“And now?” Matt raised both brows.

Hooch’s fist twisted tighter, pulling Matt even closer, until there was no further to go without jostling him. “You tell me. You’ll be out of a job.”

Matt rolled his eyes, “I’m going to open a fitness club with the money I’ve saved. It’ll be based on military fitness training and gay oriented.”

Hooch burst into laughter, immediately followed by a sound of pain. “You’ll be fucking rich.”

“Yeah,” Matt grinned. “Question is, where do I settle down? I have no fucking clue.”

“Fayetteville.”

“You’re not fucking serious!” Matt’s eyes widened, “that’s right next to Fort Bragg.”

“Precisely.” Hooch’s half-grin was back in place. “Camp beds are shit.”

“How the fuck are you going to explain, like, living with a gay guy? Because I’m fucking sick of lying.”

Hooch shrugged. “Spare room.”

“Bullshit! Nobody’s going to swallow that.”

“I’m too high profile now.” Hooch shrugged again. “Don’t ask don’t tell? This shit works both ways. You think they’re going to prove I’m not staying in my own room?”

Matt grinned. “It might just work if I take the obvious ‘gay’ out of the gym, but you’re fucking crazy.”

“No, just alive.”

That sobered Matt, but before the dark shadow could touch him, Hooch reached up to draw him closer, and Matt forgot all about it during the kiss.

## March 1998, United States of America

A few weeks later, when Matt came home from work on a Friday, the strong scent of freshly brewed coffee greeted him. He could get used to that, to someone being there, someone who didn’t answer, though, when he called out. “Hey, Hooch!”

Nothing, and Matt strained to listen. Improbable that Hooch was out and about, but not impossible. He’d been moving further and further lately, and had been coming on in leaps and bounds, thanks to the physiotherapy he meticulously followed, doing his exercises religiously.

Matt eventually noticed the sound of the shower and, as expected, the bathroom door was ajar. “Fair enough.” He muttered to himself, whistling under his breath as he took his tunic off, hung it onto a hook in the hallway, and marched into the kitchenette. The coffee was steaming in the pot and he poured himself a mug before he sat down at the breakfast bar.

He noticed a letter on the table, unfolded, the A-4 sheet pointing the other direction. Curious, he turned it round and skimmed over the letter while taking a sip of the strong, black coffee. Stopped. Almost burnt his lips when he stared at the writing. Putting the mug down, he pulled the letter closer and re-checked the heading. Medical Lab. Test results. Then read it once more, and then again, for good measure, where it said in bold letters: ‘Bozic, Hubert. Negative.’

Negative.

The grin that spread across Matt’s face threatened to split it side-to-side and he jumped off the chair. “Hooch!” Hollering the name across the apartment, but Hooch, hair still wet, towel around his hips, and leaning on his walker, was already standing in the doorway.

“Why the ear-splitting noise?”

“You damn well know, buddy.”

Hooch raised his brows in the most infuriating manner he managed. “And?”

“*And?* What does *and* mean, you dickhead?”

“You tell me.”

But Matt didn’t. Wordlessly pulling the t-shirt over his head, he flung it into a corner. Flexing the impressive muscles of his smooth chest. He wasn’t a PT instructor for nothing. “Does that remind you of anything?”

“Waxing?” Hooch deadpanned.

Matt rolled his eyes while unbuttoning the BDU's. He pushed them down, together with his briefs underneath. Baring himself down to his knees, and then the trousers slipped and got caught around his ankles at the top of the boots. His groin was just as smooth – except for a neat patch. “And what does *that* remind you of?”

“Shaving?”

Matt laughed with exasperation. “You’re insufferable.”

“And horny.”

“Now we are getting somewhere.” Matt stepped closer, pulled the towel off Hooch and steadied Hooch’s hips with his hands, holding him carefully, just enough to push his groin against Hooch’s. He grinned at the immediate reaction. “If I fucked myself on you, very carefully, would your pelvis manage?”

“If it doesn’t I don’t give a shit.” The sudden, husky quality to Hooch’s voice caused Matt to take in a sharp breath.

“In that case ...” Matt murmured, giving his hips a slight twist, “fuck me, Hooch.”

He hadn’t realised how much he’d missed Hooch’s rare, shit-eating grin.

## March 1998, New Zealand

That same week, the phone rang, but this time at a perfectly acceptable time of day. It was Dan who answered, he’d been in his study, organising the next Spa event. It was Hooch and Dan was surprised at his genuine sense of joy when he heard the unmistakable drawl. Somehow Hooch had become a friend as well and he hadn’t even noticed it happening. After a short conversation, Dan hollered downstairs, “Vadim! It’s Hooch!”

Vadim dropped the pen on the pad. He’d been making notes for a conference, based on some new reports he’d received, but that was forgotten when he hurried up the stairs. “Coming!” He rushed into Dan’s room and took the phone, while Dan smiled at him, nodded, and then left the room to grab a coffee. “Hey. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, not bad. I should have called earlier.” A pause, “how are you?”

“I’m good. I’m good. Shit, it’s good hearing you.”

“Yeah.” The smile was all too audible in Hooch’s voice. “Was wondering, any chance to see you? Here?”

“Sure ... guess you can’t or shouldn’t fly yet? Sure I can come over.” He looked at Dan, who had come back with two mugs of coffee, and touched his shoulder.

“Can’t.” A pause, “are you going to bring Dan?”

“Should I?”

“Yeah, I’d like to see him. When can you make it Stateside?”

“Let me check.” Vadim checked the wall calendar. “Next thing we have lined up is in three weeks. We could head out right away or in four weeks, after the conference.”

Dan hadn't followed the conversation and was looking at Vadim, questioningly, then sat down to sip his coffee.

"Can you make it now?" Hooch asked.

Vadim looked at Dan. "Can we fly out to the US right away?"

Dan nodded. "To Matt and Hooch?" It hadn't been difficult to cotton onto the conversation. "Sure. I was planning a Spa event in Europe, after the conference, but I could organise an ad hoc one in the US before that." He smiled, "it'll be good to see them again."

Vadim nodded, then returned to the phone in his hand.

"Done. I'll book the flights and call you then. We could actually have a holiday over in the States. Always wanted to see the Grand Canyon, even though it's just more bloody rocks." Smiling affectionately at Dan, who winked at him.

"Thanks, buddy. I'll let Matt know." With that, the line went dead. Hooch had never been one for drawn-out good byes.

Vadim put the phone down. "He sounds alright, by his standards. A bit emotional."

"Emotional? Hooch? This must have rattled him more than I'd initially thought." Dan shrugged and smiled.

"You know, as emotional as he can sound." Vadim shook his head. "States, then. I'll call our travel agent and make the arrangements."

Dan nodded and finished his mug. He'd have to get organising before they were off.

## **April 1998, United States of America**

They arrived on the Saturday morning, trying to be patient while going through the increasingly annoying customs and immigration. They were both tired, Vadim more than Dan, but they soon found a taxi and made their way to Matt's apartment.

It was good to see Matt again, Dan thought. Matt had grown up since he'd last seen him, a fact that Dan couldn't quite put his finger onto the how and why, but something was different about him.

Seeing Hooch, who had got up and was standing in the small living room, supported on two crutches, was another matter. The man had become wiry, had lost that much muscle definition that it was clearly visible in the shirt and jeans he was wearing. With the brace over the trousers, he almost looked skinny. It was the glimpse of a healed wound, small and round, visible in the open collar of the dark green shirt, which made Dan twitch before he caught himself. A cigarette burn. Almost where he'd placed Vadim's, a lifetime ago.

The unbidden notion of 'twins' was disconcerting and caught him out for a second, before he smiled and pulled Hooch into a very careful half-embrace, which was more than touching a shoulder and less than a hug.

Realising that really, what Hooch wanted, was to talk to Vadim, Dan got Matt out of the apartment and into town, under the pretence that he needed clothes and since the kid had been that successful a personal shopper a few years back, he needed his expertise. They were soon gone, taking Dan's and Vadim's luggage with them, to book into the hotel close by, with the promise that Dan would get a quadruple espresso in the shopping mall.

They had just left, when Hooch quirked a half-grin at Vadim. "Now comes the fun of sitting back down. Should have used the walker but I'm too fucking vain." Turning, he made his way to the couch, which had been set up with an abundance of cushions.

"Some way I can help you? Won't tell. Would have never happened." Vadim stayed close, as if to lend Hooch strength by physical proximity. He didn't expect Hooch to actually accept help, but hoped he would.

"No, I'm alright. Not that I wouldn't accept help ..." Hooch shuffled himself into position, "I'm beyond that," lowering himself down with a suppressed grunt, "but every little thing I can do on my own feels like a victory." He finally settled back in the cushions that kept him propped up, and flashed a grin at Vadim. "Thanks for coming." He placed the crutches to the side and looked up, when Vadim picked up the unspoken cue.

"I'm all ears. All yours." Vadim sat down and moved the stuffed chair closer. He was leaning forward, elbows on his knees.

Hooch huffed a toneless laugh. "You got one on me." Reaching for another cushion to stuff it a bit further under his hip. "Yeah, I need to talk to you. I need your help." Admitting that was doubtlessly hard for him.

"Whatever you need."

"What do you know about bad dreams?"

"More than enough." Bad dreams. Vadim pressed his lips together, but he felt a chill in his face. Hooch. Fucked up. Just like him. Thoughts whirling in his head at that, impressions, the old Hooch and their games, Konstantinov.

"You've seen a shrink, do you still have them?"

"Sometimes. They are ... rarer, now. Not as bad. I'm managing it." It wouldn't be a surprise if Hooch had PTSD, none at all. "I can give you the number of my 'shrink'. He's good, but it's not easy. He said everybody reacts differently, bad dreams are fairly normal. The question is how long the symptoms stay with you. If they stay around, it's proper PTSD. Bad dreams, emotional alienation, fits of rage. Flashbacks."

"It's not that bad." Hooch tried to reach for the half empty mug with by now cold coffee, frowned, and gave up half way. Vadim took the cue and handed it to him. He wanted to touch him, too, but wasn't quite sure whether it was welcome. How much he could touch before it would be painful.

"I don't wake up screaming, I'm not angry, not alienated, not disassociated." Hooch shrugged, took a mouthful of his cold coffee, "just stuck in the images, the smell. It's the stench that's haunting me, I sometimes think I can still smell it."

“I can only imagine.” Vadim sat back down, moving even closer, until his knees almost touched Hooch’s. “They had a good go at you, too, the way you look.” He indicated his own throat. “Bastards.”

“Yeah ...” Hooch drawled, then smiled unexpectedly. “Funny, though. Remember what you told me once? About not alienating your captor? And that nothing else mattered but to survive?” Hooch stretched out his arm as if he tried to put the mug back, but rested his hand on Vadim’s knee instead, fingers touching cloth that was warmed from skin.

“Yeah. I really hoped you’d remember that much. You can be infuriating. I’m glad you didn’t piss them off too much.” Vadim covered Hooch’s hand on his knee with his. The touch felt good. He was alive.

“It’s fucking ironic that being a masochist is what got me through. I knew that pain was a good thing. I could rely on it. Pain meant I was still alive, and most importantly, pain wouldn’t kill me. Its absence would.” Hooch’s dark eyes were intense, focused on Vadim. “And I remembered a lot of things that I’d never believed were of importance. People. Friends. My ...” he trailed off and leaned his head back on the couch.

“Your proper lover.” Vadim glanced to the door where Matt and Dan had left, then back to Hooch. “See? Maybe you don’t need a guy who’s fucked you up beforehand to fall a little for somebody. It’s definitely saner.”

Hooch looked at Vadim from under his dark lashes, with his head craned back. “It’s different. I love Matt, I understand that now. As much as I can love, but I’m not explaining those shades of grey to him. No need to.” Hooch’s fingers twitched in Vadim’s. “But I actually need you. This time more than ever.”

“I’m here, Hooch. I can give you whatever you need from me.” No whys, no hows, no whens. It didn’t matter, really, all that mattered was that on some level, they needed each other, they fit together in a certain way, complemented each other. It defied classification, analysis. Vadim still wasn’t quite sure what he felt for Hooch, only that he *felt*. “I’m clear about my emotions. That’s why I had to walk away in the first place. To think, to make sure that I knew what was going on. It was more irrational than that. More painful, but that is what happened in the meantime.”

“I thought I was clear about my emotions, but I realised that I wasn’t. I am now, though... Regarding myself, I haven’t got a fucking clue, and that’s why I need you.” Hooch pushed himself up to sit, grimacing, he had to keep changing his position. “I need to know if they fucked me up. If the stench that is still in my nostrils will remain, if the bad dreams come to haunt me big time, if the memories of torture and death are going to bite my ass and rob my strength.”

“I think I start to see where this is going. You want me to ... test that.”

“Yeah. I need you to take me further than ever before.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah, fuck.” Hooch searched and found Vadim’s eyes. “I might not even get there, but if I break ... I trust you to put the pieces back together.”

“Yeah.” Vadim nodded towards Hooch’s brace. “Will you heal up first?”

“I have to, even taking a shit hurts.” A self-deprecating huff of laughter followed. “It’ll take a while, can be up to a year before I’m ‘fighting fit.’”

“Okay.” Vadim nodded. “I can do that. I’ll do it.” Of course he would. He had to, he wanted to. Help, have, destroy. It was all one blur and he’d have to think about it for longer to work out what the underlying motivation was.

“Thanks, buddy.” Hooch leaned back again and the smile that ghosted across his face betrayed a sense of relief. “But first I have to sort a few things. With Dan and Matt. Damn that goddamned newfound wisdom.” Hooch flashed a grin, as sharp as it had ever been.

“Yeah, I found that wisdom thing a killer.” Vadim grinned, glad that the topic was off torture for the moment. “Anything you need right now?”

“I could do with a beer, and if you want me to suck you, I wouldn’t say no.”

Vadim swallowed dryly. “Can’t say no ... I’d trade you one?”

“If you get me out of this damned brace, anytime.” Hooch’s grin had come back full force. “But first ...” he did lean forward, despite the pain, and put the mug down at last, then crooked his finger to beckon Vadim close, “the beer can wait.”

The biggest challenge was to find a position that wasn’t too painful, but Vadim couldn’t resist, and he ended up standing between Hooch’s legs, holding him close, offering a little support, and perversely, the fact that Hooch was fragile and in pain increased the pleasure - Hooch wrestling his own pain, shudders and breaths, small sounds betraying the discomfort, but Vadim could only think that despite the pain, Hooch really wanted to blow him. Hooch took the pain, embraced it, and there was this terrible tenderness in himself, the relief that Hooch was there, alive, all one intense mess of emotions that added edge to the physical pleasure.

Later, after Vadim had returned the favour, and despite his best efforts to steady Hooch’s hips, Hooch had come with suppressed sounds closer to pain than lust, but it had been lust and fulfilment that was written across his face when he relaxed back in the cushions.

Unlike the old Hooch, he fell asleep soon after, and it was Vadim who closed the shirt and pulled the black denims back up over the random scattering of cigarette burns. He fixed the brace once more, patiently waiting for Hooch to wake, while watching him sleep in peace and silence.

\* \* \*

It was shortly after Dan and Matt had returned in the afternoon, carrying a barrage of bags, when Hooch called out from the living room.

“Hey, Dan.” Hooch turned his head, lifting himself up to half-sit, he’d been in the same position for too long. “Can I have a word?”

“Sure.” Dan shrugged, glanced at Vadim, who just looked at him before following Matt into the bedroom to rifle through the stuff Matt had made Dan buy.

“Thought you’d want to talk with Vadim, not with me.” Dan smiled and sat down on the comfy chair beside the couch.

“Yeah, I did.” Hooch looked at him, and Dan thought once again, how much he could understand that Vadim had fallen for that man.

“Cigarette?” Dan held the package out to Hooch, who shook his head.

“I stopped.”

“Another of those health crap scares from the US of A?”

“Not really. Hadn’t smoked for so long after that shithole, it wasn’t hard not to, when they told me I shouldn’t because of thrombosis.”

“Shit, forgot about that.” Dan smiled ruefully. “Bug on its back, aye?”

Hooch let out a huff of laughter. “Legs in the air, yeah ... wish I could, but still no fucking of this bug here.”

“Bet Matt finds other ways though, eh?” Dan smiled, concentrating on the unlit cigarette.

“Yeah, he does.” Hooch trailed off, watched Dan for a moment, then pointed at the cigarette. “Go right ahead. Matt’s a health freak, but I know he’d let you get away with murder.”

“You think so?”

“You’re a friend and you helped him, he’d do anything.”

“Bullshit.” Dan frowned, “didn’t do much and besides, I wouldn’t want anyone to feel indebted.” Shaking his head, he lit the cigarette nevertheless. “Apart from that, it’s Markus who should receive all the thanks. He’s the guy who got the info to Matt and it was quite a struggle to get info without breaking any of the secrecy required.”

“He also got the woman to mention Matt, without any mentioning.” Hooch nodded, then pushed his empty soda can towards Dan as a makeshift ashtray. “Thanks.”

“For what?” Dan looked up, surprised, “getting the info to Matt?”

“Yeah. And for understanding.”

“Understanding what?”

“Vadim. Me.”

“It’s friendship.” Dan inhaled the smoke deeply, watching it curl back out of his nostrils. “And more, but I let him do what he feels he needs to do. It goes both ways and it works for us.”

Hooch raised a brow and said nothing, forcing Dan to elaborate.

“He’s been in love with you for a few years. Since Berlin.” Dan shrugged and smiled. “That’s on top of being your friend, but that’s okay. You’re everything I was, might have been, am not, and could never be. Don’t tell me you don’t know that.” He let out a small huff. “You even look like me – just younger, less ...” scared, he wanted to say, and then he shut up, realising just what had happened to Hooch.

“Not anymore.” Hooch flashed a humourless grin.

“I’m an idiot.” Dan replied quietly. “Sorry.”

“I’m not.”

Dan raised his brows, smoking slowly.



“Yeah, wish it had never happened, but taught me a few things.” Hooch pushed himself up further until he sat, propped up by cushions.

“Like?”

“What’s important. Who I love. That I love.”

Dan tensed up, after all this time, but just for a second. “Who?”

“Not Vadim.” Hooch smiled. “That’s your department.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“As I said, I learned a few things.”

“There’s something else, aye?”

“I need to see Vadim. I need to know if I ... if they broke more than my bones.” Hooch’s voice had taken on a different quality. A compelling mix of strength and frailty. “I need to understand if I still exist.”

Dan leaned forward, forgetting the cigarette between his fingers. “Exist?”

“The man I was. The Delta. My core. My strength.” Trailing off, “... me.”

“And you need Vadim for that?”

Hooch nodded. “I need him to destroy me, disassemble me, so that I know if the core is still intact.” He tilted his head to look fully at Dan. “Vadim is the only safe bet, and he knows me. Knows I have no ... used to have no limits. I don’t play safe. He won’t kill me and I know he can do it.”

“Shit.” Dan exhaled quietly, leaning back in the chair and remembering the cigarette. Pulling in a lungful, he took his time to exhale. “You want my blessing for that? You don’t need to, you know that I am fine with what you two have.”

“I know, but I need you to understand.”

“Why?”

“Because of the things I’ve learned, of what’s important. The small things that go under the skin.” Hooch slowly let out a breath. “When it got really bad,” echoing his own words, “when I was close to let death take over, it was two things that kept me going. One, what Vadim had taught me: don’t aggravate your captor. You have to survive. At all costs. Play along, your pride is of no consequence, only your life is. I remembered that early on, and it got me through some ... encounters.” He shrugged one-sided, but there was only tension about him, no pretended ease. “Two, the memories and images of Matt. The little things, a smile, a habit, a grin, a touch in the morning, a sound during sex, a laughter at night. All that goddamned normality. Everything that I’d thought was of no consequence in the greater scheme of my life and my job, but then it was all that I wanted to see and feel and know again.” Hooch fell silent, breathing, as if the long speech had drained him of energy. “I guess, when I realised that I love Matt, something clicked. Up here,” pointing to his temple. “And now I am not sure if I could go back into combat, even if I hadn’t taken the instructor post.”

“You fear you’ve become too human?” Dan smiled and snipped the cigarette butt into the empty can. “I know the feeling.” Reaching across to place a hand on Hooch’s shoulder, he gave it a squeeze. “It’s a good one.”

“I’m not sure.”

“Worried you’ve become too ‘weak’ for the job?”

Hooch nodded.

“And a really intense session with Vadim would tell you one way or another?”

Hooch nodded again, “but not just that.”

“No?” letting go of Hooch’s shoulder, Dan sat back once more.

“I have bad dreams. But Matt doesn’t know.”

“Fuck.” Quietly.

“Yeah, but I don’t scream. Just wake up, sweating. I don’t want him to know.”

It was Dan’s turn now to nod. He understood all too well, knew exactly what it was like to be helpless, watching another suffer. “You should see a shrink. Vadim did, and it changed his life.”

“I’m not there yet. I need to know first ... shit, Dan, part of me is a masochist, an extreme one. That is either not going to change or going to completely blow up in my face. I need to know. Need to understand what the fuck happened to me and how I’m going to deal with it in the future.”

“And that’s why you need Vadim, to figure out the whole shit, warts and all.”

“Yeah.”

Dan smiled, “still a bit odd that you want my blessing, because it is really not necessary.”

“Call it a new-found social nicety.” Hooch answered with a smile of his own.

Laughing, Dan shook his head. “I won’t be jealous, if that’s what you ask. You should know that by now.” Leaning closer, “and I do understand.”

“Thanks, buddy.” Letting out a breath, Hooch sank back into the pillows.

“And Matt?” Dan asked after a moment.

“He doesn’t know anything about that part of me.”

“You think that’s wise?”

“No. I think that’s shit, and that’s why I’m going to tell him about the man he doesn’t know.”

“He’ll be okay with it eventually.” Dan nodded, “he’s a good kid.”

“Not so much of a kid anymore.”

“Twenty-eight? I call that a fucking kid.” Dan grinned.

“Yeah, everything’s relative.” Hooch pulled a face. “Just wish I’d told him earlier. Never thought it was an issue, and that it wasn’t his business. Figured what I did when I let off steam, had nothing to do with him. Seems it has.”

“Relationship and all that?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t fool yourself,” Dan grinned, “you have been in a relationship with him for years. I reckon about five at least.”

Hooch’s brows rose with incredulity.

“Just trust me, mate.” Dan patted Hooch’s shoulder again. “I’m old and wise, you said so yourself.”

“Did I?”

“Kind of.” Dan winked. “But really, he’ll understand. Eventually, because he’ll want to understand. He loves you, and you might even get a thorough fuck out of it.”

“One track mind ...”

“I have a reputation to uphold.” Dan got up, found his cane and stood, then pointed to the cane with a grin. “You’re lucky, at least you’ll get rid of yours.”

“Good thing, I’d never be as dexterous as you are with it.”

“Flattery gets you everywhere, aye?”

“Something like that.”

Dan picked up the empty cans. “It certainly gets you into our house with me out of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that the safest and best place for doing whatever you need to do with Vadim is our home. I’ll be away for a couple of weeks when you need me to.”

“You serious?”

“Hooch ...” Dan leaned down, close enough, he could have kissed Hooch had he wanted to. “I understand a lot more than you might think.” Quietly, with a smile. He turned and walked into the kitchen to get a couple more drinks, leaving Hooch to stare after him.

\* \* \*

A few days later, after Dan and Vadim had headed off to explore the State before flying back, Hooch was making his round on the crutches, the walker discarded. He was getting better, but the pain had only eased minimally. Still, he could piss and shit without major disasters and if that wasn’t a victory to be proud of, then he didn’t know what was. Getting back into the living room, he watched Matt from the hallway. He could see his profile, the chiselled face, and that perfect body, right now more or less hidden beneath t-shirt and shorts. Young, unspoiled, and if he could help it, Matt would remain like that.

Watching him for a while, undisturbed, until Matt lifted his head, cottoned on that he was being watched, and cast a smile at Hooch. Another of those motherfucking dazzling smiles. The sort that made Hooch’s knees go weak and his mind step onto a merry-go-round that didn’t quite understand why this particular man, this ‘kid’ had managed to crawl beneath his skin and settle down inside his heart. Matt was really quite something.

“See anything you like, buddy?” Matt grinned.

“If I didn’t I wouldn’t be here.” Hooch made his way towards the couch. Matt moved over, making space for him to sit down.

“Smartass.” A lazy fist connected gently with Hooch’s shoulder once he had manoeuvred himself to sit. Stretching his legs out, Hooch grimaced when he realised he had to lean forward to get to the Bud. Shit planning.

“You alright?”

“Couldn’t be better.” Hooch glanced to the side. “I just managed to take a shit without screaming in pain, I call that a glorious day.”

Matt laughed, “thanks for the gory details.”

“I knew you would appreciate it.”

Sitting comfortably in silence, each with a beer in their hand. Hooch had his legs up on the stool, and Matt slouched with his feet on the couch table, watching a football game. Hooch realised only a while later that he had no idea who was playing. He didn’t care, he only had one thing prominent on his mind. And wasn’t attack always better than defence.

“Matt?”

“Huh?” Drawn to the game, Matt took a moment before he turned his head, looking at Hooch. “What’s up, buddy?”

“I got to tell you something.”

“You’ve turned into a right chatterbox lately.” Matt grinned, taking a mouthful of his beer.

Ignoring the quip, Hooch went straight on. “I never told you that I’m a masochist.”

“What are you talking about?” Matt laughed. “Was there something, like, in your lunch today?”

“Nope.” Hooch shrugged, twisting to look at Matt. “But I think it’s time to tell you about the rest of me. When I meet Vadim? We don’t just fuck. We ‘play’ prisoner. Just, that we don’t play. I need to be beaten and fucked up until I crack.”

“You’re fucking kidding me.”

“No.”

“Then why the hell do you tell me? Now? What’s the point?”

“I need you to know.”

“After what, five years? I don’t fucking believe it, you bastard!”

“Bastard? Because I didn’t tell you, thinking that this part of me had nothing to do with you?”

“Bastard, because you fucking lied.”

“How?”

“By not telling me!” Matt’s eyes were ablaze, and Hooch realised he’d never seen him that angry and hurt. It was the latter that Hooch cursed himself for.

“If I had told you, what good would it have done?”

“I would have tried to be for you what you needed.”

“No, Matt,” Hooch’s voice turned softer. “You don’t have it in you.”

“What? What the fuck are you telling me? You say, like, I am a girl? I don’t fucking have it in me?”

“It’s not you, Matt.”

“That’s not what you said.”

Hooch shook his head. “It’s what I meant.”

Getting up from the sofa, Matt was fuming. “What you *said* is that I am not what you want.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it.”

“How would you see it then, if you were me? You tell me, after five fucking years, that you need to ... what the fuck should I call it, get punished. That you need it because it is part of you and because otherwise you go fucking insane with the pressure or whatever the fuck.”

Hooch had never seen Matt like that, and he couldn't help but admire the sheer energy of the explosion.

“And that is *not* telling me that I'm not alright? That I'm not missing something?”

“Exactly.” Hooch quietly interjected, looking up. “You don't.”

“Don't fucking kid me.” Matt's hands were in fists and he started to pace the small living room. “I thought we had a relationship?”

“We do now. The question is if we had.”

“You always came back.”

“Yeah, because you were convenient. And pretty.”

“Fucking *what*?” Matt put the beer back onto the table with a mighty thud. “Convenient? You asshole.”

“You were. Not saying that's what you still are.”

“You have the guts to tell me that?” Matt shook his head, obviously hurt. “Convenient? Like a fucking door mat?”

“No.” Hooch said quietly, looking at Matt with a neutral expression. “But I am telling you the truth right now. Back when it all started you were convenient. Great fun, fantastic source for sex. And ... pretty.”

“Pretty? Fuck you, Hooch.”

“Yeah, but you are.”

“Girls are pretty, I'm a man. I'm not pretty.”

“What would you rather be?. Handsome? Adorable? Perfect? Stunning? Gorgeous? Breathtaking? Beautiful?”

“Am I?”

“All of it and more.”

“Shit.” Matt grouched. He deflated, and some of the anger taken out of him, but the sting was still there. “You're fighting dirty.”

“Delta.” Hooch smirked and beckoned Matt closer.

“Yeah, and I'm outgunned. As usual.” Rolling his eyes, Matt reached for the beer again, but a hand on his arm stopped him.

“You've never been outgunned.”

“You're fucking kidding me.”

“I told you before, Matthew Donahue, you are quite something. Outwitted, perhaps, but never outgunned.”

“Charmer.”

“I do my best for a blowjob.”

“Convenient, eh?”

Hooch said nothing, just looked at Matt, fingers twisting into the fabric of his t-shirt. Looking at him for a long time, before he pulled him across and close. “If I told you that I wanted to spend my days and nights with you, live with you, as my partner, because out there, in Hell, I realised that you mean the

world to me? That you are my sanity, my laughter, my lust, my love, my comfort, my day and my night, my heat and cold and everything? If I told you that, would you think that translates to ‘convenient?’”

Matt swallowed, staring at Hooch wide-eyed. “N...no.”

“Damn right. Now shut up, Donahue, and tell me that you’ll spend the rest of your life with me.”

Matt pronounced his next words very carefully:

“I do.”

March 1999, Vienna

The conference centre was beginning to fill up. Vadim gently pulled the shirt from under the suit's cuff, briefly checked the cufflinks were immaculately in place, and watched the crowd. The same everywhere, wherever they did the 'circus'. Men from their mid-thirties, more often in their fifties, often well-fed, gleaming with lametta. Their 'clients'. At least no Konstantinov, no repeat of the Nelson episode. He'd had quite enough of life/work complications.

The coffee and the snacks were inadvertently excellent. All creature comforts were available, that included the hookers lingering at the edges of the conference. Vadim thought sometimes these meetings were more about getting away from the usual routine than the actual networking.

Another group came in. Several large, bullish men, and Vadim thought shit, Russian army, that was what they looked like these days.

The familiar weight of a well-known hand descended onto his shoulder. "Funny how they made it safely through to another regime and ideology, aye?" Dan murmured.

Vadim huffed. "I'd be surprised if the army had changed at all. It was always completely its own entit..."

Lesha. He stared at the man. Lesha, absolutely no doubt. His eyes, his lips under the peaked cap, in the full regalia of a Russian ... *general*. "Holy fuck. He made it."

"What's up?" Dan straightened up, looking towards the group as he leaned on the cane. "You know one of them?" Alerted, even though Vadim's reaction hadn't been alarmed.

Vadim nodded. "Alexei Ivanovich Petkov. The ... general."

"Friend or foe?" Quietly, as Dan made his way to sit down on the leather settee, beside Vadim.

"Friend." Vadim looked up, then his eyes darkened. "I have no idea."

"Been a long time?" Dan leaned back, lighting a cigarette with the new expensive lighter Vadim had given him. Slim, sleek, silver.

"We were both raw recruits. We'd joke we'd both become generals. Seems he won." And I got nothing. Nowhere. Just myself. What I always was. Even then. But there stood the career he'd tossed away to become what he was. He didn't regret it. It just stung to see it right there, on his old friend.

"You'd be above a general, given the chance." Dan exhaled the smoke slowly. "But there's only really one way to find out if he is a friend, aye?" Looking at Vadim with a smile that despite the expensive tailored suit in the highly professional surroundings was nothing but tender.

"Yeah." Vadim stood again, saw Lesha talk to one of the men around him, noticed he'd got a paunch from, no doubt, sitting at desks most of the time or maybe the good life, even if he looked a bit worried, not very well rested. Maybe

too much work. Too many worries under the new regime. Moscow licking its wounds, a former superpower brought low and crumbling, threatened from all sides – and within. It paid to be a freelancer, and when it did, it did so well. Vadim kept looking at him, until Lesha noticed him.

His old friend looked him up and down, then passed through the group of men around him, and offered an outstretched hand. “Vadim Petrovich.”

Vadim hesitated at the slightly more formal address than he had been used to from Lesha. “General.” Increasing the distance dictated by title and age, to be on the safe side.

“I saw the programme and I thought, I know that strange name.” The general smiled. “How a superpower fought and lost? That’s a good title.”

“Thank you.”

Dan was watching from his seat, within earshot, but without making himself known. The powers of observation had never left him, and he noticed the once dark hair, seemingly still full beneath the cap, glimpses of silver at the temples, expressive brows and the fairly pale eyes shaded by dark lashes. That man had been stunning, once. He leaned forward to flick ash into the ashtray, wondering what kind of ‘friend’ the man had been. Fitting a mould too well, and he smiled slightly to himself.

“Please, I would like to invite you for a drink after the panel discussion. I can imagine it getting ‘heated’, a drink will be welcome.” Lesha, or Alexei Ivanovich, continued smoothly. “Are you free?”

“Yes, Sir, of course.”

“Good man.” Lesha patted his shoulder, then moved on, and Vadim was left with a strange feeling he couldn’t quite put into words. He sat down next to Dan again. “Not sure that answers the question, really.”

Dan scratched his chin. “No, that clearly doesn’t. The guy’s either terrified or an asshole.” Quiet enough not to be overhead.

“The communist brother kiss went a bit out of fashion ...” Vadim frowned. “Shit. Now I’m nervous.” He glanced over his shoulder, but the general and entourage had left.

“Why? They can’t get you here.” Dan frowned, stubbing the cigarette out. “No one can touch you.”

Vadim inhaled. “But Lesha? Terrified? I hope not.”

“Depends on what kind of friend he was and depends on if he knows the accusations.” Dan countered carefully.

Vadim paled. “Shit. We weren’t ... we were comrades. Friends. We were close, but ... I never touched him. I had a crush on him, yes, but it never went beyond ...” Lying and killing for each other. More than he’d shared with Dima, come to think of it. Yet Dima was still a ‘brother’, still loyal.

Dan smiled. “Then it depends on what he thinks about a - the accusations and b - men who love men.”

Vadim fell silent, and lowered his gaze. That was true. It came down to the matter of being gay and what Lesha thought of that. He checked the time on his watch, saw nothing, then checked again. They still had ten minutes, but they



could get settled in. The thought still lingering. Drinking with the general. That could mean anything. Lesha had remained noncommittal, and Vadim realized he was scared that Lesha would tell him to fuck off, between a drink or two. “Panel discussion.”

“Come on, then.” Dan briefly touched Vadim’s thigh. He got up, leaned for a second on the crutch, before they headed to the room, side by side.

The discussion went on for longer than expected. Whenever Vadim’s eyes went to Lesha, the general listened, interested, head slightly tilted, sometimes rubbing his chin in a thoughtful gesture, always concentrated. The discussion was lively, especially in light of the current developments in the region, and it wasn’t quite that straightforward to get out of the room and to the bar. When they finally did, Dan understood without too many words, and left Vadim on his own at the bar, while he sat down in a leather club chair within earshot. Sampling a Speyside whisky, he flicked through one of the many newspapers. Lesha showed up eventually, without his flock of bully boys. Dan glanced up once, studying the man, before he returned his fake attention to the paper. All he could hope was that this general wasn’t an asshole, after all.

“Interesting ideas,” said Lesha in Russian and ordered – not vodka, but wine.

Vadim inhaled deeply and nodded, saw in the bar mirror that his jaw muscles had tightened. “You mean ‘outrageous?’” Answering in Russian, aware that his command of the language had suffered from disuse.

“Well.” Lesha gave a nod to the bartender. “Certainly thought-provoking.”

“Or provocative?”

Lesha smirked. “Mincing words, Vadim?”

“In the absence of anything else to mince.” Vadim felt sudden anger rise in his throat. “Why are you here? It’s not like you haven’t heard these theories before. I thought they were fairly widely discussed.”

“But less candidly. We are trying to learn from our mistakes. There are commissions, archives ... our military historians are tackling the subject.”

“I’m not sure a wolf should write the wolves’ history.”

“But the lamb instead?”

“Well, you could have a lamb and wolf committee, and then they present the findings to the President.” Vadim shook his head. “Fuck. That’s not how I wanted to meet you again.”

“I thought so.” Lesha leaned against the bar, studying Vadim. “I could have imagined much better situations for that, but time wasn’t gentle.”

Vadim nodded. “How’s the career going?”

“Not too bad. A lot of trouble – money is short, certain ethnic groups are volatile as ever ... very little really changes outside Moscow.”

“That’s candid.”

“I know whom I’m talking to.” Lesha gave him a wry smile. “And you’re now a private security specialist. You must be making a lot of money. I have an idea of the fees you’re charging – very impressive. I’m glad you are well-secured.”

“I grew too old to remain a mercenary.” Vadim lowered his gaze. With a patriot like Lesha, the word mercenary equalled prostitute. “I’m not playing, Lesha. I am getting too tired.”

Lesha inhaled. “I can imagine.”

After these words, Lesha fell silent. Vadim sensed the disapproval, and he knew that his old friend was gone. Lesha wasn’t the man whose life he’d saved. He was being civil and went through the motions, but there was nothing left. No common ground.

“Do you have any questions? About the past?” Vadim asked.

“Why are you asking?”

“I get the feeling we won’t meet again. I believe in tying up loose ends ... entirely possible you have something on your mind that you’d like to see resolved. Then let’s do it – because I’m tired, and I could be lying in bed and getting rested up instead.”

Lesha looked at him for a long, long moment. “One thing.”

“Anything. Come on. Ask me.”

“Did you kill the officer? I mean ... did you cause him to kill himself?”

Vadim shook his head, for a moment. That was the question. Not ‘did you do it’, not ‘were you a traitor?’ but ‘did you kill the bastard who almost killed us?’ He looked Lesha in the eye and nodded. “Yes. And I’d do it again, and a hundred times more. The bastard very nearly killed both of us, and he got what he deserved.” He stared at Lesha, who sat there, visibly shocked, and Vadim suddenly knew that Lesha, all his life, had rationalised that the officer’s suicide had been an accident, that Vadim couldn’t have had anything to do with it, but there had been nagging doubt. That was now resolved.

Vadim stood. “Thanks for the drink, general.” And left.

Dan looked after him, but he didn’t follow, took instead the couple of steps towards the man who’d remained seated at the bar. “General Petkov?”

The general glanced up and nodded, speaking English. “Mr McFadyen. Please, have a seat.” He looked to the barman and nodded towards Dan, in the universal gesture of ‘on my tab’.

Dan was clearly surprised, hadn’t expected the polite reaction. “Bhunnabhain, please.” He nodded to the bartender. Sitting on the bar stool, he leaned the cane against the bar. “I hadn’t expected you to remember my name.”

“I have a knack for details. Very useful in my position.” The general smiled. “And you were cited as the co-author of an analysis that kicked up a bit of dust in certain circles.”

“Ah, that. Vadim has a knack, too. That’s to turn my ramblings into readable sentences.” Dan smiled politely, lighting another cigarette after offering one to the general. “Would have never thought he was an intellectual, back then.” He raised one brow in a most minuscule way, testing the waters.

“He could even be poetic, sometimes. Some way with language, and an unorthodox thinker. Finding solutions, even if it meant tricking his way out.” The general sipped his wine.

“And you think that has changed?”

“Ah. You caught me. I don’t know how much he has changed. That was how I knew him, as a recruit in the same barracks, and when I moved on to become army, and he special forces, and then later, in that unspeakable country.”

The whisky arrived and Dan took a sip of the smoky smoothness. “Afghanistan ...”

“Yes. Vadim tricked me when he faked a heroin addiction, to win a few weeks away from any superior’s eye. I invented orders for him, or rather, requests, that were duly granted. That was in the mid-eighties. That was the last time I saw him. A desperate man, a proud man who begged me for protection, which I granted him, of course. He’d saved my life when I was a recruit. He ... killed a bullying officer. Only we thought it was suicide. But just now, Vadim admitted to it. Twenty years later. No. Closer to thirty years.”

Dan nodded slowly. “Yes, that’s the way he is. Protecting those who are closest to him. His friends, comrades.” Dan took another mouthful, relishing the taste of home. “Do you know why he ‘tricked’ you in the eighties?” Pondering for a second, but there was nothing to lose, only to gain. “I was dying. Torn apart by a suicide bomb, lying in a hospital in India. He came to see me. A friend amongst enemies.” Looking steadily at the general. Friend, lover, who cared. Perhaps he was getting diplomatic in his old age. “Vadim is the most loyal man I know.”

“Oh, I didn’t doubt he did it for the ... most honourable reasons.” The general took off the cap and sat it next to himself on the bar. “I trusted him that much. And it’s a shame we lost him. There are many who think that, but only now some begin to speak about it. I doubt he’ll ever get pardoned ... There won’t be a friend’s hand stretched out in brotherhood towards him, and his reputation is eternally tarnished with those ghastly suspicions and the trial, but there are elements that think what happened to him is ... a disgrace.”

“A disgrace? That’s the biggest understatement ever. He never betrayed anyone or anything. But yes, he was and is homosexual.” Dan watched the general over the rim of the glass. “Does that warrant torture?”

The general’s brow darkened. “Personally, I don’t think it warranted torture.” Giving a weary, bleached-out smile, he continued: “But I don’t condone his lifestyle. Is that the word? Lifestyle? I am not intending to insult you – or him.”

Dan huffed a humourless laugh. “Lifestyle? What’s there to condone? It’s not a choice.”

“There is always a choice involved. Especially with somebody as cerebral as Vadim. He has made certain decisions. But it’s illegal in the army, and in our country. Still, if he’d kept quiet about it, he could have ... followed his leanings. But instead, he stood in a court room and said what he’d done with a man, and an enemy, was not a disgrace. You don’t think that the military could just take that challenge, pat him on the shoulder and let him go for it?” The general looked unspeakably tired.

“No, but that’s Vadim for you. Standing up for what mattered.” The love. *Their* love. Dan shrugged, letting it pass. The general would never understand and when it came down to it, he didn’t give a shit anymore about those who didn’t understand. “I just have to wonder, is there anything of the friendship left?”

“I ...” Lesha sighed. “He saved my life. I thought we were friends, but whether that was real or ... I don’t know.”

“Ah, that’s what it is.” Dan inhaled the last drag of smoke. “You wonder if he wanted you sexually, or if he was a friend, and if the one excludes the other.”

The general nodded, mute.

“I’m afraid in that case,” Dan smiled wistfully as he stood up, “you’ll never find out unless you *are* Vadim’s friend.” Taking hold of the cane, he nodded politely to the general. “Thank you for talking to me, but now I have to leave you, because, you see, I love Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada, and I need to check how he is.”

“Of course.” Looking chastised, maybe, or just uncomfortable, or maybe Dan had hit a nerve, point blank.

Turning to leave, Dan stopped, glancing back. “And that is *our* choice.” He gave a brief smile. “Good night, general.”

“Good night. And ... tell him about the disgrace thing. If you would.”

“I will, rest assured.”

Dan left towards the elevators, shaking his hand to free the lapis lazuli beads that had been caught in the cufflinks. It didn’t take long before he reached the suite, calling out softly as he opened the door. “Hey, Russkie.”

Vadim was sitting on the bed. He’d shed the jacket of the suit, the tie, too, lying at his feet like a dead snake, white pristine shirt several buttons open, reaching past the pecs. He was sitting there, staring into an empty glass, a bottle of duty free whisky at his feet, and he hadn’t bothered with the screw top. “Am I?” he asked. “Russian?”

“Not if you’re drinking whisky instead of vodka.” Dan made a light-hearted joke despite knowing damn well that this was no light-hearted matter. A swift glance at the bottle, one quarter empty, quite unlike Vadim these days. Pulling a chair close he sat down in front of Vadim and dropped the cane. Leaning down to take the bottle, pry the glass out of Vadim’s hand and refill it. “I guess it’s a bloody good question, though, if you are Russian or not.”

“Yes. Yes it is.”

Taking a large mouthful, Dan handed the glass back to Vadim. “Perhaps I should look for another nickname for you, aye? What do you think?”

Vadim stared at the glass again. “Don’t know. Few nicknames I’ve ever liked. Certainly not ‘Vadya’, even if Jean never got that.”

Dan quirked a small grin. “What about ‘light of my life?’”

“Don’t feel very bright just now, sorry.” Vadim took another sip, but at the same time reached over to touch Dan’s shoulder. “I’d drink piss if it made me less Russian.”

“Why right now?” Dan remembered the time Vadim had refused to speak Russian. “Or is that a really stupid question to an obvious answer?”

“It’s easier to be Russian when there are no other Russians around. Once they show up, I want to be their enemy ... or at least something else.”

Dan nodded, placed a hand on Vadim’s knee, squeezing once. Blue stone around his wrist, blending into the darkness of the fine wool of Vadim’s suit. “The general asked me to tell you that many believe, now that they dare to speak out, that what was done to you was a disgrace. Russia’s disgrace.”

Vadim closed his eyes, then got up. Pressing his lips together. His back was taut, neck rigid, and he wasn’t breathing, fighting the surge of emotion at those words. “That’s ... that’s why he’s here.”

“What?” Craning his head back, half-twisted on the chair, Dan looked at Vadim incredulously.

“Guilt.” Vadim turned around, eyes blazing. “The bastard feels guilty because he didn’t repay me.”

If anything, the confusion grew, until it hit Dan. “You mean, because he didn’t save you when you were imprisoned?”

“He’s a fucking general.” Vadim inhaled deeply. “Don’t tell me there was nothing he could have done. The bastard!”

Dan swivelled round to fully face Vadim again. “You really think so? It took the upper ranks of the British diplomacy, and they still failed. Besides, was he a general then? What do you think would have happened to anyone who spoke out for you, back then? Do you *really* think his career would have survived another day?”

“No.” Vadim shook his head, lowered it again, the anger deflating, but not leaving him. “Doesn’t mean it’s not guilt. On some level.”

“Okay, I can see that, and it wouldn’t surprise me.”

Vadim tossed back the whisky. “Or he just wanted to look at me. Look me in the eye. Hear me say things that would have got me into a mental institution if I had been high-ranking and stupid enough to say these things.”

“What the fuck?” Dan reached for the glass, pouring himself a large measure. “First of, what things would that be and secondly, who the fuck do you think he is, getting you institutionalised? That’s absurd. The guy has no handle on you. No one has.”

Vadim inhaled, forced himself to breathe and fight down the whirl of emotions, ranging from anger to paranoia, to hurt pride, fear, regret. Too much. He couldn’t think clearly anymore, and it wasn’t the alcohol. “What ... what now? What do I do with him?”

“Do you need to do anything with him? Why don’t you just let him go. Didn’t seem to be a friend to me.” Dan drank most of what he’d poured.

“Let him go.” Vadim stared at the door. Would be for the best. This man wasn’t the Lesha he’d known, saved, cared about, lusted for. It hurt. The memory was still there. Of the young soldier in the rain, pale, lips blue, shuddering violently, uniform soaked with rain. “Yeah. I’ll let him go.”

“You’ll still have the memory. You saved his life, he must have meant a lot.” Dan pushed himself up, taking the step towards Vadim. “But a friend ... Hooch is your friend. Hooch would pull you out of a fire, even if it meant he’d burn.” He smiled, tilting his head.

“Yeah. Hooch would.” Hooch he’d met not long ago, taken apart and put back together. Hooch, who had recovered well from the torture and injury, both mentally and physically. They’d found new limits, new height, depths. There was complete trust, the strangest and deepest friendship Vadim had ever known. Hooch was worth a dozen friends. Vadim looked at Dan, eyes showing anger and pain. “I killed a man for him. Lesha. Because he’d have killed him. An officer. I broke the bastard and he committed suicide – that way, he couldn’t take revenge on us.” Us. Nothing like that had ever existed. “Guess ... I guess I was in love with him.”

“Aye, and he never paid you back.” Quietly, Dan could see the anger, but could do nothing about the pain, except for touching Vadim’s shoulder. “And never reciprocated.” Wanting to draw him close, but he’d learned that this didn’t always work.

Vadim nodded silently, then moved towards Dan, pulling him into a powerful embrace, hiding his face against Dan’s shoulder, breathing, struggling.

Dan said nothing, just holding, strong and steadfast. So fucking glad Vadim touched him, wanted him to be there, hold, and let him inside. Stroking the back of Vadim’s head, fingertips carding through the short hair, he had his eyes closed and just stood. If he’d learned anything in his life, then it was patience.

Vadim eventually turned his head to kiss Dan’s neck. “I’d be so fucked without you,” he murmured, sounding calm and tired. The alcohol had had time to kick in as well.

“Don’t think I wouldn’t be buggered without you, either.” Dan chuckled low. Turning his head to kiss Vadim’s temple. “What do you say about a hot bath and spa and a relaxing blow-job?”

Vadim nodded. “I’m game.” He finished the bottle, poured the rest of the whisky into his glass. “Fuck Russia.” Saluting Dan, and then emptying the glass.

“Yeah, and you’ll be putty in my hands in a minute.” Dan grinned, then went into the bathroom to start filling the large tub.

Vadim grinned, seemed to grow more pensive for a few moments, looking at the door, but forced himself to stop thinking about it. Lesha was dead. Better men than him had died. Platon. Sasha. For all Vadim cared, Lesha’s bullet had just missed him. Maybe he was luckier in Chechnya or wherever he worked now.

They had a long hot bath, the spa relaxing, and the whisky mellowing. True to his word, Dan got Vadim into the bed afterwards, and proceeded to give him a slow and torturously skilled blow-job, with all the tricks in the book - and he knew a lot of them.

When Vadim fell asleep, Dan was holding him, like he usually did. Spooning behind him, watching the back of his neck in the gloom of the bedroom, until he, too, fell asleep.

The next morning, after a quick shower and shave, Vadim and Dan headed back to the breakfast room. Vadim wasn't surprised to see the Russian delegation sit together at a table, the general framed by his bully boys. He studiously ignored the man, but thought he felt his gaze a few times.

When Dan got up the second time to help himself at the buffet, he caught the general's eyes and nodded with a polite smile. Wishing "good morning" in Russian, before presenting his well-dressed back to the delegation as he loaded his plate once more.

The general nodded, entirely civil, no onlooker could have seen anything amiss, neither distaste nor previous encounters. Lesha played the role well, thought Vadim, sitting next to Dan when he returned, sipping coffee, and every now and then touching Dan's hand on the table.

Dan looked up, smiling, the bullet on its chain around his neck caught a spark of light as he turned and the collar of his high-class leisure shirt opened wider. "I was thinking about going for a stint in the gym and swim later. Anything you want to do in the meantime?"

"Network," Vadim said. "Not sure I got everybody's card last night." He added a smile to that.

Dan grunted. "Guess that means I still can't let go of the Maggie-skin yet and have to behave?" A wicked grin crossed his face, "unless you'd want me to go hunting for potential fun."

Vadim pursed his lips. "Get us some fun. I'm quite in the mood, and we'd still catch our plane early tomorrow." It felt reckless, liberating to discuss this with Lesha in the same room. Not ashamed, or at least not hiding. "I'll trust your judgement."

"Hmmm ..." Dan mused while his grin grew. "You feel up to spending a wad of money on some high class hooker, or two? Been thinking about it, and not just because I'm getting older." he winked. "It's been a lifetime since I last bought a whore, and it sure as fuck wasn't anything like what I'm looking for now."

Vadim licked his lips, grinning wolfishly. "You just won yourself a credit card." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled the black leather wallet out and handed it to Dan. "Get the prettiest you can get. I don't mind blowing this time's fee on them."

Dan laughed, "they won't be *that* expensive, I'm not getting them gold-coated, after all."

"Well, if you don't like their clothes, get them something nice to wear. Some hookers have a horrible dress sense."

"As if I had a better dress sense." Dan rolled his eyes and finished his coffee, then pocketed the business account credit card. "I'll see you this afternoon." Standing up, he grinned. "Don't enjoy yourself too much while I'm gone."

“Hardly.” Vadim grinned, watching Dan leave, then his eyes inadvertently trailed back to Lesha, smile receding, vanishing, until all he did was regard Lesha from under heavy lids. His face carefully neutral, stoic, thinking how Lesha had become exactly what he’d always despised, but in more senses than one. A bigot, a general, a career officer who valued the rulebook higher than comrades. Seen from that perspective, Vadim thought, Lesha was the traitor in the room. And in a way, that gave him a grim satisfaction.

Eventually, Lesha stood and left his entourage, and took two steps closer to Vadim. Probably waiting to be invited to Vadim’s table. You won’t get me unprepared this time, thought Vadim. “General?”

Lesha regarded him for a long moment. “I have to be at the airport in two hours, so ...”

“So?”

“If there is anything else ...”

“I can send you the text of the presentation, General, if you leave me your address. You might find I have revised it in the meantime. There were a few scholars I haven’t had time to examine.” Vadim smiled, baring his teeth up to the first molars. “It would be my pleasure entirely.”

The general paused, but to his credit, his facial muscles didn’t twitch. “That would be very welcome.” He reached into the uniform jacket and found a card. Official looking. He kept it non-personal. Bastard. Vadim noticed a mark on his finger, like he’d worn a ring ... for a long time. Divorced? Who the fuck cared.

Vadim looked at the card briefly, but let it lie on the table cloth. “Have a good trip back, General. Thanks for coming.”

“Thank you.”

Lesha was about to turn when Vadim added: “And tell the others I don’t care for their pity or what they think of me. Whatever they think of me, it’s true. Whatever you think of me, it’s definitely true. I’m all that, and I don’t give a fuck what you think.” Coarse soldier’s Russian, the only language they’d shared, once upon a time.

Lesha nodded, brow dark, but he didn’t shoot back. “I understand. Well, Mr Krasnorada, that was very enlightening.”

“I bet.” Vadim stood, took the card to dispose of it later, and left the room.

\* \* \*

Dan was in a rather good mood when he returned in the early afternoon. He found Vadim sitting in the tea room, sipping a glass of wine, listening to a guy playing on the piano. He had a folder with papers in front of him, but he either hadn’t started work, or was finished. He looked up. “Chopin,” he murmured. “Hey, had a good day?”

“A successful one, aye, you could say that. Even though our business account is going to be somewhat lighter.” Dan didn’t sit down, just leaned against the chair opposite to Vadim. “We’ll be having ‘guests’ at seven tonight.”



He grinned sharply. "I was assured that the hotel is very much used to visitors of any nature."

"The bill they charge us, they better be." Vadim leaned back and grinned. "What are they like? How did you find them?"

"Now that would be telling." Dan tapped the side of his nose. "Let's just say that internet, mobile phone and personal vetting go very well together. Also, whatever you have heard about Austrians being prissy, it's not true. Vienna seems to be a positive den of sin." He grinned, "and for what those guys are like ... I saw each of them personally. Can't think of anything other than 'perfect'. Not a flaw. Mid-twenties and exactly what they should be like: too perfect to be real. By the way, I got us a dark one and a light one." He winked.

Vadim laughed softly. "I guess you know my type fairly well." Vadim motioned for Dan to sit down, relax, offered him some of the wine. "Seems like a good ... climax for a less than ideal work assignment."

"And you did say that hookers don't count, that we'd share them." Dan smiled and took the wine. "What are we going to do before seven? Sex is right out, we don't want to spoil us for our expensive 'guests'."

Vadim laughed, "no, you are right. What about going out for a meal and some sightseeing?"

"As long as the meal makes up for the sightseeing, I am game."

With Vadim's promise, they headed off into the epitome of Baroque cities. Even Dan was impressed by some of the architecture, the exquisite gardens, the marbling and iron work, but after two hours, he was tired of it and demanded his food. He got it soon in one of the finest restaurants, with a famous Viennese coffee to close an excellent meal.

When they returned to the hotel they left instructions to send the 'guests' upstairs to their room, and then retreated to freshen up. Dan joked that there was no point in dressing, but Vadim figured that it was them who should get an eyeful, certainly for the money they paid, and not the other way round.

When the two young men arrived, they were indeed as perfect as Dan had promised. One dark haired and green eyed, the other blond and grey eyed, and even the fact that he'd helped the white blond of his short hair with the bottle didn't diminish the appeal. Both tanned, both smooth, and both ready and willing to do anything Vadim and Dan asked for.

The night turned out to be longer than even Dan had expected, with those two guys truly being worth their money as they shared each other, while Dan and Vadim watched, turned on by the beauty and perfection and the professionalism with which the make-belief seemed more real than real. Slick, perhaps, too faultless, but they were a treat, rare and different. When it was Dan and Vadim's turn to make use of those beautiful men, it was a combination of watching, taking in the image of the other with one or two of them, and of taking their fill.

When the two finally left in the morning, both Dan and Vadim were relaxed, sated, and Lesha had become a mere memory. Another page or two in Vadim's diary.

## August 1999, New Zealand

The phone rang and Vadim picked it up. He'd been sitting in the living room, a book on his stomach, a notepad at his side, the phone within easy reach. He could hear Dan rummage around in the kitchen. Tea time.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"Hi Vadim."

Only one person who'd speak Russian with him, and he found himself shift back into the language. "Katya. How are you?" Almost four years. Four years since he'd written the letter, told her everything. There had been no response, and he'd gone on living his life, earning money, keeping busy, writing whenever he felt the past become too oppressive. It had been a good four years, though. Despite the nagging feeling that he should ... should do something, anything, that there was a connection that was still bleeding, somehow.

"I'm just calling to say happy birthday."

"Thank you." He leaned back, closed his eyes, listened to her terse, strained voice. There was something wrong, he could tell, but he knew from experience that straight-out asking her would merely be skilfully parried, and then there would be a counter attack.

"How is it, being fifty?"

"Hardly feel a difference." He did – they both did. The wear and tear meant there were pains, but the active life meant they suffered a lot less than anybody their age bracket they knew. "And how are you? How are the children?"

"Anya is studying medicine ... she says she wants to become a heart or brain surgeon."

"She's a clever one," Vadim said, with tenderness. He'd assumed she'd be good. Cool, self-collected, clever and perceptive. "And Nikolai?"

"Ah, he's going through a phase. Boys his age do."

Vadim paused. "Military service?"

"I took care of that." Her voice was steel.

"And what about Kisa?"

"Healthy child. Strong-headed." Katya grew increasingly terse.

"That's good to hear. I'm glad you called. Been a while, but ... did you get my letter?"

"Yes. I've read it just before I called you. I might have called you earlier, but ... life caught up with me."

"Doesn't sound good."

"The things you wrote – it was strange, because I guessed much of what you told me, but not the extend of it. I only saw a surface; I never realized how much you were hurting, how much you wanted to be free, and how difficult you found it to relate to people."

"I still loved you and the children. I still care." Spelling everything out, facing emotions like regret, love, all that, head-on, communicating, being open.

"I know." Her voice sounded thick. "I know, and I thought I'd made my peace with all this. Our marriage, the children. That you would remain a fond memory, even though you cast us from your life. I understand now why you did it, but it hurt, and I hated you."

"Fair enough. I deserved that hate." They didn't speak for what felt like several minutes. "You can't take defeat, Katya, I know. It was that which inspired me all those years. Your strength."

"And I hated your partner."

"Fair enough," Vadim repeated. "There's plenty of that in him, too."

"Yes," she conceded.

"Do you know you were the only woman I ever loved that wasn't my mother?" Vadim murmured. "I always wanted to be the husband you deserved, but I wasn't. I wasn't made like that, I couldn't be the man you loved. That's a massive failure. I'm sorry for that. If I had been, I promise ..."

"Oh Vadim." Some of her old tenderness was in those words. The tone that she had for him when telling him he'd let the bath cool because he was too engrossed in a book. "You were perfect. I never wanted to hurt you. You'd have let me go with Sasha, I let you go with Dan. I made you to, even though I didn't feel he was right for you, but after ... almost twenty years or so ... you've spent far more time with him than with me, and I hope it was a good twenty years and you'll have another fifty years, not regretting anything."

So open and honest, calm, strong. "What happened?"

"Nothing much, Vadim. I'm just feeling like I should pick up some pieces."

"What happened?"

"They thought I had cancer, but the biopsy came back negative. Not malevolent. I won't die of this."

Vadim felt his breath stall. "Honest?"

"Yes, honest. But when I got the result, I thought, what if? What if I'd die a slow death like Szandor, and Kisa is still a child." You're both not fathers, her tone said. What of the child.

"I'm ... glad to hear you're good."

"Yes. If you want to meet the children ... if you happen to be somewhere in Europe at some point ..."

Tempting him away from those last, dark promises, that he'd refuse the children as long as she held Kisa hostage. And what did it actually mean? That he was still standing by his word after those years, after that monstrous What If? What if she'd been dying? Would he still have denied her? "You're not playing fair."

"I'm sorry." She might even be, but the old grudge was still there, and that was a damned shame. "You still won't ..."

"No, Katya." Despite the fact you could be dead. In a way, it would be treason, and he'd not go so far after all those years. "But thanks for the offer. It's appreciated."

"Well, enjoy your birthday."

"Thank you." He switched off the phone and opened his eyes.

It took a while, sitting in silence, before a faint rustle, deceptively deliberate, announced Dan's appearance in the doorway. He was carrying one mug of tea and one of coffee.

"Everything alright?"

"Katya called." Vadim straightened, took his coffee, and sighed. "We're still on square one." He shook his head.

Dan put the mugs down before sitting down on the couch. "Damn, it's been how long?"

"Last time I was in touch. Nearly four years ... But Kisa is doing alright. Head-strong, she said."

"Doesn't surprise me." Dan smiled at first, then frowned, "Katya brought it onto herself, but what about your kids?"

"Anya's studying to become a doctor, and Nikolai ... she said he was having a phase, like young men do." Whatever that meant. Drinking? Girls? Hormones? Rebelliousness? Nikolai? He was the shyest kid he'd ever known. Him going 'through a phase' sounded wrong, but what did he actually know about his children.

"You should see your kids, Vadim." Dan said quietly, before having a mouthful of coffee.

Yes. No. "Shit. Happy birthday," Vadim murmured, and Dan got up, laboriously, only to scoot closer, and to wrap his arm around Vadim, who touched his head to Dan's.

"There's a party on Saturday to look forward to, and you haven't even opened your present."

Vadim smiled. "No. Sorry."

"No need to be sorry, I haven't given it to you yet, was wondering if you thought I'd forget your 'big O'." Hardly possible with an enormous birthday cake in the fridge. Dan twisted to get to the back pocket of his black jeans, and produced a small envelope. Grinning triumphantly. "Here you go."

Vadim laughed. "Careful. My Big O is just a few months before yours. Thank you." He opened the envelope and smiled as he read. Two weeks holiday in a luxury spa hotel in Tuscany with personal trainer and beauty treatments. He noticed that Dan had ordered the treatments for 'two adults', which meant Dan would subject himself to the same regime. Vadim leaned over and kissed him. "Sounds good – when are we flying?"

"Sunday." Dan grinned, "but at least I made it an afternoon flight from Palmy, so we can recover from the party."

"That's very considerate. Tuscany. You know that's dangerously close to Rome with all those museums, galleries and archaeological sites?"

"Oh no!" Dan exclaimed in fake horror. "I knew I shouldn't have done that, it's going to bite me in the arse. A propos arse, if I let them wax mine, and if I suffer through that horrendous pain for your viewing, touching and tasting pleasure, are you going to leave me in a place with good food and booze while you do that culture shit?" He grinned from ear to ear.

“It’s a deal. Museums are better if I don’t get the ‘Are you done yet’ question every five minutes. Even though you’d miss all those naked and semi-naked statues the Romans liked so much.”

“Russkie, you’re a bastard, you know that? I don’t complain every five minutes, it’s every ten at the most.” Dan laughed, “and I’d rather have a semi-naked Roman than a fully naked Roman statue.” He had another mouthful of his coffee. “As for naked men, I recall that you haven’t had your birthday blowjob yet. Am I right? In fact, shouldn’t that be fifty, one for each year?”

Vadim laughed. “Aren’t you a bit optimistic about my endurance?” He turned and kissed him. “I’ll take one of the fifty, and keep the others for later.”

“Aye, that’ll do.”

They didn’t bother to go upstairs, and they found a way for Dan to enjoy his favourite pastime of all, there and then, and with never waned enthusiasm.

They might be fifty, but they weren’t past it yet.

### August 2002, Hungary

Dan was stirring his double espresso, unaware he had been chasing the spoon around in circles for at least two minutes. He tried not to check the door, neither his watch. Staring into his coffee, as usual over-sweetened, he started another forlorn round of stirring long dissolved sugar.

He shouldn't feel so nervous, the way he was sitting there was plain ridiculous. A man of nearly fifty-three, behaving like a teenager on a first date. Good thing he hadn't told Vadim how long he'd been standing in front of his suitcase that morning, deciding in the end on customary black jeans and one of the linen and silk mix shirts that Vadim had bought him. It had even taken him a whole shocking five minutes to decide on the charcoal coloured one.

Deciding on the jacket had been easy: black leather and from a chap called Armain. Or Armani. Or Armand? Didn't matter, all that counted was that Vadim had told him those clothes made him look as hot as any middle aged man possibly could. If it was good enough for Vadim, it was good enough for him.

But would it be good enough for Kisa?

Dan was about to add yet another lump of sugar, when the door of the ice cream parlour opened. He looked up, and almost dropped the spoon. A girl came in, dressed in black, weird 'straps' attached to her combat-style trousers. Her dark hair had purple streaks and was done up in some sort of explosion. Long, at least, so he had an inkling that it was actually a girl, even though that probably didn't count for much, either. What had happened to his idea of a twelve year old kid? Black eyeliner around her eyes, smudged, everything but expertly applied, and those fingernails ... when she came closer he noticed the bitten and chewed, chipped-off black polish. Holy shit. That couldn't be his daughter? Not the pretty little dark haired girl with the huge brown eyes and the impish grin?

"Hi." She stopped in front of his table. "You Dan?"

He looked up and nodded, remembered to stand up, a bit laboriously, and had the intelligence to stretch out his hand for a shake. He hadn't expected this ... this strange looking kid. The last photos he had received were about a year old.

"Yeah, I'm Dan. Hi Kisa." He had the urge to flee, but she grabbed his hand and the firm but brief shake made him look into her eyes. Stopped. Surprised. Despite the black around them they were still the same eyes from the photos.

His eyes.

"What would you like?" He remembered to ask, but felt awkward. Trying to show her the menu, he knocked it over instead. Stupid. She would know all about the menu anyway, she lived close by, unlike him. He'd just flown across the globe for over twenty-four hours.

“It’s Okay.” She sat down, all cool, despite her age, and unlike him very much at home in that place. “I order.” While Dan sat down, she fired off a rapid conversation to the waitress in Hungarian, with the occasional quick laugh.

He kept his left hand under the table, conscious of the scars. He had noticed her initial stare at his face. He couldn’t remember if the recent photo he’d sent her mother had shown his scar, hoped it had. Didn’t want to be regarded as a freak, not by this kid.

Kid. Daughter. His daughter. Holy fuck.

He couldn’t help studying her, the way her hands moved while talking to the waitress, the ragged black nails flashing in quick succession and then that laughter again. She sounded like a kid who could be suspiciously good fun, if only she didn’t look like a bundle of rags.

“So,” she turned back to him, switching into English, which turned out to be fluent and with a pleasant accent. “You’re Dan.” She tilted her head, unabashedly staring at him, she let her gaze wander across his face, back down to the shirt and up again, left and right until it ended in the centre. She obviously studied the grey temples and silver streaks in an otherwise dark and forever unruly head of too-long hair. “You look nothing like a father.” She stated her conclusion, then rubbed her nose. “Nothing like my friends’ dads.”

Dan couldn’t help but laugh. “What the fuck did you expect me to look like?” Wincing. Damn! He hadn’t meant to swear.

She laughed, seemed it was funny to her that an old geezer talked that way. “I thought men your age wore suits and tie and had short hair. I expected you to be boring, not with a cool scar in your face and a leather jacket.” She spotted the cane that leant against the free chair. “That’s more like it.”

Dan grinned, suddenly not feeling so awkward anymore. “You think the scar’s cool? It’s old, I keep forgetting about it.” Yeah, right, as if. You’d been worried about that all morning. Like the clothes and what he should say or expect and whatever the fuck he was supposed to feel and think and why on earth he’d ever agreed to this in the first place. He nodded towards the cane. “That? I have an artificial knee and it’s easier to walk with a cane, but bloody uncool.”

She shrugged, “my friends’ fathers are totally uncool to start with, but then they are at least fathers.” Another shrug, she twisted a strand of the purple-dark hair around her fingers, stuffed it into her mouth and chewed on it.

Before he could reply, the waitress arrived with a tray and a glass of coke and a huge bowl of ice cream. Vanilla and chocolate, dripping in sauce and crowned with whipped cream, several chocolate fingers sticking out of the top. Dan stared at the concoction. Perfect. At least that kid had an eclectic taste: his own.

“I’d like one of those as well and another coffee. Extra sugar.” Dan pointed at the ice cream and the waitress smiled, heading off to the counter. He didn’t notice at first how the kid was staring at him.

Kid. No, Kisa. Kisa, his daughter. Shit.

“What’s up? Are those ice creams reserved for kids?” He rose his brows then finished off the coffee, now lukewarm. “I happen to like sweets.”

She tilted her head even further, until her face almost touched the table, dark hair and twisted purple strands nearly falling into the whipped cream. He felt strange being scrutinised by eyes that were so much like his own.

“I like sweets, too. My favourite stuff. Mum tells me off for ladling sugar into my cereal.” She shrugged, then tucked into her dessert, “I don’t care what she says. I’m old enough to know what I want.”

“Aye, I guess you are.” Dan offered a smile. Watching her eat, he wondered if he’d ever looked like that when wolfing down his food.

“You think so?” She frowned. “You don’t *know* that I know?”

“Of course I don’t know, I can only imagine. I don’t know you.”

“Exactly.” Suddenly sullen.

Dan waited a moment, but that was it. She was silently shovelling the dessert into herself, hovering the whipped cream down as if there were no tomorrow.

Great. Now it was awkward again and Dan wished the waitress were faster in preparing that goddamned chocolate vanilla bowl. At least she’d provide a distraction. Was he now meant to say something or was he supposed to wait? He’d never had to deal with a kid; his nephews had never required any work. Or perhaps he hadn’t been there when they’d been kids.

“I’m sorry.” He finally offered an apology even though he wasn’t sure for what.

“Really?” She looked up, the angry glare somewhat lessened by a cream moustache. “Why would you be? If you were sorry, then why didn’t you ever want to see me?”

Target locked. Missile fired. Where was the eject seat when one needed it the most?

“Shit.” Dan murmured, avoided her gaze, glad the waitress came at last with the ice cream and coffee. It gave him an excuse to remain silent while frantically trying to think. Think, Dan! You had all the perfect explanations and smoothly polished lies, ready for use. Why, then, why did it feel all wrong? The bluntness, the open eyed questions, the stare that was so frank he could almost forget she was only a kid. Kid. Kisa. Why did I never see you? Your mother stipulated she’d cry ‘rape’ if I ever did. You were hers and hers alone, and I’d been happy with that, never really questioned it. You’ve never been part of my life, you couldn’t have been. Except for money, but money didn’t count. I never wanted you. I hated your mother for creating you. And now you’re here and you look at me with those goddamned eyes, and I’m helpless.

“You still haven’t answered my question.” She frowned. “Don’t you want to answer it or can’t you? You think you can’t tell me the truth? You just didn’t want to have anything to do with me, is that it?”

Was it? Was it that simple? Oh, Kisa, you’ll never know.

“No. It’s not that simple. Nothing ever is.” Dan took a mouthful of cream, then twisted one of the chocolate sticks in his hand.



“Then tell me why? Mum said you had a one-night stand, but I found out that you’d known all along that I existed. I found a couple of letters that had come back from some place, what was it, the one before Serbo-Croatia.”

“Yugoslavia,” Dan muttered. *Land of horror and hatred, of mass graves and wailing, and of kids like you, killing soldiers.*

“Yes, that one.” She wiped her lips with her sleeve. “I know I shouldn’t have, but I opened them. They’d been undeliverable. I opened them because mum never told me anything about my father. She kept telling me that she hadn’t known you, a one-night stand. The best that had ever come out of it was I.” She frowned. “There were pictures of me as a toddler. Short letters that said a bit about what I was doing, nothing else, but you knew that I existed and I know that you knew all along. Then why did you never want to see me?”

The same question again, and all Dan could wonder about was why the hell Katya had kept those letters. He worked his way through some mouthfuls of vanilla ice, while sifting through all the optional lies he’d been fabricating in his mind. One-night stand. Busy. Business. Didn’t know - that one was out - couldn’t, the truth, but not enough.

Truth. Shit, yes. Frankness pitched against frankness. If Kisa was anything like him she’d want the truth and nothing else. The truth, except for her conception. Some truths were too brutal to ever be known.

“Is that all your mother told you? I was a one-night stand?”

Kisa nodded, while drinking her coke.

“That’s the truth, but only part of it.” Dan sat back. Katya would kill him, but then, what did he have to lose? “The truth is that you are ‘a child of love’, as they say, but not of the love between your mother and me, but between my partner and me.” He paused to take in a breath. “I’m gay. Vadim, your siblings’ father, has been my lover for twenty-two years.” Sometimes the truth needed a little help.

“What?” With the spoon paused in mid-motion, she stared incredulously at him. “You mad?”

“No,” Dan sat just as still, “only gay.”

“That’s the biggest load of lies I have ever heard!” Eyes ablaze, she furiously glared at him. “That’s not possible. You think I’m stupid?” Her spoon came down onto the table with a nasty crack, ice-cream sludge splattering across. “I’m not a child anymore, I’m nearly twelve. I know something about gays and they don’t do it with women!”

Dan couldn’t help but burst into laughter, admiring the black-and-white view of her world.

“We can.” How the fuck to explain things without going into detail. He wasn’t ready to talk about sex with a kid whose image in his mind was of pigtails and impish grin. “It happens. It did happen.”

The steep crease between her brows deepened. “Oh, really? So my sister’s and my brother’s dad has been having sex with you all the time and not with mum, right? And you in return had sex with my mum, once, and why? What’s that got to do with lovers and love and everything else?” She started to fume

again, “what’s that got to do with me? Why did you never want to see me? You knew you had a daughter!”

Shit. Too many questions and only one answer. The old whore again. Truth. The one who’d brought him in and out of trouble, and whose painted face had to hide the odd deceit.

He sighed, then took a deep breath while his spoon came down, hands resting on the tabletop. Both of them, side by side. Looking at her, as calmly as he managed. “Kisa,” not ‘kid’, and it felt right, “you are my daughter, I don’t doubt that for a second, even though I’ve never been a father to you.” He fixed her angry stare with his steady own. “And since you are my daughter, I figure that you’d appreciate the truth. All of it. The whole story.” Another deep breath. “Do you want to hear how it all happened and why I never tried to make contact?”

She nodded, grabbed the spoon and shovelled the last of the ice-cream down, then pulled Dan’s bowl closer when he gave it a push towards her. “Yes. The truth, and don’t you dare make it sound better.”

He shook his head. He wouldn’t, but he’d sanitise the truth. Corpses, death, hatred and desperation, these things had nothing to do in her life.

“First of, I’ve actually seen you before, three times. I never made contact and you didn’t know who I was, don’t think you ever saw me.” He shrugged, “Your mother and I,” the lies, they did come smoothly sometimes, “we decided that it would be best for you not to meet me. We were wrong, it seems, and I’m sorry for it.”

She’d gone back to the customary tilt of her head, quiet for now.

“Let me tell you the whole story.” Dan told her about how he had met Vadim, sanitising every event as he went along, two enemy soldiers, who did not kill each other, instead began to fall in love. Condensing eight years into a story fit for a Hollywood movie. No lies, just the absence of some of the truths. He went on to talk about Vadim’s execution, how he had visited his ex-wife, Kisa’s mother, to get a message across to him through his father, one that was about love. Their love. Vadim’s and his.

“That night, Kisa, your mother and I consoled each other and it just happened. One thing led to the other, we were both devastated about Vadim’s impending execution, and we ended up having sex.” He could hardly believe how smoothly this lie was slipping across his tongue. “That’s how you were conceived. Because of love, just not between your mother and me.”

He’d have to talk to Katya to reinforce the story. A lie that was destined to remain the truth and nothing but the truth, for this one person. His daughter. He wasn’t a good man, but he’d be buggered if he let the kid get hurt.

“Oh man.” Her eyes widened, the anger had turned into fascination. “That’s ... that’s crazy. My friends are never going to believe that. How cool?”

Cool? Dan lit a cigarette like a dying man reached for the sacraments. He’d expected anything but that reaction. “You think that’s *cool*?”

She grinned, rage forgotten, and nodded vigorously, purple strands flying all over the place. “My father’s gay and he slept with my mother because my

sibling's father is his lover, who was going to be executed by the KGB. Wow!" She positively beamed, "that's fucking cool!"

He didn't even notice the swearing. *Cool.*

Right, the whole thing was cool.

Dan muttered about kids, the new world, things he didn't understand anymore and the fact he'd produced a female monster. One he already liked. A lot.

She grinned, "you promised to tell me why you've never seen me and why mum and you thought that would be best."

He nodded, exhaled smoke away from her and reached for the coffee. "Okay, the reason has to do with my job." He continued to explain what he'd done as a merc after her conception, that he hadn't known of her existence before she was two. He'd been in the Gulf at that time. He wasn't sure if she understood why risking his life every day would be a reason she shouldn't meet him, but she seemed to accept the explanation and his apology. For now. No doubt she'd come back to the whole thing later, he had a feeling she wasn't someone who'd ever let go.

"Is that why you have the scars?" She pointed unashamedly at his face, then reached for his left hand. She took it, pulled it over and studied the ugly mess. Functional, but by no means pretty.

Dan stared at his hand in hers. She had long fingers, a narrow hand. The female version of his own, and she'd probably be tall when she was fully grown. Her mother was tall herself, lithe and slender, and he was strong, but tended towards the wiry, if he didn't work out extensively. If he wasn't mistaken, the kid would turn out to be a stunner. He could already imagine the trail of broken hearts.

"Aye," he nodded, "got the scar on my hand from a close security job. I was protecting a lady ambassador in Kabul, in 1988. Was a car explosion, tore my guts open as well, but before you ask," he held her back with a grin, "I'm not going to show you those scars. Not dropping my trousers in a café."

She grinned up into his face, and he smiled back her. Completely smitten. These eyes, despite the dreadful makeup. Those hands. 'Lapushka', how fitting, a kitten's paw. Kisa, kitten. Apt for the tiger's daughter. Dan wondered for the if the story he had left for Vadim's father to tell, had anything to do with the choice of his daughter's name.

"I'm glad I finally met you."

She nodded, still grinning, "I'm, too. You're cool. Wish I had met you earlier."

"Sorry, we fucked it up." He didn't realise he was tilting his head just like she had done, earlier.

"It's a lot to swallow right now. That's the craziest story I've ever heard and I'm right in the middle of it." She let go of Dan's hand, looked at her watch then out of the window. "Mum's picking me up, she's probably already waiting. You have an email address?"

Dan grinned. "Of course, I'm not that old. Here," he reached into a jacket pocket, "take my card. It's my private email address and my private mobile number. Don't give it to anyone else, Okay? Not even your mother. It's just for close friends."

"Thanks, that's great. I'll send you a mail. I want to ask you a lot of questions, but have to go now." She stood up, too fast for him to do the same. "Bye, Dan!" She was out of the door before he could stub out his fag.

Dan leaned back in the chair, closed his eyes for a moment, to sit and think. He finally took a very deep breath, before searching for his phone to send a text.

Kisa. Force of nature. What the hell else had he expected.

Dan grinned.

\* \* \*

The moment the cell phone vibrated in his pocket, Vadim got up and began heading for the ice cream parlour. A press of a button retracted the lens, and the small, sleek, silver thing transformed into a silvery cube, which fitted neatly into his inside pocket. The wonders of Sony.

He'd tell Dan of the quick series of photos later. Only Kisa had really been on them. Dan still had his instincts, and had been invisible from the park opposite the ice cream place, and in cover behind a concrete pillar.

He checked the text before crossing the road. "Were done," it said. Dan never bothered switching menus for the apostrophes. Dan's irreverent nature of course extended to his own language. Vadim stuffed the phone back into his pocket, knowing full well that Dan could see him by now, long before he entered the cafe. He walked towards the table, where Dan was still sitting, grinning like a fool that had just been laid. Only that he didn't tend to grin that much after sex.

"Ah, I can see you're in love," murmured Vadim. He looked up to the waitress who had given up preening behind the counter and was now preening with a pad in her hand. Dan's charms. "Ah." Eyes narrowed to make out the words on the blackboard behind the counter, but nothing he could understand. "Tea. Earl Grey." He turned back to Dan. "So. As bad as expected, I gather?"

Dan simply continued to grin. "Bad? You have no idea. She's a terror." He smirked and ordered another coffee by pointing to the one he'd already had. "I need you to talk to her mother, though. It's urgent. She needs to know the new party line." He reached out and touched Vadim's hand, never noticing the disappointed look on the waitresses' face. "I told Kisa the truth. All of it, and she thinks it's rather cool. To quote her: 'to have a gay father who slept with her mother because of her siblings' gay father's execution, who is the lover of her father'. Or something like that." He grinned.

Vadim gave a dry laugh, thumb moving to hold Dan's fingers that lay across his hand. No thought went into it.

"It's FUBAR." He pondered the request for a while, then nodded. "Katya will respect that. She is a very reasonable person." He could sense the

thunderstorm gathering around Dan, and waved it away with a hand. "In her way. She did a good job with the kids, you know. Much better than, uh, we could have. I mean. I did try to be a father back then, but it didn't work out very well." He listened to himself, astonished just how insecure he sounded.

Dan shook his head, then reached for another fag with his free hand, the other resting comfortably in Vadim's. "We never got a chance to be fathers, for different reasons." Lighting the fag, "Okay, so I would have been crap at it, but there's no one to prove otherwise." He shrugged and pulled in the first deep drag of nicotine.

"I can give her a call. Or would that be a meeting? Maybe in a restaurant?" Keeping all options open.

"I guess I really have to meet Katya, aye?" Dan glanced at Vadim. "She needs to know urgently what I concocted regarding Kisa's conception, or the 'Truth As The Kid Knows It' will get blown." Dan nodded his thanks when the waitress brought their orders, and took a sip after adding a double portion of sugar. "I told her we 'comforted' each other because of your impending execution and that's how it happened, even though I'm gay. Child of love and all that stuff." Another sip, "at least the last bit's not a lie."

"Well, I think after all that time ..." Vadim glanced at Dan and decided it was not nearly enough time, there was still anger in Dan's eyes. Let's talk about this again when the sun has burnt out. "Okay. I'll give her a call. She might want to meet." He squeezed the lemon slice with the metal thing that was designed for it, watching the juice vanish in the tea.

"Thanks." Dan smiled and let go of Vadim's hand.

"Let's see if I have her number." Of course he did. Vadim's phone was brimming with contact information and he never deleted a contact. He fished it out of his pocket, and thinking of it, put the Sony camera on the table as well. "Photos of your girl." Nodding towards it, while fiddling single-handedly with the phone. The buttons were getting smaller every year. "There." There was only one 'Katya', just the first name, the last name felt always awkward on her or even the children. Strange. He looked at Dan. "Right now?"

Dan reached for the camera, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, while he peered at the display. "Yep, right now. It's important she gets the 'facts' right before Kisa goes bonkers on her." He was flicking through the pictures, grinning at the mess the kid was. The dreadful clothes, ratty nails and awful hair, and that unspeakable eyeliner. He studied one photo in particular, which showed her laughing, holding his fucked-up hand in hers.

Vadim nodded and pressed the button. Once to select her name, second time to dial. Waited.

Then "Yes?"

"It's me."

"I know."

Of course, she had his number, too.

"How are you?"

"Just fine. How are you?"

“Yeah, I need ... a bit of sleep, jetlag. Hardly know what date it is.”

“Thirteenth.”

Vadim gave a short, toneless laugh. “Touché.” This was her way of telling him she knew he didn’t call for kindness or concern, but that he had a request to make. “How are Nikolai and Anoushka?”

“I can send you their phone numbers.”

“That would be good, thanks.” She was slipping away, mobile, evading effortlessly, and he felt like a lumbering idiot. “Listen, Katya, we would like to get together for dinner, after I’ve slept off the worst.” He gave Dan a quick glance again. “Dan ... has come up with a story for ... Kisa.” Your daughter who is not my blood, and not even mine in any way. Could that old jealousy still be around?

“Good. Because she will ask.”

“Seems like a temperamental little thing.” Vadim thought he could hear her voice warm slightly. Maybe. They needed to meet. See what was still there, make it friendship, if they were lucky, build on their mutual goodwill. “You were consoling each other. That’s the story, not much to it.” Only it was about my death and you fucking got Dan to do this, and it still feels like treason. “She knows about me, too. About ... how I live.” Gay lovers, sharing a woman under the strangest circumstances. “Maybe, just stick to the story. We don’t have to screw up that little lady, do we?”

She paused, waited for a long time. “You can pick me up in two hours. There is a good restaurant just down the road.”

Yessir. “Sounds like a good idea. See you later.”

“And you.”

He ended the call and exhaled. “So far, so good.”

Dan was still studying the same picture, engrossed in the photo, while listening to every word. He turned his head to glance at Vadim. “So far so good?”

“She won’t fuck it up. Whatever you think of her, she’s not a devil. She is just protecting.” Her kid, after all, for twelve years. He could just hear her voice. Her children. She had raised, clothed, and fed them, and he was pretty sure it had not occurred to her that Dan could possibly be genuinely interested in his offspring.

Vadim sipped his tea. Thought, how the fuck had he ended up in a position where he tried to defend his ex-wife from his partner. She deserved all the trouble she got into with Dan, just for the thing she had done, and at the same time, he was the only person who understood them both. And knew they were not compatible. Strange then, that they’d been the two people in the world he’d genuinely loved. “She said restaurant in two hours. We’ll pick her up.” And that will be tough enough. “Are you sure, Dan?” He looked to the side to meet Dan’s gaze.

“Aye, I am,” Dan’s eyes narrowed, “It’s been thirteen years. I’ll be civil.” He ran a hand through his hair, brushing some wild strands of dark and grey out of

his eyes. “Whatever happened thirteen years ago, it doesn’t matter anymore. It’s about the kid now.”

“Okay, it’s decided, then.” Nice restaurant, and two volcanoes left and right, one able to poison everything with as much as a rumble, and the other able to do the full set earthquake, lava, and spitting stones. Wonderful prospects.

“Good pics, by the way.” Dan suddenly commented, as a peace offering. “We could make it back to the hotel for an hour’s kip. That is, if you want to sleep. Personally, I have different ideas.”

Vadim looked up. “I think I would like a bath or shower, but the exact circumstances are open for debate.” Hot water, and Dan’s groans echoing off the marble tiled walls.

Dan grinned, “I’m opting for bath, can’t risk losing my balance in the shower, bash my head, die of a cracked skull and bleed to death in a fancy hotel bathroom instead of gloriously going down on a battlefield.”

Vadim laughed. “But you’d go down ‘loved’.”

Dan waved the waitress closer and paid for the lot, amused by the moustachioed blokes on the forint notes. He gave her a hefty tip, more out of can’t-be-arsed than deliberation and she smiled at them, without the preening but no less interest. Dan reached for the cane and the jacket.

“Come on, then, let’s hurry. An hour isn’t anymore what it used to be.” He laughed over his shoulder, “and certainly not anymore twice in sixty minutes. You drive.”

“Copy, Sir.” The thought made Vadim smile. He wondered whether his younger self would have been able to imagine, even begin to grasp all the things that had happened in the meantime, that he’d end up living with the enemy, who was now by far less an enemy than the state he had killed and suffered for. He’d always thought he’d die before he could feel the abuse of his body as clearly as he did. The lower back, the dislocated shoulder, but both less visible than Dan’s problems.

He walked Dan towards the big BMW, he liked the heavy, solid European cars; that one clung to the road like a tank, dark blue, fit for a diplomat, and cost more per day to rent than he’d made as a Soviet soldier in a month. Another reason to embrace capitalism. The thing unlocked when he pressed a little button on the keychain, and he allowed Dan to get in first, knowing he’d be offended if he helped him. Lowering himself into the car, he felt the gentle vibration of the machine. Enough horsepower to get a rush, several times over.

The hotel was close enough, ten minutes, they had stuck to the main roads, and Vadim even switched off the classical CD on the way. Dan couldn’t stand the ‘noise’ of the Firebird suite. And that was one of the more accessible things Stravinsky had done. Like all the best things, it was an acquired taste.

The lift of the hotel reached right into the parking lot underneath, nice, modern, plenty of investments going on in this city. When the lift doors closed, Vadim grinned at Dan. “Any plans apart from taking a perverse pleasure in my tottering flesh?”

“To actually have a bath?” Dan didn’t want to think about the impending meeting. “No other plans.” He grinned, licked his lips before leaning in and kissing Vadim. A few seconds before the elevator doors opened, enough time for a miniature snog.

They managed to pull apart before they arrived on their level, with Dan grinning his particularly wicked grin, and made their way to the penthouse suite they had booked. The bath was run soon, the tub a brand new installation amongst marbled and polished perfection. Round, vast, enough space for two tall men. Hot water that soothed aches, eased jetlag, and most of all, took the weight off their two bodies.

The bath turned predictably into what Dan had planned, a feast of water, heat, steam, and two bodies rubbing against each other; of hands and hardness and of skin sliding against skin; of tongues and teeth, kisses and bites, and of the unparalleled moment of toppling over the edge and into orgasm.

Ten minutes before they had to leave, they finally got out of the bath, and swiftly rubbed lotion into each other’s scars. Dan laughed, as usual, making stupid jokes about getting old disgracefully.

Dan decided to wait for Vadim to put out clothes onto the bed for him, which would guarantee that appreciative look that he’d learned to like and seek. Once dressed, he grabbed his customary shades, still wearing them at the slightest chance of sun. Wallet packed, room keys in his hand, he stood at the door with a wry smile. “You do realise that this is a more dangerous mission for me than the HALO jump in the Gulf?”

Vadim grinned. “At least you are much better dressed now than you were then.” A slap between the shoulder blades. Let’s go, comrade. “Pilots get lost all the time, anyway. The moment they’re grounded, they’re fucking sitting ducks,” he murmured, remembering his own rescue missions, and the bloated, booby trapped mess that was usually at the end of the rainbow.

Vadim had reception get a taxi, and when they were standing in front of the house. She’d rented out Szandor’s house and moved into a smaller place, but it was still stately: a light grey, spacious villa that looked like it needed a paintjob in case one got the vines off first. He quickdialed Katya’s number. “We’re downstairs.”

“Coming.”

He flicked the phone shut and looked at Dan, knew he might not want to be touched now, but felt like stroking his side. Felt like lying down and having him rest at his shoulder, no thought, no word, just existing without heat, without dust, without a clock ticking in the background.

Katya stepped out, just closing her coat, charcoal grey, blonde hair done up with two long, vicious looking ivory and mother-of-pearl inlaid pins. She looked at them, gave a smile. “Good to see you both could make it.” She looked at them, face friendly, neutral maybe, and Vadim gave a small sigh of relief that was barely noticeable. Five seconds and counting, and none of them had ripped out the other’s throat.



Dan nodded at her, studying her appearance. She hadn't changed. "Been a while."

She gave a smile and a nod, and there was a strange motion, as if Vadim and her wanted to exchange something, like a hug, a touch of the arm, but they didn't. Vadim looked down, feeling awkward. "I'm ... starving," he murmured. "Is the restaurant anywhere near?"

"Does he not feed you well?" she asked, still smiling. "I'd have thought he does. You look good, Vadim."

Vadim gave a quick grin, flattered, then placed a hand on Dan's arm. "You do, as well." He nodded, indicating she should lead the way.

Dan twitched. "I don't fucking cook." Murmured. *Feed him well.* What the fuck did she think he was, Vadim's maid? Oh, wait, he remembered. Of course he did. 'You are his bitch', she had said, thirteen years ago.

Vadim gave a laugh. "Before you ask, Katya, he doesn't grill, barbeque, fry or bake, either."

She laughed, too, shaking her head. "That means you poor men must be nearer to starvation than you look. Or have you learnt to cook, Vadim? The man who couldn't cook water?"

"What made him so attractive back then was that he had an endless supply of energy bars. Can't look at snack bars these days without remembering why I got him." Vadim leaned against Dan for a moment, while walking.

Dan rolled his eyes, "Next time you want to chat about my merits over my head, do that while I'm actually not there." Grumpy. "You did have a taste for those fucking disgusting peanut butter bars, Russkie."

"It was peanut butter?" Vadim leaned in closer to Dan's ear. "It was peanut butter on top of the salt from your body that did it," he whispered, hardly more than a breath.

Dan held his breath, trust Vadim to get him to think about the wrong things at the right time or vice bloody versa. Concentrating on walking, the safest bet.

"Well, the Italian place is really just around this corner." Her heels tack-tacked on the sidewalk as she moved a little forward, allowing them to fall behind.

At the restaurant, a slightly greasy looking young man welcomed her with kisses left and right, and tossed random Italian words like "bella" into the quick conversation. "Amici," the deal. They got a nice place slightly remote between potted ferns. The Italian helped her out of her coat. A lighter shade of grey underneath, a cashmere jumper and a long, classic wool skirt. She didn't wear the lapis – Vadim had feared she might, might make a statement that would hurt Dan, or set them on edge. Instead, it was amber in silver, an elegant pendant with an amber drop between her collar bones, and a matching ring.

Dan looked around, the place seemed nice enough, and Italians usually served mouth watering deserts. He took his jacket off and hung it over his chair, then leaned his cane against a potted fern and sat down. He probably should give being civil a try. "You haven't changed much, Katya."

Vadim studied his hands while Katya gave Dan a smile, and lowered her gaze for a moment, much like a fencer lowered the blade after the fight. “I am lucky that cosmetic surgery works so well.” Light-hearted. “But thank you. You seem ... comfortable.” The flicker of a pause indicated she wanted the word to have several layers. “It is good seeing you like this.” The “you” held both him and Vadim.

“Aye, comfortable.” Dan found a small smile somewhere. “It’s been a bumpy ride.” It was his turn to stare at his hands, the right covering the scarred left one. “I got to talk to you about Kisa.”

They had to order drinks first, Katya ordered the wine, going with the waiter’s suggestions, but her attention was mostly on Dan. When the waiter left with the order, Katya nodded, taking up the conversation again. “Kisa – yes? Isn’t she wonderful? Admittedly, a little unconventional, but I’ve been told being a nonconformist these days is a sign of intelligence and willpower.” Her bemused tone left no question as to who thought that of herself.

“Aye,” slight irritation in Dan’s voice, “she is. She is quite remarkable, from what I could see in an hour.” He turned his head, away from her, staring at the plants for a moment. “Look,” returning his attention to her, “I need to talk to you. I told her the truth.” His right hand dropped off the table, reaching for Vadim’s thigh. Resting there, touching, connecting. “I told her about our lives.” He tilted his head, “she thought I hadn’t wanted to see her.”

She nodded. “It’s the basic human question. Who am I, where am I from, and, of course, where am I going.”

Vadim cleared his throat, tensing his thigh to respond to the touch. It was a way of saying everything was alright, the situation under control, and that he was there. “I’m not sure this is a philosophical question, Katya. It’s pretty real.” Without looking at her, but the brow dark.

She acknowledged that, then focused her attention on Dan. “Firstly, teenagers tend to over dramatise. But of course, she’s not the kind that would accept anything but ‘the truth’.” A quick blink. “I guess I didn’t think it through, or what are you aiming at?”

Dan frowned. “I’m not aiming at bloody anything.” His hand on Vadim’s thigh clenched into a fist. “I know jack shit about teenagers, kids, toddlers, babies, and if I had had any say in it I wouldn’t have ever had any.” A miniature twitch in his body betrayed his tension. He wanted to hurt her, accuse her, ask her what the fuck she had been thinking and that he had been hating her guts since then, but he fought with himself. What the hell would that achieve. “It’s not the point.” Shaking his head. The fist relaxed a fraction. “The point is that we have to stick to the new party line.”

Her eyes grew steel, one thing to accuse her, another to regret Kisa’s existence. She was ready to defend, deflect the blade, and go for a deadly riposte. More than ready. She shot Vadim a glance, who didn’t look up, but saw the movement of her head in his peripheral vision. As far as Vadim was concerned, he was just listening, impassive on the outside, alert on the inside. More a referee than an ex-husband or lover.

“Vadim said we had been consoling each other. And that she knows about your lifestyle.”

“My ... lifestyle.” Dan’s voice was growing dangerously intense, “that *lifestyle* that made me tell her that she was a child of love, just not between her mother and me but between Vadim and me.” The tension was back, the fist knuckle-white.

“You make me sound like a surrogate mother.” She shook her head, speaking on, allowing him no pause, speaking firmly and cool, like she had gone through this in her head often enough to know the lines by heart. “What I was referring to with ‘lifestyle’ is that you form part of a gay couple with Vadim.” Acknowledging something just as ancient as that other grudge. She spread her fingers on the table cloth. “I wanted her, and the exact circumstances don’t matter much now. It’s been thirteen years. She will be around when we are gone, and we don’t have to leave her with that burden. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“The exact circumstances *do* matter. They matter because Kisa must never know them.” Dan hadn’t relaxed the tension, every movement and facial expression were showing Vadim how close Dan was to attack. “Seems we agree on that one.”

Vadim dropped his hand on Dan’s hand. Thumb on one side, fingers on the other, a firm presence that was not restricting. He didn’t move any other muscle, focused and aware like a sniper.

“I’ll omit that in my autobiography, then,” she said lightly, but with a layer of strength underneath. “It’s not like I tell my children the whole story.”

Vadim glanced up. “What did you actually tell Anoushka and Nikolai?”

“A war hero who turned to drink and violence. They heard the same story as everybody else. And apparently you were bisexual. Like your daughter, come to mention it.” She smiled, with the irony of it.

Vadim leaned back, shaking his head.

A brood of killers’ kids. Dan dropped his head back into his neck, the corners of his mouth twitching, this was too fucking insane.

“That is Vadim’s official story. Why we are divorced. What he did. We know why he did it, but it’s nothing you can cover up.” She sighed, as if not quite understanding what the fuss was about. “I never mentioned your sexual orientation, though. You were a one-night-stand. Two children and a marriage are more difficult to explain.” She looked at Vadim. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No, of course not.” Vadim felt never threatened, between them it was something of a ritual, like fencing. Not about scoring points, but sparring. “Apple and trees, eh?”

She smiled. “You could say that.”

“Do you think she’s happy with it?”

“She’s too busy for much of a private life. A workaholic. ER. Emergency room. She says she likes the excitement, but her working hours are atrocious.”

Dan looked from one to the other, and felt like the proverbial fifth wheel. He closed his eyes, thought of the mountains, the sky, their house in New

Zealand, the Jacuzzi and the way Vadim sighed before he dozed off in the warm water. Always water.

Vadim nodded. "I'll see if I can meet her." It sounded vague, however. He wasn't much of a father, and she wasn't much of a daughter. Trying now ... would taste of desperation.

The drinks arrived, the waiter took the orders. Vadim went for a salad first and marinated chicken, always concerned about nutritional value, melon and ham to finish, his hand still on Dan's. "As long as they are happy," he mused.

Dan asked for whatever they had with the most calories and went for the maximum fattening choice of their pasta with every cheese and cream under the sun and a pile of seafood on top. "What if Kisa wants to see me again?"

Katya gave a delicate shrug after ordering swordfish. "If you can make the time, why not? I don't think you'd harm her, and there is no point fighting over her like an estranged couple."

"I don't want to fight." Dan shook his head, exasperated. "What the fuck makes you think that." He hadn't been so frustrated with anyone or anything since keeping a gaggle of Yank kids alive in the desert. "I was just asking for permission."

She seemed a touch surprised, but then remembered, and glanced quickly at Vadim, then back. "Oh. I was missing something there, I'm sorry. If you want to stay in touch, and visit her, you're welcome. When she's old enough, she can visit you. Frankly, I didn't think you'd be interested, but if you are ... no, I mean as you are interested, you're welcome."

Vadim seemed thoughtful, questioning without speaking a word.

"Interested." Dan dropped the word like a gauntlet. "You didn't think I was interested." His hand came off Vadim's thigh, back onto the table. Both of them, in plain sight. Flexing and tensing. "You are fucking surprised that I am interested in the kid who happens to be my daughter? Fathered because you forced me to, because you're a fucking selfish bitch who got what she wanted. And before you go all self-righteous on me, I do not regret that the kid exists, don't you ever dare accuse me of such shit." He growled, dark eyes blazing, not letting her get a word in edgeways. "You might want to think about the fact that I came here to talk to her after I had been told you'd cry 'rape' if I dared to contact her, and isn't that fucking ironic."

Katya's eyes narrowed, aggression meant counter-attack, swift, without thinking. Turned tables, the mask of civility shattered. She was unbalanced, thrown back by the sheer force of his attack. Overrun. "There is no way either of us can prove either story after all that time," she said coolly, jaw muscle tense. "I tried to be civil, Mr McFadyen, after I had been lacking in civility when we met the first time. And I understand there is resentment, but that is over, it doesn't matter anymore, not to me. You feel used? Fine. You were used. You were a soldier, that shouldn't be anything new for you, either. All your lives, you have been nothing but tools. But for once, it was not about destruction. Face it: You cannot keep a foetus in an ammunition pouch. And as much as you and Vadim might try, there are a few things only women can do. Szandor would

have obliged me, but he was HIV positive then. You seemed healthy and fit, and I hated you for having brought Vadim into prison. For breaking a man I spent years defending. For wasting his life, his career, and breaking his heart.” She stood, standing very straight. “Fight me all you like, Mr McFadyen. Go right ahead. I’m ready.”

“I can defend myself,” said Vadim, face oddly calm. He placed a hand on Dan’s arm, fingers curling, as if to physically hold him back. “If I don’t hate him for it, you have no right to.” He shook his head. “Nobody wants to harm Kisa. Dan least of all.”

“Did you hear what he said?”

“What he says is he fucking cares.” Vadim sighed, shaking his head. Too much going on in his head right now, what she had said and what Dan had said, and he tried to translate. He should have stuck to guns.

Dan looked up and in the eye. “How can you be so self-righteous. *You* asked *me* to be here.” Sharp emphasis on each pronoun. “I came to talk to her, to be what she wanted. And you ...”

He didn’t finish the sentence, one of his mobile phones started vibrating, a buzzing sound from one of his jacket pockets. He padded the jacket down, found the right one, looked at the display and seemed confused for a moment.

Katya was about to launch into another series of attacks but stopped before she had done more than open her mouth and narrow her eyes. She looked at Vadim, accusingly, who sat there, shaking his head.

“Aye?” Dan didn’t look at either of them, pushed the chair back and stood up. “One moment. I’m in a restaurant. Hang on.”

He didn’t pay any attention to either Krasnorada, only to the mobile in his hand, as he made his way towards the corridor that led to the toilets. He smiled, lowered his head, then chuckled. All low-key, unlike himself. He nodded, then grinned, then shook his head, his face turning serious, but ended with another chuckle. His lips moved, talking, before he pressed a button on the mobile and looked for a moment at the sleek, black thing in his hand.

Neither Vadim nor Katya spoke, but they looked at each other, Katya almost daring Vadim to accuse her, Vadim as impassive as he’d been for most of his active service. Face unreadable, light blue eyes cold.

Dan straightened, put his mobile into a trouser pocket, and walked back to the table. He stood behind his chair, looked from one to the other. “Kisa asked if she could see me tomorrow afternoon. She wants to ‘show me off’ to her friends and asked me to meet her at school. I said yes, provided her mother allowed it.” He looked at her. “Do you?”

Katya inhaled deeply, but remained standing, seemed to debate what harm it could do, another long glance exchanged with Vadim.

“Do it,” said Vadim in Russian. “Don’t screw it up.”

Katya finally nodded. “If she wants to.” Her voice hinting why on earth anybody would want to meet Dan anyway, but that she was powerless. She looked at Vadim, with that ‘here you are’ glance that Vadim acknowledged.

Dan nodded, glanced at Vadim, then took his jacket, turned and walked away from the table. Leaving food and Russians behind.

“Where are you going?” asked Vadim.

“Into the mountains.”

That meant: leave me alone, I need to think. This would have made Vadim nervous, only a few years ago, and there was still a hollow feeling when Dan decided he needed time off. These days, he could be sure Dan would return. He still wanted to follow. Every time. Mostly to not be left behind. But he knew that was a response from the trauma, and natural for him. “See you at the hotel, then.” Vadim looked at Katya. “And you are not leaving me with three dishes and the wine.” Less of an invitation, more a gun drawn and pointed. “Because we need to talk, too.”

She sat down again, her attention now on her ex-husband. “Okay. Best we get it all out on the table.”

“I’m missing pieces of the picture. About Anoushka and Nikolai.” And later, about Kisa, but wine first. Fencing was the art of deception. Make the opponent believe he’s doing what he wanted to do and made you do what he wanted, when it was actually the other way round. With Katya, this would be interesting.

\* \* \*

Dan soon cursed himself for having left the cane in the restaurant, but the taxi driver understood his limp, his gesturing and a few words of English, to take him to a sports shop in the centre of Budapest where he could get a walking stick.

He sat in the park for hours, watching the swans, geese and ducks in and around the pond, while eating ice cream, cakes and drinking coffee, then walking the streets as much as he could. Ending at night in one of the small bars they had found the first time he had stayed in Hungary with Vadim.

The pub was populated with men his age and older, and they communicated in a mixture of silence, beer, cigarettes and English and Russian and playing pool and darts.

That night he simply was an aging man, like them. No past, just present.

\* \* \*

According to Katya, Anoushka was working in ER now, her desire to be a neurologist or cardiologist blown apart by a stint in the ER unit, where she enjoyed fighting death every night, deal with torn bodies like a combat medic, and saw the most gruesome things that could happen to a body. She said it made her feel alive, and when Katya relayed that information, Vadim felt a strange moment of guilt. Did blood and genes actually transfer character, too? He wondered whether his daughter resented him for having taken lives. Like she tried to get as far away from him as possible by doing the exact opposite

Nikolai was travelling a lot, he sometimes called or sent a postcard. He had 'straightened out' – Katya never mentioned what his troubles had been – and now did technical installations and maintenance. Katya said it had to do with oil rigs, and the photo she produced showed a dog-tired, but smiling, rugged good-looking man who seemed at least ten years older than he was. Stubble, and his father's freckles. The background was metal, crammed, desolate, and whoever had shot the photo had no idea about focus. Nevertheless. He was damned handsome, better than his father, and he could just have been one of the young security contractors – aka mercs – they had encountered during active service.

Both children had been brought up, grown up, finished their education, moved, studied without him. Fallen in love, wrestled with life, like everybody had to, found a job, doubted, but still lived. Getting in touch now, at this late stage, would be pointless. I'm your father, I never bothered, too busy killing people, and by the way, did you ever wonder about me? He'd grow old, and eventually leave them what he had owned, the stuff that didn't go to Dan, and they would sell it and go on with their lives, because he didn't matter to them, either.

Vadim shook his head, gave her more wine, listened like he had very rarely listened to her. They had poured out their hearts in letters, she more than he did, and even her letters had been a study in deception. The KGB had always been too close, everything important needed to be said without words. He didn't believe for a moment that they hadn't been spied upon, everything filed away in the many darknesses of the KGB headquarters.

They talked more about Szandor. He'd read the story in her letters, but she repeated it. That nobody knew exactly when he had got infected. It could have been one of the international tournaments, sometime in the early eighties. Szandor had no idea how many he had infected in return.

Szandor had withdrawn during his last few years, met a partner, much younger than himself, who couldn't bear him dying, and who had left him when Szandor's health took a dip for the worse. It left Katya at his side, who made sure he saw the doctor when he was due, and who got him in and out of hospital and was there when he died.

"You know, I hated him, too," said Katya, very calmly. "I thought it was just pure luck he didn't infect you." She reached out to touch and press his hand, and he nodded, thought what a rotten way to go, for one so elegant, so deadly, and so swift. Nothing money, willpower or training could have averted.

"You hate Dan."

She looked up, wanted to pull her hand back, but he held her tight. Looked at her free hand, the wine glass was close, she could throw that at him. He very softly shook his head. "Don't, Katya."

"Yes, I do." She showed teeth, white, straight, she had had something done to them, but he couldn't pinpoint the change. She had had her teeth fixed, her wrinkles, her whole life. He did believe that there was an official biography. Katya had reinvented herself. A dragon from the ashes.

“Why.” He kept her hand, and to everybody else it had to look like flirting or an old couple. They both had their masks on in public.

“Because of what he did to you.”

He shook his head. “That is a matter between us. I gave him worse.” He laughed. “Oh, much worse. Do you think he could do anything to me without having to pay the price? It was I who started it. I took his life apart. His soul. His mind. That man is my creation. This is the man I have created in twenty-two years, from the first night to the last one.”

She inhaled sharply. “And when you came home to Moscow?”

“Yes. The scars. Those are his.”

“The torture?”

“Him.”

“The day when you told me you needed to leave? That was because of him?”

“Yes.”

“He broke you, Vadim.”

Vadim smiled. “No. That was the war. That bitch took everything. Without him, I’d not be sane. I wouldn’t even be alive. I might be a danger to everything. I’m not like Szandor. I don’t need your help, Katya. I don’t need protection from you anymore, I am fine. I know who I am, and what I did, and I’d do it all again. From the first night to right now. If you hate him, you hate the thing that kept me alive, not the thing that broke me. I’d hate to just leave now, because I respect you, and we have a lot of history. Dan’s my life, and I will defend him, just like you think you need to defend me. It’s really quite simple.” He stood, releasing her hand only then.

“Why are you here?”

“Because I love that man. I did what I could for you, the kids, but this ... the rest of life that I have left, is for Dan. I’d do all the things I’ve done for you or Russia, for him now. Kisa means a lot to him, and he is vulnerable there. That’s why I am here. To tell you I will not allow you to harm him just because you can, and ask you to let sleeping dogs lie. It’s hard enough for him as it is.”

“And I?”

“You are a lot tougher, Katya. I’m not worried about you.” He reached to touch her shoulder with his fingertips. “Please. Let’s be friends. I know how generous you can be. Come on.”

“Tell him ... your friends are my friends. Will you have an eye on Kisa?”

“Two.”

She nodded, then stood up to go pay the bill. He walked her home, declined the tea – it just wouldn’t be proper, they both needed time to think – but kissed her forehead when she stepped closer. “I wish I could have loved you the way you deserved,” he murmured in Russian, and felt the old pain flare up. Being not enough, defunct. She had been his match, all those years ago. “This old man needs some sleep now. Jetlag.”

She pressed his hand with hers, then the tack-tack of her heels as she walked towards her door. He waited for the light inside, then turned around, standing



on an empty, deserted street. Nothing to the left, nothing to the right. He checked his mobile. No message. Sent a quick text to Dan: Where are you?

A few minutes later the answer arrived. 'pool & beer go 2 sleep old man'.

Vadim grinned, didn't confirm, knew he didn't have to, walked down the street until he found taxis, and was brought back to the hotel. Sat at the bar for a little, listened to piano music while thinking, allowing the vodka to calm him and make him tired. He then walked up the stairs, began to lose the suit when the door had shut behind him, started to run a bath, switched on the TV, found a talk show for the comfort of human voices, and had the peanuts from the mini bar. He had a good, long soak then wrapped himself up in a big bathrobe, lay on the bed and rested. And fell asleep, listening to voices on the TV.

\* \* \*

A few hours later, at five hundred hours, Vadim's mobile phone rang.

His body was too confused to keep to the old routine of waking at five. But he smirked when he saw the time on his watch. "Yes?" Sitting up. "Dan?"

Dan's voice harboured a grin and tiredness. The good kind of sleepy. "Fancy breakfast with fresh bagels, coffee and tea, while looking over the city and watching the dawn spectacle? If yes, grab a taxi and come to the Castle District and get yourself to Fisherman's Bastion, it's off Trinity Square."

"Copy. I'll be there." Vadim dialled reception, ordered a taxi, found his comfortable clothes, a big jacket, boots, wallet, key card, returned to the room to pick up Dan's cane then went downstairs, greeted the visibly tired driver and gave him the directions. Dan sounded fine, peaceful. He got out of the taxi, eyes scanning the surroundings, waiting for Dan to notice him, or maybe give a sign.

Suddenly a small pressure point in Vadim's back. Too much like a muzzle. "You're getting old and careless." Dan chuckled, holding the cane in one hand, two large bags with breakfast, fresh from a baker in the Old Town, in the other. "There's a good place over there." He gestured with his chin to a low wall that ran along the ramparts, spotting his own cane in Vadim's hand and he smiled. That special one, warm and deep. "Thanks, Russkie."

Vadim smiled, that smile was like an embrace under the covers, both half asleep and so aware at the same time. He stepped in and ran his fingers down Dan's cheek.

*Dan's my life. It's really quite simple.*

"Well, now you have two."

"The one you gave me for my birthday is a thousand times better." Dan was still smiling, the right thing at the right time. They had come far.

Vadim took the bags, walking close, no rush in the world, he was too tired for that, too much at peace. "Enjoyed your night?"

"Am a bit sore, but that's probably from the pool." Dan chuckled, exchanged the walking stick for his cane and leaned against Vadim for a

moment. No one around at this time of day, the world still belonged to them alone. “Been a good night, aye. What I needed. And yours? Did you talk?”

Vadim placed an arm around Dan’s shoulder, moving close enough to smell the smoke and beer on him. My creation. My life. Nothing to regret. Fags and beer, perhaps a whisky, mixing with Dan’s own scent.

“Yes, we talked. You can see your daughter whenever you like. As often as you like. It’s the kid’s decision. She won’t interfere. No more shit to put up with, I promise.” He touched Dan’s arm and led him to the indicated place, sky beginning to glow brightly over the city. “Katya ... needs to understand that hating you on my account is insane.”

Dan pulled himself up on the wall, waited for Vadim to sit down beside him, before taking one of the bags and retrieving the Styrofoam cups of coffee and tea, rummaging for the sugar sachets. He was surprised at how good it made him feel to know that he could see Kisa without interference. His daughter. Holy fuck, his own daughter. He grinned to nothing and no one in particular, before returning his attention to Vadim.

“This hating ... it actually leads me to a question I should have asked you long ago.” Pouring sugar into a cup of coffee, he had forgotten the stirrers, his finger would have to do. Paused. “Do you believe I destroyed you?”

“She said that,” murmured Vadim, took the cup from Dan’s hand and folded his hands around it. “It’s not true. And it is. Difficult.” He frowned. “You destroyed the lie. The mask. Vadim Krasnorada, Soviet citizen, Spetsnaz for the fucking Interior Ministry. “Yes, you did.” The assassin who sneaked into London to kill a sleeping, unarmed dissident and destroy a family, just out of spite. “That’s not me. Should have never been me. Not the way I felt. Few people get a second shot at trying to be what they are. I’m lucky. I’d be trapped if you hadn’t done the things you did. You tried only once to destroy me. And that ...” He paused for a moment. Hated that memory, hated the way it had weakened him with the KGB. “was well-deserved.” He shook his head. “I mean, it was paypack, that one. And you still ... turned around and did the opposite.”

Dan smiled, tired and a little melancholic, watching the flawless early morning sky play a game of light and shadows in Vadim’s face. “No, it wasn’t payback.” He paused, searched for the right words. “It was more than that, worse. It cut me open, laid me bare, because it showed me a misconception of myself. Taught me what I was capable of, and how thin the line is between human and monster.” He slowly reached for the second bag, fishing for a warm bagel. “Torturing you ... I am not sorry for what I did, but I do regret it. The only thing in my life that I’ve ever regretted.” Dan looked to the sky and across the city. Beauty laid out before them, a waking place of history and life.

Vadim nodded. He had one major regret. And couldn’t, because that was how it all started. He couldn’t have picked Dan up in a bar. Hey stranger, we’re meant for each other.

“I sometimes think I don’t deserve all this,” Dan mused, “you, the farm, friends, a purpose. To be alive, to have that second chance you talked about,

instead of having died a drunken ex-soldier who everyone had forgotten. And now ... Kisa. No matter how she happened, it's a fucking miracle that she exists and I very much want to get to know her." He smiled at Vadim. "Guess the whole thing settles the question if there is a God and divine retribution. There isn't. Or I wouldn't be so goddamned content right now."

Vadim smiled. "I never believed in God. That gives us the right to do what we bloody well please." He angled for a bagel as well, finishing it in a few hasty bites that told him how hungry he actually was. "We paid for it, anyway. Each other, definitely."

Dan took a large bite from his own bagel, sipping coffee while chewing. "I guess when it comes down to it, I'd do it all over again."

Vadim shook his head. "The whole shit again? You silly bastard," he murmured, leaning his head sideways against Dan's, content and at peace. "What about enjoying being retired and fucked-up too much to do anything even if we wanted?" A mock punch that wasn't more than half a slap. "Next wars aren't ours. Even though the Yanks are making noises about this 'War on Terror' all the time. Doesn't look good. One moment, it's the end of history, now every Muslim is a suspect. Middle East. Former Soviet sphere of interest. Looks like it's all going to hell in a handbasket."

"Ach well," Dan let his Scottish accent come to the forefront, leant his head against Vadim's. "Wake me up when the wars are over, aye? This worn-out 'tool' is comfortable just sitting here." He fell silent, smiling.

Their wars were over, and he was glad about it.

September 2003, New Zealand

For over a year, Dan had been in contact with his daughter. At first the occasional mail, but soon technology won out, and Dan surprised Kisa, when he proved himself to be internet savvy and didn't even blink when she suggested to chat online – whenever the time zones and their schedules allowed. They were getting to know each other rapidly, and developed a relaxed familiarity and ease.

Dan and Vadim's lives were paddling along comfortably, until Kisa told Dan that she wanted to come for a visit some time during the Christmas school holidays, to see New Zealand in summer. Something Dan was simultaneously looking forward to and dreading, because he knew that things wouldn't be that easy. They'd have to have her mother's permission, and when he confronted Vadim, asking him to ask Katya, Vadim stoically, albeit with a smile, told him that Kisa was his daughter and thus Dan should talk to Katya, not he.

Dan cursed, even pleaded, but to no avail, and eventually he had to bite the bullet, because Kisa kept asking. Three weeks before Vadim and he were due to fly out to the last conference of the year, combining work, as usual, with a tour through Europe to visit friends and families, and possibly a stint to the US as well, he finally contacted the dragoness.

By email, because while he was ex-SAS, ex-Mad Dog and ex-daredevil, he was also a man and in this particular case a coward.

Her email back was as cool and polished as her letters, seemingly it didn't make a difference to her whether her words were on paper or formed of bytes.

*Mr McFadyen,*

*On the matter of Kisa visiting you, I believe we should meet face to face to discuss this more in depth than email allows. Let me know when you are in Europe again, and I will ensure I have time to meet you.*

*Regards,*

*Katarina*

Oh shit. Dan frowned at the screen and reached for his cigarettes. Some things required a strong coffee, with at least three lumps of sugar, and a fag. He didn't light it, though, as he walked downstairs, cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. As expected, Vadim was in the kitchen, preparing what looked like dinner.

"I got not so good news and bad news." Dan grimaced, talking around the fag in his mouth. "Not so good news is I need a coffee. Bad news is Katya wants to talk to me. Face to face."

Vadim motioned towards the fully automated Italian coffee machine. “And I guess I’m not the referee this time.” He added some lemon juice and herbs to the couscous, while Dan set to work the machine.

“Doesn’t sound like it, no.” Making coffee or tea had become one of the few things – apart from a Sunday fry-up – that Dan had learned to master in the kitchen, and soon the machine was underway. “Actually, perhaps it is better that you are not.”

“Just remember to think before you attack her. She’s a fencer, that’s a strategic mind. If you go about it with too much anger, she’ll gut you. Stay calm, breathe.” Vadim checked on the marinated chicken. “Food in about five minutes.”

“I don’t want to fight with her. I’d rather not see her at all.”

“I know, and that makes you defensive, which in turn makes you aggressive in inopportune moments.”

Dan sighed and shrugged. “Bugger. The things I do for Kisa ... who would have thought a *woman* would ever have so much power over me again? A miniature one, granted, but still ... have we already got an itinerary when we’re in Europe?”

“Only a tentative one.”

“We’re off in three weeks to the conference, aye?”

“Aye. Gives the other coach time to take over my lessons.”

“Sure, how’s it going with the kids anyway? Have you turned them into a lethal bunch of mini Spetsnaz fencer kids yet?” Dan grinned, then went about pouring the coffees.

Vadim raised an eyebrow. “I’m just giving something back to the community.” He tossed the chicken breast into the hot pan and arranged them neatly with a fork. “It’s good to see them develop some control and grace ... so, yeah, the coaching helps pass the time. The school head teacher was asking whether I’d want to teach some self-defence, too. Kids these days are all energy and no discipline.”

“I was right. Mini Spetsnaz.”

“Well, minus the throat cutting and forced marches.” Vadim turned the chicken.

“Shame, that.” Ladling sugar into his coffee, Dan grinned and sat down at the table, but only for a moment, because one sharp glance from Vadim reminded him of his duty: setting the bloody table. Up again with a groan, and getting the plates and the cutlery out of the cupboards. “We could see my family for pre-Christmas.”

“Yes, sounds good. I’ll tell the other coach to take over and start the self-defence when we come back.”

“Sorted, then.” Sipping his coffee, Dan sat back, watching Vadim’s back, as he dished out the food. Sometimes, like now, there was a flash of surrealism in such a domestic setting, remembering the men they once were, hell-bent on destruction.

He smiled when Vadim handed him his plate, and murmured something in Russian, which sounded suspiciously like ‘mine’.

\* \* \*

When Dan stepped into the apartment, he was immediately struck by how *perfect* everything was. The furniture looked modern, classy, highly polished and impeccably clean. She led him into the living room, which had a centrepiece of a large white glass table, no doubt ridiculously expensive, with elements of chrome, just as polished as the rest. The hardwood parquet made his steps sound louder than expected, accompanied by the regular ‘tap’ of the cane, and when he half turned to get to his offered seat on one of the chairs, he became aware of the abundance of book shelves all along the walls, dotted with photos of the kids. *Her* kids, as he knew all too well.

He sat down, placed the cane onto the woollen rug beneath his feet, doubtlessly just as expensive as everything else. The place looked as ordered as her. Cool, controlled, and polished to the extremes.

She gave a host’s smile. “Do you want tea, Mr McFadyen? Black tea, Earl Grey, green tea, fruit tea ... or fruit infusion, that is the term in English ...”

Dan took in a deep breath and looked up, as she stood amidst all her perfection. “Can we get something clear right from the start? Call me Dan. I am your daughter’s biological father, after all, I’d rather not be ‘Mr McFadyen’.” He offered a small, very small smile. “And an ordinary black tea with three spoonfuls of sugar will do.”

“Very well, then. Dan.” She nodded, smiling a little. “I will bring the tea.” She left the room for a few minutes, and Dan noticed that she didn’t offer her name in return. Whatever. As his gaze went around the room, he noticed, on one of the higher bookshelves, more photos. There was Szandor, mask under his arm, sword by his side, hair damp and curly with sweat, smiling. It looked like a shot right after a fencing tournament. There was another one - Vadim, emotionless, in the regalia of a paratrooper captain, very much an official photo, the face straight, stoic. Another photo of Vadim with another man, easy comradeship, a freckled brown-haired man in a flight suit, Vadim in fatigues.

Dan got up, left the cane on the rug, and walked over to the photos. He took hold of the one of Vadim in his uniform, and studied it for a moment. He knew immediately who the other man was. Sasha, the pilot. The third father, the one who was lost.

She returned with tea and biscuits, set everything down and lit a candle under the tea pot.

Dan turned his head, the photo of Vadim still in his hand. “This is how I met him.” He offered an opening. The offer of a past, a connection. He was too goddamned tired to hate her anymore; or perhaps there was this other ‘woman’, this girl, daughter, Kisa, who had moved the pieces on the board and he no longer felt he could threaten the Queen, because the Knight would suffer.

She glanced at the photo and smiled. "Yes, this was from before he was called to Afghanistan. He said just in case something would go wrong. This was taken a few days before he shot the Afghan president."

"He did *what*?" Dark eyes wide, Dan didn't hide his surprise. "I wonder about some of the skeletons in the closets." He shook his head slightly and put the picture back to where it belonged.

"I don't think he likes remembering the assassinations," Katya said calmly. "He was never that cold inside, but he obeyed his orders, even when they were at odds with his sense of honour." A faint smile, a touch of irony there. "Whatever horrendous things he did, I believe deep down, Vadim is an honourable man."

"He ..." the rape. Rapes. Plural. A lifetime ago. "He is."

She sat down, studying him as she poured the tea and rearranged cups and the plate with cookies, while Dan slowly sat back down.

"Dan, then. What will you call me? Katarina? Katya?" She blew on her tea and took a sip.

"Vadim calls you Katya. Kisa ..." another swift smile crossed his face. "Will Katya be okay?" He reached for his tea, stirring the sugar into it.

The more familiar, more affectionate version of her name. She held the cup in both hands, elbows on her knees. "Yes, it will be okay." A long, scrutinising glance. "I think we met at the worst possible moment in our lives."

Dan took another deep breath, taking his time to have some tea and reach for a biscuit before he answered. "I am not sure. I guess when it comes to 'worst possible moments' there are a few in my life that vie for prime place." He chewed thoughtfully to win time and think things over. "But perhaps you are right. You kicked me when I was down, and at that moment, I had no defences. Unlike ever before or after." He very deliberately reached for the tea to take a sip, once again slowly. "I hated you for that." He looked at her, studying the face, and then he saw it. Similarities, reminders. Features that he saw on a webcam, or in photos sent via the net. Features which reminded him of Kisa, and he quietly added, "I don't anymore."

She furrowed her brow in thought. "I was jealous. Vadim has repeatedly apologized for not being the man I wanted. He never realised I might berate myself for not being the person he could love forever, or even desire. Seeing you have something I wanted and that I lost ... no, let go, because I could see he could not go on as my husband, that he had to leave or break, that struck me deeply, Dan. I am not used to being struck like that, just like you."

Dan nodded slowly. "Do you still hate me?"

"No, I can't say I do. Enough time changes everything, but also the fact that Vadim doesn't seem unhappy these days. And that Kisa doesn't seem unhappy about you, either."

Dan let out a small huff. "Vadim's happiness or unhappiness are not necessarily down to me, but to a certain therapist." He concentrated for a moment on the tea, finishing it. "Kisa ..." he trailed off, looked at his scarred

hand, then pulled in another breath. "Would you believe me if I told you that I love her?"

"I do. She cares about you a great deal, too." Katya sipped her tea. "I didn't foresee this - it's unexpected, and I went to foregone conclusions. It wasn't meant to happen like this, but as it does, I see no reason to make things more complicated than they are."

Dan nodded again. "Unexpected, unplanned, trust me, I can imagine." A small spark of humour was visible in his dark eyes. "But tell me one thing, are you glad things turned out this way?"

"I think we were lucky. The times worked in our favour. People are more free than they ever were, there is more space for dissenters, more places to hide, and many things we no longer need to hide. I know that my daughters can be women in very different ways than I had to be a woman. Nikolai ... didn't have to join the Russian Army. Due to corruption, but nevertheless. He won't die. He won't get tortured. They will not break him."

"Aye, but are you glad that *this* turned out as it did?" He made a gesture towards himself, then the whole table. "I remember that you threatened me not to interfere. Not so long ago you were ready to uphold that."

"I don't really know you, Dan. All I can see is the effect you have on people close and dear to me. I am not sure how familiar or at ease we will ever be, but I don't feel threatened by you anymore, and I appreciate very much you want to take care of your daughter, too."

"My daughter?" Dan smiled. It warmed the darkness of his eyes and soothed the lines in his weathered face. In return, her blue eyes and cool face warmed as well. "Thank you." He moved his hand towards another biscuit, to cover up an emotion that was still too visible. He'd lost his poker face, some parts of Mad Dog were dead, after all. "Trust me, I would do anything to keep her safe. As safe as she allows anyone to keep her. You brought her up as someone quite wonderful."

"Oh, she brought herself up, mostly - she wasn't easy, and I don't think she will ever be easy, but I did my best. Children are very much their own people, you can tell the difference when you have several. All parents can do is give them a moral compass and encourage them to live their potential and give them love and discipline."

"And you should know about the difference of children." There was no sting in his voice, no accusation. "I am sorry you lost Nikolai's father. Vadim told me about him." Looking at her straight on, while biting into the biscuit.

"That was one of those points in life, where things could have gone very differently indeed. Vadim would have been free several years before he left ... and who knows what else could have happened. He was a good man. Cheerful. Innocent. There was no darkness about Sasha."

"Very much unlike Vadim." Dan nodded, took another bite and chewed on it thoughtfully. "I have been wondering for a long time, did you just use me as donor material because I was convenient at the time, or was there another motive?"



“I hated you and I wanted to make you suffer. See how far you would go. And solve a problem.” She didn’t smile - as if that female way of smiling, the constant wish to endear oneself, the constant softening of everything one said, wasn’t hers, not naturally. She was earnest and serious, and meant what she said, uncompromising like the lunge with a blade. A lunge wasn’t softened, nor was a parry and riposte. And it was exactly what Dan wanted: honesty.

Dan didn’t smile either, but neither was there a frown. He nodded calmly. “I assumed that, and rest assured, you *did* make me suffer. At the time you scored a point.” Admitting to this was giving her more than he’d ever believed he would, but it was the right thing to do. All cards out in the open, no more jokers up the sleeve.

“Telling you to leave my life forever was a way to protect me - or anybody else - from the consequences.”

“There wouldn’t have been any, but you couldn’t know that.” Another small nod. “You were Vadim’s ex-wife, and no matter what you had done, that still counted for a lot. He once showed me a photo of you and your kids, that was on the day he gave me the lapis lazuli beads. Whatever happened after that, you were always connected to him, and to him wanting to protect you and his children.” Children. Son. There was a hint of a smile in his face. “I believe you have the same beads.”

“Yes.” She stood and opened a drawer, pulled out the beads and placed them on the table. “From the same stall, most likely.” She sat back, regarding him for a long while. Dan finished another biscuit, then shook out his left arm and pulled the sleeve back. There they were, the string of lapis lazuli beads, wound around his wrist. He said nothing, just cocked a brow with a slightly self-mocking smile when she glanced at it.

She looked up. “He didn’t talk about you, but that was an understanding between us. We would never speak about anything in clear words, in case we were spied upon. Vadim had a career in front of him, we might have been paranoid, but we were cautious to not risk what we had.”

“And in the end, even that didn’t work out.” Dan ran a hand through his unruly hair. “I am sorry for that for more reasons than just the ones that concern myself.”

“Nobody can know what would have happened,” she said, looking once more at the beads around his wrist. “We can never be certain of anything. Best-laid plans, good intentions ... everything only makes sense in hindsight. While we are in a situation, we never have all the information to make the best decision. Some things are just reflexes ... like in combat.” She poured herself more tea, then offered to Dan, who nodded, watching her fill his cup. “I’ve read an interesting book on the last years of the Soviet Union, by a Western scholar. He said, all Soviet citizens were deformed in their personalities. We were taught to keep our head down, and that the damage to our people by the purges and generations of suppression and indoctrination, would only be healed after many, many more generations. I think life deforms everybody.”

“But sometimes, life does the exact opposite. Sometimes the pain, the joy, the whole insanity that is life turns us into much wiser people.” He let out a soft chuckle while ladling the sugar into his cup. “If you had despised my younger self and not let him near his daughter, my older self would have agreed. I was an asshole.”

“Vadim fell in love with you. He must have seen the potential.” She smiled. “Beyond the obvious physical qualities.”

Dan laughed, “believe me, it took a long time before the ‘obvious physical qualities’ were outwon by the love.” And he was never going to tell her how those physical qualities had drawn one predator to another. To conquer, to be conquered in the end. “I guess when it comes to Kisa, I hope she’ll never become the asshole that I was.” He took a sip of his tea, looking at her over the rim of the cup. “I sincerely doubt it. After all, she’s not going to kill.”

“Well, there’s the moral compass again.” Katya nodded. “And you seem determined to be a force for good in her life.”

“What else would I want to be?” Dan put the cup down, and leaned back in his chair. “I have family, a brother, sister in law, three nephews. On a farm in a village in the Scottish Highlands, the place where I was born. I would like Kisa to meet them, my family can’t wait to get to know her. They are her family, too, and they are good people.” Dan gave a slight but warm smile. “If you asked Vadim he’d tell you my brother is like me, how I would have been, had I not done the job I did. Guess he’s trying to say diplomatically that Duncan got all the good parts.”

“I see.” As if it had never occurred to her that Dan might have family, too. “Good she speaks English, then.”

“Does this mean that you trust us enough to let her visit her family in Scotland, and perhaps spend her Christmas holidays in New Zealand?”

“You, and her. Just make sure she’s back before school begins again, and don’t be too indulgent. She’s a teenager, they need limits.”

“I guess if I imagined her as a recruit, that should work.” Dan smiled. “We could take her to Scotland for pre-Christmas and then fly together to New Zealand. That way she won’t have to take the flight on her own. Back shouldn’t be a problem. Could we wrangle out four weeks holiday? What with the distance it’s otherwise not worth it.”

“I’ll call the headmaster. Four weeks.” Katya smiled.

Dan reached for his cane, then stood up. “Would you like to know more about Kisa’s aunt and uncle? I could send you photos of my family, the farm, the Highlands.”

“That would be very nice of you.” She stood, too, and came round the table. “Personally, I always considered writing letters an art form, but I understand that these days, photos have taken that place.”

“I’m afraid I’m not a man of words, that’s Vadim’s job. He’s the cultured one.” Dan flashed a smile, humour lighting up his eyes. “Any intellectual achievements Kisa will have solely inherited from you.”

She smiled, extending her hand, and Dan shook it. “Just arrange the flights, I’ll bring her to the airport, suitcase packed.”

It was still odd, being that civil, but it felt right. It had been fourteen years, after all. “Truce or armistice?” Dan held her hand for a moment longer. His grip firm, just like hers. “We’ll never be friends, but in hindsight, I understand some of your decisions.”

“Peace.” She moved a bit closer, holding his grip, and kissed him on both cheeks. “You were a good choice, Dan.”

He was flustered for a moment, she’d caught him by surprise with that move, and he murmured with a grin, “you got another score in, after all.”

Before she could reply anything, there was the sound of a key scraping in the lock and the next moment the door flung open, a girl’s voice calling out in Hungarian. Dan turned his head towards the living room door, and let go of Katya’s hand, when the girl’s voice exclaimed in English: “Dan! I didn’t know you were here!”

He grinned like a fool when his daughter flung herself into his arms, nearly toppling him over.

\* \* \*

Dan stayed longer in Hungary than expected, while Vadim took off to America for a couple of weeks, to visit Hooch. When he returned to Europe, they met in France, after Dan had spent a week alone with Jean.

Reunited, they visited friends, organised Spa events, and spent most of their time in Britain, with the Baroness and friends. December came soon, and Dan flew back to Hungary to pick up Kisa, and to take her to his family.

It was a successful visit, with Duncan and Mhairi welcoming their niece with open arms, and Kisa in return enjoying her stay. She got on like a house on fire with her cousins, especially the oldest one who came for a visit over the weekend. When all three left for New Zealand, there were a lot of tears, something that Dan noted with a grin to Vadim.

Dan wasn’t the only one, though, who struggled at first with the wise advice of setting limits, but true to his word, he found a way to imagine the kid during times of potential trouble as a young recruit. From then on they went along just fine, even though there was no doubt that the two men allowed Kisa a lot more leeway than her mother would have.

When finally, after Christmas and a few days into the New Year, it was time to take Kisa back to the airport, Dan flew with her from Palmy, just to see her off on her flight across the world. That time, during goodbyes, even Dan’s eyes glistened dangerously, but he wasn’t going to admit that to Vadim.

## November 2004, Australia

Vadim was amazed at the hidden power in Nikolai's hands. Of course. Manual labour. Worker. The grip was warm, though, he took Vadim's hand with both of his, the kind of grip that seemed reassuring and strangely gentle.

Vadim frowned, looked into the light eyes, as if to ask why, and got nothing. Not a smile, no evasion, nothing. Nikolai just stood there, holding his hand, sincere. Light brown hair, wavy instead of Sasha's curls, colour lighter from Katya's genetic input, but with Sasha's reddish tint when the light struck it right. Warmer than Katya or Anoushka.

"Thank you for coming," said Vadim in English; it was the most natural language, he rarely spoke Russian anymore. When they'd done the latest catch-up, Doctor Williams had told him there was still much unfinished business in his life, and that it would help looking some things in the eye. Consolidation. He'd tried and failed with Anoushka – Anya, she was a grown woman now, and they weren't on affectionate terms.

"I was in the area anyway," said Nikolai. His English had an American tint. Or Canadian. Vadim still couldn't place the North American accents.

"Australia?"

"Diving and visiting friends. A couple friends opened their own opal mine." Nikolai released his hand, but stood close. "I think the digging and building gets to you."

Vadim nodded. He'd wanted to see Sydney and Melbourne, and Nikolai had written back he would be off work soon, and they could meet up, what about the banks of the Yarra river that crossed the city. Out in the open. Dan was somewhere close, doing his usual over-watch, as if Vadim could just vanish from sight and from this world if he didn't. Vadim looked at the water, and began to walk, Nikolai joining him, hands in the pockets of his dark, almost indigo blue jeans. Broad shoulders, nearly as tall as he was. Sasha hadn't been this tall – he wouldn't have become a pilot otherwise.

"Do you enjoy your work?"

"The money is excellent. I don't want to work till I'm old. This job means I won't have to."

Vadim had heard that same tune from security consultants, PMCs, all the military freelancers that made a killing while they could. But Nikolai didn't seem unhappy. He was far more relaxed than his sister, less on edge – like wood to her steel. And working on an oil rig had nothing to do with the army, or with killing. "Did you hear anything about Anoushka?"

Nikolai shook his head. "Last I heard, they had a fight about children."

"Who?"

"The girlfriend and her."

"Ah." Vadim didn't want to show the surprise. Katya had mentioned it in passing, but he had had no idea that Anoushka had found a partner. Let alone children were even an issue. "How do you know?"

"Last Christmas."

Nikolai's face darkened, and Vadim wasn't sure he wanted to hear that particular story. Which promptly reduced the number of viable topics for discussion down to the bone. The hard parts. Vadim was only too aware his talent for small talk approached zero. From the negative side. It was one thing to do small talk during a conference, and another to try and small talk to family. "Of course, Christmas." Vadim looked at Nikolai again, high cheekbones, a clear, intelligent brow. A good jaw. On all accounts, a good looking young man, much younger than he'd been when he had met Dan the first time. "Do you have a family?"

"Apart from the screw up in Hungary? No." No bitterness, but a straightforwardness that spoke of little love left. "I stick to people who don't get me down and are my friends. I mean, what else do I need? Two good hands to work with, and a passport."

Exactly like one of the mercs. Maybe these kinds of professions attracted the same type of man.

Nikolai looked at him, as if expecting something, but Vadim couldn't guess, couldn't read what it was. People were never easy at the best of times, but it was far more difficult when they were blood related. Vadim answered that gaze, felt the insecurity under the gaze of this young man he hardly knew. He had a lot to answer for.

"Why the sudden interest?" asked Nikolai. "Or are you making conversation?"

"I've ... always been interested." Stellar record of showing it, though, Vadim.

Nikolai's face was calm, collected. Observant. Less cheerful than Sasha. Sasha had been young when he died. Or maybe, in hindsight, they had all been so very young. "I guess you were just busy, then."

Vadim sighed and shook his head. That one was well-deserved, and he knew it. He could still hear Anoushka: What do you think I am doing? I cut people open, just like you did. Only I put them back together. And now excuse me, that's the pager. That ill-fated phone call, when he'd mustered his courage and called her on shift in the hospital.

"In a way, yes." Busy killing people. Busy holding my life together. Busy trying to be human. But, for fuck's sake, why hadn't he managed to do anything else for his son? Why had it been so convenient to know he was clothed and fed, and the bills paid, so he could go on doing whatever had been so important back then?

"It was difficult to get in touch. I was ashamed." Still no reaction from Nikolai.

"I understand I am not much of a ... a father. Wasn't." He had read a lot about fathers and families, and what made people the way they were. An attempt to understand why these things were so complicated and how he'd failed so completely to play that particular role. Whatever Nikolai's troubles were, chances were, it was partly his fault. "I understand that you're angry. I'd be the same. I'm just not good with people. Especially after ..." The trauma. "... what happened."

“So why now?”

“Getting old does that to people. They start to wonder about their mistakes.” Vadim shook his head. “I’m sorry. So very sorry.”

Nikolai’s face suddenly twitched, the lips moved in that involuntary way that betrayed his son was fighting an emotion, something like hatred or sadness, or both. “I just ... wondered if it was my fault. Why you didn’t love me.” He took a deep, sudden breath, and turned away, tension in his shoulders, hands formed fists, struggling.

Love. Vadim’s guts formed a knot of lead, and that was probably the worst accusation of them all. Love. He remembered the tenderness for the baby, the toddler, the child, but he was missing the teenager and the young man. The things his own father had done – that infamous first shave, the first time in a suit, the father-son-talks about the profound truths of life ... back when they’d still got along, before it had become an intellectual competition and constant trench warfare, long before Vadim had become the man he was. Nikolai was missing all those good bits of having a father. His real father on a military cemetery, and the one who had taken the role had done nothing but gone through the motions until he had found something else. Somebody else. “I should have been there,” he murmured.

Nikolai shook his head, and turned around again. Eyes a brighter colour, more intense with the proximity of tears. “I wanted ... that you fucking cared.” He inhaled deeply, raised his face, blinking to keep the tears down. Vadim knew exactly what he felt like. “You were the man in the uniform. The one on the picture. Everybody spoke about what a hero you were. I wanted nothing more but ...” He paused, struggling again. “... be like you. How could I? I had no fucking idea what you were like.”

*Be like me.* How could anybody, even a child in Moscow, would have wanted to be like Captain Krasnorada. “I wasn’t myself then. That took ... a long, long while. I wasn’t a good man, and I would have been ashamed if you’d known.”

Nikolai said nothing.

The original plan for the meeting had been to tell Nikolai about his real father. Sasha. He didn’t want Sasha’s son to not know, it felt like he was taking something away from the dead comrade, a theft, a dishonesty, like fleecing the corpse of a memory. But at the same time, Nikolai was his son, too, and just driving the knife deeper wasn’t right. That dirty little secret would remain just that. No reason to screw this one up more than he most likely was.

“Maybe you want to meet Dan?”

“Your partner.”

People these days had no trouble accepting that. His father gay, his sister a man-hating lesbian. Of course not. It was a miracle Nikolai seemed to have his head screwed on right. “Aye, he should be at the café we walked past.”

“Any plans to marry him? And - would that make him my stepfather?” joked Nikolai, and Vadim gave a short, surprised laugh. That would bring the count up to three fathers. What a fucking mess.

“Relations in this family are too complicated for this old warhorse,” murmured Vadim, while they walked towards the café. Veranda with white painted wood, a good view on the river and the path that they walked. Tea time. Vadim would be very surprised if Dan wouldn’t be having tea now.

“Anything I should keep in mind?”

“No. He’s fairly easy going.” They entered, Vadim’s right hand between Nikolai’s shoulder blades, before he remembered to keep his distance, guiding him towards Dan’s table. Vadim pulled the hand back, surprised at that involuntary touch, an intimacy that he had no right to. He hoped Nikolai didn’t mind.

Dan was sitting with his customary shades on, his silver streaked hair grown well past the collar of his dark blue linen shirt. Placing the sleek PDA back onto the table beside a pot of tea and an almost empty plate of cream cakes, he took the shades off, folding them into his shirt pocket. He stood up, smiling while assessing the good looking young man that came towards him. Damn good looking in fact, positively devastating, and he felt ancient that very moment.

“Hi Nikolai, I’m Dan.” He held his hand out to him, “pleasure to meet you.” He didn’t know exactly what Vadim had told him, was playing it safe, but whatever it had been it looked good between those two, much better than expected.

Nikolai shook the hand. “Pleasure meeting you,” while Vadim pulled the third chair back and sat down, glancing at the menu, to give both of them a moment to seize each other up.

“Well, it’s good I finally manage to get off an oil rig to meet my father. And his partner.” The sentences came without hesitation. “And Kisa’s father. You look like her a lot.”

Dan laughed, shaking his head. “Hell, yes, when you put it like that, it sounds positively fucked-up.” ‘Father’, Dan noticed, glanced briefly at Vadim and smiled to himself. Father it would be, then, he was convinced it was for the best. Dan sat back down. “When it comes to Kisa, I’m afraid if she’d turned out to look like Vadim’s children, I would have been very surprised.” His age-lined dark eyes gleamed with warmth.

“Not very likely, genetics being what they are.” Nikolai sat as well, craned his neck to make eye contact with the waitress. “Let me just order a bite to eat, you guys want anything?”

Like ordering food in the pub with his mates. Vadim breathed a sigh of relief, and stretched out a leg so his calf made contact with Dan’s shin, who pressed back in acknowledgment.

“No, thanks,” Dan grinned, “I just had a couple of portions of sweets. According to Vadim I’m a lucky bastard, I eat like a horse and never gain weight.”

Vadim shook his head. His guts hadn’t quite unknotted yet.

The waitress looked over at their table and gave a nod and an indication she’d noticed, while taking somebody else’s offer.

“How long have you been working on oil rigs? Don’t think Vadim told me, and I’ve got quite a few mates who went onto them after the Forces.” Dan glanced to the side, located Vadim’s hand and took it. Holding it lightly in his own while fishing for his pack of fags with the other. At least he could still smoke outside.

Vadim closed his hand around Dan’s, and Nikolai didn’t seem to think it important, or ignored it, or just took it in stride.

“That’s two years now. I started working on a ship – bananas, life cattle. Saw some interesting places, Macau, bits and bobs of Africa, the Caribbean. Then I met some drillers on shore leave, and since I wasn’t dodging hard work, I ended up working there.” Nikolai gave a grin. “I expect you saw some interesting places as well.”

“I bet that what you saw was a hell of a lot more interesting. Whenever I got anywhere, I was less welcome.” Dan grinned and shrugged, “makes sightseeing difficult.”

“The conferences are good, though, Dan,” mentioned Vadim.

“Yes, I guess so.” Dan smiled at Vadim, his thumb absentmindedly caressing the fingers. “It’s just that I never fancied the actual job very much.” Dan flashed a quick grin at Nikolai. “All those suits, the constant need to dress up like a penguin and to pretend I’m well behaved, while all I am is still the irreverent squaddie.”

Nikolai grinned, leaning back. “I’ve worked with some Scotsmen in the North Sea. Good people. I liked them.”

Dan’s face suddenly shone with an odd sense of national pride. “I’m glad, I guess we are hard working people. Probably also just as hard headed.” He shrugged. “Still, I’ve seen most of the world and we continue to tour it. At least these days we don’t tend to get shot at.” He tilted his head, just like his daughter, with that half-quirked lopsided grin. “Tell me, Nikolai, do you have a favourite country or place?”

“I like sunny places, whatever part of the earth where it’s summer. Like now. Was getting cold in Europe, so I came over for scuba diving, snorkling and opal digging in the Outback. And you?”

“Afghanistan.” The word came out without a moment’s hesitation, while his hand gripped Vadim’s tighter, and Vadim’s hand tensed, as did his jaw muscles. Things came back to Dan, no doubt, just at the mentioning of the word. “No competition, it will always be the Afghan mountains. Nothing is as majestic.” And nothing else had swallowed him whole, changed his life, taken him in and settled in his mind, like that land of sky, mountains and dust. “But you wouldn’t want to be there right now. The shit’s flared up again, the West hasn’t learned from the old East and Brits and Yanks are pulling the same useless, idiotic stunts as the Soviets did.”

“Yeah, I heard things about pipelines there. Friend of mine is in the pipeline business.” Nikolai glanced at the waitress again, with a somewhat hopeful expression that made him look boyish.



“Anyway, I don’t mind heat nor cold, at least I didn’t use to.” Dan shrugged, was about to say something else when the waitress arrived to take their orders. His tea was cold, so he ordered another one, lighting his fag while Nikolai organised food and drink.

“That’s scary, you know? You look like Kisa, and you even light up like her. It’s like somebody snatched my baby sister and did the Dr Who thing with her and there she is, older and male. Any moment I expect you to throw a tantrum.” Nikolai gave a deep, open laugh.

“She smokes? At her age?” Dan’s eyebrows shot up and the zippo hovered in front of his face, forgetting to shut down the flame. “Holy fuck, I didn’t know, she didn’t tell me. Does her mother know?”

“Katya would rip her head off if she knew. Well, she’d try.” Nikolai grinned. “Quite a bit of bitchfighting going on there – Kisa doesn’t want to go fencing anymore, I stopped long ago, and Anya decided to remain an amateur as well, even though she was probably the best of us three. Kisa might have stopped only to piss Katya off. But smoking would take that to a new level. She calls me, you know. Kisa does. It’s the big brother little sister thing, she’s irresistible for me.”

Vadim smiled and looked pointedly at Dan. “You didn’t believe me,” he murmured in Russian, close to Dan’s ear. “She’s got that from you.”

“Oh.” Dan’s reply was as nonsensical as the way he managed to blush. He hid his flustered expression with a deep drag from his cigarette.

“Well,” when he had himself under control, thumb once again rubbing Vadim’s hand, “I’ll have a word with her. Smoking is shit, been doing it for almost forty-five years and I’m just a lucky git who got nothing.” Not that the rest of his lifestyle had ever been remotely healthy.

“My bet is, she’ll stop once she’s moved out. You know. It’s an act of defiance. Well, I moved out as soon as I legally could. Katya told me I’d be coming crawling back, and much of what happened later was just me proving that I wouldn’t.” Nikolai glanced up. “I’ll take the Chicken Milanese with salad and potato wedges.” Back to Dan. “And if that doesn’t stop her, I’m sure Anya will oblige and give her a tour of the cancer ward.”

The waitress scurried off to get their drinks and Nikolai’s food, when Dan inhaled again, keeping the smoke in his lungs, contradicting his own words. Exhaling and speaking at the same time. “I knew she stopped fencing, took up running instead, and martial arts, she told me.” He frowned before continuing, “did she tell her the latest, though? Do you know she wants to join the army?”

Nikolai nodded. “Yes. And I told her to do it, when she’s legally on the safe side and nobody can stop her. She’s been talking so much about it, I think she’d be pretty unhappy if she didn’t do it. And there’s a career for women in NATO and UN, she sent me the links on the net. Almost recruited me.” He gave a laugh, while Vadim’s features barely contained the impact of those words.

“No!” Dan would have jumped off the chair if his knees had let him. His hand gripped Vadim’s so tight, he felt the bones between his fingers. “How could you! You have no fucking idea about the forces.” Inhaling and exhaling in

swift succession, smoke curled out of his nostril when he continued, as agitated as before. "Don't you understand? No army in the world is all about building villages and saving natives' lives. It's about killing - and surviving. And what if she gets stuck in a NATO camp, under order to not interfere at all, while next door and in plain sight she'll watch women being raped and men tortured? We were there, in the Balkans. We've seen it, we've heard it, and even though we thought we'd seen so much death and destruction it wouldn't affect us, fuck, it did, and we had thirty years of killing behind us. What if she had to deal with that in, what, five, six years time? *A kid!*"

Nikolai listened with concentration, as if he listened to the shift leader about a very difficult and complicated drill, and the humour was gone. Very serious and very silent. "But some people have to deal with it," he said calmly, and that was very likely taken straight from Kisa's mouth. "I'd rather see good people do it than bad people."

Dan shook his head, grey hair flying wildly. "I don't want her to become like me." The fag landed in the ashtray and his fist came down onto the table, albeit controlled. "I don't want her to kill." Adding, in almost the same breath but with the aggression entirely lost, "she won't listen to me, as little as she listens to her mother." Pleading, "perhaps she'd listen to you?"

"We've been through that already. I told her she should think about it, get more information. She did. She now knows a lot about the Hungarian Forces. I don't want her to end up in some place getting blown up by a road bomb, and I'd rather she'd do something else, but she's set on it. Sorry, I don't think I can do anything there."

"She only told me a couple weeks ago." Dan looked at his scarred hand, still in a fist on the table. His voice lowered as he shook his head again, slower this time. "I know what it's like to be blown apart by a bomb." Looking straight at Nikolai, who paled, making the connection between the scar and the words, and murmured a silent "shit".

"I don't want her to see nor experience any of what I have seen and done. But," Dan gave a slight nod to Vadim's son, "as you said, it is her decision, and nothing and no one can take it from her." He should know, she was his daughter, and the stubbornness had come through, together with the charm and the looks. "Her mother will think it is all my fault and she shouldn't have allowed me to have contact with Kisa. I just want you to know that I would do anything to keep her from this idea and that to my knowledge I never tried to make my army career look glorious. It's a miracle I'm alive, and that's that. For what it's worth, I want you to know that, but I also want you to know that I'll always respect my daughter's decisions." *My daughter.* Yes, he felt it deep inside, in his guts and heart. His daughter.

Nikolai looked at Vadim, as if trying to get clues from him, but Vadim's face was expressionless, hiding the coiling fear that whatever he'd done, and however much he'd tried to keep Nikolai out of the army, he might have come close. Katya had paid off corrupt officials, several thousand dollars got Nikolai off the Russian Army list – the state corrupt enough to leave a Russian in

Hungary in peace. But the thought was there that Nikolai might just as well have ended up in the Legion, like other men without roots, men who wanted to get away.

“I think that’s the best,” Nikolai nodded, “and I don’t think for a minute it’s your fault. Seriously. We’re our own people, and what we want is really very personal, you know.”

Dan nodded, felt for a curious moment the bizarre urge to stand up, pull the shirt out of his trousers, just to let Nikolai have a look at the ragtag bag of scars his body was. “I wonder if she had chosen the same career path if she had never met me. We are our own people, but our decisions are influenced by those around us.”

“True.” Nikolai glanced at Vadim, and Vadim could decipher that one. Where would I be if I had had a father.

Vadim’s grip on Dan’s hand grew stronger for a moment, then relaxed. Vadim leaned in. “Be back in a minute.” He got up, touched Dan’s shoulder, and headed inside, for the loos.

Dan nodded, then looked back at Nikolai and pulled one shoulder up, before letting it drop. “Hell, I must have been influenced, way back when. ‘Join the army, be the best’ and all that shit.” He smiled wryly. “Who knows, maybe she gets bored with it after a year or two. There’s always hope, and at least she’s not going to join up as an ordinary grunt. More chances she actually has a proper career as an officer, right?” Prep-talking himself, but perhaps what he dreaded most was the inevitable phone call from Katya. No doubt the peace was fragile.

“Right, and she’s smart, she’ll work out the best way to go. That’s why Katya was so pissed off about the fencing thing. Kisa has the mind for it, she said.”

“If she is anything like me,” and hell, Dan knew Kisa was more like him than he wanted, “then she’d be good with any blade.” He quirked the corner of his lip, “any weapon, in fact.” He sighed, “oh damn.”

“Yes – her favourite was the sabre, but she was good with all three.” Nikolai glanced over his shoulder, where Vadim just vanished. “I wonder why he does that.”

“Does what?” Dan craned his head to follow Nikolai’s gaze.

“Leave us alone.”

“He just went to the loo.”

“Hm. Yes.” Nikolai shrugged. “He’s alright, isn’t he? Heard some bit down the family grapevine, it’s not, like, health related he wanted to see me?”

“Family grapevine ...” Dan rubbed his chin before searching for another cigarette. “How much do you know, Nikolai?”

“People think, and people talk. I got the impression he might ... have health problems. Then him wanting to see me. Sounded to me like cleaning house before you check out.”

“No, it’s the other way round.” Dan tapped his fag on the table, a habit he never got rid of, then lit it, looking from under his lashes at Nikolai. Vadim’s

son. Perhaps not in blood, but everything else. “He certainly is physically very well. Lower back problems, but that’s expected at fifty-four and a life like ours.”

“Good. Sorry, but that was what I thought. Good to hear that’s not what it is.”

“What do you know about the past, I mean, around the time you left Moscow. You must have been, what, nine? Ten? Around 1988 or 89.”

“Yes.” Nikolai glanced at him quizzically, perhaps surprised that Dan kept dates and tabs. “Just old enough to understand something was seriously wrong, but not old enough to understand why. I mean, the divorce and everything makes sense now, obviously. Katya told us they were trying to blame our father for ... well, basically losing the war. Scapegoat.”

Dan nodded, smoking slowly, deliberately. As deliberate as each of his carefully chosen words. “Have you ever been told anything about Vadim’s imprisonment, and what was done to him by the KGB in the Lubyanka?”

“Shit.” Just that, and a frown.

“Aye, shit.” Dan followed the smoke with his eyes before concentrating once more on Nikolai. “Vadim was set up by the KGB in Kabul, taken in 1989, to be charged with High Treason. I was a witness that day, but was successful in eliminating the KGB killers set onto me. From 1989 to 1990 Vadim was in the Lubyanka, tortured. Physically, beaten and worse, and mentally, isolation. Confession was extracted under torture, an entirely false confession, I hasten to add, because your father never committed any of the crimes they convicted him of. In February 1990 Vadim suffered a mock execution. As you know, your sister was conceived in January/February of the same year, I guess the story is common knowledge in your family.” Dan’s voice was quiet, his words purely factual. Recounting two years of terror in a few sentences.

Nikolai reached for the water jug and poured himself a glass, also filling up Dan’s. “I had no idea,” he murmured. “Yes, about Kisa, but not about him. How did he get out?”

“A re-trial was ordered later that year, because the KGB was badgered by the Interior Ministry. There was diplomatic pressure, too, which would not have been possible without the help of a dear friend and employer of mine, a former UK ambassador. Vadim continued to be kept in isolation. He was sentenced for misconduct and homosexual activities, but extensive bribery ensured that he was let out at the Finnish border on December 24 1990.”

“For misconduct and being gay.” Nikolai shook his head, then looked away, didn’t seem to find something to look at, struggling with the concept and the emotions. Pity, most likely, and even anger at the unfairness. “And that’s why ... he is that way?”

Dan inhaled deeply, taking his time. “What do you know about the short- and long-term effects of imprisonment, torture and isolation?”

“Not too much. I heard some stuff, but ... well, I guess if it happens in the family, it’s still something else. Hard to imagine him ... you know. In pain.” Nikolai struggled again. “It’s hard to understand parents are human, when

you're a kid. I always thought he just doesn't care, and suddenly he does, but it's like ... he's in pain. I can't deal with that. I have no idea how to treat him."

Dan smiled, tilting his head to look at that young man before him. "The worst thing for survivors is pity, and even more so for Vadim. Don't get me wrong, he is a strong man, very strong. If he weren't, he wouldn't have gone on as he did."

"No, I think he's strong, never struck me as anything else. Just ... distant, even when he was there. I remember him telling us how important languages are, and to always work hard for what you want. And I thought how do I work hard so he sees me? Him and Anya, they worked, but I never thought he was very interested in me." Nikolai shook his head. "But I guess all that makes sense now. He could hardly look out for himself."

"Sometimes, it takes torture and trauma survivors and sufferers of PTSD many years before they either give up and commit suicide, or the pain and its effects get so bad, they finally dare to take the hardest step of all, to go into therapy."

"Suicide. Shit." Nikolai again craned his neck, but Vadim seemed to take his time downstairs. "Was it ... was it that bad?"

Dan flicked the ash off his fag, "I don't think any of us will ever know how bad it was. All I can tell you from my vantage point as closest observer ..." Dan played over it lightly, "Vadim is in a lot less pain than he used to be. Trust me, he's quite well these days. It was a hard time, but some of the worst effects of the trauma are either gone or have considerably lessened. That's more than anyone can ask for, aye?"

"Sounds good. Shit. I really had no idea. Too caught up with my own crap. Seems that's in the family, too." Nikolai shook his head. "But how do we go from here? How do I treat him?"

"I tell you something, Vadim doesn't know how to treat you, either. He was more worried about meeting you today than I was when I saw Kisa for the first time. He feels guilty, and he was frightened you would accuse him, reject him. I guess you'd have every right in the world to do so." Dan smiled as he took another drag from the cigarette, "but you're a damn decent guy. I saw how you arrived and realised you hadn't done what you could have. As someone who loves your father and has known him for twenty-four years, I'd like to thank you for that, for giving Vadim a chance. Just try to treat him like a friendly stranger? You two have to get to know each other from scratch. A lot like me and Kisa. These days I try to be a good friend to her, since it's too damn late to be a father, but perhaps, if you get to know each other, you might find you get along as well."

"I have a couple weeks. There's a wildcat drill not far away, off the coast, the company man approached me about it, I might just take the job and stay in the hemisphere for a while."

"That sounds like a damn good idea." Dan smiled, stubbed out the fag and reached for the PDA, fingertips playing on the shiny surface. "Tell you what, if

you want to, I can have something to do somewhere else. My presence might be a bit too interfering. What do you think?"

"Not on my count. Might be good to get to know you, too. You're family as well."

Dan smiled, more pleased than he'd been for a while. "Thank you, you have no idea what that means to me."

"It's alright." Nikolai gave a grin to play over the uneasiness of having been thanked, then paused. "You did say 'twenty-four years', didn't you? Shit. That's almost all my life. You'll have to tell me your secret – I can't make my women stay longer than six months. They like the money, they don't like the job."

Dan laughed, "that's simple, do what I did and find a woman with the same job, and she'll understand."

"Oh, women on oil rigs. Plenty ... tons of them." Nikolai gave a laugh. "I mean, if you don't mind the girl being stubbly, smelling of drilling mud, roughly your size and answering to the name of Peter or Kevin ... well, okay, you wouldn't mind." A wink, and another sip from the water.

Dan smirked. "Or, do it like a good friend of mine, who used to be in the French Foreign Legion and then a merc and has been married happily for donkey's years, find one who looks at you as the big strong man and provider, and on top of that, is a damn nice lady to boot." He winked, "guess neither of those are easy, eh?"

"No. It's getting easier, though. You're getting used to it, and sometimes I just don't want to deal with the complications. Guess I turned out a bit of a loner."

"Still, I hope you find someone. Never thought I would, never even looked. Certainly not in a place like Afghanistan and with the job I had." Dan smiled, craned his head again to look for Vadim who still hadn't shown up. "Let me summon that Russkie, lest he's drowned in the loos, together with your food and our drinks."

"I think I'll check on him. You try and attract the dizzy waitress."

"No problem," Dan nodded, and put the gadget back onto the table.

Nikolai stood, flashed a broad grin at Dan, friendly, matey, then headed inside to check on his father.

Watching the young man retreat, Dan sat musing for a moment, smiling to himself. Who knew, maybe it would all work out. Spying the waitress a second later, he snatched a crutch, stood up to is full height and waved at her. Figured he could try the pissed-off growl later, if friendliness didn't have an effect. She noticed him immediately this time, and came hurrying over with a bright red face, apologising for the delay.

Dan had hardly managed to sit back down and settle comfortably, starting to check his email on the Blackberry, when she arrived with food and drinks.

"Thank you, and don't worry, we all forget things sometimes. Especially at my age." He winked at her, she blushed once more and burst into ... giggles.

Dan prayed for deliverance.

Vadim stared at the mirror and was breathing, holding his breath, going through the tension. It had come like a shock wave, a sudden impact that he found hard to absorb; guilt, memory, whatever had triggered it, it was the same old thing. He'd felt it creep up and it had hit him the moment he'd left the table. And that despite Nikolai being complete reasonable about it. Maybe about Sasha? He couldn't tell, could only breathe.

"Hey." The door opened, and Vadim saw - not Sasha - his own son stand there and look worried. "Are you okay?"

Vadim straightened, wiped the water from his face with a hand and turned, reaching for some paper towels. "I'm okay."

Nikolai regarded him critically, and clearly did not believe a word.

"Just had an off moment. Not as bad as they used to be. I'm okay. Okay is relative, but I'm okay." Vadim felt he was babbling. Drying his face, Vadim was glad that Nikolai just stood there, was simply present, and was mortified at the same time that his son saw him like this. "Sorry."

"Don't worry." Nikolai murmured softly and gave him a quirky, insecure smile. "Good to go back?"

"Aye."

They headed back, where, to Nikolai's delight, the food had finally arrived, and there was more small talk, with Nikolai opening up a bit more, telling some stories about various drilling adventures as if making an effort to entertain them, or lighten the mood, something which didn't come natural to him. Nonetheless, that was a completely different world and an interesting one to boot, and they spent a good few hours together, until Nikolai had to leave to meet up with a friend who'd pick him up for a drive into the Outback, but not before they'd repeated that Nikolai was perfectly welcome down in Palmy.

He showed up three weeks later, and Vadim showed him the favourite places in a three-day tour around the North Island. They talked a lot, caught up on all those years, and when Nikolai one evening, in a motel near sulphur-smelling Rotorua, stepped close and embraced him in a bear hug, they were both crying, knew it both and both wiped their eyes as if to hide it. Nikolai held him so tight it bordered on despair, and Vadim ran his hand through that hair, relishing the unexpected and altogether undeserved closeness.

October 2005, New Zealand

When Dan finally came out of the consultation room, he was frowning, but the moment he looked up to shake the doctor's hand, his face smoothed back into a neutral expression. With a large manila envelope under his arm, he made his way towards Vadim, who'd been sitting in the waiting area. Dan's limp was more pronounced these days and it wasn't the left one that caused the problem, forcing him to rely on the cane a lot more than he used to.

Vadim looked up from his chat with an elderly kiwi he'd struck up a conversation with, and touched the man's arm when he said goodbye, and the man nodded and smiled. Vadim stood and looked at Dan attentively, then stepped to his side and silently offered support. "What's up with that knee?" he asked.

"Fucked." Dan summarised the whole shebang of lengthy consultation with the one word. "Just like the other." He frowned and handed the envelope to Vadim. "I need another replacement, and this time, I was told, I mustn't wait too long."

"You won't." Vadim touched him on the arm, moving slowly while Dan made his way outside and towards the car. He opened the car door for Dan, then moved around to claim the driver's seat. Thinking. Remembering how only family could visit, remembering the whole painful time spent waiting and worrying. "We'll do that one better this time."

"Aye," the frown was back on Dan's face, and remained even as he lit a fag, window down. "I guess it would be damn hard if we managed to do it any worse than last time." He grimaced, blew smoke out of the open window and struggled to find his irreverent humour. There was no way around it: he was frightened, but hell, he wasn't going to admit it again. "I just bloody hate hospitals and you don't like them any better."

"We'll get the best one money can buy, and ..." Vadim paused when a thought hit him. It was an outrageous thought, but it seemed like a good idea. He'd have to check some things, just to be sure. He followed the news, and he was fairly certain it was possible, but he'd have to be absolutely sure. They were both still British citizens, after all.

"And what?" Dan looked at Vadim, brows raised.

Vadim put the key into the ignition and turned it. "And we won't make the same mistakes again." He glanced over at Dan and smiled. "Promised. We can plan this properly and make sure it's nowhere near as bad and awkward." He fought to keep his face straight, because he really liked that idea.

"Okay, guess I just have to get through it somehow." Dan leaned out of the window once more to blow smoke. "I fucking hate hospitals." Grumbled, but he fell silent after that, deep in thoughts. It took him almost all of the way back to the farm before he had caught himself. If it had to be done it had to be done,



and perhaps this time he'd have the bottle to ask Vadim to be there with him, and if he felt really courageous he might even tell him that he was scared stiff of the anaesthetic – completely irrationally.

Back at the house, Vadim made them both mugs of tea and then took to the office for a bit. Internet was slow, but he didn't mind that much. Bingo. After browsing a few official sites, that question was answered. His memory hadn't betrayed him. It was possible, and for once, a good way to hit back. Defend himself and Dan, and their 'lifestyle' from any doctor bullshit. He came out again. "I have to get something from the supermarket – I really want roast chicken for dinner." He leaned in to kiss Dan and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'm back in an hour."

"Sure." Dan grinned, "I never say no to roast chicken. As long as I get chips as well, and some mayonnaise." He'd thrown the x-rays underneath the couch table and had propped himself up in front of the telly, watching a DVD of yet another war film. His collection had become legendary.

"I'll get fresh potatoes – and stuff to make mayonnaise as well."

"*Make* mayonnaise? Holy fuck, I think I am in love with you." Dan was still laughing when Vadim left.

Vadim drove to Palmy, bought some chicken and the other things, then set about making dinner. The chicken was huge and took nearly one and a half hours, which gave him plenty of time to set everything else up. He laid the table out on the veranda, lit some candles, then set up the food as well and called Dan, who had been upstairs in his study while the chicken was in the oven.

When Dan came back down, slowly and laboriously, since the knee really was giving him trouble when going down the stairs, the frown was immediately back. Steeple, but with the added dimension of curiosity. "What's up? You don't usually lay it out that thickly. I'm not dying yet, you know, and the doc promised the new medication would kick in soon."

"Just sit down." Vadim smiled, watched as Dan sat down in his chair. Not quite the mood he'd have gone for, but then, when was ever the right mood. "I was wondering whether you'd make me an honest man." Vadim grinned, showing teeth.

"What?" Dan leaned half across the table.

"As in, would you marry me, or do you think you can get somebody younger and fresher? Hm?"

"*What?*" The one word was all Dan managed to get out. Dark eyes wide, staring at Vadim.

"Marriage. We are both British citizens. While Russia doesn't even allow any Russian to be gay, the United Kingdom and Her Majesty's Government have enabled us to 'marry', or at least have a civil partnership. I checked. Since I'm an atheist, I don't need the Church or a priest in this anyway. I'd have asked you whether you'd civil partnership me, but I think that sounds far too prosaic."

"I ... am a man." Dan slumped back in his chair, staring bug-eyed at Vadim. His intellectual capacities seemed to have deserted him.

"Yeah. So am I."

“Aye, I noticed.” Dan ran a hand through his wild hair.

“Civil partnerships work regardless of gender.” Vadim smiled. “It’s really just so the doctors can’t chase me out of your room. I’d be family. I could visit you, like family. I’d have the same, no, more rights. I don’t want to get sent away again when you need me. And if I have to have an operation, the same applies to you. Plus, of course, it would make some things easier. Pension. Inheriting. Wills and all that legal stuff.”

“I ... guess.” Gobsnacked, floored and effectively shut up, Dan still hadn’t stopped the fixed staring. He was trying to process the offer, but couldn’t quite get his head around it. But then he’d gained a daughter, and that was the last thing he’d ever thought he’d have, and perhaps he could also gain a husband without the world spinning out of its axis? Holy shit.

“Just think about it. We don’t have to decide that today.”

“Aye.” Sitting back, Dan looked up and at Vadim. Taking a long time to just look. The short blond hair, the face he knew so well, and how it had changed over the years. Lined, some wrinkles, slightly more tanned than it used to, age seemed to be doing that to a person, and thus the pale eyes looked even more stunning. Stunning, yes, that was the word, the face had never lost its impact and the body had never diminished its allure. The years had been kind. Vadim still was the man he’d always wanted. Everyone else, no matter who and where and what, paled in comparison to Vadim. His Russkie. His cunt. Dan smiled at last. “You really caught me off guard.” Tilting his head, he studied Vadim’s face once more. Each expression, every inch he’d touched and kissed and knew so damn well. And Vadim, in turn, seemed calm, a smile around his lips, but it wasn’t self-conscious at all. Vadim liked being looked at.

“Do you remember all the times we were joking? And I always said I’d never do such a crazy thing, knowing full bloody well that we never could? Seems I was wrong.” Dan huffed.

“Well, I actually was married and I promised that that wouldn’t happen to me again. I was wrong, too.” Vadim leaned back, regarding him. “But who could have known it would be possible at all? That we have a place in ‘normal society’, rights, legal stuff, pension plan and all that?”

“Aye, that’s fucking weird. And good, damn good.” Dan’s smile rapidly morphed into a grin. “Shit! Now I actually *do* have to figure out the answer.”

“Yes please.”

“So, do you want to marry me for convenience or for my outstanding beauty, charm and loveliness?” The toothy grin nearly split Dan’s face.

“I thought you’d swallow the hook easier if I told you it’s just for the legal side of things.” Vadim reached over and took Dan’s hand. “While, in truth, I want to see you in that kilt again.”

“You’re so predictable, Russkie!” Dan laughed, “and you didn’t even take proper advantage the last time I wore one.” His fingers curled around Vadim’s, squeezing tightly for a moment. “Is that the male variant of a wedding dress, aye?” He winked, leaned across the table, meeting Vadim halfway over the chicken.

Vadim grinned, leaning over, too, hand held fast. "Well, with us, it's fairly clear who wears the dress ... and I'm going for a proper tux. Bells and whistles. Peter has tried to sell me one for years." His tailor on Saville Row, who might or might not have a crush on Vadim, but certainly had made a small fortune from the acquaintance.

"Guess that's settled, then." Dan tilted his head forward, to briefly touch Vadim's forehead with his own. "But just so that it's clear, I won't marry you for the surgery, the legal rights, the kilt and not even for the tux. I marry you because we bloody well can and I bloody well love you."

"And you caught the flower bouquet from Solange."

"Oh shit, I'd forgotten."

Vadim grinned, then grew more serious. "I love you, too. For everything, and for the rest of my life."

Dan swallowed, said nothing, just smiled and leaned in for a kiss. Bad enough the chicken was getting cold by now.

\* \* \*

Later that day, after checking the time zone and figuring that it was morning in England, Dan phoned the Baroness, hoping to catch her in her mansion in Surrey, probably during her morning tea. He wanted to tell her first of all people what they'd decided. Maggie, his oldest friend.

She was on the phone straight away.

"Ma'm?" Dan never introduced himself these days.

"Dan, what a pleasure to hear from you. Is everything alright?"

"Pretty much, aye. Have to have another knee op, but that's not why I call. Figured you'd like to know what I have to tell you."

"Which is?"

"Did you hear that the law is going to change in Britain from December onwards?"

"Which law, Dan?" She sounded a little bemused, and Dan had to grin.

"Civil partnerships, Ma'm."

"Civil ..." there was a moment's hesitation and Dan picture how she was catching on. Rather quickly, he presumed, for she had the most acute mind he'd ever known. "Dan, are you telling me that you have decided to 'tie the knot'?"

Dan laughed, "I think that's a bit too late. We've got so many bloody knots tied, we'd never manage to unravel them, but aye, Vadim had the grand idea that we should go for it. What do you think? Makes all the legal stuff easier."

"What I think?" her voice seemed suddenly that of a much younger person, "I am absolutely delighted! Oh, Dan, my dear friend, what wonderful news on a dreary October morning. That is an excellent idea. Tell me, have you already decided when and where and how?"

"Uhm ... no." Dan frowned, "haven't even thought about it. I figured somewhere in a registry office?"

“Absolutely not!” Her sudden enthusiasm surprised him. “You have to have a proper celebration. Do you not realise that you have been together, if memory does not fail me, for twenty-five years?”

*Together?* Dan’s eyes widened. Together was perhaps not the right word, but ... holy fuck. She was right. Twenty-five years since a night of terror in a rat infested alley in Kabul. “I hadn’t thought about that, no.”

“This is therefore a silver wedding.” Her brief laughter was nothing but delighted. “Don’t you think this should be celebrated in style?”

“I ... guess?” Dan was clearly out of his depth, but when it came to this lady, he was rather used to that.

“Exactly, and I am certain that Vadim would agree. Would he not?”

“I ... guess?” Dan rolled his eyes to no one, realising he wasn’t quite making intelligent conversation.

“In that case, my dear friend, would you do me the honour and allow me to arrange and organise the celebrations? It is such a wonderful occasion, and I would be proud if you let me be your wedding coordinator. I’d be delighted.”

Dan was taken aback for the second time that day, and he could do nothing but shrug. “If you’d like to, Ma’m, of course.”

“Wonderful, absolutely wonderful. You just send me a list of guests, and please don’t keep it short, I’d like you to invite everyone who has been a friend and acquaintance over the years and who you would like to partake in this joyous occasion. Send it to me via email, I have recently properly joined the ‘net generation’. I believe they call us silver surfers.”

Dan grinned, “of course, and I’m not so far off the silver myself.”

The sound of her laughter was heard, short and warm, before she gave him her private email address, then added, “I will let you know a choice of venues and possible dates. I believe you would like to have the ceremony as soon as possible and before the surgery you mentioned?”

“Aye, that’s the idea.”

“January it will be, then. You will hear from me soon.”

Dan wondered for several long minutes after the call, if he’d ever heard her that delighted and excited before, and he decided that he hadn’t.

\* \* \*

“Vadim?” Dan called out from the top of the stairs. “I’m not sure if I haven’t just made a fucking big mistake.”

“You typed in your bank details in a phishing email from Nigeria?”

“Worse. I think I just told Maggie it was okay for her to organise the wedding. Civil partnership ceremony, but it’s the same damn thing.” Dan leaned against the banisters at the top of the stairs, with a helpless expression in his face. “I hope that’s alright with you, she was so excited, I fear this will be a *big* occasion. She’s asked us to come up with lists of guests. Emphasis on the plural.”

Vadim laughed. “What, the whole lot in one place? Hooch, Jean, Duncan, Katya and Kisa ...” he grinned up at Dan. “Why not. Should be the party of the year, and it’s all friends and family.”

Dan was visibly relieved. “A propos Hooch and Jean, we’re going to have best men? The whole shebang? Does it work like that with blokes, too?”

“I think so. And ... Hooch is probably the logical choice for me. Which means I have to call him. And Jean for you. Should result in great photos.” Vadim was leaning against the wall. He could already see that – all four of them decked out in formal clothes, grinning into the camera.

Dan laughed. “If we’re not careful we’ll end up in one of those male fashion mags you sometimes read.” He turned more serious, “but you’re right, I should go and give Jean a ring. The way Maggie sounded, we better get cracking on a list of addresses soon. As you know, she can be awfully fierce if she wants you to do a job.” He winked, before retreating back to his study.

“Yeah. Get on the phone, then. I’ll do the same.” Vadim was about to turn, then paused and went up the stairs and followed Dan, stopping him in the doorway. “By the way ... what about rings? Would you like rings?”

“Haven’t even thought about it. Actually, haven’t thought about anything at all.” Dan grinned, then glanced at his left wrist, where he usually wore the lapis lazuli beads. “Have you got something in mind?”

“Yeah, something simple. I’ve seen rings in one of my ‘fashion mags.’” Vadim mocked Dan’s tone lightly. “Steel, but damascene steel. It has patterns. Very different to anything I’ve ever seen. I only have to find out what the designer was called, but you’ll like them.”

“Steel sounds good.” Dan smiled, “you always liked me with a blade, aye? I guess a steel wedding ring is the second best thing, and a little less lethal.”

“Aye.” Vadim reached out and kissed Dan, one of those gentle kisses that were all about tenderness. “Damn. We’ll get married. Now it starts to sink in.” Vadim stepped back with a sigh.

“Don’t mention it, or I’ll get a twitch in my eye.” Dan grinned, and gave Vadim’s shoulder a tender squeeze.

Vadim smiled. “Right, I’ll call Hooch. Let’s hope he’s not on some training course or other.”

“Good luck, I’ll try Jean. Let’s hope he’s not occupied by kids or vintners.” Dan winked.

Vadim snorted, shook his head and went to find the other phone.

\* \* \*

It took a while for anybody to answer Jean’s phone. When Jean did, he sounded a little breathless. “Oui?”

“You been screwing vintners or playing with your kids?”

Jean laughed. “You got me. Give me a sec.” Some rustling and shifting, then the familiar sound of the coffee machine grinding beans.

“Got you in what, the screwing?” Dan lit a fag while listening to the sounds on the other end.

“No, we were just getting a bit frisky. No screwing yet.”

“So you *are* doing the pretty vintner.” Dan smirked.

“Frederic? Yeah. It just happened. Right, I’m in the kitchen now. What can I do for you, apart from phone sex and telling you naughty stories?”

“Be the best man at my wedding?”

“You and Vadim? Sure. When? You dragged me to the altar, I can recipro... do the same.”

“What, you’re not even shocked yet?”

“What?” Jean paused. “You *are* serious? You’re marrying him? I thought that was a joke.”

“What else? You think I phone you up, disturb your chances of getting hot man-sex – which is an important thing for someone as straight as you are – just to take the piss?” Dan laughed out loud. “No, Frenchie, we *are* doing the civil partnership thing. It’ll happen in January, and Maggie has taken over the organisation. I assume you know what that means.”

“Wow.” Jean stopped the machine with a click, then foamed up some milk. “Sure, I’m up for it, and as I said, Frederic just happened.” He grinned. “Congratulations. Solange saw that one coming. She always thought you were perfect together and should be married.”

“She knew more than I did. I am rather floored.” Inhaling smoke, Dan grinned at the computer screen, which displayed an email from Kisa that had just come in. “Britain’s changing the law, I’m just checking it, from fifth December on, and the first folks get hitched before Christmas. The party will happen somewhere in the UK, no idea what Maggie comes up with. Anyway, how are you, how’s Solange, and how are the aliens?”

“I’m doing alright. It’s weird being a freelancer. I have to hustle to make sure the bills are paid. No hustling, no cash. Solange has acted a little bit in a few very independent and arcane films. I doubt that will ever pay as much as her other stuff, but it makes her happy. Her and her arty friends, and there’s talk of golden palms and Cannes and all that, but I think they are just talking shit.” Jean sipped his coffee while Dan chuckled and put out his fag.

“The vineyard is doing good business – surprisingly, really. Frederic was spot on about all that organic food trend. He got it back up to specs, since it had been left for years and years the soil was clean, so he could start with that organic thing straight away. While other vineyards are struggling with the demand, he’s starting to buy more acres and working on the actual wine. It’s not going to be massive, but it’s nice enough and starts to pay off, we don’t have the same price pressure as everybody else, so that’s a good thing. The kids... well, they are at school. Boarding school. Great stuff, they are in the same place with diplomats’ kids and, above all, that gives us the flexibility to keep the rest of our lives running. But they are great. Smart young people, they are much, much better compared to what they were when we picked them up. Healthy, too, which is the main thing.”

“Positively domestic, then.” Dan smiled, “and does Solange have any idea about Frederic and you?”

Jean paused. “No. I’m keeping that double life going. Does that make me a scumbag?”

“I’m not the right person to make any judgments, but I am looking forward to seeing her again. Will you bring the aliens?”

“They are in school, but you’re welcome to visit us when they’re here. We got enough space.” Jean’s voice lowered. “And while I like Frederic, he’s not quite the same.”

“He doesn’t fuck you?” Dan murmured, closed his eyes and pulled up the image of Jean on his lap.

“No, he doesn’t. Mostly, I fuck him.” Jean’s breathing was louder, the voice rough with intimacy. “I imagine you when he gives me a blowjob. He likes giving head, just like you, but he’s still different.”

Dan tipped his head back, phone close to his ear. Shit, this really wasn’t what he had intended, but that voice, the memories ... “I want to fuck you again, Jean, and this time I want to call all the shots.”

Jean swallowed audibly. “How would you do me? Want me to get off on that? Here, now?”

“What haven’t we done yet, is the question.” Dan grinned, eyes still closed, going through the mental images of all the times he’d fucked Jean since the first time, back on that couch. A dozen times, perhaps, and each as special as the first. “You’ve never been on your knees.” He murmured, hand dropping to his groin, he sat with knees open, feeling the response beneath his palm. “But that’s where I want you, in front of a mirror, so you can watch yourself getting fucked.”

“Oh you bastard,” Jean murmured. “I’m so hard. Frederic is probably asleep up there in the bed right now ...” Breathing louder, then changing the grip on the phone.

“In the afternoon?” Dan mocked.

“Yes. We were about to get to round two...”

“In that case ... I don’t want you to come in the kitchen, but I want you to go upstairs and do exactly to your vintner what I’d do to you. I want you to be hard, and close to coming, and I want you to not even bother waking him up. Just take him and imagine it was me taking you.” Dan’s breathing increased, “do you understand, Jean?”

Jean groaned. “Yeah. He’ll like that. He likes it a little rough at times. Should still be oiled up. Shit. Dan.”

“You’re going bareback?” Surprise in Dan’s voice, soon overlaid with arousal. “The next time I see you, I want you on all fours, on the bed, knees spread wide, lubed up, arse high and open, while you’re watching yourself in a mirror. I won’t touch you, and you won’t stroke yourself either, while I’m standing behind you, slamming my cock into your arse. And you’ll want it, you’ll want to get fucked, and you’ll ask me for it.” His breathing was fast, irregular, his cock hard under his hand, trapped in the tight black jeans.

Jean gave another groan and breathed hard, like he could feel it, the intrusion, when he focused his mind completely on getting entered. He found it hard to relax, every time. "I'll want you to fuck me hard and deep," he murmured. "And I'll watch you... do it, watch your cock ... ram up into my arse..."

"That's right." Dan felt like groaning, wanting to do exactly that right now. "And you'll want it so badly, you'll come by getting fucked, you'll lose it completely." Dan concentrated on the images, then whispered, "now go, take him. Fuck him."

Jean needed a few moments before he could respond. Stopping right there was hard on him, wanted to stay on the line and finished it. "Okay ... call me ... call me later?"

"Aye, when you're done, and you'll tell me everything." Dan pushed a button and hung up. Breathing hard, he opened his eyes. Damn, he was so horny right now, he had two options. Pushing himself out of the chair, and went for option number one. Number two could be a fall-back, his own hand never refused.

"Vadim?" Dan leaned in the doorframe of Vadim's study, watching the broad back, hand inside his jeans, the top buttons open.

Vadim turned, saw Dan's state, smiled and got up. "Good conversation?" he asked.

"Aye ..." Dan grinned, "telling Jean how I want to fuck him, and making him fuck his vintner in the exact same way, does that to me." He popped open the last two buttons. "I am really horny and really want to fuck you. Or suck you. Or get sucked, Or even just a hand job, or ... you get the gist." He leaned against the doorframe for support, while pushing his jeans down. Commando, like he'd always been, and fully hard.

Vadim came close, chest to chest, and kissed him deeply, fully, hand moving down to Dan's cock, smiling into the kiss. "Why am I not surprised," he murmured, then went down on his knees without releasing the cock. He took Dan between his lips, wondering for a moment what Dan was thinking of, Jean or him, and whether it mattered. It didn't. Jean was somewhere in Europe, and they were here, and everything else didn't matter all that much. There was no cheating involved, just pleasure and sex. He took him deeper, fucking his own throat with eager, practiced motions, Dan's reactions making him hard as well, the taste, all that tenderness and love.

When Dan came, he had a hand in Vadim's short hair, the other gripping the doorframe for leverage, as he thrust erratically. Eyes still open, he was breathlessly grinning down at Vadim. "Your turn ..." he pointed to the chair in front of Vadim's desk. "I want to taste you, Russkie."

Vadim swallowed one last time, as if for emphasis, then got up and kissed Dan. "Okay." He pulled the chair close with a foot and stepped back to open his own trousers and pulling his cock free, while Dan sat down, jeans still open. A few firm strokes got Vadim all the way interested from mostly-hard to fully hard.



Dan pushed the lever of the chair and it lowered down. Grinning, he beckoned Vadim closer. He had his hands on Vadim's hips, pulling him near and pushing him onto his lips, then down his throat with one reckless movement. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on the tightness, heat, the suction and the fight that he'd always win: deep throating with greed.

The sound in Vadim's throat might have turned into Dan's name, but was strangled and shattered into its components that didn't make any sense. Vadim thrust, hands in Dan's hair, against his neck, touching as he moaned and gasped with each thrust, each movement. This was exactly right, mindblowingly good, and nobody could make him come that fast or hard. The exact knowledge, there was no awkwardness, no shame, just complete trust and welcome of whatever the other wanted and needed. Vadim groaned when he climaxed, feeling the throat constrict convulsingly against his cock, but Dan managed, kept breathing, knew how to.

Dan spent a long time licking and cleaning Vadim's slowly softening cock, and when he finally let go, he looked up, grinning. "That's better." He had to clear his throat, but always enjoyed the aftermath of the willing abuse. "Guess you can phone Hooch now, without fear of needing to come." He smirked toothily, patting Vadim's hips and buttocks.

Vadim stowed himself away, then bent down to kiss Dan again. "We do that kind of thing very rarely," he murmured, and reached for the phone. Casually, as if inviting Dan to stay right there while he did his phone call. Re-dialling the number that had been busy a quarter of an hour ago.

"You know that I don't mind, whatever you do." Dan smiled, stood up with some effort, and tucked himself in. Thankful when Vadim picked up his cane while listening to the ring tone, which was going on for several times. Dan pressed a light kiss onto Vadim's cheek, then left the room, closing the door behind him.

The phone was finally answered by a girl's voice, cheerfully announcing the reception of 'Fitness Bootcamp' in a thick American accent and rather over-enthusiastic tones.

Vadim kept the laughter down, but the amusement was still audible. "Ah. Is Mr Bozic there? Krasnorada. I'm a friend."

"Oh hello!" She chirped, "it's Mandy speaking." Sounding as if she were the happiest person on earth for the only reason that she was talking to Vadim. "I'm sorry, I picked up a private call, it must have been set to reception. I'll patch you through. Bye!" Some clicking in the line, and then another ringtone, different this time, and a further wait, until there was a final click, and Hooch's voice drawled, "hey, Vadim."

"Hey." Vadim sat down and leaned back. "How are you doing?"

"Good, real good. Less bored than I used to be." Hooch let out a huff of laughter, as dry as always. "I'm getting old. Forty-fucking-five, and I finally miss being in the midst of the action less." Another huff of laughter. "You good? Been a few months."

“I am. I’m trying to get everybody to the UK in January. You think you’re free then? I would hate to have to look for another best man.” Vadim kept his tone level, very casual.

Hooch immediately shot out, “a what?”

“I’m not sure what the American word is, the Brits call him the best man. The guy who keeps the rings in his pocket and acts as if he lost them.”

“You are talking about *whose* wedding here?” It was a mean feat to get Hooch to an incredulous stage, but Vadim had succeeded, for once.

“Mine and Dan’s. We’re using that civil partnership law they are going to pass soon. We’ll legally ‘marry’. And that means rings and a huge party, and all our friends, and, well, you’re special. I can trust you to not lose the rings, for once, and I love you in a suit.”

“Jesus H Christ.” Hooch exclaimed, “I didn’t know about the law changing. We still have ‘don’t ask don’t tell’ in my job and Fayetteville’s not, like, gay centre.” A rustling sound, as he was getting out of his kit.

“I can imagine. Palmy isn’t quite Wellington, either.”

“Your best man? It’s an honour. But a suit? Figured you’d rather want me in my dress uniform.” Vadim had never seen him in it, despite the usual US military way, Hooch tended to prefer civilian kit. “On such a special occasion.”

Vadim laughed. “Oh fuck. Well, you get off on the Soviet stuff ... yeah, I would like that. Dress uniform at a gay wedding. That’s ... that’s a good thought, I’d like that.”

“No insignia, though. You know us Delta, secretive and all that shit.” Hooch huffed again, then more rustling and two faint thuds, as he toed his boots off.

“That’s fine. I know what you are, underneath that cloth,” Vadim murmured.

“You are the only one who *truly* knows that part of me beneath the cloth. Matt ...” Hooch breathed for a moment, nothing else. “Don’t tell me I’ll be the only military guy. What about that legion officer?” His voice changed as he walked through the rooms, then the sound of the fridge being opened.

“Beauvais? He’ll be invited, too. Dan’s best man is also legion. Ex-legion, actually. Fake Frenchman, he’s from Moscow. Jean. He’s the guy where we picked up Beauvais, when he got married.” Vadim smiled. “He’s married, but very much into Dan. We had some threesomes with him, it all started in Kuwait. Maybe I’ll tell you the long story one day, but he made me really jealous, the bastard.”

“Worse than I made Dan?” The pop and fizz of a can being opened. These days, as Vadim knew, Hooch was more into diet coke than lager.

“Somewhere in that category.” Vadim felt he missed the man, missed the way he moved and how he looked at him. Barbed friendship, there was always a touch of hurt, but the rest was deep and good and solid, and if he could help Hooch deal with his demons, and enjoy in return what Hooch gave him in trust and need and other blood currency, he could only count his blessings. They met about twice a year, to play their games. ‘Time out’ they called it both, and Matt and Dan knew. Dan understood, all that jealousy stuff didn’t find any purchase

these days between him and Vadim, and Matt accepted. "I'll email you some photos so you know who you're talking to."

"You can always mail some nude shots if you have them." The sound of liquid and swallowing. "I might just reciprocate." The can came down onto the table and Hooch's grin was audible in his voice. "I'm sure Matt would oblige, he got pretty good with the camera. A side-job in addition to the gym. Even though the little bastard earns shitloads."

"Good to hear ... I think we have some ... suggestive shots, not sure about nude. Will have to check with Dan." Vadim laughed. "And I remember you well, but wouldn't say no."

"You could tell me *how* you want me." Hooch retorted, "it's been a while ... I'm getting antsy."

"Then we should meet as soon as you can make it." Vadim checked the calendar on the computer. "We're in Europe anyway for Christmas and will flyover at the beginning of December. It would be good to meet you before that."

"I can make it at the end of November. Can you come to the US?"

"I can." Because he really wanted to, and maybe get himself some work lined up on short notice. There were a few corporations that had been interested. "How do I want you ... well. I remember how you shake when you're kneeling in a stress position, blindfolded."

"Shit, Vadim," Hooch took in a sharp breath, "I got to be at a Mess dinner in an hour."

"How long is the drive?"

"Twenty minutes. Plus shower, dressing. I got twenty-five minutes tops."

Vadim checked the time. Twenty-five minutes. That should be just enough to make Hooch uncomfortable. "Get a nice steel plug," he murmured, low, checking over his shoulder whether Dan was anywhere near, but Dan had shut the door behind him when he left. "Then kneel."

"Yes." Just that, and then the sound of Hooch moving to another room. Vadim knew Hooch kept the small but excellent selection of high-class toys in the bedroom, and that Matt was perfectly aware of it all. A drawer was pulled open, metal clinked, and then Hooch's voice again. "What do you want me to do?"

"Prepare yourself for that plug." Vadim closed his eyes, imagining Hooch down on his knees, the tanned skin, the smooth muscle. At his physical best for his age. The man was the very best the Americans had, and he agreed, wholeheartedly, if for different reasons. "Fuck yourself with it, on your knees, chest down, knees apart."

Hooch didn't answer, except for his hitching breath, and the phone was put down on the floor. "Fast? Deep?"

"Slow, but deep. Don't let up." Vadim smiled, but kept the smile out of his voice. Hooch's groans were intensely rewarding, even though his own body didn't respond, it was still something to be cherished, and he was better at this if he didn't need himself. Hooch had a way to break his control, so it was always

better to get off first, before they started in earnest. “You need to feel it. Hit that spot, like I’d do it. I’d hold you down, between your shoulder blades. Boots, uniform. You can’t see me, but you can smell me. Hear me.”

“Yeah, I ... can hear you.” Hooch’s voice was forced, as he breached himself and fucked his own arse with slow, deep, but intensely powerful thrusts. A sudden jolt, a suppressed cry, when he got it right. “You ... hit me ... again?”

“Yes.” Vadim said firmly, the smile now gone. “I worked you over good. Slapped you, whipped you, strung you up like a hog for slaughter.” Hooch shuddered audibly, and Vadim stood, feeling tension in his body. The thought of torture did that, made it impossible to remain relaxed. “But I’d fuck you like this, feeling you cringe after the pain. With the afterglow of pain. Fucking you because it’s good, because I have the power to do it, like I want it, not how you want it.” He sometimes did that, when Hooch had suffered, and he felt that a brutal hard fast fuck was not enough of a contrast. He’d often squeeze Hooch’s balls then, after he’d come himself, to add just that edge of pain and often getting him off like that. With more pain.

Hooch groaned loudly, “I need ...” he never finished the sentence, couldn’t ask nor beg. Against his very grain, but he needed, needed so badly. The pain, the humiliation, and ever more pain.

“Slow down.” Merciless. Vadim wanted to make Hooch come, wanted to hear him lose it, but knew that Hooch needed the exact opposite. Compassion, love, friendship, all that only meant he had to give Hooch what he really needed. “Slow. Down to a crawl. Shallower. Now let it go, don’t touch it, leave it right there. Both hands on the ground. Breathe.”

“No ...” Hooch’s voice hardly human, but he did as he’d been told. The steel plug remained deeply embedded in him, and he shuddered as he stilled, so close to coming, his breathing was erratic and loud in the phone.

“Get a cock ring. No, better. You won’t want to embarrass yourself. Get that chastity device. Put it on. Careful, I don’t want you to come. Not now. Not without permission. Wear it under the uniform ... our little secret.”

The breathing was ragged and Hooch’s voice impossibly husky. “Shit, I ... need to get soft to get into it.” Desperation tinged his voice, too. “Cold shower. Yes. Give me a moment.”

“I’ll be here,” Vadim promised. “Don’t finish yourself off.”

“I won’t.” The sound of movement, then nothing for a few minutes, before the phone was picked up. Hooch’s voice sounded more normal now, it had regained some of its equilibrium. “I did as you ordered. Locked in, the plug as well. Where am I to leave the key?”

“Put it in an envelope and drop it off at the gym for Matt.” Vadim smiled now. “Get dressed and attend that Mess function like a good soldier.”

“I will.” The discomfort was evident, but also the way Hooch hid it. “I will call you later.”

Vadim smiled. “I’ll be here. Later.” He had to hang up, to not break the tension too much, allowing Hooch his fantasy, and, besides, he should call Matt. He redialled the number and fortified himself against that saccharine sweetness

of the receptionist, knowing that the private line had been set to the switchboard.

She was just as annoyingly enthusiastic as before, but quickly patched him through to Matt's mobile, who had just finished his class.

"Yeah?" Matt sounded breathless, and there was music in the background. He was clearly not just giving training but taking it at the same time.

"Vadim here. I just talked to Hooch. He's off to his function, but I think he'd appreciate it if you were there when he returns. I don't think he'll linger more than he absolutely has to." Vadim smiled. "You think you'll be home?"

It took Matt a moment before he caught on. "I always am ..." The sudden change in breathing told Vadim that Matt had figured out what he was talking about. Matt moved from the gym up the stairs, through sets of doors and into the flat above. "Will he need to be silenced?" A timbre in his voice gave proof that while Matt didn't play those games, he had learned how to reap their benefit.

"Why not." Vadim grinned. "Make sure he left you an envelope – or you'll need a bolt cutter and maybe some embarrassing help at a local clinic. He should have dropped it off."

"Hang on ..." paper in Matt's hands, then a smile in his voice. He had found the envelope with the key and a few words written on it. "How much will he need?"

"Make him kneel when he gets back, gag him and blindfold him and take the gear off. Fuck him hard. He'll be desperate when he gets back, I'm not sure slow and gentle does it after he's worn the chastity stuff for several hours. You okay with that?"

"Yeah, I'm okay with that. I won't even ask what he's thinking of." Matt's voice was coloured with a hint of arousal. "Did Hooch tell you about my go at photography? Want me to take some?"

"He did." Vadim gave a low chuckle. "I ... wouldn't mind. Shit. I wouldn't. Too bad I'm getting too old to get photographed in the nude, or I'd ask you to take some of me. But Hooch ... yeah, would be appreciated."

"Bullshit, you're not too old to be photographed, it's all a matter of *how* you take the pictures, but I'll snap some of Hooch tonight. I'll send them across by mail." A pause, "when are we seeing you two again?"

"End of November ... and of course in January, because, yeah, Dan and I are getting married." Vadim gave a laugh. He'd check his email throughout the day. Damn. Hooch bound and desperate on photos. Imagination alone was great, but photos ... he forced himself to concentrate on what he was saying. "In Europe, we're just inviting everybody, so, yeah, it would be good to have you there, too. Hooch is my best man, but partners and friends are welcome."

"Holy fuck, that's, like, the best news since Dan called me to say that Hooch was getting medevaced out." Matt was audibly grinning. "I've followed the debate, you're lucky bastards. Don't think it'll ever get here. Gods own country and all that shit, and let's wave the flag." Despite his words, Matt laughed.

Vadim refrained from agreeing with words – Matt was still an American, and those tended to be irrationally patriotic, whatever their country did to them. Let alone all the other things that he disliked about the remaining sole Superpower. Invading Iraq, making noises towards Iran, and seriously believing that *they* could change Afghanistan. Bush was a disaster, as laughably incompetent as any of the old men of the politbuero had ever been, but this was the new century, and part of him had hoped that they'd entered a more rational, less ideological age. America was single-handedly proving him wrong. "You'll be welcome," he said by way of diplomacy.

"I make sure I'll be there. Can't let Hooch have all the fun for himself. Tell Dan congrats from me, and you'll hear from me later. Bye."

"Bye." With that the call ended, and Vadim put the phone down and stretched his chest. That was two, well, three down, best man and his partner set up. He'd make a list of guests, too. That also included Katya, and he'd try to get hold of Nikolai. Anya? Unlikely. Maybe he should leave that to Katya. She had more influence over her daughter than he had. He jotted down some notes and was surprised at how many names appeared. Some were arcane, long-lost people like the Swedish cop. If he was still around in the area, and didn't mind coming to a gay marriage. It would be fun – he knew it would be.

\* \* \*

A couple of hours later, after Dan had received his phone call from Jean, which left him with a huge grin and a thought he'd keep for later, he was called down for dinner. Dan slapped a stack of paper onto the table. "I made a list, but it's insane. Maggie did say to think of anyone we might want to see, but this is crazy." He followed Vadim into the kitchen to help put the food onto the table. One handed, with the knackered second knee he needed the cane all the time for now. "What about yours?"

Vadim pulled the quiche out of the oven and nodded towards the bread basket and salad bowl. "More than I thought," he murmured. "I guess the next stage is to agree who we want to see and who one of us doesn't like. Matt's coming, I talked to him already, and I'll invite Katya. I was just thinking to try and find that cute Swedish cop that got me out of the worst after Finland. Weird, I'm still curious about what happened to him. Maybe even some guys from the SAS selection, though ... that might be weird. Andy. He was a good one."

"Why not? If you can track them down? Or rather, get Maggie to track them down for you, she might be officially retired, but she still has her bloodhounds." Dan grinned, balancing salad bowl and bread basket all in one hand. "There are some guys I liked from my PMC teams, back in the Gulf and the Balkans. Then the Americans, of course, the chopper crew. If they want, or have the time, the money and the inclination, I'd like to see them again, especially the kid." Dan managed to get the items to the table without any accidents. Returning to the kitchen for the coffee and the water. "Dima and Markus, of course, they are

right on top of the list, together with the likes of Maurice, Beauvais, the Glaswegian chaps, and don't forget my entire family, which seems to grow by the hour, and your entire family, and, most importantly, the part of family that is *both* yours and mine." He grinned, "I really can't wait to tell Kisa and Duncan." He was back in the doorframe, reaching for the water bottle, "what about your former life?"

"I don't want to embarrass General Ivanov." Vadim had stopped calling him Lesha after that ill-fated meeting. It didn't seem right. "I guess I can send him an email, emails are quickly deleted and forgotten, saves us both the embarrassment. Szandor is dead, so is Sasha, Platon, and Vanya. Dima is already on your list, so he's a given. And other than that ... I lost touch, they didn't mind me rotting in the Lubyanka, or we weren't close." Vadim sat down and started cutting up the quiche. Solange's recipe. He would have thought the fact she was a Muslim would have kept her from using bacon, but she had looked at him, smiling, and called herself a "Muslim-light". "My swimming coach is likely dead, and ... oh." His old father. "Oh, no way I'll ship my father or his family over. That would ruin everything." Father issues. The whole psychoanalysis had only served to make himself very aware of his hang-ups, especially when it came down to family.

"Well ..." Dan poured water into their glasses, "I don't think I'm going to have anyone there from my old life in Forces, either. It's too long ago, I was a different guy then, and there isn't really a mate that I bonded with, but we have new mates now. We could invite the best lads from the Spa and see who balks in terror and who actually shows up." He laughed, holding out his plate for a large piece of pie. "And as for family, mine will be brother, sister in law, three nephews and their assorted wives, girlfriends, and babies. That's quite enough."

"Yeah, some Spa guys - fine with me." Vadim pushed the slice of quiche on Dan's plate. It didn't disintegrate, not like last time.

Tucking into the pie, Dan looked up after his first bite. "It would be good to meet Anoushka and her partner, in all those years I've never met your daughter, and your son is a great guy. Perhaps Katya could somehow persuade her?"

"I'll see if Katya can put her foot down. Even emergency surgeons need holidays, and I'm not above using some force to get Anya to comply. But from what Nikolai says, she's turned out a bit of a bitch ... she'll require some careful handling, I suppose." No wonder, as she's eternally pissed off at him for just leaving - and that was well-deserved. "Well. We can attempt to be courteous and friendly."

Dan grinned. "If she's anything like her father used to be when he was her age, then it's probably no surprise." The quiche was good and Dan showed his approval by chewing with gusto. "I think I know how to handle an explosive Krasnorada."

"How good are you in dealing with man-hating lesbians?"

"Are they any worse than rapist Spetsnaz homosexuals?" Dan bared his teeth in a sharp grin.

Vadim swallowed. “No. Don’t think so.” Did it shock him? No. But surprise. Yes. Was it the word or the thought, or was he reacting weirdly to banter. Banter. “Alright, we’ll try and get her and her partner in. That’s a lot of phone calls and emails.”

Dan reached across, touching Vadim’s arm. He’d seen a reaction in Vadim’s face, a twitch, or whatever it was, and he’d learned that it could mean a whole torrent beneath. “I was joking, okay?” he smiled, “but I guess it wasn’t a very funny joke. I’m sorry.”

“I was just ... surprised.” Speaking. Communicating. Whether it was a nightmare, a flashback, or irrational fear and anger, he had to communicate. “I’m nothing of that anymore. And that’s not denial. It’s just ...”

“It’s not denial, you are right. You are nothing like that anymore. Neither am I the man anymore who tortured you.” Dan gently squeezed Vadim’s fingers.

Vadim looked at the food, and Dan’s hand in his. “No, it’s not very funny. Guess it never was.”

“No, it was a shit joke and I’ll try not to make one like that anymore, but you know me, I usually open mouth first and then engage brain.”

“No, don’t pussyfoot around me. I can take a joke.” If I get it’s a joke. Damn those triggers.

“I don’t pussyfoot, you know that. I just realise some things a bit quicker these days.” Dan smiled and gave Vadim’s hand another squeeze. “It is over. It’s the past, and some things really are the past. So much so that I’m going to *marry* you. After twenty-five years. Get that, Vadim, twenty-five years. We’ll have our silver anniversary on our wedding.”

“Quarter of a century.” Vadim reached out with his other hand and held Dan’s in both of his. “You made me human. I stand by that. You made me into somebody I would have wanted to become, if I’d ever thought about what I wanted to be that wasn’t about a record or power or a rank or some ... delusion I was chasing. If all that was gone and stripped away, the man I am, I am because of what you did, what you made me feel all those years. Damn right you’re going to marry me.”

Dan swallowed, stared at Vadim and swallowed again. Fuck, that had hit him, fair and square, and all he could do was batter the sudden flood of emotions down with a jackhammer. “I ... wouldn’t be me without you. Wouldn’t even exist anymore.” He tilted his head, wild grey hair, mixed with dark, falling into his face. “Is that enough reason to marry you? Aye?”

“Aye, it is.” Vadim smiled, and all he really wanted to do was hold him now, hold Dan tight, but he’d do that later, after the food, and after he’d cleared everything away, standing in the kitchen and holding. They were fortunate in ways they discovered every day anew, he thought.

\* \* \*

About a week later the Baroness called, and from the tone of her voice, she was rather pleased with what she had planned so far. She told Dan that she



recommended Edinburgh for the ceremony, the capital of his home country, and the exquisite Balmoral hotel on Prince's street, with its spectacular ballroom, overlooking the whole of the glorious city. Dan was speechless at first, listening to the rest of her list, then asked her if he could call her back, because he wanted to talk to Vadim about it.

High class. Exquisite. Expensive. Posh. Ballroom. Holy fuck, that sounded as much like him as a Russian peasant's working boots sounded like Vadim.

He had a few bits of information scribbled down on a piece of paper when he went into their gym, to find Vadim do push-ups with free weights, breathing out every time he lifted the bar.

"Are you seated comfortably?" Dan stood in his favourite position, leaning casually against the doorframe. It took some weight off his knee and didn't make him look like a granddad.

Vadim pushed up again, then moved the bar back on the rack, and he sat up, patches of sweat on his grey shirt. "Now I am."

"Maggie called ... I think she completely missed her calling in life, she should have become a wedding coordinator." Dan grimaced rather than grinned, and put the paper far too close in front of his eyes. Damn, he'd forgotten his reading glasses again.

"Isn't diplomacy something like that?" Vadim wiped his hands on his gym slacks. "What has she coordinated for us?"

"She suggests Edinburgh, the Balmoral hotel, and their ball room, the Sir Walter Scott suite." Dan looked up from reading, raising his brows. "I don't know if you know, but the Balmoral is *the* most expensive hotel in a very expensive city. It's damn posh, it's probably so snooty they wouldn't even let me in if I didn't happen to be one of the grooms."

Vadim laughed. "I read 'Kenilworth' and 'Ivanhoe' and ... 'Heart of Midlothian'? That is as far as my exposure to Sir Walter Scott goes, apart from the monument on Princess Street."

"Show-off!" Dan huffed. "But that's not all, she was talking about weird stuff such as wedding favours, whatever the fuck they are, wedding stationary, wedding flowers, wedding decorations, wedding-fucking-*cake*, wedding music, wedding catering, wedding ... you get the gist." Dan let his hand drop and groaned.

"That sounds complicated."

"Complicated? It sounds like a nightmare to me. Unless you have anything to say about all this, or any preferences, I'd suggest we just let her get on with everything the way she wants to, because I really, truly and honestly, can't be arsed. I'd rather do the whole SAS selection again, than trying to figure out what bloody flowers should be on which bloody table accompanied by what bloody music." He grimaced again.

Vadim grinned and wiped his forehead on his shoulders. "I'm happy with that. Did you send her the list of people?"

"Aye, I did, but I have no idea how the hell she is going to find some of the guys. Besides, they might not even be alive anymore." Dan shrugged, "but I

guess she isn't Her Ladyship for nothing. You do realise there'll be precious few females? I kind of feel sorry for the few that will be there." Dan pondered a moment, "no, actually, I don't. They are all tough bitches," he said with a fond grin, "except for my sister in law. Poor Mhairi, perhaps we should get someone to be extra nice to her? She'll probably be a bit overwhelmed, even though I think Duncan won't fare all that much better."

"Maybe place her near somebody ... chivalric. Beauvais? He's good at acting straight, too. Or one of the Spa guys, there must be *some* that have manners." He could already picture that. "Wait, if Solange's there, she'll be nice to her. Solange is nice to everybody."

"Aye, that would work, and if we can get George, he'd be impeccably behaved." Dan let out a huff of laughter. "I guess any of the straight folk just have to expect that there will be more men than women and that the majority won't be playing the opposite field."

"Well, we'll have to invite their partners, and I assume George will bring that PA of his. And our straight contacts their women." Vadim gave a smile. "It might just work – it would be expected that military grooms have more male than female friends."

"Aye, that, too." Dan folded the paper and put it into his jeans pocket. "A propos George ... last time we spoke he didn't have anyone yet. Don't you think that Maurice might be just the right thing for hung-up George? Free spirited crazy-arsed French doctor and tight-as-a-button English financier." He let out a laugh and waved his hands before Vadim could say anything. "I know, I know, they say the one drawback of a happy marriage is that you want to see all your friends in one, too."

"English and French? That spells doom." Vadim shook his head, but grinned. "I assume there will be some hooking up, though. Why not? The guys can just as well enjoy themselves when they travel all the way to Edinburgh."

"Are you planning on a gay orgy and ..." Dan didn't finish his sentence, because the main phone rang, and none of the stations was in the gym. "Shit." Dan rolled his eyes, "I'm slow, can you get it?"

"Sure." Vadim grabbed a towel on the way out and headed into the living room. "Yes?"

"Vadim? What a pleasure to talk to you." Maggie's voice.

"Baroness."

"May I congratulate you as well? I'm sorry to call again, but I am afraid I only now realised a terrible oversight on my part. I did not explicitly state that the celebrations are my wedding gift, did I? Oh dear, I fear I must be getting old."

Vadim smiled and walked back with the phone towards the gym. "We are delighted, and, well, humbled a bit as well, but of course we'll receive it in the same spirit as it is given. Comparing how things started, getting this 'happily ever after' is ... an interesting development. Thank you."

"I am ever so pleased that you are pleased." Her voice sounded younger, suddenly. "I'd also like you to know that I am going to subsidise rooms for

guests. We cannot possibly have them fly in from all over the world, and be unnecessarily out of their pockets, can we? So, please be assured that everything will be taken care of for everyone, and that immediate family and friends, and of course the best men, will be all accommodated in the Balmoral hotel, with further accommodation available in the Scotsman and the Carlton, both only a few yards away on North bridge.” She’d had a lifetime of organising far greater things than a wedding, and yet her enthusiasm was audible.

“That’s very appreciated ...” Vadim didn’t want to do the numbers. He’d had a look at the hotel’s website, and, well, all that wasn’t cheap, by a long stretch.

“I would also like to invite best men with partners and spouses and both your families to a few days for acclimatisation. I believe that offering subsidised accommodation for all your other friends for two nights before the celebration and the night itself would be suitable? I would hate to see the party suffer from jet lag.”

“That is incredibly generous of you, and frankly not something we’d have thought of. Hopefully you’ll find the people enjoyable, too ...”

She gave a quiet laughter, “a propos party, what do you think of Scottish music for the ceremony? I know that Dan will enjoy it, but I do not wish to presume anything. I was thinking of a piper, a fiddler and a drummer, and for the evening’s entertainment a Ceilidh band, with dancing master, so that all guests may join in. I was hoping to book a somewhat more contemporary band for the late night party, I was told there are bands that play Scottish music with ... ‘oomph’.” The way she said that colloquial word with her posh voice and perfect diction caused Vadim to grin.

“Well, *I* like Scottish music, and Dan should as a matter of patriotism.”

“I am most extraordinarily glad in that case. Please tell Dan that I am not doing too badly with my mission to seek out the guests.” She paused a moment, “I was wondering, if I send the invitations out, would your family and friends have already heard the good news from you? I am about to send you a scan of the invitations by email, my cook has a most marvellous nephew, he is a wizard of technology, bless the fine young man.”

“No - we got the best men set and then we ... didn’t pursue it quite as vigorously as we should’ve.” Vadim leaned against the doorframe, grinning at Dan. “But if you handle that part, I guess them calling us is easier than us chasing everybody up anyway.”

She laughed, almost at odds with the iron-willed elderly lay. “Do I detect a hint of ... cowardice there?” She teased, “or laziness? If I were talking to Dan I would guess for both.”

“Both, Ma’m, and it’s easy to stay in our little bubble here in timeless Kiwiland.”

“At least you are honest, I do so appreciate that.” The smile was audible in her voice. “There shall be a scan for you to approve in about half an hour. I promise after that I will leave you in peace and simply organise the celebrations. All you have to do is turn up on time. A few days before, don’t you forget that.”

Vadim grinned. "We'll fly over a week before, maybe two. We'll be there. Missing our own wedding would be too strange, especially as we inconvenienced everybody else." He paused. "Do you wish to speak to Dan? He's sitting here watching me and probably wants to talk to you, too."

"No, no, thank you, that'll be just fine. As long as you let me know if I may go ahead with the invitations."

"Of course. I'll check our email and get back to you ASAP."

A pause, and then a warm, "I wish you a good day, Vadim."

"You, too, Ma'm." He hung up.

Dan looked up from the bench. "Any more weird things on the wedding malarkey list?"

"She's handling the invitations, and got down to music, subsidizing rooms and inviting the closer people a couple days in advance." Vadim shook his head. "I'd have loved to have her as my quartermaster back in Kabul."

"Quartermaster?" Dan laughed, "she would have organised the whole of Afghanistan, down to every Muja, in about a month."

"And there's that."

Dan pushed himself back up, "what was that about email? Should I head upstairs to check something?"

"Yeah. She's sending us a scan of the invitations." Vadim leaned in for a kiss. "I start to feel like royalty."

"And I start to feel very frightened ..." Dan rolled his eyes, then gave a slap onto Vadim's buttocks. "Come on, let's get it done and over with. The quicker we say 'okay' the faster she sends them out and the sooner the phone starts ringing." He groaned.

"Yeah." Vadim stepped back and followed Dan out of the gym and up the stairs. Marriage, he thought. It was all hard to imagine, unreal, especially with the dimensions this was taking. The computer was always on, the mail programme checked mails every few minutes.

Half an hour had definitely been an exaggeration, because a mail was already downloading, with a fairly large attachment. When Dan opened the mail the text read 'Dear friends, I forgot to inform you that the flowers and decoration will be thistles and natural grass, there is therefore no need to worry about the potential of any un-manliness', Dan laughed at that description and shook his head. Her Ladyship had gained a newfound, almost irreverent humour in her advanced years. He read on, 'and you will hopefully like the stationary that I have chosen. They are an understated off-white, with gold embossed Rene Mackintosh design in one corner'. Dan groaned, "understated? My arse."

"Well, she got you right with the thistle," Vadim commented.

"What, fucking prickly?" Dan smirked.

When they opened the image attachment they saw the elegant stationary and the pre-printed message:

*Baroness Margaret de Vilde requests the pleasure of the company of*

.....  
*at the Civil Partnership ceremony of her friends*

*Mr Daniel Ewan McFadyen  
and  
Mr Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada*

*in the Ceremony Room at The Balmoral Hotel, Princes Street, Edinburgh on  
Saturday 21st January 2006, at 2.30pm and afterwards in the Sir Walter Scott  
Suite, The Balmoral Hotel, Princes Street, Edinburgh*

“Holy fuck.” Dan exhaled, “it really is real, then, aye? What the hell happened to us along the way? We used to be so cool and reckless.”

“We grew up, got modestly well-off, and somehow stood each other for twenty-five years.”

“That is the biggest bloodiest understatement of the century.” Dan sat down on the chair.

“She’s enjoying herself so much, we shouldn’t spoil it for her. And anything more than understated will feature horse-drawn carriages ... so be glad it’s ‘just’ this.”

“Shit, no! Horse drawn carriage? Maggie? I don’t believe you, but I’m not going to risk it. I’ll reply straight away.”

Vadim laughed. “Yeah. Let’s not take any risks.”

All they had to do now was bracing themselves for the phone calls from family and friends.

\* \* \*

The calls came in for days - at ungodly hours, too, which made Vadim laugh. Whenever the phone rang in the next days, he knew what he would be saying and explaining and it amazed him how many people they knew and how many of those cared. Katya promised to bring Anoushka, Nikolai agreed to come, too. Dima, Markus, Beauvais, Maurice, George, the Glaswegian guys who were still together, several squaddie friends from their Merc days and PMC team mates, and of course the best lads from the Spa ... there was nobody of any importance who didn’t come - or promised to. Kisa had made noises over the phone which Dan described as squeals, but decided to be kind and not to mock her, and Duncan, well, Duncan and Mhairi were just as warm and delighted as anyone could have expected. Dan’s rescued copter crew would be there as well, and Vadim kept a list, which grew daily. It would be a huge party.

When November arrived, he flew out to meet Hooch; it was good, comfortable, they knew each other so well, and as deep and dark as they went, as easy and good was the comradeship and that love and care that just enriched

and didn't rival. Love, thought Vadim, never destroyed, it just added a new dimension, more depth. It was only a matter of how to approach it.

Then Europe, meeting the family, Jean, of course, and several days that Dan spent with Jean on his own, while Vadim this time, like Dan earlier, enjoyed some sights. Finally Christmas with Duncan's family. A familiar rhythm they had established, which found an unexpected high point when Nikolai flew in and brought Kisa over for Christmas in the Highlands.

Hogmanay, celebrated once more in the Highlands, and Dan joked when they all sang Auld Lang Syne, and had held hands, waved arms and kissed everyone there, the whole family with nephews, partners, babies ... that if this domesticated scene was going to get worse, he'd have to have his brain replaced and not his knee. Yet he secretly enjoyed it. They were both fifty-six and while they didn't look like it, they were getting older, and priorities had changed.

Not so much, though, that Dan didn't grin like a fool at Vadim when he mentioned the possibility of a stag night with the best men. Vadim was up for it, of course, remembering Jean's stag night, even though they had agreed to never share a man again, but this was special, Vadim argued. Hooch and Jean. It was a good thought, arousing and plain fascinating - whether they'd get along and it seemed only fitting to share that night. They flew down to London at the beginning of January, for Vadim to pick up his suit from the tailor, and then settled in Edinburgh. Hooch and Jean had agreed to come early - Matt would come with Hooch, but Solange couldn't get out of a shoot much earlier than the wedding.

The Baroness had been in Edinburgh, but was back down in London for a few days, to organise something or other that no one quite understood and thankfully left it in her immensely capable hands. She would be flying back up in a couple of days, to properly welcome her friends.

A week before the ceremony, Dan and Vadim stood at Edinburgh airport to pick up Hooch and Matt, waiting for the plane from Heathrow. As usual, it took just about forever until the luggage had come through and the two Americans had made it through immigration and passport control. Dan was the first one to spot Matt, thirty now, and as perfectly sculpted, groomed and tanned as a model. He was animatedly talking to Hooch. Hooch, as cool as ever, shades stuck on top of his head, chewing a gum and looking every inch as deadly with forty-five as he had back in the Gulf. He had a slight smile on his face as he listened to whatever Matt was explaining with wild gestures.

"If that isn't an old couple then I'll let you fuck me sideways." Dan commented with a grin.

"You let me do that anyway," murmured Vadim, but had to agree. The two men looked very comfortable in each other's presence. Everybody else might read them as comrades or family, but this went deeper. Vadim sought Hooch's gaze and met it. Hooch's eyes flashed a recognition, smiling as he stepped closer. "How was the flight?" Vadim asked.

"Good, even though Matt complains the seats are too small."

“Damn well are. Made for midgets.” Matt grinned, and before anyone got another word in, he pulled Dan into a tight buddy-like hug. He’d perfected the art of touching without *touching*. He’d always wanted to come out of the closet and say fuck it all to the military, but he never did, for Hooch’s sake.

Dan laughed. “Shit, kid, even *you* have grown up. Far cry from the twenty-one year old Jarhead, aye?”

It was Hooch who answered, with a raised brow. “Don’t mention that, or he’ll worry about an imaginary grey hair or a nonexistent wrinkle.”

“Fuck you.” Matt groused, and Dan winked at Vadim, who shook his head and embraced Hooch, too, no less inconspicuous than Matt.

They gathered up all the bags and suitcases and brought them over to the rented car, paid the ticket and were off to the old city centre. “Ever been here?” asked Vadim.

“No,” Matt settled into the seat, while Hooch pushed the shades back over his eyes, despite the rare sun being milky.

“Got anything planned?” Hooch asked after a moment, and the way he put a slight emphasis on the ‘planned’, it was obvious what he meant.

“Do you mean sightseeing, or ...?”

“Depends how jetlagged you guys are,” Vadim said. “I was thinking we’ll head to the hotel and maybe grab a bite and catch up.”

“I haven’t ‘caught up’ with Dan for a long time.” Matt grinned, still looking out of the window, as if he hadn’t listened.

“Your own fucking loss.” Dan craned his head, but could only catch a glimpse of Hooch who was slouched in the backseat.

“Catching up’ all together?” Hooch casually asked.

“Matt’s call,” Vadim murmured.

Matt didn’t answer, kept looking out of the window, before he turned and glanced first at Hooch, then ahead, head slightly tilted. “Can I, like, have a quick chat with you, Vadim?”

“Sure. Your call.”

“Okay.” Matt smiled and settled back, once again watching the city go by. Dan shrugged, and Hooch said and did absolutely nothing, while Vadim got them back into the very centre.

They parked not much later, and checked the guys in in the Balmoral - they’d decided moving around between hotels would be too awkward, and they’d be staying in the hotel anyway from Thursday onwards. They brought them up to their room, and left the two Americans alone to get showered and changed - and to discuss whatever needed to be discussed.

Dan had made his way down into the Palm Court Bollinger Bar, while Vadim checked his voice mail and called a bunch of guys back who had questions regarding the marriage.

Relaxing in one of the comfortable benches in a half-circle around a small table, Dan had a drink, flicking through a couple of Scottish newspapers. He almost didn’t notice Hooch, not until he had reached the table. It surprised him

that his senses, which had never left him, hadn't alerted him to the man's presence. He would have noted anyone else, strangers, staff, much earlier.

Hooch nodded to him, and Dan smiled, wordlessly indicating the seat beside him. They didn't speak for a while, and Hooch ordered a drink, then settled back with an international newspaper. Both of them reading in companionable silence.

Upstairs, Matt was knocking on the door of the exquisite room that Dan and Vadim shared.

Vadim just switched the phone off.

"Vadim?" Matt knocked again, listening to sounds from inside.

Vadim stepped to the door and opened it. "Yes. Come on in."

"Thanks, buddy." Matt smiled and stepped through. "Wonder if you got a moment, like. Got some questions."

"Sure." Vadim closed the door and gestured towards the mini bar. "Drink?"

"No, thanks. I don't drink anymore, not good for fitness, you know."

"Not actually true. Moderate drinking is no problem, but I guess you Americans watch the carbs all the time?"

"Don't get me started." Matt laughed, "believe it or not, but I got into the scientific side of things and did a few courses on nutrition. I'm certified and all. Gives me an edge over competitors and my clients appreciate that I'm 'not just a pretty face'." He laughed again.

"You're not just a pretty face," Vadim agreed, vaguely amused to have discovered what seemed a bit like a hang-up for the kid.

"Trust me, you don't want to hear me start lecturing on it, it'd probably bore you to death, and no, I rather be chiselled with less effort than have a drink. Easier to stop completely."

"You know I used to be part of the Soviet sport circus?" Vadim shrugged. "But that's not what we were going to talk about, right. Something else to drink?"

Matt sat down. "Got some water?"

"Sure. Still or sparkling? French, Scottish, or ... Hawaiian, I guess."

Matt laughed again, "just water. Scottish will do. Sparkling." He watched Vadim busy himself at the bar, which was everything but mini. "I wanted to ask you about Hooch, and if I understand him right. The whole thing." Matt shrugged, while Vadim selected two bottles and poured them both water.

"I'm listening."

"Last time, after your phone call, it was ... I don't know. It was more than I expected and I didn't know what to do, or do wrong, or right, or fuck all." His language was still that of the Jarhead. "He usually goes to that club of his, but I ..." He trailed off, uncomfortable.

"You'd rather he didn't?"

"No, I'm okay with that, I think, and I'm okay with you, I just ... I just suddenly felt all possessive and at the same time didn't know what I was doing." Taking his water, Matt had a sip. "I don't have it in me, I got to accept that, just ..." he looked at Vadim with a confused expression.



Vadim met his gaze, then sat down, figuring that would be more ‘matey’, more friendly. “It’s a completely different itch to scratch,” he murmured. “The pain is different from the love. The love is different from the war. We’re humans and humans can deal with contradictions, not like bloody computers. You love the man. He loves you.” Vadim leaned forward. “What’s the problem?”

Matt didn’t hesitate. “I want to give him more of what he needs, because I ... really got off on it last time. But I don’t know how, don’t know if I’m doing it right, and don’t know how to deal with the whole thing other than ignoring it, but ignoring has started to seriously piss me off.”

Vadim was silent for a while, pondering the thought that the lover of his sometimes-lover asked him how to give the latter what he needed. “Try and visit the same club. Watch things. It’s something that can be learnt. Like you pick up any skill. Stress positions, for example. You must have done that in the Marines?”

“Yeah, I know about shit like that. You think I can just use some of the stuff and transfer it? Hooch told me about his job, what he teaches, it’s pretty much that kind of thing. The crazy stuff.”

“See. That’s a start. That’s where I took it from. Well, inspiration at least.” Vadim studied that face, the thick neck, the curve of muscles. “Guy once told me the bottom is in control. He is. He lets it happen. He trusts you. You give him what he wants. It’s ... fairly selfless, actually. At least I ... I’m best after I got off.” He gave a crooked little smile.

Matt smiled in return and nodded. “Guess I’m better at the selfless side of things, anyway.”

“You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t,” Vadim agreed.

Matt tilted his head. “Going to the club, I might do that, but I won’t tell Hooch about it. He doesn’t know what I’m talking about with you, nor that I needed to ask, also. I didn’t tell him I got pissed off recently, neither that I’m sure I can do more than he thinks.” He flashed a brighter smile, “that is, if I have any fucking clue *what* he thinks.”

“It’s guesswork for me, too, and he can drive me insane with that.” Vadim grinned. “Dan gets quite a few clues from his various internet groups. He’s ... pretty good at that game, too, but everybody has his own style. And it remains between us and in this room, no problem.”

“Shit, of course, the net, should have done some more of a search myself.” Taking a large mouthful of water, Matt grinned, with obvious relief. “Thanks, buddy. And for later ... you said the ball’s in my court. Why?”

“Because it is.” Vadim studied him. “Your decision ... with that amount of innuendo, and my ‘condition’,” he shrugged. “It’s better things are out in the open, so I don’t misunderstand, or people misunderstand me. I have to make the constant effort to communicate, and that was my way of saying ... whatever ... is your decision.”

“Dan is happy with whatever happens?”

“He sounded it. Or, in any case, he could either be convinced or suitably distracted.” Vadim smiled. “There will be quite a few very attractive men at the party, too. It should be an interesting collection of characters.”

“Yeah, sounds like my gym. Plenty of good looking *gay* men.” Matt winked. “But, like, if Dan’s okay, I’m okay, as long as we don’t get into Hooch’s stuff.”

“Fine by me.” Vadim half-emptied the glass and studied Matt again, smiling. “We haven’t done anything like that in a while. Few guys I’m taking a deeper interest in these days. Might be my age, too. Or simply some of my issues.”

“Yeah, but Hooch’s here. And Hooch and you ...” Matt emptied his glass. “It’ll be good with you and Dan, has been forever. You’re old, but you’re hot.” Matt laughed.

Vadim stood, straightening up. “Good. I don’t want to make you feel like a necrophiliac.”

“I won’t, and it does mean I can be certain I’m the best looking one.”

“If you want to be the prettiest face ... go ahead.”

“Not again!” Matt rolled his eyes but still grinned. “Where do you want to meet? I’m good.”

Vadim measured him. “Guess that’s either our room or yours ... beds should be about the right size.”

“Right here? Now?” Matt sat up straight, hands on his shirt.

Vadim grinned. “I’ll call Dan on the phone and make sure he brings Hooch.”

“Okay.” Matt cocked one brow, then proceeded to undress without the slightest reservations.

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Dan and Hooch, downstairs, had ended up in conversation about civil rights, don’t ask don’t tell, Europe vs. America, and gay marriage, when Vadim called. Dan had his mobile on buzzer, and picked up.

“Hi Dan, you guys might want to come up to our room. Bring Hooch.”

“Okay ...” Dan glanced across at Hooch and flashed a toothy grin, when he cottoned on straight away. He pushed a button to finish the call and grabbed the cane to push himself off the bench.

“Vadim wants us upstairs and I have the funny feeling that if we don’t, we might miss something we’d regret later.”

Hooch huffed a low laugh and stood up as well, following Dan.

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Vadim watched Matt undress, and damned, he was trained to perfection, every muscle where it should be. He could easily be an underwear model, his body as clear an advertisement of his gym and nutrition as anything Vadim had ever seen. He flicked the phone shut and pulled the jumper over his head, slipping out of the leather shoes.

“So you *do* like what you see.” Matt grinned from ear to ear as he let himself fall back into the comfortably upholstered chair, sprawling in all his stark naked glory.

“What, I fooled you?” Vadim opened his trousers and pulled them down, then placed them on the free chair. “Must be a better actor than I thought.”

“In pretending to like what you see?” Matt’s pose was that of a high class model, clearly provocative. One leg stretched out, the other on a nearby chair, knee bent and falling open, displaying ‘the goods’, which were no less groomed than the rest of his body. One hand casually resting on his roped abs, fingers splayed negligently, while the other arm lay along the armrest of the chair, presenting those finely honed muscles of his arms and shoulders to their best advantage. His body was smooth, waxed, except for some neatly kept pubic hair at the base of his cock. He was, to all intents and purposes, the picture of perfection. Thirty-five years old, and by no means the naive kid anymore, the Jarhead who’d shown Dan that kissing for fun and sex with laughter were a good thing.

He was about to say something, when the door to the room opened and Dan walked inside, immediately followed by Hooch.

Vadim turned, gave a smile, and continued to study that body, the easy grace - not soldierlike, nothing like that about Matt anymore. “He started it,” Vadim murmured in mock-defence.

“I believe you.” Hooch drawled, “I live with him.” With the air of someone who was long-suffering, even though the hint of a grin spoiled the effect.

“How do you survive that?” Dan closed the door behind them, looking at the naked man in the chair. Holy fuck, the ‘kid’ was no kid anymore, but so goddamned perfect, he looked like coming straight out of a high class porn. “You’re already forty-five, how do you deal with that?” He gestured towards Matt, as if he were an – admittedly incredibly arousing – piece of art.

“It’s the military training.” Hooch shrugged, “without it, I couldn’t guarantee for my health.”

Dan made his way closer to the chair, watched by Matt who remained in the same position, grinning, and oozing sex out of every pore. “What do you think, Vadim,” Dan pointed right at Matt’s cock, “what could we use that one for?”

Vadim studied it. “Many things come to mind, really. I guess we could simply see how calm and relaxed he is when he’s begging to be taken down the throat, after some appropriate kissing and licking, of course.”

“Aye ...” Dan glanced at Hooch, “you know him best, what would be best done with it?”

“The cock?” Hooch seemed to ponder, as he took the remaining steps towards them, standing beside Dan and Vadim. All three men looked down at the naked Matt on the chair. “Or the arse? He does like to get fucked, after all.”

Vadim pursed his lips. “You think he could take three men?” He reached down to touch Matt’s abs. “He’s strong enough, I think. And I certainly would enjoy seeing his arse pounded.”

Matt still didn't say anything and didn't seem likely to do so in the near future, but he pulled in a sharp breath at the touch, and his cock visibly hardened from the words.

"Look, he agrees." Dan pointed at the half-hard cock.

"He's quite a slut on occasion." Hooch flashed one of his miniature grins. "I once found him shagging with two guys, down in the gym, after hours."

Matt's eyes flashed at the spilling of secrets, and he let his head relax back a little, effectively baring his throat.

"Hmmm ... you think he's strong enough to take it standing? He looks quite solid." Dan leaned down to run a hand across Matt's pecs, taking his time with brushing over and teasing the nipples, causing another sharp intake of breath.

"I think he is," Vadim agreed, "maybe if he faces a wall so he can support himself if it gets too hard for him." It was a wicked pleasure watching how Matt reacted to the words, how the ease was underpinned with tension, the sensuousness by arousal.

"I'd let him hold onto one of us, cock down his throat, to keep us entertained." Hooch mentioned casually, as if talking about the latest weapons development.

"I guess he would make a good pre-wedding present, wouldn't he?" Dan leaned closer, dropped his hand to Matt's cock, merely brushing along its length, watching it harden rapidly.

"Aye." Vadim leaned in to kiss, then bite a nipple, which caused Matt to jump and let out a hiss, while Vadim murmured against Matt's skin. "You guys are overdressed."

"So are you," Dan quipped, but without taking his eyes off Matt and Vadim, he got out of his clothes in record time, pulling a chair close to take the weight of his knees while being close. Stroking Matt's legs, arms, torso, wherever he could reach. Stroking and teasing, arousing.

Hooch went slower, more deliberately, but when he was naked, he leaned over Matt, who had let his head fall back on the backrest on the chair, fully baring his throat. With a remarkably tender gesture, he caressed Matt's face, smiled at him, and their eyes met for moment, before Hooch dove in for a demanding kiss.

The kind of kiss that never featured in porn movies, Vadim thought, suddenly breathless from Hooch's intensity, even if it was directed at somebody else. He shed the remaining clothes and concentrated on Matt's chest, biting and sucking those nipples, rolling them between his teeth, moving from a tease to what would have been pain if Matt hadn't been turned on by it. Matt's chest heaved, breath fluttering with the attempt to remain calm, but the sound that was swallowed by Hooch's kiss was so goddamned sexy, it charged the atmosphere in the otherwise still room.

Three men breathing, the fourth one increasingly frantic, and another sound escaped, far more desperate, when Dan leaned closer to lick along the length of Matt's cock. He teased the slit, taking his time while pushing his palm against

Matt's hip to keep him down in the seat and prevent any attempts to thrust up and towards Dan's lips.

Vadim watched that from the corner of his eyes – Dan on another man, and he knew exactly what it felt to be on the receiving end, knew exactly how Dan drove another guy wild. He brought up a hand to lay it flat on Matt's stomach, placing pressure there to keep him still, then, as he was sucking on one nipple, twisting the other, he took hold of Matt's knee and pulled his leg up and to the side, opening the younger man further.

It was Hooch who pulled back from the demanding kiss, leaving Matt to make small, suppressed noises, that went straight into Dan's cock, while he was mercilessly teasing the one between his lips.

"I think he's ready." Hooch drawled in a low, husky voice. "Question is, who wants him first? Which one of the two grooms?"

Vadim glanced up, but Matt still said nothing, eyes almost closed, lips parted and glistening from Hooch's kissing. Breath coming fast and shallow, his hands had curled into the armrests of the chair, and he was more lying in than sitting. Pliable, passive, utterly gorgeous. The perfect gift.

Vadim felt a shiver pass through him – he hadn't had him, that first 'meeting' had somehow put up a wall, and he'd never have expected that would ever become an issue. All those years later, it suddenly did. He glanced at Dan to gauge his reaction. "I wouldn't mind," he murmured.

Dan nodded, then moved his head to lick across Matt's shuddering abs, and up the chest. When he reached the nipples, Matt lifted his head, cast one glance at Vadim with an almost imperceptible nod. His next reaction was a gasp and his eyes closed when Dan bit and then sucked on a nipple, before he pulled back.

"All yours." Dan murmured with a gesture towards Hooch, and a glance at Vadim. Hooch slipped his hands underneath Matt's shoulders and pulled him up to stand, then made him turn around, until he stood over the chair, facing Hooch.

"Bend down." Hooch's voice was low and goddamned sexy, the arousal lent it a husky quality.

Matt complied, and Dan stood up, taking a good look at the offered arse, with a sharp intake of breath at the perfection before him. "I'll do the honours." He went to get condoms and lube.

Vadim placed both hands on Matt's back, stroking, then kneading the muscles, bending down to kiss his neck. Still strange, as he was Dan's lover, and, on several more levels, Hooch's lover. When Dan offered him the lube and the condom, he took the condom and stepped a little bit sideways. "Open him up for me," he murmured to Dan, meanwhile getting the condom out.

Hooch was watching them, stroking the back of Matt's neck, his shoulders, carding his fingers through the dark hair. Eyes intently on Dan, who got a generous amount of lube onto his hand, warming it slightly, before placing his scarred left hand onto the small of Matt's lower back, the right slowly entering with one finger, but quickly adding a second, while Matt let out a low moan.

Vadim rolled the condom down; no question, safety first, watching Dan get Matt completely ready – it seemed like the right thing to do, less weird now, less loaded with past and unpleasant memories. When Dan nodded at him, he stepped closer, took hold of himself and positioned, then began to thrust in, more a slow easing, leaning into the other's solid body, slow, but inevitable, and Matt's reaction was sparked like a fuse exploding through electricity. He reached for Hooch instead of the chair, digging his hands into Hooch's hips, the way the fingers curled into muscles and bones had to be painful, but Hooch merely took in an audible breath, when Matt nuzzled his face against his now fully hard cock. Hooch's eyes never left the scene, watching every detail, each movement.

"I don't think we should make him come." Dan commented. He once again reached for Matt's nipples, playing with them almost casually.

"No, you are right, but he should keep me entertained." Hooch murmured, pulled back and nudged with his cut cock against Matt's lips, which immediately opened, pushed forward and down the length of the cock with Vadim's next thrust. And seeing that tightened Vadim's guts, sexy, yes, knowing what that felt like, how a second cock really changed everything. He took Matt's hips, to stabilize them both and to make sure Matt wasn't driven too far. Hooch did the same to Matt's shoulders, as Vadim began to thrust properly, deep, forceful, carefully measuring how much Matt needed right there.

The sounds that Matt made, muffled by his lover's cock, were some of the sexiest that Dan had ever heard, and he sat back down, watching the scene, while never taking his hands off Matt's chest and nipples, adding to the overload of sensations, but otherwise a spectator, turned on by sounds, sight and smell.

Matt was starting to shudder when Vadim was thrusting harder and Hooch, who had himself under remarkable control, keeping close but never too close, warned Vadim. "He cums from getting fucked." A glance at Dan, "stop him."

Dan understood, reached for Matt's cock, hard and wet with precum, and he squeezed hard at the base, cock and balls, almost brutal, acting as a cockring to stop Matt's orgasm, who nearly screamed against the cock in his throat, bucking backwards and into Vadim, trying to get off.

"Bad boy." Hooch murmured breathlessly, with a half-grin.

Vadim grinned and stilled, forcing himself to pause. It cost him a lot, but he managed, shuddering, very nearly there himself, but forced himself to wait for Matt to calm down, and with a huge effort, pulled free, while Matt groaned and protested, but had no choice, than to accept. Vadim evaded his own climax, because that way there would be more fun, more need, more lust. "Dan? Your turn."

"And you?" Dan looked up and pointedly onto Vadim's rock hard cock, while letting go of Matt's cock and balls, who groaned, but was muffled the next second, when Hooch pushed his cock back down the willing throat.

"I'll watch." Vadim stepped closer to Dan, who was surprised when Vadim grabbed his neck passionately, and kissed him deeply, pressing against him. No man. No other man, but this one, right here.

When Vadim pulled back, Dan smiled at him for a moment, while feeling dark eyes intently on him. He didn't need to turn his head to know that Hooch was watching him. A sound from Matt brought him right back to the man whose smooth and muscular arse was invitingly open, bared, loosened enough to be fucked without preliminaries.

Matt was letting out whimpers, of need or anger, or lust, or discomfort, was not clear but it didn't matter, because all that counted was the sound, the movement of the body and the way Matt tried to lower his shoulders more, despite the cock down his throat, and to lift his arse up higher and spread his legs even further. This man wanted to be fucked, and Dan never took his eyes off the body while getting a condom onto himself.

More lube, and Dan thrust forward, up to the hilt, all the way. Matt screamed against the intruding cock, yet pushed backwards, as if his body begged for more.

Vadim shuddered, still standing close, almost close enough to brush Dan. He felt his heat and the heat of Matt, smells and sounds overwhelming, and he wished he'd finished, watching Dan thrust, the hip muscles, and the cock that slid in and out, hypnotic, intense, unbearably sexy. Like Dan, though, he took hold of Matt's cock, squeezing the base to keep him from reaching the peak, but brushing Matt with his own cock. He pulled off the condom and just enjoyed the brush of heated, smooth skin.

Eventually, Hooch pushed away, whole body tense, too close to the edge. The moment his cock slipped out from between Matt's lips, the sounds Matt made filled the room, drilling down into Dan's mind and guts and balls, making him speed up and increase his grip on the lean hips.

Matt's body was covered in a sheen of sweat, pooling in the small of his back, and Hooch reached forward, as far as he could, to run his hand through the sweat, and to slowly, deliberately, lick it off his fingers, first looking at Dan, whose eyes widened, and then at Vadim, intensely fixing him with dark eyes.

Dan's thrusts became erratic, speeding up, violent with his need, as the orgasm drew closer and he was taken in, body and mind, by the heat, the tightness, and by Matt's responses. The scent of fresh sweat, the body that begged for more and held its own by the strength pitted against Dan's. When he came, he thrust uncontrollably, letting out a deep groan. Shuddering while staying inside Matt's body, hands leaving visible impacts on the buttocks and hips.

"I think ..." Dan managed to get out, still shaking with the aftershocks, "it's your turn." Looking at Hooch.

Matt whimpered, let out unintelligible sounds, as Dan pulled out to discard the condom. Matt was out of it, and despite being doubtlessly sore, he was begging for more, the desperation was palpable.

Hooch's voice was so husky, his drawl was close to being just as unintelligible as Matt's sounds of lust. "Get him to suck you off." To Vadim.

Vadim didn't protest, just released Matt's cock and took Hooch's position, supporting the man like Hooch had done, offering his cock to Matt's lips, who

eagerly took it, sucking down as far as he was offered, muffling those sounds once more, and Vadim couldn't help but stroke the head, neck, sweaty and hot. There was no force, no darkness, just passion and tenderness, respect for the one who took all this.

Dan sat down, within reach of Matt once more, marvelling at the hard cock, purple, straining, slick with precum, and he touched it lightly, causing Matt to jump. Dan grinned, shook his head and murmured "no". He knew Matt well enough to realise he wouldn't need a hand. When he looked up, he saw Hooch move forward, bareback, no condom, not with his own lover. An intimacy and distinction which touched Dan deeply. Hooch poised, didn't slick himself up either, instead forced himself to wait, and used his fingers to enter Matt, drawing more muffled screams, as he angled, searched and found the prostrate. Knowing this man so well, each reaction, every want and need, he caused Matt to buckle and almost to break down, had Dan not reacted and held him up, and had Vadim not grabbed his shoulders. The too-intense sensations that Hooch's manipulations caused Matt, made him swallow Vadim's cock further with each jolt, almost getting Vadim off without any conscious effort.

Hooch finally pulled out his fingers to replace them with his cock and the way he thrust forward, the speed and angle, told both Dan and Vadim that he'd known and used and had this body for many years, giving and receiving lust in perfection, pushing Matt further and further towards the edge. Matt and himself, and the look on his face was far away and utterly concentrated, almost distant, as he fucked that body without holding back.

The tremors from Hooch's thrusts pushed Vadim further, and there was really no reason now to hold back, instead pushing carefully into the wet heat, feeling the body being rocked by Hooch's motions, strangled sounds and responses from Matt. Dan's watched the scene, all that combined to a heady mixture of lust and need, and it didn't take long for Vadim to come, with Matt taking all of that. Vadim remained standing, only to support Matt, watching Hooch fuck his lover, while catching his breath.

Hooch's eyes were closed, face utterly concentrated, before all of a sudden his eyes opened, staring down at Matt, as he did the impossible, increasing the ferocity of his fucking. Truly letting loose, a wild, complete abandon with reckless viciousness of powerful thrusts and sharp snaps of his hips. "Come!" he pressed out, then another brutal shove and twist, before nearly completely pulling out, then slamming back in. "Now!"

Matt, who'd been swallowing still, lifted his head, and Vadim's cock slipped out. He threw his head far back into his neck, hands digging into Vadim, as he let out a cry, eyes staring blindly at nothing, body, mind, lust and need, letting go and crashing into oblivion. His orgasm ripped through him, shaking his whole body, arse clenching and milking Hooch's cock, who followed suit nearly simultaneously, like a well-honed machine, a couple, two men, whose bodies were in sync and whose lust was one.

Hooch was panting, yet had himself almost immediately under control again, pulling out mere seconds after cumming, when Matt simply collapsed, slumping



down onto the chair, which had been soiled with Matt's cum, and threatened to tumble backwards.

"He'll crash for a while." Hooch was still breathless, but his hands were already on Matt, joined with Dan's, holding the exhausted, sweat drenched, naked body up. "He always does that." Tenderness was evident in Hooch's words, despite their huskiness.

Vadim gave a short laugh. "Who wouldn't ..." He glanced around and spotted his chance. "I'll have a shower," already heading there, then paused. "If anybody is desperate, I'd be willing to share."

"I would, but I'll stay with Matt." Hooch gave a half-smile, then concentrated on the limp body in his arms and hoisted him across to the huge bed.

"Take your time," Dan commented with a smile, when Hooch climbed onto the bed beside Matt who was out like a light, deeply asleep. "We'll head to the bar after a shower."

"Yeah." Hooch drawled, before gently gathering the sleeping body close. No doubt he'd done that many times, and the intimacy and affection was an easy one.

When Dan entered the large and marbled bathroom, the shower was already running. "Not a bad pre-wedding present, aye?" he grinned at Vadim and joined him under the luxuriously hot spray.

Vadim squeezed some shower gel into his hand and began to wash Dan, letting the water sluice off the foam from his own body. "No, not bad at all. Never would have thought it would come to this, but ..." He smiled. "It's appreciated."

Dan grinned, "aye, never thought I'd see Hooch 'in action' again. Quite impressive." He winked, and then both of them enjoyed the intimacy of washing and sharing that heat. They took longer than was strictly necessary to get clean and refreshed, and repeated the same with towelling. They got dressed and after a last glance at the two men on the bed, who appeared oblivious to anything, they headed downstairs to Hadrian's, the hotel's brasserie, to relax, have a drink and a bite to eat.

### January 2006, Edinburgh

Dan and Vadim sat in the hotel's restaurant, just about to order, when Dan looked up and saw a familiar shape through the arch that led towards the lobby. "Isn't that Maggie?" he pointed towards the archway. "She was supposed to return today." He took his cane and got up. She hadn't seen them yet.

"If the haircut is anything to go by, it's her," Vadim murmured, standing as well, but remaining near the table.

"Aye, the bomb proof hairdo." Dan grinned and made his way into the lobby. He had hardly stepped through the archway when she turned, and a bright smile lit up her face. She was even tinier now, deceptively fragile, her face wrinkled and yet no less classy than it had always been. Dressed in the eternally elegant twin set, and her pearls, the ring sparkling on her finger as it had done since her lost fiancé had given it to her. She looked up at the much taller man, exuding joy and warmth and despite her slender frame, she showed the core of steel in the way she moved despite her years. The aura of natural authority around her had never waned, right now replaced with joy and warmth.

"My dear Dan!" She exclaimed in her upper class voice, "so good to see you." She glanced past him and towards Vadim, "and your almost-husband." Her bright smile took on an almost wicked hint, when Dan's eyes widened in surprise at her declaration.

The couple of strange looks he got from some of the patrons, made him grin like a naughty schoolboy. "Ma'm, you look as radiant as ever."

"Oh, don't be silly." She laughed. When he took her hand to kiss it, he stooped for her, but she reached lightly for his shoulder instead and stretched to place a light kiss on his cheek. "Have you been looked after well?"

"Very well, Ma'm. This place is one of the best we have ever been in."

"I am delighted, and I am sure that after the celebrations you will be convinced that it is *the* best one you have ever been in. Now come and let me welcome Vadim."

With that she turned, but waited for him. Standing his free side, the other hand using the cane, she slipped her arm into his. With an amused smile, she let herself be escorted into the brasserie.

Vadim stood near the table, smiling as they approached. "Ma'm." He indicated a bow. "How good to see you."

"And you, my dear Vadim." He kissed her hand, but she did the same she had done to Dan and kissed his cheek. It seemed she had decided on a new manner of dealing with her friends.

After they'd settled, the attentive staff showed up, offering the menus. They sat for a while and talked, until the Baroness asked whether any guests had arrived.

“Yes, my best man and his partner,” Vadim answered, smiling. “But the last time we saw them, they were recovering from the flight. I could see if I can summon them, they might be hungry, too.”

“I’m not sure.” Dan fidgeted a little, and her eagle-eyed ladyship looked at him with a bemused smile, when he continued. “They seemed pretty much out of it, didn’t they, Vadim?”

“Did they?” She interjected before focusing on the menu and hiding her facial expression.

“Aye, they did.” Vadim controlled that grin which became a smirk. “Maybe later. If you’d like to meet them.”

“I would indeed. In fact, I am very much looking forward to meeting all of your friends. Especially your best men, and of course your families. Truth be told, I am particularly excited to meet your daughter, Dan. I am sure I will be delighted.”

“Oh, you will be ...” Dan grinned, “imagine me at my worst time, unruly, wild, but female and a teenager.” He laughed.

The Baroness chuckled and patted his hand. “I didn’t expect anything less.”

Vadim poured them all water, Baroness first. “The other best man arrives early tomorrow, probably in time for breakfast, his wife arrives the day before the ceremony. And then it’s a steady trickle ... many more guests than we’d have invited, but then ... we were just following orders.”

“Aye, Ma’m.” Dan smartly added with a swift salute, making her smile at both of them.

“I knew that if I hadn’t taken over, you would have made this into a very short affair. Believe me, my dear friends, it has been and continues to be a pure delight to organise these festivities. After all, now that I am retired and whiling away the hours in my home ...” if Dan didn’t know better he’d thought she winked at them, “it was a most pleasurable pastime. It is affording me the opportunity to share your joy, together with all your friends and family, while not having to worry about the perfect gift. You see, it was all very selfish.” She leaned closer and murmured, very un-ladylike, “of course, it was all a ruse to see Dan in a proper Scotsman’s outfit.” Her brief laugh sounded light and carefree.

“Oh, that should be well worth all the work,” Vadim said, chuckling. “He wore that when *his* best man married, and he looked stunning.”

“Aye,” Dan interjected, “but that wasn’t the proper McFadyen tartan, and neither the same quality as I’m wearing now. You just wait and see.”

Vadim reached over to press Dan’s hand for a moment. “Should we order?”

“Indeed.” The Baroness smiled and they proceeded to do just that.

They had a light meal, taking the chance to catch up. Talking about the time that had passed in between, the current world situation, the ceremony that was to come. Easily moving from topic to topic, comfortable and pleasant.

Several hours later, Hooch and Matt emerged, and the Baroness took an immediate liking to them. More to Hooch, thought Vadim, but the difference was hard to spot, and he might be completely wrong with his assessment.

That night they slept well and restful, aided by an increased dose of painkillers for Dan. While waiting for them to kick in, he had stood at the open window, smoking a forbidden cigarette into the icy wind while looking out across the magnificent city and towards the illuminated castle. Edinburgh, the grand old lady, and he, had finally become friends. He smiled when he ‘cuddled up’ to Vadim and was asleep a few minutes later.

\* \* \*

When they picked Jean up at the airport the next day, he looked like a guy in a fashion ad when he stepped through the gates. He wore his hair a touch longer these days, mostly so it could be fashionably mussed, but also, noted Vadim, because the hairline was receding in the corners, or at least thinning a bit. Apart from that, expensive loafers, designer jeans, designer belt, white T-shirt that was too simple to have a logo anywhere, and a very tasteful jacket that he wore open and still flattered him. Solange must have so much fun dressing the ex-Legionnaire tastefully. The Breitling watch Vadim spotted was certainly new and one of the more expensive models – and unlike most men who wore the brand, Jean had the strong wrists to not look ridiculous with the watch. That alone told Vadim that the Frenchie was doing well, financially.

Jean spotted Dan first and lengthened his stride, dropping the bag that had hung over his shoulder, when he made contact with Dan. He drew him into a tight hug.

“Damn, it’s nice to see you again,” Jean murmured into Dan’s ear.

“Missed me?” Dan grinned and held Jean close. “Not quite the same to fuck the pretty vintner?” he chuckled then drew back, knowing that he’d kiss the man otherwise, and that really wouldn’t be appropriate.

“No, not the same.” Jean grinned, pushing back. “Vadim. Hug?”

“Sure.” Vadim opened his arms, and was pulled into a very similar bear hug. Exuberant Jean. “Like the watch,” he murmured.

“The ... oh, yeah.” Jean laughed. “Solange doesn’t like it, but I told her it’s a guy watch. Men like watches like that. How are you guys, good?”

“Aye, spent some time yesterday with the first guests ...” Vadim answered.

“... who turned out to be the first wedding present.” Dan smirked. “It’s the other best man and his partner. Have I told you about Hooch?”

“You mentioned him. American?”

“Yeah.” Vadim herded them out of the terminal towards the car. “Old friend. From the Gulf.”

“The Gulf is the place to go for best men?” Jean laughed as they were getting into the vehicle. “Seems it was.”

“Shit, that’s right, we should start a marriage agency, based in Kuwait.” Dan grinned. “By the way, have you got anything planned for ... later?” He craned his neck towards Jean, once they were in the car.

“I’m open for suggestions.”

“Depends on what Vadim, Hooch and Matt are going to be up to, and if I will be missed at whatever they are up to. Unless, of course, you want to do some good old fashioned sightseeing.”

“Don’t be cryptic.” Jean leaned over towards Vadim. “Do you have any idea what he’s talking about?”

“I guess it has to do with celebrating in a close and intimate environment.” Vadim kept his eyes on the road, as he pulled out of the car park.

“Oh. Right. Well. As I said, I’m open.”

“Ha ha ha, you fucking jokers.” Dan groused. “So much for me trying to be less obvious and not going down the ‘you want to fuck, Jean?’ route.” Dan finally cottoned onto what exactly Jean had said. “... open, Jean? Did you say *open*?”

Jean coughed. “Metaphorically. My mind. Okay?”

“Perhaps this, too, is up for negotiations after a bottle of plonk and some excellent food? Those beds really are first class.” Dan smirked toothily. “And ... I’m just reminding you of the vintner.” Reluctant to say anymore about the phone call.

Jean groaned, but laughed. “Hope the wine has arrived. Frederic was fussing over the boxes like he was sending away newborn kittens.”

“What wine?”

“Your wedding planner was in touch. Last year’s wine turned out pretty well. It’s ... my wedding present.”

“Wedding planner? I wouldn’t call the formidable Baroness a wedding planner.” Dan chuckled, “she didn’t tell us, probably wanted this to be a surprise from you. Thank you, Jean, and say thanks to your Frederic.”

“You’re welcome. He sends greetings, too. The way he got all starry-eyed, I was glad I am already married.”

“Good grief, he’s in love with you? You’re a regular heartbreaker, Frenchie.”

“He’ll get over it.”

Dan grinned and settled back in the seat while they negotiated the late morning traffic of the city centre, before arriving at the front of the Balmoral. The door man in kilt, cape and tam o’shanter, helped take out the luggage and carry it in, before a valet took the car to its designated hotel parking space.

They got Jean’s keys, and Dan and Jean went up to the room, while Vadim went to await the delivery from their tailors, having been alerted by the reception staff. Up in the room, the Frenchman tipped the valet and had a tour of the luxurious room, grinning. “Edinburgh’s finest. Solange’s friends were very keen on this place.”

“But they are *not* coming, aye?” Sudden trepidation crept in Dan’s voice. “I’ve never forgotten that Chrestien fellow ...”

“Course not. Hope you arranged for a different photographer, because Chrestien is not coming.”

“Phew.” Dan leaned the cane against the nightstand and let himself fall onto the bed. “By the way, I was told the suite that the Baroness has booked for us

from tomorrow onwards, is absolutely breathtaking.” He patted the space beside him and lay back.

Jean took the jacket off and hung it across one of the chairs, then came over to lie on the bed with Dan, embracing him and breathing against Dan’s neck. “Last chance,” he murmured. “You could still elope with me, you know?”

Dan smiled into the handsome face before him, lined, tanned and goddamned gorgeous. Flashes of the young Jean in his mind, the man he’d met in the Gulf, the *straight* man ... “You realise that Vadim and I have our silver anniversary this year, aye? But I must admit I do try to *not* commemorate the day we actually met.” He quirked a brow, then ran a hand down Jean’s back, inhaling his scent.

Jean lifted his head to kiss Dan’s lips, fingers running down Dan’s cheek, as he opened his lips for one of those tender, skilled, heartfelt kisses. “You guys are great together though. Even Vadim looks happy these days.”

“It’s been a long ride. Twenty-five bloody years. Fucking crazy, aye?” Dan took his time to kiss Jean, to hold him and to be close. He murmured when he broke the kiss, “I sometimes think I’m making all of this up. It’s just too damned insane, and a far cry from the man I once was, the tough SAS soldier who went out to work covertly in Afghanistan.”

Jean smiled at him. “Miss it?”

“Good question. Only a few years ago I would have said ‘aye, I do’, but not anymore. Funny that, but what I have now, is a damn fine thing. Partner, family, friends, lovers, even a daughter, and no more goddamned wars.” Dan chuckled softly. “I’m too old for wars, Jean. The reason why Vadim came up with this whole wedding thing? I mentioned it on the phone, I got to have a second knee replacement. I’m okay with that, but I’m clearly no longer fit to be a tough soldier. I’m fifty-six, and somewhere along the way, I grew a bloody dangerous and inconvenient thing: a conscience.” He smiled, leaning in to place a kiss on Jean’s lips. “I never thought I’d say that, but for me the wars are over, but I would do everything all over again.”

“I call that a happy man, Dan,” Jean said, in a rare moment of wisdom, and smiled. “Sometimes we give up something we think is such a sacrifice, and it isn’t? And years later we finally get that it wasn’t and feel a bit weird because ... we made such a fuss about it?” He smiled, kissing Dan back, who nodded. “Few things I regret.”

“Which are? I only have one.”

“Having turned into such a bastard because of the army and later the Legion. I didn’t like soldiering, I never did. I’d have been alright as a civilian, I think.”

“Really? I never knew you didn’t like the job?”

“They take too much away that ... many never recover.” Jean kissed Dan again. “And yours?”

“Is one that isn’t really one. I regret torturing Vadim, *really* torturing a man. To have become so base, because of revenge, is my one regret. But ... if I hadn’t done it, and if Vadim hadn’t done what he did, twenty-five years ago, then we

wouldn't be here. So, I say the same that Vadim says when asked, I regret and I don't regret." Dan reached to caress Jean's face, smiling at him.

"That's what I mean. You wouldn't have done those things if you hadn't been a soldier."

"Aye, that's true. Look at Duncan, he wouldn't even have dreamed of doing anything like that in his worst nightmares. Of course my family doesn't know about the things I've done, and never will."

Jean held him close, chest to chest, fingers running across Dan's back. "Maybe it's different ... I found my wife outside soldiering ... you found your man inside."

"And a lover kind-of inside." Dan chuckled, inhaling deeply before rolling himself onto his back and taking Jean with him, until Jean ended on top of him. "What now, Frenchie? More cuddling, or getting frisky, or heading out to see if the other best man and his partner and the other groom are up to doing something?"

"I'd be happy with a cuddle ... sex when they won't miss us, hm?"

"Aye, good idea." Dan embraced Jean and relished the weight of the man on top, enjoying to simply be and hold for a little while.

\* \* \*

The next morning, they all gathered in the hotel brasserie for brunch, which gave the Americans some chance to adjust to the time zone, and suited Jean's leisurely life style. Jean had, he said, perfected late breakfast to an art form, which was altogether un-French, with their hasty croissant drowned in café au lait, he admitted, but he said it was probably closer to the Bohème lifestyle.

To which Vadim turned to face him and commented: "Tell Solange to not allow you to read her *Cosmopolitan* anymore."

Almost as if on cue, Hooch and Matt arrived. Hooch in silence, as usual, Matt talking to him, equally as usual. Only a few words, but enough to make Hooch crack a smile, until the word '*Cosmopolitan*' was all too audible around the table. Hooch rose one brow but didn't comment. It was Matt who introduced himself and Hooch, with his usual killer smile.

Jean grinned back, too relaxed and informal to stand, instead giving a half-wave.

"You're Dan's best man?" Hooch addressed Jean.

"Yeah. Jean-Pierre Leclerc. Dan dragged me in front of the altar, I'm now returning the favour. Well, I married somebody else, but hey."

"Someone other than Dan." Hooch stated drily, as both men sat down.

"Vadim would have skinned me alive even before my honeymoon," Jean quipped, glancing at Vadim, who didn't respond, merely watched.

"I can *just* about imagine that." Hooch let the words stand in the room, and three men out of the five knew exactly what he was saying.

"Skinning is hard work, takes a lot of control," Vadim stated, and reached for his coffee. "There are cleaner, faster ways."

Dan didn't say anything, downed his second cup of black coffee to hide a grin, while Matt coughed and Hooch kept a completely neutral facial expression.

Jean laughed. "You can still be scary. Good to know people don't actually change all that much. Gives me hope for my future."

"You find Vadim scary?" Muscles finally moved in Hooch's face when he raised a single brow.

"Well ..." Jean seemed to think about it, regarding Vadim for a long moment. "I used to. Hard to read him, and he's stronger than I am, and I've seen what he can do. To other people, to himself, and the rest of the world. Yeah. Vadim can be fucking scary."

"And you can be fucking annoying," Vadim said, but smiled, while Dan's grin turned into a badly concealed laugh, before he stuffed his face with some of the rolls. Matt was the only one who regarded the table for a moment, shook his head slightly, then got up to leave the older guys to their pissing contest and went for what was more important: the breakfast buffet bar and its nutritional content.

"You really think you have seen what he can do to others?" A second brow joined the first in Hooch's face. "Tell me more." He hadn't even touched his coffee yet.

"He's Spetsnaz. I've seen what those guys can do. A couple days into our friendship, Vadim smashed my elbow in a 'friendly' bit of wrestling so that I couldn't do anything with it for weeks."

"Did you cry?" Hooch deadpanned.

Jean's eyes flashed – his hands stilled left and right of his plate, and Vadim could see for a moment the Legionnaire, a man who did more than joke and screw around and play at being camp – or metrosexual, as they called it when straight men did it. "You think I would've?" Jean asked, and there it was, the gauntlet right on the table. He didn't joke, there was no lightness in him, a rare moment.

Hooch slowly leaned forward, dark eyes on every expression in Jean's face, and ... he relaxed a visible fraction. Casting his customary near invisible half-smile as a peace offering. "No."

But Jean didn't relax that easily, Vadim could almost see how Jean had re-evaluated Hooch and decided he didn't trust the man. Friends of friends didn't mean friends, not to Jean, not that easily. Like a kicked puppy, he didn't find his equilibrium again that quickly, and Hooch wasn't any help, face once again entirely neutral.

"That's how he became friends with Dan," Vadim murmured. "Jean decided he hated me, so my enemy had to be his friend. And since Dan and I were at odds at that point, Jean here figured joining forces with Dan made sense. But he got more than he bargained for ..."

Jean shot him a glance, likely annoyed at the insinuation, but now Vadim smiled at him. "I'd have done the same." Remaining deliberately cryptic.



“What, deciding that you wanted to get into my pants even though you were straight?” Dan smirked, cruelly continuing in the same vein, this was too good to drop yet.

Jean was working on an answer, but visibly discarded several, when at that moment, Matt returned to the table, took once glance round and put his plate down, filled with nothing but high-protein low-calorie delicacies. He shook his head again, and reached for Hooch’s plate without a word, to turn and retreat back to the buffet.

“Seems you fucked with Dan the same time I did.” Hooch took a mouthful of his coffee. “And Matt did, too.”

“In fact the kid started it.” Dan shrugged, entirely too amused. “The Gulf was one big happy ‘fuck Mad Dog’ fest.”

Jean inhaled, forced a smile, but it didn’t work on his features. It looked strained, which told Vadim that somewhere, he’d actually drawn blood. Jean would get over it. His jokes weren’t exactly always completely friendly.

“Well, there was precious little else to do but play pool, and nobody could beat me at the pool table,” Jean said.

“I’m not convinced, I do remember a particular game, don’t you, Vadim?” Dan grinned.

“You were getting naked,” Jean said, sharply. “That’s not pool, that’s ...”

“That’s ...?” Vadim repeated when Jean left the sentence hanging.

“Unfair.” Jean gave a sharp laugh that betrayed how ill at ease he was with the topic of conversation. “You guys were flaunting it all over the place. What’s a man to do? I’m not as stoic as good old Vadim.”

“I was flaunting it?” Dan asked with a grin.

“Yeah, you were.” Matt commented. He had returned with a plate full of similar nutritious goodness for Hooch, with a few naughty carbs thrown in. “Or I wouldn’t have asked you, like, behind the armoured personnel carriers, would I?” He rolled his eyes when Dan laughed.

Hooch touched Matt’s back as a ‘thanks’ for the food, when Matt sat down.

“What was that about being straight?” Hooch suddenly asked, cleverly slicing back into the same wound, while Matt rolled his eyes again and muttered something about stupid pissing contests.

Jean’s gaze met Hooch’s, blue and brown, and Vadim could see that the Frenchman was struggling to keep the gaze level – and he could also see that the hair on Jean’s arms was standing up slightly. The thought hit him that if Jean was a dog, his neck fur would be on end and he’d bare his teeth, unsure whether to attack to defend himself or whether attack was really what he wanted to do. Jean certainly did not want to discuss his orientation with a man he didn’t trust. “Does it matter?”

“Depends on the grooms’ plans for ‘further entertainment’.” Hooch countered coolly. Nothing in his body, stance, facial expression or eyes gave way to whatever he might be thinking.

Matt had been about to put a king prawn into his mouth, when he stalled, eyes flashing, before he murmured, “this time without me. Five’s one too many.” And stopped any further comments with said prawn.

Jean stared at Matt, and then suddenly understood. His tan turned into a redder shade and he missed a few beats.

“Jean, you up for another stag night?” Vadim helped, even though he enjoyed a flustered Jean. He’d never seen him this insecure, this out of his depth. Jean was too used to his charms working, if they didn’t, he was clearly struggling. That made him far more likeable than he normally was, despite the fact Vadim had made his peace with Jean insisting on being a ‘close friend’.

“Why not.” Jean glanced at him, not sure whether that was a lifeline or another trap. “Last time didn’t hurt.”

“No, it didn’t.”

“Not so sure about that.” Dan commented, thickly buttering a fresh piece of toast. “I was fucking sore for days.”

Matt cast a quick glance, then stopped his grin with a couple more prawns and a few slices of hard-boiled egg, while Hooch still didn’t let anything on.

“Correction, it didn’t hurt *me*.” Jean’s smile was more natural now. “Won’t hurt this time, because I sure as hell won’t get fucked.” He kept his voice down, but it was a clear challenge, gauntlet on the table again.

“Too straight or too worried it’d make you less of a man?” Hooch drawled.

Vadim smirked; he could smell ozone, like sparks flying off the other two men. They didn’t like each other, or Hooch was enjoying to draw Jean out into treacherous territory.

“Jesus fucking H Christ.” Matt groaned and washed his latest mouthful down with a cup of coffee. Dan, for once, actually stopped grinning and sat slightly tense, curious, waiting.

Jean froze again, more visibly now – anybody could see he’d been hit hard. “Try it, you bitch, and I’ll kill you.” No joke. No lightness. Just bared teeth, a cornered feral dog. Vadim could see a completely different Jean, the Legionnaire, as he must have been like, the man who faced down Beauvais, a Legionnaire who was just as vicious as the worst of men he’d seen. Losing his composure like that, drawing out a darkness that nobody had thought Jean possessed. Or, yes, once, when Jean had cursed him right after his elbow had got hurt. Interesting.

Once again Hooch leaned forward across the table, opposite to Jean. Slowly, deliberately getting closer and closer into the Jean’s space. “It will be a pleasure.” He said in a low, deceptively soft voice.

Jean was bristling silently – he couldn’t break free, he couldn’t move forward, he couldn’t move back. He stood his ground for what it was worth, glaring at the other man, fists suddenly tight, veins on his lower arms visible, subtle play of muscles. “I promise, it won’t,” he hissed between his teeth.

“Oh yes, it will.” Hooch’s voice remained just as soft, as he slightly tilted his head, baring his teeth for a moment in a fake smile before the attack. “And the pleasure won’t just all be mine.” His hand, until now lying casually on the table,

turned and moved, fist flexing once, showing the corded strength that ran up the arm, around the wrist and inherent in each finger.

“You fucking freak.” Jean grit out between his teeth. “You think you can make me? Say goodbye to your balls.”

“I’ve got yours knotted three times and then stuffed down your throat before you can even mutter the word ‘girl.’” Hooch murmured.

Matt was taking in an audible breath, sitting tense and with a steep frown between his eyes, but he said nothing, not yet.

Dan was drawn to the scene before him. Part of him wanting to stop this, but the dominant part was bloody turned on by it. What wouldn’t he give to see those two men fight. Naked. Holy shit.

Vadim glanced from one to the other. Yes. Jean was up in arms, and Hooch had his eyes on a target. Interesting combination. He assumed that Hooch would win. Jean had been softened by life as a civilian, while he’d never assume that Hooch could be anything but danger on legs. On the other hand, Jean would put up a fight, and that alone would be interesting.

“As much as I’m getting hard from watching you two,” Dan said fairly quietly, but with no less intensity, “enough is enough. It’s a wedding, not a battle, even though I’m clearly getting off on the latter right now.” He glanced at Vadim with an expression that told Vadim that Dan was part amused, part surprised, part unsure what the heck to do about the animosity.

“Hooch, you’re being a dick.” Matt sighed. He placed his hand onto Hooch’s back and the way the muscles twitched gave proof for all to see that if anyone else had touched him now, that fool would have lost an arm.

“Figures he’s Vadim’s best man,” Jean murmured under his breath, by way of a parting shot, and murmured something about “alike draws alike,” as he pushed his chair back. “Got to make a phone call. Gentlemen.” He stood.

“Give her my greetings,” Vadim said levelly, deciding for once to support Jean - him getting away from the table seemed a good way to calm things down.

“Yeah,” Jean murmured, and stepped away, heading to the bar to pay for his mostly untouched breakfast, unaware that all expenses were being paid by the Baroness.

Dan sat in silence, looking levelly at Hooch for a long moment. No accusation, no judgment either, then took in a deep breath to let it noisily out through his nostrils. “Guess I better assist in that phone call.” He took hold of his cane. “Could do with a fag after all this excitement anyway.” He made his way towards the lobby, searching for Jean.

Jean was asking the guy at reception something, then received directions, as the other man was pointing and talking and Jean was nodding. Jean gave a little salute, then turned towards the doors. Noticing Dan, he slowed his stride and gave a small smile. “Hey. I was going to find a more peaceful place for breakfast,” he said.

“Care to take an old battle horse with you?” Dan smiled and placed a hand on Jean’s shoulder.

“Sure, come along.”

“Would be a good idea to grab our coats first. January in Scotland isn’t fun. Unless you rather have breakfast in bed?”

Jean looked at him. “Mind to walk a bit? I need to blow off steam. The cold will be good.”

“Can’t blame me for trying.”

“No, I can’t.”

Jean steered Dan towards the lift and they went upstairs to get their coats. Jean’s was a lambskin affair, fur shorn off and worn inwards, the fine leather turned outwards, while Dan still went with the practical but expensive high class outdoor gear.

They were soon out and on the steps of the hotel. “You want to go along Princes street,” Dan pointed to the left, “or towards Carlton Hill,” pointing to the right, “or up North Bridge? Carlton Hill’s probably out for me, and you did mention breakfast.”

“What place serves breakfast and won’t get us trailed by your American friends?”

“Singular, nor plural. Leave Matt out of it.” Dan sighed and held the cigarette packet out to Jean. “North Bridge is our best option, lots of places in the university area.”

“Taxi?”

Dan took a cigarette for himself, then put them away when Jean didn’t take one. “No, we walk.” Lighting his fag he went off the steps and turned sharply right, towards North Bridge and its breathtaking views. Arthur’s Seat to the left, and the city to the right, but Jean didn’t seem to take in any of it. “So your charms didn’t work and Hooch behaved like a prat, because for some reason you two just crashed spectacularly like something proverbial that I can’t think of right now.” Dan blew smoke into the cold wind. “Or maybe you’re just chalk and cheese and a good fuck amongst friends would take care of that.”

Jean looked at him, hands dug into his pocket, a frown on his face. “You heard him. He’s decided he’d fuck me, and ... and ...” Jean shook his head. “Fuck. This is your marriage do, you’re getting married, you and Vadim, and he just ticks me off like that. Why? Because I’m suddenly some pushover that he’s decided will just lay down for him and get fucked by a guy who doesn’t ... who I don’t trust?”

“Hey, hey, hey! Whoa, calm down, Jean.” Dan put his free arm onto Jean’s shoulder and stopped in the middle of North Bridge, in the bracing wind. Turning Jean round to look at him, and Jean followed, after just a few moment’s hesitation.

“He never said he’d fuck you. I remember distinctly that we were joking about your stag night, you said it won’t hurt you this time either, because you won’t get fucked and all he asked, admittedly in an infuriating way, was if you’re too straight for it or if it would make you less of a man. *You* blew your top after that, telling him you’d kill him if he tried, but he never said he would in the first place.”

“He did. He said something about getting me to enjoy it.”

“Well, you did call him a bitch before that ...” Dan pulled in a drag from his cigarette. “Let’s get some things straight, here.” Dan flashed a grin at the age-old pun. “First of, Hooch never said he wanted to fuck you. Second, you blew your top. Third, you obviously have a problem with getting fucked, or rather, the idea that *anyone* might know other than you and I, that I do sometimes fuck you. Trust me, absolutely no one knows, and that includes Vadim. Fourth, Hooch’s the most extreme masochist you can think of, who lets himself get worked over by Vadim until he’s half dead.”

Jean had opened his mouth to speak during the list, but the fourth point surprised him so much that he lost the thought he’d been holding onto. “By Vadim? He’s ... oh fuck.” Pausing, and reconsidering. “It’s ... it’s just that I don’t trust any other guy to do that, okay? I’ve known you for forever, and I’d trust you with anything, my life, my family, my pride, whatever, but it’s between you and me and I simply don’t trust anybody else enough. Not a total stranger, not one that basically tells me I will enjoy it, whether I like it or not. One that makes me feel like a bitch, and he did that.”

“I’m sorry that you felt like that. Hooch’s an acquired taste, I give you that, and you two really did hit it off spectacularly badly. Hooch’s a good guy, even though it might not seem like that. Loyal, in a committed partnership for years, and, yes, trustworthy. Just ... a damn acquired taste and not everyone’s taste at that, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah. Didn’t say he wasn’t attractive. I can see what Vadim sees in him, anyway.” Jean conceded.

Dan stubbed out the cigarette butt on the bridge’s turquoise ornate iron. “And *no one* will ever know what we do between us, okay?” He smiled, and reached out to squeeze Jean’s shoulder. “No one.”

Jean reached out and embraced Dan, a close, warm touch, his cool lips moving to Dan’s neck. “Maybe breakfast in bed would have been the better option ...”

“Well, we could go back, if you wanted to, that would certainly stop the tourists from staring at us right now.” Dan chuckled, but made no move to let go of Jean. “Or aren’t you missing my famous blowjobs?” Murmured into Jean’s ear. “I am sure I could take your mind off the unpleasant non-breakfast.”

“You win.” Jean smiled and hugged him closer. “The tourists are just staring because we’re both damn good-looking guys.” He moved away a bit, and turned around, back to the hotel. “Let’s go.”

Dan laughed and shook his head. “Hang on, got to text Vadim, should at least let him know I won’t be around for half of the day.” Producing a sleek mobile, he texted while walking. “I am sure Vadim will be able to entertain our American guests with a sightseeing tour.” He winked, and soon they were back at the hotel entrance. The whole excursion had taken no longer than fifteen minutes.

“My hotel room, or do you want to get Vadim up there as well?” Jean asked.

“No, just you and me, aye? We need some quality time. What with groom and best man and all that. Besides, you know that Vadim doesn’t share anymore.”

“Yeah, sounds good to me. My room, then. It’s really nice. Huge. Great view.” Jean led him upstairs, where they shed the jackets and kissed, then they remembered food, which they ordered. When it arrived, they were both half-dressed and breathless, but they managed to keep their hands off each other long enough to have breakfast, which was a whole lot more playful and tender than expected. They returned to being breathless, trading more kisses and later blowjobs, eventually resting, comfortable and content, together on the bed. Talking a bit, interrupted only by Dan smoking a fag illicitly out of the window, then back on the bed to just be comfortable together. Being close, and being there. True friends.

\* \* \*

Matt and Hooch had been exploring the city during the day, while Vadim spent some quality time in the luxurious Spa that was part of the hotel. Dinner with the Baroness at night was scheduled to be a quiet evening, before the remaining guests started arriving the next morning and.

Before the dinner in the hotel’s own five star restaurant, Matt vanished into the health club and gym, working out, and Dan returned to Vadim, spending alone together, probably the last chance before the big event.

When Jean came out of the elevator, Hooch was leaning casually against one of the pillars, looking at him.

“Yeah, that’s okay, I’ll call you later,” Jean said into the slick little cell phone and flipped it shut, walking casually as if he hadn’t, with the flicker of an eye, noticed Hooch and deduced that the man was there not because he liked to watch lift doors open and close, but for him. Unnerving, like passing another predator at the water hole. Jean gave him a friendly nod and proceeded on his way outside to have a smoke.

A moment later and Hooch moved into Jean’s peripheral vision. He hadn’t made a sound, not until the last moment, when he’d been deliberate. “Vadim told me you were legion?”

Outside, Jean lit the cigarette and inhaled. Still a light smoker, but habitual again. He’d quit a million times and restarted just as often. “Regular army before that, then Legionnaire. You’re Delta.” And a masochist. Damn, he didn’t look it.

“Yeah. Commissioned these days.” Hooch shrugged with a miniature grimace. Implying the unspoken: no more missions for the ‘old man’. “The legion’s damn sharp.” He leaned against the cold stone of the massive doorway, looking comfortable in the cold, despite wearing only a shirt. Watching Jean from dark, somewhat shielded eyes, who didn’t quite know how to take the compliment. At face value? Was that a ‘kiss and make up’ without the kissing?

“The Legion has to be. The French army boys are, in the majority, not worth their salt. That’s why they send us when they cannot pull out just because of some bodies ... the whole Iraq thing ...”

“Yeah, I remember. You were a Merc with Dan. Might have walked past you in the Gulf. Was there anyone he didn’t have sex with?” A small, amused spark came into Hooch’s eyes, before the expression went back to neutral.

“Lots.” Jean stood there, smoking for a moment, feeling the chill more. “I developed into a regular shag, though, in the Gulf and after. We go back a long way. Like ... you and Vadim?”

“We’re friends, and so are you and Dan.” Hooch gave a slight nod of recognition. “Not that different, after all. You’re married. I got Matt. You got Dan. I got Vadim. When it comes down to it, they got each other. Non-negotiable.” Hooch slipped his hand into his jeans pocket as if he were looking for something, then after a moment, crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Dan hasn’t had sex with your wife. She’s the odd one out.” He flashed a small grin as a peace offering.

“She’s buddies with Vadim. I guess that counts.” Jean glanced at the cigarette and dropped it, grinding it out under his heel. “Do you smoke?” Offering the pack, just in case. His own peace offering.

“Not anymore.” Hooch shrugged. “Got fucked up in some shitty place, couldn’t move for months. Stopped it then.” He studied Jean’s face with utmost intensity, for one short moment. “Can I buy you a drink?”

Jean paused, long enough to stuff the pack back and slide the Zippo back in his pocket. “Sure.” He nodded towards the hotel doors again, indicating Hooch should lead the way. On his account, the matter was settled. They were both best men, they’d both behave, and that was it. “Any idea who of us is going to keep the rings?” he asked on the way in.

“No idea, but you can if you want to. Uniform is shit for that.”

“Yeah, no uniform here.”

Hooch made his way straight to Hadrian’s bar, where he stopped at the bar top and leaned against it.

Jean took up position a polite distance away, briefly checking the substantial drinks menu. After the cold, that was whisky. “Right, you caught me off balance ... just wanted to make sure you won’t ambush me and fuck me ... up because of that.”

“Matt said I was a dick.” Hooch glanced at the whiskies on offer before turning his attention back to Jean. “And Matt’s usually right. You got up my nose, and I don’t know why.” He waited for Jean’s order before getting a Clynelish for himself.

“Yeah. Nevermind.” Jean said while the barkeeper poured him the 25-year old Highland Park, and, when the man retreated a bit, added: “Don’t think it makes me less of a man, just prefer it the other way round. I’m attracted by people, not plumbing, but I have some preference what to do with people I take to bed.”

“Yeah, so do I.” Hooch cast another miniature grin, merely a flash, then reached for the small jug with water and poured a tiny amount into his whisky to allow the flavours to come to life. “What doesn’t make you less of a man, though? That you play both fields? I used to, too.”

“That I don’t take it.” Apart from Dan, but that was different. He’d do anything for Dan, including that, even if the kick was mostly in what it did to Dan, and that weird psychological thing about turned tables and allowing Dan to do this. Like a good sub, he let Dan have that power over him.

“*Not* taking it makes you less of a man?” Hooch raised his glass with a ghost of an amused smile. “You’ve got some weird reverse psychology working here.”

“No.” Jean rolled his eyes. “Fuck, the other way round. You said I’m afraid to be less of a man if I took it. Do I think Dan or Vadim are less of a man? Vadim loves getting fucked.” Beauvais, Vadim, the stag night, and the threesomes he’d had with Dan and his partner. Somebody so powerful, cool, threatening, somebody so aloof, yet that strength even when he was getting fucked. How Vadim could relinquish control. How his face changed when he felt something, lust, surrender, when Vadim’s armour cracked open. Time to change the track of thoughts, because, damn, those were some *fine* memories.

“What made you stop? Why would anyone foreswear women?” Jean asked.

Taking a sip, Hooch savoured the taste for a long moment, with half-closed eyes. Never closing them fully, not unless he was with those he trusted, and that was exactly two men, and no more. “Realised eventually they couldn’t give me what I needed. Was pointless, then, and too complicated.”

Masochist. “You need the equal or superior strength? Vadim’s a good choice there.”

“Vadim’s a safe choice.” Hooch nodded, “on all counts.” He took another small sip. “You can take it from me that it doesn’t make you less of a man to take it. I can still wipe the floor with anyone’s ass here,” Hooch flashed another rare grin while making an economic gesture across the bar.

“That’s your hang-up, buddy, not mine.” Jean raised his hands. “Me, I don’t care what anybody calls me. I have kids, a wife, a nice house, very nice holidays, lots of friends – I’m fine, I’m happy, and I have no hang-ups. Just because I don’t like something that other people do like doesn’t mean my masculinity is anywhere near dubious. Neither is yours. Our job as best men is to take care of our friends that are getting married, maybe throw a memorable stag night, and leave our shit at the door, because, frankly, it’s their party, not ours.”

“First of, I haven’t got a hang-up. Secondly, seems to me that you have one, or you wouldn’t have blown your top. Thirdly, you do have a point, like, about the best men business, but have you got any ideas for something memorable?”

Jean decided to leave the hang-up part unanswered. Big macho Americans insinuating the whole receiving anal sex thing was that much of a deal. He just didn’t like it very much. “My stag night, we had an orgy. One of my old Legion friends ... well, contacts ... well, comrade, really, Dan and Vadim, well, and me. Helped with the nervousness, I was very calm the next day.”



Hooch let out a huff of laughter. As dry as the whole man. “I can imagine. We’ve already all had Matt, and I don’t think they’re nervous.” Taking another sip, he was relishing the taste. “Perhaps we could make them nervous instead.”

Matt. That was a nice looking guy right there, seemed exactly the type for some fun and fooling around. Jean took a small sip from that whisky – he preferred them neat and worked through a shot in increments. “Short of taking them hostage ... what could make them nervous?”

“After the lives they had? Not much. Can’t even make them sweat if you chain them up. At least not Vadim. What about Dan?”

“Dan doesn’t like that. Surprising them at night? Sneaking into the room ... recording some sex, or photos, or something ... I don’t know. How nasty a prank should it be without screwing it up? Or just ... unexpected?”

“Not nasty.” Hooch finished his whisky and leaned back against the bar. “Let’s go for unexpected.” He was thoughtful, then, “how much do they trust each of us you think?”

“That’s easy. Vadim doesn’t trust me. He never did, he never will. Dan trusts me a great deal. Why?”

“Dan doesn’t completely trust me, whatever he says or even believes, he doesn’t. You trick Dan, I trick Vadim, until they are helpless ...” savouring the thought for a moment, “and then they find themselves with Dan with me and Vadim with you. That’s as far as my thoughts go. Over to you.” Hooch ordered another whisky for himself and one for Jean.

“Hmmm... swapping right in the middle? Blindfolds? Now, what would they want to happen when they are blindfolded? What would Vadim want of you then? I have no idea what you guys do in bed. With Dan, he ...” Jean swallowed another bit of whisky. Damn. Dan would like to fuck him. Like they’d done that time on the couch. But Dan would end up fucking Hooch. And Vadim? He had no idea. The thought was mildly disturbing, at the same time, his body liked the idea.

“Blindfolded, good. No talking, and they haven’t got a clue who they are dealing with. No touching, too, when they’re tied up.” Hooch raised his glass once more to his lips, taking a small sip, neat this time. “Vadim and I don’t just play hard. There’s the whole vanilla stuff, we swap.”

“I’m glad, because no way I’d let Vadim top me in a scene ...”

“You said fucking’s out, I can take two, but ...” Hooch thought for a moment, “not sure if I ever kissed Dan.”

“I kiss him whenever I can. If you’re going to impersonate me, kissing is definitely part of the package.” He still hoped that Dan wouldn’t ask for one of those rare fucks. He might. He’d just have to hope that Dan didn’t give him away. “I give head, and handjobs, and the rubbing stuff.”

“How do you kiss?” Hooch pondered, “when I fuck Vadim, it’s pretty much vanilla.”

Jean suddenly felt his pulse jump up in his throat. “Shit, describing it ...” is useless. How do you describe a kiss? He looked at Hooch ... his lips, his eyes,

the features, the dark hair, back to his lips. He'd somehow manoeuvred himself into a really awkward situation, and that sober. "Guess showing is easier."

"Yeah ." Hooch tipped the rest of his whisky down. "Guess it is." Dark eyes resting intently on Jean, before his brows arched. "Your room?"

No fucking way, Jean thought, especially as Hooch made it sound like a corny pick-up line, or that was irony or an accident. "Yeah." He couldn't back out. He took another sip – shame to rush it – then finished the glass, and led Hooch to the elevator. Upstairs, he unlocked his door smoothly and closed it behind Hooch.

Hooch turned round, facing Jean, who stood with his back to the door. "With Matt a kiss can be anything. Brief peck, silly smooch, full-blown snog, mindless eating face off. With Matt it's daily, but with Vadim it's different. It's rare, and it's intense." Hooch stepped forward, closed any distance between their bodies. He dropped his hand to Jean's hip, holding, the other at the back of Jean's neck. "With Vadim," Hooch's voice dropped, "it's always full body contact. Full tasting." Angling his head a fraction, his lips touched Jean's, and his tongue instantly sought entrance.

Jean almost jumped – but damn, this was a fucking nice way to get kissed. Possessive, the hand in the neck was like claiming control, but damn did it feel good, and this stranger knew what he was doing. He hadn't had that many casual encounters, somehow his men always turned into relationships, if he discounted the sex he'd paid for. Jean couldn't help the groan, couldn't help opening up to the tongue further, without thinking, his body greeting the full-on contact enthusiastically. Good kiss. Damn. Bastard. To catch him off guard again. Demonstration? It wasn't. It wasn't showing. It was too fucking much for that.

Hooch's groin pressed into Jean, growing hard, pushing him further and further backwards, until Jean's back hit the door, and Hooch's hand slipped from the hip to Jean's buttock, resting there, but leaving no room for movement. The fingers in the back of Jean's neck splayed and opened, as much contact and guiding as possible, while Hooch's kiss grew in intensity from zero to one hundred.

Jean groaned, the taste was new, still whisky, but smell and taste were a stranger's, the body was unfamiliar; male. Fit, trained, dangerous. Fuck. He pressed against the strong flesh, shifted his legs just enough to have one leg between Hooch's knees to increase the pressure. Hands moving over that body, hard, tough, sexy. He wanted to say: Fine, I get it, that is how you guys kiss - but by now, it wasn't Vadim and Hooch, it was him and Hooch. And it got more serious by the second. They could just get off together. They could. Nothing bad about it. He broke the kiss to suck on the man's throat, the strength there was tantalizing, sinews and muscle and pulse. "Fuck. Vadim's lucky," he said, managed to barely make sense.

"So's Dan." Hooch murmured, baring his throat, head far in his back, while grinding and pushing against Jean's thigh. A moment later the passiveness turned without forewarning into aggression, as he pushed full body contact into

Jean, pressed him against the door, and sought out his lips again, while his hand searched for and fumbled with Jean's fly.

Jean struggled to have a little control despite the onslaught, despite the fact how good this guy was at this. The aggression was what he'd have imagined, and it had freaked him imagining it, but right now, it was great. It was fantastic, even, far away from any game or demonstration. There was no friendship to be won here, but god, the kissing was already blistering hot. He, in turn, fought Hooch's tongue, mouth wide open, locked, needing and fierce, tasting the heat and the man, hands pulling him closer, hips rocking against the other.

Finding Jean's cock, freeing first Jean, then himself, Hooch never let up on the kissing, as fierce and real as any kiss he'd exchange with either his lover or his love. Forcing their cock's together, trapped between their bodies, he let out a throaty sound, half swallowed and half suppressed, but entirely needy, while stroking and grinding both of them closer to the edge.

Jean responded to the kisses with all the need and passion he could muster, thoughts of threat and enemy and smug bastard bleeding away – Hooch was a body, a great body, and god did he know what he was doing, driving Jean closer and further, higher. It wasn't about making it last, that wasn't part of it. Jean pulled him close, thrusting, muscles in his body dealing with that sheer brute strength, and the orgasm was fierce when he came, making him almost shout – very different to Vadim who was always so silent.

Hooch swallowed the sound in a last, deep kiss, and with a few more ferocious movements, near violent thrusts, he came, in absolute silence, except for his breath hitching. He pulled back from the kiss soon after, lips parted, hand still closed around their combined cocks, with their shirts and trousers splattered with cum.

Jean looked up, trying to catch his breath and self-conscious about that. Flushed, hot, sweaty. The post-orgasm high racing through his blood like cocaine or speed or something else that threw everything into sharp contrast. "And this ..." he murmured. "Is how I kiss." Hand reaching out to Hooch's face, thumb brushing the lips apart as he closed in, the kiss comparatively soft and gentle, tender; his eyes closed to concentrate better, not ignore the man, because after this mad race, shit, he could easily kiss him like this, just for the buzz he'd given him. Opening up his lips, he licked Hooch's lips, all playful, no urgency, just tenderness, caring, playfulness, but still fully committed. More artful, too. Hooch had great lips.

"Damn ..." Hooch murmured, and then nothing, too occupied with allowing his body to relax into the come-down, hand slackening, covering their spent cocks, no longer holding, no more pressure. His passiveness came to the surface now, letting go and giving in, he was breathing into the kiss, with a shudder and small sound.

"What about the bed," Jean murmured. "Or are you in a rush to leave?"

Hooch's eyes opened fully, giving Jean one long and searching look. "Got until dinner."

“Plenty of time.” Jean pushed him backwards, then pulled his shirt free, shedding clothes and taking the undershirt off to wipe himself down. He was naked, no point in keeping any clothes on. He showed off his body, semi-smiling at Hooch, who was clearly appreciative. Jean had a good body, no doubt, and after Matt, he was the youngest man.

It took Hooch only a moment before he decided to do the same, got out of his soiled clothes and stood naked, allowing himself to be inspected. Unlike Dan, his scars were not spectacular, one surgical, could have been for a civilian reason, and an odd, but faded, senseless pattern of dots. What was striking, though, was the sheer deadliness of the body. Still honed to perfection, and without the extremely ripped appearance of Matt’s ridiculously low body fat, Hooch was sharp angled and his muscles spoke of the stamina of a killer, rather than simple strength. He clearly was still in the business, even though he wasn’t out in the field anymore.

Jean studied, but he’d always been more tactile than visual, closing the distance again for another deep, gentle kiss, manoeuvring them both onto the bed, where he rolled on top to kiss and lick down the throat, to the chest. Stroking and caressing, relishing in all the skin he had underneath him and against his skin. The heat, the power, the strength. “Caught me by surprise again,” he murmured between kisses. “Didn’t think you’d go that ... far... doesn’t matter,” murmuring nonsense like that, lazily, off-handed, no deep pondering.

Hooch didn’t move much, less than active and more than passive. Receiving, by no means as tactile as Jean, and yet he left no doubt that the touches were welcome. He lifted a hand eventually, resting on Jean’s shoulder to keep him at a distance to look at him. “There is no fucking way we’ll fool them.”

“Alcohol could help.” Jean rolled down and regarded Hooch from the side.

“Yeah, but I’ll never kiss like you. No chance. Am not touchy-feely.” Hooch flashed a sharp grin.

“Damned shame, that kiss wasn’t bad at all.” Jean rolled onto his back and stretched out, arms above his head, making himself as long as possible. Thinking about something – that passion, and something he did rarely, but with a lot of relish. “You said you like women, too? What do you think ...” He reached into the nightstand and pulled out his copy of the setcard that Solange had given him. “Have a look.”

Hooch lazily reached over and studied the pictures for a while. Nothing in his face gave away what he might think. “Your wife.”

“Yeah. Solange.” Jean found that mask face unnerving – something always remained out of reach with this guy. On the other hand, he thought, that wasn’t too different from Thierry. A core that nothing touched. “She’s coming for the wedding. We plan to stay for a week or two, depending on whether she has a shooting or not. These things get cancelled a lot at the last minute.”

Hooch turned his head, still lying on his back, photos in his hand. “She’s beautiful. Haven’t had sex with a woman for over ten years.”

“Not something you ever unlearn,” Jean teased.

“Yeah, but why do you want me to have sex with her?”

“Because I get to watch my collared slave take it from another man.” Jean gave him a sharp grin. “And you’re her type. It would be part of a scene. She’d love it.”

That finally did get a reaction. Hooch sat up. “Collared slave. Scene.” He raised both brows. “Don’t think I’m the right one for that.”

“Funny. You’re the guy who has sex with Vadim. I’d have tagged you as somebody who doesn’t shy away from a little fun and games.” Jean remained on his back, comfortable, tiredness lingering at the edge, a short snooze was always a possibility after sex, but he wouldn’t mind a second round with this guy.

“I don’t play games.” Sitting on his hip, Hooch twisted to look at Jean before putting the setcard down. “In my ‘scene’ I ...” just a second’s hesitation, before Hooch gave Jean more than he could ever be paid back in trust. “I’d wear the collar.”

Jean’s eyes lit up – possibilities here, too. *He plays with Vadim until he’s half dead.* Dan had said something like that. Different from Frederic, who was vanilla, but male, heartfelt, who was in love with him and adored him, but who thought blindfolds were kinky. “I can do that,” he murmured. “I could order you to fuck her, or tie you up.” The thought was arousing, his body certainly agreed and he turned onto his side, then sat up.

A miniature shake of Hooch’s head was his first, unchecked reaction. “No can do.” He looked at his hand for a moment, then back at Jean. Dark eyes intense for a moment. “Not with a woman.”

“And if we keep it vanilla?” Jean nodded towards the photos. “Interested?”

“Vanilla for whom? Me? All?”

“You. We could still have her collared.”

“Yeah,” the intensity in Hooch’s eyes waned and softened. “You can direct me. I do that. Orders, no.” Another small quirk of his lips, “but I got to get Matt’s okay first. Woman? He’ll be shocked.”

Jean laughed. “So a guy like me’s alright and a woman needs to be talked about? You’re a weird guy, but sure. It’s just an offer.” And damn, he’d spend the next night imagining that – even right now, it was a *good* thought to have.

“Yeah. I love that guy. Don’t want to piss him off. That so weird?”

“No. I don’t do other women that are not whores, guess we’re not that different, only I’m not telling her.” Jean took the setcard and placed it back in the drawer, then studied the other’s body. “I’m not as good as Dan, but fancy a blowjob?”

“You sure I’ll get it up again?” Hooch grinned. “You could always help it along by tying me up.”

“That an offer?” Jean pushed Hooch back with a hand against his chest, wasn’t sure the kissing would be welcome now, so he pushed the legs apart and got between them, placed bites along the stomach, a sixpack that moved with Hooch’s breaths. Living, tanned flesh, male, powerful, some black hair, except for his shaved balls, which again emphasized that this body was male. Vadim always appeared too chiselled in all that hairless beauty, the effect of the marble

statue was likely on purpose. Hooch was a man of flesh and blood. Reserved, but willing enough when it came to straightforward sex. Less tenderness than with Frederic, who was a cuddler and touching him meant a lot more.

Hooch's voice had turned a notch huskier. "You dare take it up?"

Jean grinned. "Yeah. I'd offer you wrestling for it, but winning is not what you want." Spoken against Hooch's skin, then emphasized with a sharp bite. "Is it?"

Hooch let out a dry huff of laughter. "You got it." He lifted his arms in front of him, crossed his wrists and raised his brows with a challenging smirk.

Jean got off the bed and grabbed cuffs he'd kept in his suitcase. He was long past caring what security people at airports thought of him and his sex life, if he'd ever cared. They were nice, smooth metal cuffs, rounded to not cause damage to the skin, but not padded. Clicking them around those strong wrists turned him on more – the challenge, too.

A challenge that was turned up a few degrees with Hooch's growing, impetuous grin. "And now?" Rattling the cuffs for effect, before raising his arms over his head. He stretched out, until every muscle, sinew and line in his body stood out, pronounced, before slowly, provocatively, letting one knee fall open, bent.

Jean thought that that was a good look on any human being, male or female. "Make sure you won't get in the way..." he murmured, stretching out on top of Hooch. Jean brushed Hooch's face with his stomach as he stretched to tie the cuffs to the bed frame.

"Any more toys in that suitcase of yours? Or don't they come in man-size?"

Jean grinned, amused that Hooch was fooled by the obvious, the outside. "Plenty more." He checked the knot at the frame, moved so his cock brushed Hooch's face, who moved his head to follow and lick, which made Jean harder. Very different game now; no way he could be as nasty as Vadim, but Hooch clearly wanted more than vanilla. How far could he go? Especially with a guy who needed the extreme from somebody like Vadim. He stood up, found the nipple clamps, and put them on Hooch, carefully positioning the little teeth, readjusting them on the nipple, which was painful.

Almost no reaction, just an increased concentration in Hooch's face, as if the pain made him focus. He made no sound, cocked his brows, but a new timbre in his voice gave him away. "Not bad for a start."

Jean grinned at him. "I'll fuck you," he murmured against Hooch's chest, glanced up, a mischievous, dark glance, then his teeth pulled on the left nipple clamp, twisting and turning. His weight on his left arm, the right hand went down to Hooch's cock, his balls, squeezing them in his hand, rolling and twisting with the motion from his teeth. Getting reactions out of the man turned into a bit of an ambition for him, but Hooch wasn't cooperative.

Hooch's body reacted, and his breath quickened with every bite and each jolt of discomfort. His reactions were involuntarily, but what he could control he did, except for the cock that hardened, the breath that had its own mind, and

his voice, which betrayed the rest of his body. “What if I don’t let you fuck me?”

“I’d do my best to convince you.” Jean turned to the other nipple, licking the clamp, brushing it, the playful motions rather different at Hooch’s end, tip of his tongue toying with the metal while he was on top, his cock brushing Hooch’s stomach and hip. “I might fuck you the way you like it best ... hard and fast, or slow ... I can give you pain there, too. You want it to hurt, right? I can fuck you that it hurts. I can make it burn for you.”

“Yeah.” Hooch’s voice was forced now. “Make it hurt. As much as you can.” He was fully hard, moving into the painful bites and touches, instead of away.

Jean felt his guts tighten at that voice. *Make it hurt*. He wasn’t Vadim, shit, hurting people was natural for Vadim, while he was always playful about it, but the bottom called the shots, and Hooch was the type to call a bluff when he saw it. “Turn,” Jean murmured, voice coarse, as he moved away enough for Hooch to roll over onto his stomach, which he did, with surprising compliance. Added bonus would be friction of the mattress against the nipple clamps when he’d fuck him.

Hooch opened his legs straight away, no preliminaries with that man. He raised his arse as much as he could with those legs wide open. Jean pushed a pillow under Hooch’s hips, improving the angle by a few crucial degrees. The back, the V-shape of excellent lats, landscape of muscle. Jean was short of breath – different now that the eye contact was broken, Hooch could have been another man, any man. That made it easier in a way. He spit in his hand. He’d promised pain. He rubbed the saliva over Hooch’s opening; he’d need more, but he forced two fingers in, causing Hooch’s body first to tense, then push back against and into the fingers, while Jean allowed more spit to run between them, opening the muscle a little bit. Extra-strong condom from the nightstand, he tore it open between teeth and free hand, then rolled it down. More spit, while Hooch relaxed for a moment, before his body tensed once more, as if he deliberately made it more difficult for himself. Bracing and at the same time contracting his muscles, making the onslaught truly hard.

Jean groaned, shifted weight, got on top, knew he’d need his weight in addition to his strength to really fuck this guy. Pulling the cheeks apart, smooth, slick muscle, breaching him was one part violence for every part lust. The tightness almost hurt him, it took a lot of concentration to not slip and hurt himself, but he used his fingers to force, to find the angle and a way in, and finally he got a reaction. A sound, suppressed, clearly involuntary. A sound between a groan, whimper, cry, everything and anything; a sound that spoke of pain and lust and the ultimate satisfaction of giving into the need, no matter how dark it was.

Hooch’s fingers curled around the rope that tied the handcuffs to the bed post, and pushed back, trying to force more of that cock and the pain into his body. Breath coming ragged and noisy now, he didn’t have that under control, didn’t want to, even. Jean gave him what he so clearly wanted, pushed in,

deeper, the spit just barely enough to allow this to happen, groaning in turn. Force. Male bodies were capable of so much force, withstanding it, containing it, unleashing that strength and focus – against each other. Jean was covered in sweat when he was finally inside, breathing hard, and soaking up the other’s sweat, the sounds, the breaths, that need. He pulled back, began to thrust, hard, slow thrusts, the tightness too much to simply speed up – he’d last longer like this, too.

The sounds that Hooch were making became more urgent, and yet they remained suppressed, as if he fought against them, but they forced their way out nevertheless. Moving against and into each thrust, while deliberately rubbing his chest and the nipple clamps over the bedding, he was as much demanding as he was taking, even though he did not speak a word, did not ask, nor beg, and certainly not demand – not in words. And Jean sped up with those thrusts, inflicting pain on top of that pleasure, following his instincts, then came, surprisingly hard and sudden, biting into muscles and burrowed deep inside, panting against the sweaty skin.

Hooch kept moving into the final, erratic thrusts, towards the bites, then slowed more and more, until he suddenly lay still, completely unmoving, legs wide, arms stretched, whole body tense and still. His breathing remained wild and ragged, noisy against the rumpled bed sheets. Jean remained there for a few seconds, too dazed to move, then finally pulled back, holding the condom as he pulled out to not spill anything, and got rid of it, then lay down on the mattress, right next to Hooch, who still didn’t move. Didn’t say anything either, but the tension in his body, the way his breath had not calmed, it was obvious he was waiting or expecting. Something, something he did not ask for.

Jean’s hand roamed across the back, to the arse, stroking, kneading. “Turn around,” he murmured and when Hooch did, Jean moved to take the cock between his lips. The taste of precum, he’d promised a blowjob, and the cock seemed filled to bursting with blood. He licked the hot tip, searing hot, left it, blew cold air on it, then licked across it.

Hooch shuddered, a sharp intake of breath, before he murmured, hoarse “hurt me.”

Jean reached up, saw how sore the nipples looked, and twisted them with the clamps, while he took the cock between his lips, sucking in time with the movements of his hand.

That was it, enough after a short moment to make Hooch arch up, tense so hard, every muscle stood out as if sculpted from solid bronze, and the sound he made when he came was full of need, before he managed to swallow it, because it gave more away of his self, than anything he’d done or said or would allow Jean to see. He fell back onto the bed, breathing hard, eyes half closed, still never fully.

Jean forced himself to swallow the moment he came, mouth suddenly filled with the stuff. He didn’t particularly like that, but he did, sucking the cock for several long moments after Hooch had come. Frederic didn’t like that, he didn’t like to be touched just after climax, too sensitive, but Hooch clearly relished it.



Every guy was different. Jean let go of the cock and crawled forward on the bed, lay there, near Hooch, just brushing the body, hardly a touch.

Hooch was silent for a long time, breathing into the come-down, until he finally shifted slightly and turned his head. His facial expression was back to exactly what it had always been: the somewhat ironic half grin and the mocking cocked brow. "Not bad all the way through to the end, either." His voice was still husky.

Jean thought he liked him better when he was needy. "That will hurt more," he murmured and reached for the first clamp, opening up and taking it off, and it did cause Hooch to take in a hissing breath. Then the other one, which caused the same reaction, before he reached up to untie Hooch's wrists. "You okay now?"

"Yeah, I'm good." Hooch rubbed his wrists, which were red circled by the steel. "How long before dinner?"

Jean checked the watch on his wrist. "Two hours. Enough for a snooze and a shower."

"Give it one, I need to get back." Hooch stretched slowly, then got up to sit. Nothing in his movements showed that he might be sore, which he had to be.

Jean just watched, lazy and sated, on the verge of drifting off to sleep. "Your shower, if you want it," he murmured, pulling the pillow closer and resting on top of the tousled covers, allowing the sweat to cool, breathing deeply, and then his eyes closed and he drifted off to sleep, discounting all danger that might come from Hooch, trusting him implicitly.

Hooch watched him a moment, then got up and into the bathroom. When he returned, freshly showered, Jean was asleep. He lay down beside the man. He could do with a quick kip himself.

When he woke again, more than an hour had passed, and Jean had turned in his sleep. He had turned away, his back touching, Jean's face pressed into the pillow, arms crossed in front of him.

Hooch touched Jean's shoulder once, then got off the bed to dress and leave the room quietly.

\* \* \*

When he got to his own room, he could hear water running in the bathroom, and soon Matt stepped out.

"Where have you been?" Matt grinned while drying his face, freshly shaved, standing in just his briefs in the doorway. "Had hoped for a quickie after the gym."

Hooch didn't say anything, just walked closer, until he stood close enough that he could lean against the doorframe, almost touching Matt. So close, that Matt couldn't miss the scent of Jean's shower gel that clung to Hooch's body.

"You fucked." Matt stated promptly. Throwing the towel over the edge of the bathtub, before crossing his arms in front of his chest.

Hooch nodded and quirked a brow and one corner of his lips. When he reached for the buttons of his shirt he could feel Matt's gaze on the bruises around his wrists.

"Vadim?"

"No." Hooch unbuttoned the shirt and opened it, revealing the sore and swollen nipples.

"No?"

"Jean."

Unspoken between them after all those years, that if Matt was going to have to force each bit of information out of Hooch, there'd be shit, and Hooch liked being in shit just that little bit too much.

"Jean?" Matt repeated with disbelief, then pulled himself up to his full height and breadth, which was impressive. "You're a slut, Hooch."

The surprise was evident in Hooch's face. This was a new angle to Matt's tack, and he might have been amused, but he liked that new side in his long-term partner more, than it amused him. "Am I?"

"Yeah, you are. I bet you're fucking sore now, right?"

Hooch nodded, shrugged, and slipped the shirt off his shoulders and onto the ground. Hands on the buttons of his black jeans.

"Good, because I'm going to screw you now, Hooch, and I don't give a shit that we'll be late, and I give even less of a fuck that you'll hurt like a bleeding motherfucker, and I sure as hell am not going to try and make you come again, because I'm just going to fuck you as hard as I can and get off. That's what you want, isn't it? You want to be torn apart and you want to be made to scream, but I won't let you."

Hooch stared at Matt with open surprise. Damn, that man was getting better with age. When he'd snapped up the baby Jarhead, he'd been one lucky bastard.

He said nothing else, just opened his trousers, toed off his shoes and socks, and stepped out of the jeans. He still said nothing when he went across the room and towards the elegant dresser, to bend over it. Silent, still, as he lowered his chest, spread his legs wide and reached behind to spread his buttocks apart, like the slut he'd been accused of to be, opening wide and presenting his sore arse. And fuck, was that a damn good feeling.

Hooch didn't make a sound when Matt forced the briefs he'd been wearing between his teeth and pushed them into his mouth, and when Hooch finally screamed into the gag, at the entirely reckless onslaught of brutal, unbridled strength, when Matt fucked him, just as he'd promised, the hand over his mouth helped to muffle the sounds further.

It blew Hooch's mind, if not his already too sated body, and the pain was exquisite, as was the knowledge that this, bareback and trusting, was his lover, who was giving him all the pain he could have wanted. He really was a goddamned lucky motherfucker.

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During dinner, Jean was silent, almost sluggish, but that hardly registered as they sat together around the table. Matt, Hooch, who sat stiffly throughout, the Baroness and Dan and Vadim. The conversation flowed much easier than Vadim had expected. The Baroness had it down to an art form to talk to such different people. Much later, after courses and courses of food, Vadim and Dan moved into the suite proper – both impressed with the splendour and elegance there, and that night, Vadim couldn't help the thought that it was just one night now, and the one after that they'd be married – or at least a legal couple.

Something he mentioned to Dan, who for once didn't quip nor laugh, and just smiled at Vadim and held him tighter. Perhaps awed by the extravagance of the their lodgings, or maybe just, for once, quietened by the magnitude of what they were going to do and what that actually meant for their lives. Even though their lives themselves wouldn't change, it meant that despite their past, they were two men who had gained everything anyone could wish for: love, trust, friends, family, children even, financial comfort and good health – bones and joints didn't count, Dan always said.

\* \* \*

The next day guests began to arrive – guys from the Spa and relatively recent additions to their circle of friends. Dr Williams arrived by train, and with Waverley station being literally next door to the Balmoral hotel, he was warmly welcomed by his old friend the Baroness, and of course by Vadim, and even by Dan. Dr William joined them for a late breakfast, and then, one by one, more people arrived. The American guys Dan had rescued, who came with their partners and wives, and who were all much impressed with the city and what they'd seen so far, and keen to explore with one of the double-decker sightseeing buses. Seeing Chris again, the injured crew member, was a moment for Dan that was more emotional than he'd have ever thought, when the lad – no lad anymore – pulled him into a bear hug.

Markus and Dima arrived around lunchtime. They were still very much in love and made a handsome, comfortable couple, joking with Dan and Vadim for a while, before they hooked up with Hooch and Matt. The latter enthusiastically welcomed them, glad to meet the man who had got some information to him during Hooch's captivity. When the Glaswegian couple arrived, still together after all these years, they ended up in the company of an Austrian, a Russian, two Americans, while fitting in without the slightest hitch.

Almost at the same time, the whole family Krasnorada arrived. It was Kisa who hollered Dan's name through the hallowed halls of the posh hotel, not giving a damn for appropriate behaviour, as she threw herself into a hug, almost toppling Dan over, who managed to keep hold of his cane in the last moment. He was laughing, then admiring the kid who was still classified a kid because of her age, but she was a tall, dark haired, deadly good looking youngster, for all he knew. Katya clearly called the shots, though, keeping Anoushka in line, who had arrived with a heavily pregnant woman – her girlfriend, Nikolai said, by way of

explanation. That woman was Polish, a pale beauty who seemed more silent and composed than Anoushka, or Anya, as she was referred to nowadays. Anya had become a respected surgeon, and, she said wryly, with that undercurrent of steel that was so typical of the Krasnoradas, she was about to become a 'dad'. Vadim spotted the hidden edge in that, something like an accusation, but he congratulated her and sincerely hoped she'd do a better job than he had.

Dan, too, congratulated both of them, and held Anya's hand for a moment too long, while intently studying the face, remembering the teenager he had once met. He got a hug from Nikolai, and Kisa hardly left him time and space to talk to anyone else, until Dan's side of the family arrived. All of them still lived in Scotland, except for the youngest nephew, who had settled for now in London to make a career in – most uncharacteristically for all of the McFadyens – fine arts. Duncan and Mhairi, nephews, wives, girlfriends, babies. Both grooms' families – with Kisa being the combining factor, were soon settled around several large tables, pushed together in the Brasserie.

In the afternoon, Beauvais arrived, wearing the uniform of a French army officer. He'd brought a younger man with him, who might or might not be his lover, but was certainly a soldier himself, dressed in the tenue de sortie of a legionnaire. George arrived, gorgeous and red-haired, as bland as he was English, and then Vadim spied a blond man he faintly remembered, but wasn't sure whether that guy was his or Dan's acquaintance. He touched Dan with an elbow. "Any idea who he is?"

"No, best we find out, aye?"

They walked up to the man, who smiled at them, somewhat bewildered by the setting.

"Vadim Krasnorada?" the man asked, in English. "I'm Manke."

Vadim smiled, touched to meet the man again, and he stepped up and offered a hand. "I'm glad you came. After all those years."

"Not too long, you've become a bit of a local legend ... the homeless Russian who forgot who he was."

"I remember now. Manke, this is Dan, my partner."

"Manke?" Dan's face lit up and he quickly shuffled the cane into his left hand, holding his right out. "So glad to meet you at last. You are definitely a private legend as well, because without you, I don't think Vadim would have found out of the darkness."

Manke glanced quickly at Vadim, then at Dan. "It's weird, all those years, every now and then I wondered what had happened to you. But there you are, healthy and about to get married." Manke smiled brightly, clearly and strangely happy for them both.

"It was a bumpy road." Dan nodded.

"It wasn't easy to get him to talk," Manke said to Dan. "It was my luck he had been famous, otherwise I'd never have worked out who he was."

"There you hear it," Dan laughed, giving Vadim a nudge, "you were famous. By the way, did you come on your own?"

"Yes. I ... years later I married, but my wife died five years ago."

“I am sorry.” Dan smiled warmly, he didn’t know the man, but without him things would be very different. “I hope you will enjoy the party.”

Which answered a question, Vadim thought, remembering that strange attraction for the cop, back then. An attraction buried so deep that he was hardly aware of it. “Come on in,” Vadim offered. “Meet the rest.”

Manke had moved through into the Brasserie, and was welcomed into the ever growing group inside, when a man walked up the steps. Shaved hair grey and distinguished, body ostensibly fit and wiry, and wearing stylish glasses. “Maurice.” Dan pointed out, grinning. He hadn’t seen the man for years, and the French surgeon was everything Dan remembered him to be: still a knockout, still fit. It all depended on if he had calmed down his habits a bit. Dan turned his head to murmur to Vadim, before Maurice spotted them, “I have plans for him ...”

“Plans? Tell me it has nothing to do with stag nights or honey moons...”

“We’re too old for that shit.” Dan laughed, “but did you see George arrive with anyone? Huh?”

“George? You planning to bore that French doctor to tears, are you? Apart from that, French and English ... that’s not supposed to work.”

“You wait and see. George is pretty and sophisticated and Maurice must have fucked more men and women in his life, than we have soldiers in the Army. You never know, he might be ready for retirement.” He flashed his teeth in a sharp grin, then turned his attention to Maurice, who had spotted them.

“A hundred quid it’s not working out,” Vadim murmured, then followed to greet Maurice as well, before finding Dima to alert him to Maurice’s presence.

There was much greeting, laughing, shaking hands and patting shoulders, and both Dan and Vadim made sure that Maurice was welcomed in by the crowd, that had taken George and Manke under their wings.

While Vadim was occupied for a moment, Dan spotted Beauvais fairly alone in a corner, looking as stiff and officious and as goddamned attractive in his uniform, as ever. Age, like for so many of those men around them, had been good to him, but then all of them were working with the years, not against them, keeping as physically fit as possible.

Dan decided to exchange a few words before Jean returned, who’d left for a short while to pick up his wife from the airport. “Good to see you.” Dan smiled as an offering.

Beauvais gave him a nod and something that might become a smile if he relaxed more. “And you. You are making it real. Marriage.” He stepped a bit closer.

“Aye.” Dan kept his vice quiet for privacy. “Who would have thought, aye? Looks like we’re respectable now, guess we’re simply too old to be disgraceful.” He smiled, then glanced around, but he couldn’t spot the young man that Beauvais had come with. “You? Are you faring well? I saw you didn’t come on your own.”

“Yes. It’s illegal and dangerous.” Beauvais gave the smallest shrug. “He’s part of my staff. It’s a secret, we don’t usually appear together in public, but we are en route to a NATO manoeuvre, so there is an excuse.”

“For how long have you been together?”

“Getting to our second year.”

“That is good to hear, I am glad.” Dan nodded. “Hooch is here as well, Vadim’s best man. He’ll be attending the ceremony in uniform. He is here with his partner. I trust all our guests, even if you should ever slip in public, but somehow I don’t think you will.”

Beauvais shook his head. “I can’t and I won’t. We can’t make it official, not like you.” His brow was dark, maybe with control, discipline. “Times don’t change that much in the Legion. He’s a legionnaire, I’d be dishonourably discharged, and he ... no.”

“Of course not, as far as I know that would be the end of both your careers. But perhaps, one day. How much longer before your retirement?” Dan saw the young legionnaire come towards them in the corner of his eyes.

“Not just yet.” Beauvais didn’t seem willing to discuss that – as if denying age stopped making it happen. The young man came to a halt in what seemed respectful distance, just as stiff as Beauvais, impeccably dressed in his uniform, and he looked as if he was about to salute his superior.

Beauvais looked at him, then at Dan. “St John, that is Dan McFadyen, Dan, this is Martin St John, one quarter American, one quarter French, half-Vietnamese, which makes him appreciate cars, good food and a good ambush.”

“And good men.” Dan murmured very, very quietly, for no one else to hear other than them. He smiled and nodded to the young man, who couldn’t be any older than perhaps twenty-four or twenty-five. A good looking man, no doubt, but not conventionally attractive. He held out his hand. “I am glad you could make it, and I hope you will enjoy your stay. We have American serving military here, one of them, a Delta officer, is Vadim’s best man, and we have a lot of special forces. I think you might find the company easy to be with. They are good guys.”

St John took the hand and shook it. “Thank you,” he said curtly. “It is an honour to be here.” The way he said it sounded as if he meant it. “All this is certainly an inspiration.”

Dan tilted his head and scrutinised the young man for a moment. The ‘inspiration’ was quite ambiguous, and he liked that. He could also see how the lad had as much of a rod up his arse as Beauvais had. “Well, who knows.” Just as ambiguous, before he stepped to the side. “Would you like to have a word with Hooch and Matt? They are in the Balmoral bar.”

St John exchanged glances with Beauvais, who nodded. Subtle, fast, just flickers of movement, a well-honed team, communication between them was easy and natural. “I will find them.” St John moved towards the bar, to ask around who the men were he was supposed to have a chat with.

Beauvais’ glance followed him – and his glance did rest on the young man’s legs and arse, then returned to Dan. “Officer material.”

“Aye.” Dan gestured towards the door. “Care to join me while I continue with my vice? I need a fag.” He made his way outside, then leaned the cane against the massive doorframe, then himself. It was cold and quiet out there, out of the way of the tourists. “I am curious, where the hell did you find him? He seems quite remarkable.”

“He found me.” Beauvais watched him, a wry expression on his face. “It was a bar, I was looking for company, and was just getting to an interesting part with a local, when he spotted me. I recognized him, too.” Beauvais’ eyes showed an echo of the mortification he must have felt. “He vanished, I went to the darkroom. Somebody in there touched my head, then kissed me. That man had a shaved head as well. He ... fucked me, there, told me to meet him if I wanted, and I did, so we ...” Beauvais breathed, “got started. I was determined to end it after R&R, but St John had nothing of that.”

“He *is* a remarkable young man, in that case, but you know that, or you would have never accepted that offer, aye?” Dan lit his cigarette, inhaling the smoke with relish. It must have been a damn good first fuck, he thought, but for once he didn’t say it out loud. “You are taking great risks, both of you are. If you tell me now that he’s just a good source for sex, then I tell you that I don’t believe you.”

“It’s a compromise between what we are and what we feel.” Beauvais’ brow was dark, determined. “I don’t care about the risk for myself. I will not risk his career, nor would he risk mine. We’re bound by that.”

Dan nodded. “Love’s a funny thing, aye?” Leaving the remark at that, he exhaled thoughtfully. “You’ve been managing so far, and eventually, you’ll be in an easier situation. One way or the other. Look at us, twenty-five years, and the first fifteen were insanelly difficult. And now?” he gestured behind him, “need I say anything?”

“No.” Beauvais nodded. “There are always solutions. It would be more difficult doing this alone. I’m working to get him to realize his full potential. Actually ... care for a man. Different to how I used to do it. He will be a fine officer.”

“Good luck to you two.” Dan nodded, “I mean it.” Stubbing the cigarette out in the sand bin. “Really do.”

Beauvais gave the hint of a smile. “Thank you for making me aware of this,” he said, voice low, terribly controlled as he was. “Facing it turned out easier than expected.”

Dan smiled and reached for Beauvais. Only touching his shoulder. “I wish you and your partner as much love as I found.”

Beauvais nodded. “We’re not there yet, but it was a good start.” Not pulling away was, for Beauvais, as much of an affectionate gesture as he could allow himself in the uniform.

“He certainly is remarkable.” Dan let go of the shoulder, dark eyes warm. “While your age gap is quite remarkable, I somehow think there is far less of a gap between you than seems on the outside.”

There was a strange flash in Beauvais' eyes, showing that, yes, that thought had crossed his mind. "What are thirty years between friends," he said, voice taut. "When the time comes, I will let him go without losing my pride," he said, staring into the distance.

"You will never lose your pride, Beauvais. That is one thing I am sure of. You are what, around fifty? And he is what, mid twenties? That's just a silver anniversary between you, not thirty years." Dan made light of the fact, but he reached out once more, touching the uniformed arm for a brief moment.

Beauvais pressed his lips together, jaw muscles tensed under the meticulously clean-shaven skin. With a small, rapid movement of his head, he met Dan's gaze again.

"Just take what you can get." Dan said. "It will last as long as it does, and let's face it, love can tear down the most remarkable hurdles. Vadim and I are proof of that. You never know what happens." Not making promises, accepting the facts and the likely outcomes, but he did believe that there was never a certainty when love was involved.

"Yes, an inspirational example if there ever was one," Beauvais said. "You and Vadim. Matt and Hooch. Even those mixed civilian military couples, everybody finds their way to live. But legislation and tradition what they are, we have to exist in the spaces that others leave us. Servants of the civilian order, we don't have their rights or liberties. They expect us to lay down our lives and live like dogs, but we may not do things they do with impunity or they will destroy our careers and lives. It's still worth it. I'm more than what I do in bed," he said, the small speech brought forth like he was reporting to a commission, calm, every syllable carefully pronounced, the only emotion in the choice of words.

"I know." Dan nodded. Legislation, rules, and most of all what made a person. He'd learned it the hard way. "You are not what your needs are, they can even be suppressed, but at the same time, your sexuality is a defining part of you, of the man, not the soldier. It does seem to me that the man has found a way to exist within the confines of the soldier."

"I have merely let go of my anger and accepted my place." Beauvais' lips quirked with a hint of irony. "Time will tell whether I will be the last generation that has to play the game like that, or St John's generation, or the men coming after him. We merely have to be stronger than our peers. And at that, a real Legionnaire excels."

Dan nodded again, slowly this time. "Don't forget that when I joined up, and even when I left the SAS, it was still illegal to be homosexual in the British Forces. I would have been discharged without a second thought, no matter how good a soldier I was. And now? Not only has Britain become all inclusive, we can even marry now. Would you have believed that if anyone had told you, even less than ten years ago? I wouldn't. The legion might still be the most traditional military force of the whole lot, but as I said, you never know." He half-turned towards the doorway, picking up his cane. "You are strong, especially if you are given the opportunity to sometimes just be."



“We have our arrangements,” Beauvais said with the hint of a smile, then opened the door for Dan. The way his gaze swept the room when they returned was not mistrustful, merely to locate the other man and seek his gaze, and St John, who stood in a group with Hooch and Matt must have a seventh sense for Beauvais, because he nodded to the Americans and half-turned to look at his superior. Dan was certain he saw the ghost of a smile in the young man’s face, before Beauvais joined the group, standing near St John, but at a distance that was perfectly acceptable between soldiers. Nothing even hinted at their relationship.

Dan took a look around and spotted Vadim talking to his family, which made him smile even more. He then he joined the group of ex and current soldiers. Even Matt wasn’t touching Hooch, not in public, and Hooch, like Beauvais, stood close, closer perhaps than the other two, but there was nothing obvious. Certainly not in the eyes of the former crew of the American chopper and their families, who could return any time from their sightseeing.

Dan addressed the group. “Gentlemen, I thought I’d best mention to those who might not know yet, that free use of the hotel’s luxury Spa and the gym are included in the festivities. Matt, I guess you’ve used it?”

Matt laughed and nodded. “Yeah, it’s, like, as high class as the hotel. I was about to go for a couple hours before dinner, anyone care to join me? Was pretty much empty yesterday.”

“Sure.” Hooch shrugged, “could do with a workout.”

“I would be quite partial to some exercise myself.” St John’s well chosen words were a surprise to Dan. The young man didn’t sound like the usual crop of soldiers the legion conventionally recruited. St John half-turned to face Beauvais. “Sir?”

It was not asking to be allowed, but asking to join. Beauvais gave a curt nod. “I will see you there.” The ‘you’ ambiguous, meaning the group or the man.

Beauvais moved away to head to reception to get directions and then to his single room, where he changed not into private sports kit, but into the legion’s tenue de sport. White shorts, white vest with a broad yellow block stripe across the chest. Both skin-tight.

When he joined the gym, St John was already there and in the same outfit, listening to Dan who had just arrived and was asking him how he enjoyed the stay so far. The gym was otherwise deserted, despite the state of the arts kit and machinery. Dan wasn’t the one who turned first to welcome Beauvais with a glance, it was St John again, who seemed to sense his superior before he was visible.

Beauvais gave him a glance, then took a moment to make himself familiar with one of the treadmills, placed the towel across the screen – he knew exactly how fast he ran, he didn’t need a computer to tell him. Then he stepped to St John’s side.

It all too visible, how St John relaxed the moment Beauvais stepped to his side and they were alone with Dan. Dan, who grinned at them, thinking for all his control and all his masks, the legionnaire was still very young and when the

mask slipped, he became entirely transparent. "Quite fetching, those outfits." The joke seemed to relax the young man a little more, and Dan realized that he had to trust him, because the young man smiled, for the first time since he'd arrived. Beauvais had probably told St John about himself and Vadim. When Dan glanced at Beauvais, he knew what he saw in those almost black eyes. Hunger and something else. Bigger, deeper.

"I think so, too. On some." Beauvais commented.

It was clear who he meant, and only one. Dan noticed how the young man's hand twitched, as if he wanted to touch but couldn't or didn't dare to. Beauvais, in turn, relaxed more, rolling his neck and shoulders as if he were getting ready for exercise. "We are spending a lot of time improving our times on the triathlon," he said, off-handed. A good reason why they were spending time together, and a clear indication why Beauvais was as hard and fit as his age allowed. "St John could beat me, but he is too polite." He raised a hand and, once, touched the young man's shoulder, who smiled warmer, and who leaned a fraction into his superior's touch.

Dan craned his head towards the doorway for a moment, then cleared his throat. "You do realise that single rooms side by side were booked for you?"

"We will make good use of the facilities," Beauvais said.

That was when Dan saw St John, for one moment, relax completely, letting go of any and all guards. He touched the small of Beauvais's back, hand resting there, leaning down, to steal a kiss onto the side of his face, while smiling brightly, which entirely transformed the whole man. Beauvais didn't change as much, just smiled, which was shocking enough for him. But then there was a sound outside, and immediately, without hesitation, St John straightened back up, the mask slipped on, his dark eyes shielded, and he stood perfectly respectable and ramrod straight.

Dan recognised Matt's voice and smiled. "I shall leave you now, as much as I could do with some exercise, I have to take care of our guests. Especially my daughter." Turning towards the two Americans who stepped into the gym, he grinned at them, then back at the legionnaires, "it's only Matt and Hooch ..." Leaving the comment in the room, he re-gripped his cane and made his way out of the gym and back into the hotel.

Beauvais turned to face the Americans, shoulders squared, but not hostile. "Our American friends," he said in French, again with a double edge, hinting at deeper meanings, the days he'd spent understanding how he could be himself without destroying something that was also him. St John nodded, and the mask of his face relaxed a little, but only a fraction. Following Beauvais' lead to the letter.

"Good to see you again." Hooch started the conversation, a rare occurrence. "It's been a while." He stretched his hand out to Beauvais, while Matt smiled and nodded.

Beauvais took the hand, nodded to Hooch. "I heard your lives have changed quite a bit in the meantime, but seems you are faring well. You met St John." Indicating the younger man.

“Yes, on both accounts. Matt left the Marines and I’m commissioned now, have taken over a training wing in Fort Bragg after a ... mishap with enemy forces in some years ago.” Hooch gave the slightest indication of a wry smile. “We’re doing well, or rather, Matt is the one who is making all the money.”

Matt laughed. “The gym turned out to be a success.” Focusing on the young man, a mere ten years or so younger than himself. “Since we seem to be at the lucky end of the aging scale, up for a round through the machines against me?” Adding, “but leave out the treadmill, I’d lose against a legionnaire.”

“You?” Hooch commented, one brow raised.

“Yeah. Even I.” Matt grinned.

“I wouldn’t mind.” There was something immediately eager and competitive in St John, an edge that seemed razor sharp.

“Hoo-rah!” Matt slapped St John on the shoulder, all buddy-like, and St John hardly flinched. “Let’s get started with the weights, then.”

Beauvais watched the younger men get on the weights, shifting his stance to stand closer to Hooch. “You had the mind to be commissioned,” he said. “And to train young men.” Which was his way of saying ‘it suits you’ and ‘they couldn’t have found a better one’. “I managed to follow your advice, eventually. The hard way, but I learnt.”

Hooch stepped onto the treadmill beside Beauvais’. “Getting out of the operating theatre and taking over the training wing wasn’t merely a decision I made. I was more or less forced to do it. Physically, after a broken pelvis, and mentally. I had become too human after the ... mishap.” He began to walk on the treadmill, towel around his neck, checking the setting. He had to take his time to warm up, or his pelvis would give him grief.

Beauvais started the machine as well, going for a slow, but steep setting for the warm-up, merely accepting what Hooch had said. Taking it at face value, no pity, no questioning of a foregone conclusion. Hooch clearly not only appreciated it, but had anticipated the reaction, or he wouldn’t have admitted to the real reasons instead of the usual career-move smokescreen.

“St John is your lover?” Hooch asked, as straightforward as ever.

“He is.” Beauvais reduced the angle and sped up, now moving at an easy trot. “Part of my staff, we outed each other in a local bar. The haircut.” And the built, and the discipline. The place hadn’t been seedy enough to reduce men to just shapes.

Hooch remained in a fast walk with long strides, rolling his shoulders to ease his neck. “Local? That was courageous.” He added, with a quirk of his lips, “or presumptuous.”

“A bit of both. It was on R&R, but in the area. Best part about being the highest-ranking legionnaire in the region is that I had less to fear than he had.”

“Is that so? In our military the superior would get dragged in front of a tribunal, for misuse of their position.” Hooch let out a dry huff, lacking any humour. “If only they knew what position the superiors might want to get themselves into.”

Beauvais glanced at him, but was clearly amused. "That position can't be abused," he conceded, playing upon a private joke. "He had no business being there, either. I'd have pulled rank if he'd attempted anything. There are very interesting postings for legionnaires. Very interesting."

Hooch nodded, speeding up the treadmill, but when he started jogging he grimaced. He was still sore, worse than anticipated, and he turned the treadmill back down again. Muttering something under his breath, before he caught a glance from Matt in the mirror, who was spotting St John in a shoulder press. Hooch gave a rueful smile to Matt, then commented to Beauvais. "I was too reckless yesterday. No running for me."

Beauvais cleared his throat. "I'll join you in twenty minutes."

Hooch nodded again, not offering another comment, then hit the stop button and got off the treadmill, walking over to the free weights section instead. He settled in, working on shoulders, biceps, triceps and chest, while watching the two younger men piling on the weights, continuously fighting to outdo each other.

Beauvais brought the speed up, his strides lengthened, moving faster, then found his best speed, and went for it, breathing deeply and controlled. He began to sweat after a few minutes, focused on a point far beyond the walls of the hotel, somewhere only he could see, and a place where he was by himself, just he and his body, the systems that kept him going. The pounding of blood and pulse, the second rhythm of breath, the third rhythm of his feet on the treadmill. When the twenty minutes were up, he was pumped up and sweaty, veins visible at his temples and more so at his hands. He wiped his face with his towel and watched how St John stood over Matt's weights, ready to take the bar off him if Matt lost his strength midway through a chest press.

He didn't though, but he almost got to failure. When Matt got the barbell back into the rack, he demanded that St John should put on five kilos more. He was going to widen the margin, even if it killed him.

When he sat up, he was sweaty, every vein visible along the arms, wrists, hands, pulsing in his neck and into his chest. He took the shirt off, used it as a towel, wiping the sweat off his hands and neck. Deliberate or not, it did cause Hooch to glance across and admire that body. He always would and it always made Matt grin. Beauvais' eyes lingered, too, but then returned to St John, whose muscled form was beautifully outlined by the sports kit. Beauvais walked over to Hooch's position, then selected for himself a bar and weights, stretching the hips before he prepared for deadlifts.

"Wouldn't have thought you could ruin your running like that," he said, after the thought had settled in that Hooch might have taken on too much. Ten years ago, Hooch hadn't seemed like a man who would.

Hooch wiped his hands on his shorts, taking his eyes off Matt, who was sitting back in position concentrating before another rep. Hooch glanced across at Beauvais, taking his time to assess and decide, finally conceding. He'd given an opening earlier, if the man was willing to take him up on it now, he wasn't

going to rescind the offer. "I've ruined a lot more at times, than a quick run. Just not with Matt."

"Out of recklessness or ignoring things?"

"Neither. Out of need."

Beauvais found the tableau of the two men riveting, the hiss-groan of Matt lifting the weights, and St John, steady and strong, ready to help and take the weight instead. Very distracting. "You have also given a lot of help."

"I could have given more, had I allowed you to see deeper." Hooch's gaze was drawn to the way Matt's arms started to tremble, the sounds he made as he tried the last rep, the determined struggle, and the inevitable failure. The barbell was safely caught and put back into its rack by St John. "He sounds very much like he does when he comes." Hooch commented quietly.

Beauvais shuddered. An off-handed comment from Hooch could affect him deeper than far more explicit material. "I was struggling too much, and I wasn't done," he said, quietly. "That was why I didn't stay closer in touch."

"Would you now?" Hooch let his gaze rest on Beauvais, intense and without escape. "You are always welcome. Your lover, too. Does he already have his passport back? No one would know you in America."

"He has it." Beauvais met the gaze. "And I would." America, a country that was so large that people simply got lost in there, lost from the world, from other humans, from the constraints of smaller places.

"It's a deal, then. I leave you our contact details. You're always welcome. If I'm on a training course, Matt will be there. Unless we're on holiday, there's a gym in Fort Bragg, with a large flat above, a comfortable guest room that is 'mine' but never used, and staff that has been proven trustworthy for years, and who are used to 'don't ask, don't tell, and we have seen nor heard nothing'."

Beauvais nodded, then continued with the lifts, working legs, arms, back with every motion, precise and focused like a machine. It helped not thinking about the other men, kept him firmly grounded in his own body.

Hooch returned his focus for a while to the weights, before he sat up, watched the two younger men still outworking, outdoing, and outlifting each other, until he caught Matt's eye again, who was spotting for St John, doing straight triceps pulls. Hooch offered a ghost of a smile that he knew only Matt could read, then glanced at Beauvais, then at St John, who was working too hard to notice. Hooch finally gave a minuscule shake of his head with another fleeting grin.

Matt seemed to understand, because he flashed a grin and nodded, then concentrated on the man beneath him. Hooch heard him say soon after, once St John's last rep ended in failure, "I think I'm done in. Shall we call it quits?"

St John turned his head to look at Beauvais, who placed the weights back on its stand and came over to offer a hand. St John didn't need it to get up from the bench, but he took it nevertheless. "We wouldn't want to be too late for dinner," Beauvais said.

"Wise decision." Hooch stood up from his bench and rolled his shoulders again. He stepped beside Matt and put his arm around the younger man's bare

shoulders. "There's only a couple of hours left. Taking a shower *does* take time ..." he deadpanned without a twitch of a muscle in his face, while Matt broke into a bright grin, wrapping his arm around Hooch's waist. Comfortable with each other.

"We'll see you later, buddies."

St John smiled once more and nodded, the young man hardly ever said a word, but when he turned, he allowed his hand to touch Beauvais, and with a fleeting but tender gesture, he placed it between the other's shoulder blades, until they reached the door. They went straight to Beauvais' hotel room. Beauvais was glad when the door was open, and then closed behind them. Decorum intact for another moment, before St John turned round and with one fluid motion, pulled the sports vest over his head and stepped closer, into Beauvais, pushing him against the door. He spoke in French, barely above a husky murmur. "Need you. Badly. So long." Stammered words, not even sentences.

Beauvais reached up. Touching the other man's face was like burning himself, too intense after all that denial. The same room was too close with him, every step further was torture. Grabbing St John by the neck, the kiss made him gasp, burned all oxygen immediately from his blood, that was the reason why he was suddenly panting. Shaved neck, whisper of short hair, the fresh sweat, all that need coupled with youth and strength. "Yes," Beauvais said, in French as well, breaking the kiss just for that long.

St John didn't say anything else, as if all the words had been spoken that could possibly be said. He pulled on Beauvais' vest instead, tearing it off. There was nothing controlled about his movements, only demand, when he stepped back, pulled Beauvais with him, pushed, nearly forced him onto the bed. Beauvais resisted only enough to feel the strength and the need, heating his own blood more, being wanted like this, and St John passionate. He'd be rough, he knew that, which was what had attracted him from the start; where other men probed, insecure, St John simply did. He got on the bed, still sweaty from his own workout, managed to kick the shoes off before St John joined him there, after he'd somehow managed to get off his own shoes, socks, even pulled down the shorts and off.

When St John straddled Beauvais's legs, he was naked, taking hold of the waistband of Beauvais' white shorts and pulled them down in one swoop with both hands. He followed through, took the socks off on the way, until Beauvais was naked. St John mumbled something in French as he came back up, letting his hands roam all over the sweaty body laid out below him. Need, unbridled need, nothing was tender in those touches, it was groping, taking, grabbing of muscles and sinews. Open admiration for a body that belonged to a man who could be his father, but that he wanted so much.

Under those touches, Beauvais grew fully hard, reached in turn for the other's body, vibrating with the strength from the workout, the smell heady, male, fresh.

"Lube?"

“Bathroom.” Beauvais hadn’t expected it like that, had just arrived and put the bag with everything into the bathroom.

St John nodded, was off the bed and in the bathroom, where an almighty clatter was followed by a heartfelt “merde” and another grunt. He reappeared a moment later, lube in his hand, and was back on the bed, not straddling this time, but roughly pushing Beauvais’ legs apart. Too needy for consideration, just the pure, visceral greed. Base instincts, pushing up Beauvais’ legs with one arm, and his hand, slick with cool lube, found the cleft, the ring of muscle, the resistance that he breached the next moment.

Beauvais kept his legs up as St John pushed the fingers in a few times, rough, using enough lube to slick him up good. He rolled over while St John lubed up his own cock, then pushed himself up on all fours, slightly grimacing, too aware of his own need, the fact he offered, very nearly demanded to be taken like that. Movements replaced all words, they knew each other well, never mind the age gap, or, worse, the gap in rank. All pretence went out the window when they were alone, during sex. They both preferred these roles, Beauvais taking it, St John giving. Beauvais lowered his head, saw St John shift behind him, saw his own, hard cock expectant, and felt, rather than saw, how St John positioned himself. In one formidable, brutal thrust, he breached and entered, nearly taking Beauvais’ balance with the onslaught, making him brace, bend deeper, shaking from the way the other man took him. Already. Perfect. So good he fought hard to not make a sound, because it would have been begging, and he couldn’t, simply couldn’t do that, not right now. Not yet.

St John groaned, his whole body trembling as he stilled, both hands on the narrow hips before him, two, three, panting breaths, before pulling out, almost completely. Knowing what Beauvais could take, as much as he needed, and the next thrust buried his cock deep into the offered body. Again, Beauvais hissed, teeth clenched, he opened his legs further, clenched his arse to feel as much as he could. The strength and resistance, the thrusts made his body tighten, arse, guts, throat, the next thrust stripped him off more control, and he groaned, pushing back, so desperate to get all that strength. “Yes. Please,” he said in French, the last word choked when he received yet another thrust. God, please yes.

“Oui.” St John answered. Only ever ‘yes’. No negations, never, and he gave Beauvais everything he wanted, everything they both needed. Fucking the man with all the strength and need of his twenty-five years, with months and weeks of denial, he was soon dripping sweat onto the bared back, with its muscles coiling beneath smooth skin. He had the stamina to wait for Beauvais, not touching the man’s cock, while groaning, cursing, growling under his breath. He knew Beauvais, had known the body long before he could have known it, had wanted it even longer. Knew the angle, the strength that was needed, the treatment and unbridled passion. Knew better than to reach for Beauvais’ cock.

Beauvais in turn fought that damned pride, every groan got him further to his own brand of denial, denying that he was an officer, and so much older, and that it was improper, that they were both at risk and breaking every rule that

was drilled into him. Denying he could lose this man, denying that he couldn't show what he felt for him ... he could lose himself like this, losing that control, this kind of sex finally set him free. The unbalance in their lives matched by the unbalance in bed – true natures, true selves, as equal as they could never be because of it. Beauvais lost more and more of himself, slipped towards burning, excruciating need.

“Come for me. Come. Come ....” St John stammered, French words, thick accent right now, “can't hold back ... can't ...” senseless, breathless, and even though nearly impossible, St John still sped up, still increased the strength and violence of his thrusts and still had yet more power to unleash as he completely let loose and fucked Beauvais with utter abandon.

The climax was just as violent – Beauvais had been close. This tipped him over the edge, tensed every muscle while the pressure mounted and suddenly exploded, and he had to clench his teeth or he would have screamed. Beauvais felt the pulsing, the twitching, and the impossible relief wash through and over him, going weak for those moments, barely able to withstand the fierceness, when St John could finally let go of his own control and crashed over the edge, coming inside of him. I need you, Beauvais thought when thoughts returned. I need you like that, need you more than anything.

St John stayed in the position for a long while, breathing, his hands roaming over Beauvais' sweaty back. Gently this time, fingers slightly trembling. With exhaustion perhaps, or with the fulfilment, and while his cock eventually softened, he was still caressing, still touching. As if taking now what he couldn't have taken earlier, and what he could never have outside the confines of the locked room.

He carefully withdrew eventually and leaned down to place a kiss between Beauvais' shoulder blades, then slowly kissing along the spine, until he reached the small of the back. He lingered there for a long moment, before he left and went into the bathroom to clean himself up, soon returning with a wet washcloth. Smiling at Beauvais as he got back onto the bed and handed the washcloth over without a word.

Beauvais cleaned himself lazily, then left the washcloth and kissed St John, the kiss tender and strong, more emotional now than he'd been before the sex. Defences down, purified of all that steel, relishing the weakness alongside the exhaustion. Speaking, however, was a different matter. Talking about deeds, actions, practices was one thing, emotions were quite another. Fuck me was easier than love me.

St John didn't speak either, not even outside of bed, unless he absolutely had to. Obeying an order, yes, Sir, came easy, but all other words were locked up inside of him. His emotions transmitted themselves through his touches, his smile. Open, warm, relaxed, and without the hint of a mask. Each kiss was tender, every touch said without words what he couldn't voice. Holding Beauvais close and being held. Now that the need was over, he finally could be once more what he was as well as being a legionnaire: a young man, in need of tenderness and reassurance.



Beauvais eventually rolled onto his back, and St John rested his head on his shoulder, one leg possessively thrown over Beauvais, while his arm rested across the chest, holding onto. He closed his eyes, drifting, being caressed and caressing. Beauvais' lips at his temple, and Beauvais relished the closeness and silence, and how they breathed together.

\* \* \*

Down in the gym, Matt grinned and settled down on the bench, straddling it. "Well?"

"Well, what?" Hooch sat down, but carefully and he sure as hell didn't straddle the barely padded bench.

"You look like a man who is on the one hand quite pleased with the world, like, and on the other has got something to say."

Hooch chuckled dryly. "You know me too well, kid."

"Kid?" Matt laughed out loud, then scooted closer to rest his chin on Hooch's shoulder. "Thanks for the compliment, but a kid I ain't no more."

"No, you ain't." Hooch smiled back, reaching to touch the handsome, smiling face. "You're everything but."

"Is that another of your weird love declarations?"

"Could well be."

"Yeah, could well be, but is it?"

"What do you think, Donahue?" Hooch smiled and Matt lifted his head.

"I think that you *do* love me."

"As I said, you know me too well." Hooch leaned closer and placed an infinitely tender kiss on Matt's lips, whose smile grew.

"But that was not what you wanted to tell me, right?"

"It was, partly." Hooch twisted on the bench until he sat face to face, "seems to me these days that it's something that bears repeating." He let his arm rest on Matt's shoulder, who turned his head enough to place a kiss on that arm.

"And the other part is?"

"The stag night. Jean and I, as best men, are going to come up with something hopefully memorable for the two grooms, but I didn't want to leave you out of it. Don't want to take you for granted." Hooch smiled, more at Matt's touched expression and the open emotions, than anything else. In many ways Matt was still and would always be 'the kid', no matter how much of a man he'd become.

"I know you don't."

"Good, don't ever forget that."

Matt shook his head, then rubbed it along Hooch's arm. "I'm sorted for tonight. Martin and Gordon are taking me out. We'll get the train to Glasgow. They want to show me the gay scene, they said it's pretty thriving in Glasgow."

Hooch grinned. "You'll be a busy man tonight."

Matt chuckled. "Don't think you won't be either."

“Well, that’s true.” Hooch’s grin morphed into a warm smile. “There’s something else, Jean offered me his wife, Solange. She’s his slave, and he wants a threesome. Haven’t had a woman for over ten years, but wouldn’t mind having a go in a setting like that. Are you okay with me having sex with a woman?”

Matt broke into a huge grin. “A woman? Holy fuck, girl cooties!” He didn’t mention the ‘slave’ thing, living with a man like Hooch had pretty much stopped him being surprised at anything. “No, I don’t mind, no more than I’d mind other men, and you know that I don’t mind them.” Adding suddenly, “usually.”

“Usually?” Hooch tilted his head, studying the face before him. Still no lines, no wrinkles, and so goddamned ‘pretty’, but if he told him that, Matt would verbally whop his arse again, and that would only make him laugh.

“Yeah, but I don’t want to talk to you about that right now. It’s nothing bad, like, just different.”

“Different? You speak in riddles, Matt.”

“I know.” Matt grinned, “makes a change, huh?”

Hooch laughed, and when he trailed off he leaned his head forward, resting his forehead against Matt’s. “You know what I want to do tomorrow night?”

“No?” Matt smiled, their faces so close, all each man could see was a blur.

“Just be with you. You and I, no one else, and then make love to you. You need a thoroughly good, slow and long fuck.”

Matt would have quipped another time, might have joked about the old man getting it up and still having stamina, but nothing of that sort right now. He just smiled and murmured, “yes, I still do.”

**January 2006, Edinburgh**

Dan had a good long chinwag with Kisa, which ended for the umpteenth time with him trying to talk her out of wanting to join the Hungarian Forces and her being adamant that she would join them. She was just as boneheaded as he'd always been, and he really shouldn't be surprised, especially not with that mother. When he got back into the main areas downstairs, he noticed Vadim with Dr Williams and the Baroness in a quiet corner in the Balmoral bar. He smiled and waved at them on his way past, then spotted Maurice and George in the Brasserie, talking at one of the small tables. He grinned to himself, wondering if the surgeon had calmed down these days, or if he was just trying to chat up the only seemingly single man – unless he might find a single woman. Time would tell. Dan was still miffed that he never got to shag Maurice, but he wasn't going to remedy that anymore.

Walking on, he got to another table in the bar, with Dima and Markus, and he steered towards them. "I haven't had time to properly talk to you two yet." He addressed them as he stopped at the table.

Dima stirred his tea, and nodded to him. "Come on, sit. Scones?"

"Aye, always." Dan handed the cane to Markus, who put it against the wall. Dan sat down. "How have you been faring since we last talked? You look like a picture perfect couple."

"We are." Dima grinned and pushed the dish with the scones towards Dan. "I was hoping Markus would catch the flowers, but then I thought, well, no flowers, probably?"

Markus laughed, "I keep telling him that *he* should catch them. Why me? He's better at sports anyway."

"What, are you planning to follow suit?" Dan grinned from ear to ear, putting jam on his scone. "And does that also mean you got a different passport now, Dima?"

"Ah, I pulled some favours and got some things adjusted." Dima winked. "You only have to know how to ride the beast that's bureaucracy, who to pay off and what kind of papers to get. Much easier than convincing anybody I should be their citizen. The places we go certainly work that way."

"Of course I had nothing at all to do with such shenanigans." Markus winked, pouring himself some more tea.

"Of course not ..." Dan took a bite off his scone.

"We never thanked you for introducing us." Markus smiled.

"Bollocks, I was simply into the matchmaking business, still am." Dan laughed, "and as long as you're happy ..."

They didn't need to tell him that they were happy, because it was so very obvious. Dan stayed for a while, chatting with those two close friends, until it was time for dinner.

The Baroness had arranged it so that several tables were reserved in the restaurant. For anyone who wished to explore Edinburgh and eat out, the hotel had put together an excellent guide on her behest. Most of them stayed, though, and the restaurant was filling up. Eventually Matt and Hooch came down for dinner, dressed rather elegantly for the occasion, and when Beauvais and St John turned up, only marginally late, they were for once in civilian clothing and blended in better than before. Maurice and George had opted for finding a place to eat away from the others, because George had claimed he knew the city quite well and was happy to play tourist guide for the French surgeon. The American ex-crew and their families chose to stay, together with the whole lot of Krasnoradas and the large group of McFadyens, with babies, toddlers and children.

A lot of the Spa mates stayed for dinner as well, before heading out to Rose street, to go on the piss. Some of Dan's old mates from the Gulf and the Balkans joined them in the meal, and they had convinced the two legionnaires to come with them to a pub crawl after dinner.

The multi-course meal was excellent and the company great fun. The Baroness smiled with joy and amusement at the level of noise that would otherwise have been unacceptable, and, sitting beside her old friend Charles, the doctor, they kept exchanging quiet words. They both retired to a whisky and a chat fairly soon after the dinner was over, when the whole large group began to scatter. Guests either went out, like Duncan and Gordon, the two Glaswegians, who took Matt down to the train station to head into Glasgow and to hit the scene, or those with children went to their rooms, while others stayed in the comfortable bar a while longer.

Eventually, only Dan and Vadim were left. Hooch walked over to Jean, leaned close and murmured something into his ear, which made Jean grin and stand up. They both walked over to where Dan and Vadim were standing at the bar, enjoying a drink, while Dan smoked a fag. One of the few places the hotel still allowed smoking.

"Hi guys," Jean said, grinning. "Ready for the stag night, or would you rather pass?"

Vadim glanced at him, then at Hooch, but Jean's face gave more away – with that smirk and a hint of excitement. Good kind of anticipation. Stag night. That seemed to mean a foursome. He looked at Dan.

"Do you honestly think that I would say no?" Dan smirked, "unless your plan is to make us wear glittery learner driver plates, pink fluffy bouncing headgear and angel wings, and take us to a pub crawl. In that case, you can fuck right off."

Jean laughed. "Damn, not a bad idea at all. No, I guess Hooch and I had a rather more intimate setting in mind. Upstairs?"

"Our suite? Sure, we've got enough space in there to host a whole Rugby team." Dan added while stubbing out his cigarette, "shit, isn't that a nice idea."

Hooch pointed to the lift. "Up, then."

“Never knew you’d be so bossy.” Dan grinned, then made his way to the lift, that took them to the suite that overlooked the castle and most of Edinburgh.

Hooch waited for Vadim to step through the door as the last one, then closed it behind him. “Did you actually bring any toys?”

“I did,” Jean said.

“Not necessary, Dan has his own stuff, and plenty of it,” Vadim murmured. Trust these guys to bring toys into the foursome. He didn’t get much time to ponder what this meant, though, because Hooch was suddenly close, suddenly demanding, pressing into him and kissing him.

Jean dimmed the light a bit, then stepped to Dan to kiss him, arms around him, one of those tender playful kisses. “I’d rather have you blindfolded,” he murmured, pulling a blindfold from his jeans pocket and offering it.

“Why?” Dan eyed it somewhat warily.

“To work with your imagination,” Jean murmured, between kisses, then pulled his shirt off and tossed it on a chair.

“But that means I don’t get to see this.” Dan pointed to Jean’s chest, but when Jean just smiled at him, he conceded. “Okay.” Lowering his head, “and what about Vadim?”

“Don’t worry about him.” Hooch’s voice, in between the kisses.

“No. No worries ... at all.” Jean slipped the blindfold over Dan’s face, then moved him towards the bed. There *was* plenty of space. He cast a glance towards Hooch and Vadim, who were kissing just like Hooch had kissed him, deep and passionate, full body contact, and Vadim really got into it, eyes closed, unreserved, showing a trust and desire that seemed almost not like him. That was what Vadim looked like when he actually opened up.

Dan sat down on the bed, dropping the cane onto the floor once he was seated. Hooch pulled out a blindfold. He was prepared, and between Jean’s suitcase and his own, they might not even have to improvise with the kit that Dan carried around. Hooch didn’t ask Vadim, wordlessly pulled back from the kiss, offered a grin, then slipped the blindfold on and reached to buckle it in the back of Vadim’s head. Black leather, and secure.

Vadim exhaled, but didn’t protest, instead went back into the kiss, even more interested, if that was possible, as if telling Hooch he trusted him. Hooch started to undress him, while never stopping the kisses. He finally had Vadim naked, while he was still dressed.

Jean got rid of his clothes now, undressing himself and Dan on the bed, who let it happen, even though he felt uncomfortable at first, but then got into it, with more of Jean’s kisses and touches. Jean rubbed his face against Dan’s cock, allowing him to feel the warmth of his breath there, then glanced at Hooch to check on the other guy.

Hooch steered Vadim towards the bed and got him to sit down on the other side of Jean and Dan. The bed was massive, four poster, with bed hangings and a brocade ceiling. “Will be right back.” He murmured, then quickly undressed himself, getting in record time out of elegant shirt, tie, suit and shoes. He gave a silent thumbs-up to Jean, who grinned, got up, and took the bottle of whisky

that sat on a table nearby. Just to blur the taste, and maybe blur perception. He took a mouthful himself, then offered the bottle to Hooch, indicating the swap with a creative use of military hand signals, which almost made Hooch huff a laugh, but he got himself under control by taking a very large mouthful of whisky.

Hooch indicated he'd understood, reached for a tumbler on the night stand, and filled it with whisky, then handed the bottle over and gestured that he'd deal with Dan now. He silently made his way across, placed the tumbler onto the other bedside table and swapped with Jean.

"What the hell are you doing?" Dan complained, patted around on the bed, trying to find someone, but before his hand could reach Vadim it was snatched away and placed back onto his chest. Neither Hooch nor Jean said anything, but Hooch gestured to restrain the two, or the game would be over too soon.

Jean nodded, grinning, and found some leather cuffs. It was strange, to say the least, tying Vadim's hands together, but Vadim accepted that, no questions, no hesitation, and Jean felt weird for a moment as he was claiming Vadim's trust and didn't actually deserve it. He climbed on top and tried to kiss Vadim the way Hooch usually kissed, while lifting his hands up and tying them to the poster. He began to stroke Vadim's cock, which had an immediate effect, as Vadim stretched, hardened, and sighed. No doubting yet who was doing this to him.

Hooch had nylon ropes in his hands and when he took hold of Dan's wrists, to swiftly and expertly tie them together, Dan protested. "Jean, what the hell are you doing?" But Hooch didn't answer, only leaned down, concentrated, and put all his emotions, every scrap of feeling he'd ever had for anyone, into a kiss, as playful, tender and sensuous as he could make it. It worked, Dan relaxed into the kiss, allowing Hooch/Jean to tie his arms over his head and onto the bed post. It was their stag night, after all, and if the two grooms were to be ravished, side by side, by their best men, who was he to struggle?

Jean almost laughed, but that, too, could give them away. He fished for a note he'd written beforehand and only now felt confident enough to hand to Hooch, who came up from the kiss and tried to remember how Jean had stroked him. Making sure that Dan remained interested while he took the note.

Jean had spent some time thinking what he wanted to do and what would likely happen, so he handed the scrap of paper to the other best man.

It read: "I lied, I do let him fuck me, and if you tell that to anybody, I'll have to kill you."

Hooch's reaction was priceless. First a widening of his eyes, then a swift, growing grin, that soon turned into a rare, full-blown smirk, and he fought hard not to laugh out loud. He kept stroking Dan, who was moving into his hand, getting hard. Hooch signalled 'okay' with his free hand, he'd understood, he wasn't suicidal, and would keep the secret. He held up his hand, signalling to Jean to give him a moment, before spending a minute licking and kissing Dan's cock to buy himself some time. When he looked up he grinned again, gestured and mouthed silently that he was willing to fuck himself on Vadim, and that

since they'd never find out who exactly was doing what when, they could swap back now, and no one would know that Jean wasn't doing the same, when they'd swap once more, before Hooch would take Dan as well. He shrugged in the end.

Jean considered it, really did. He wasn't too eager to do it, it had taken a long, long time until he could get his head around it with Dan, and Vadim ... but on the other hand, Vadim didn't appear much larger, and secondly, Vadim was tied down – and had no idea it was him. He'd still have to do it like he expected Hooch to do it, which meant likely with a lot less care and more speed than he'd normally do it. 'Oh fuck', he mouthed, but stayed on top, grinding against Vadim and playing with his nipples, biting them, which made Vadim groan and shudder. He knew the man was sensitive there, while Hooch lavished attention onto Dan's cock, as far as Hooch knew, Dan wasn't much aroused by nipple play.

After a while, Hooch moved off the bed, reached for his trousers to get the mini packs of lube, and handed them over. He indicated to Jean that 'he' would fuck himself on Vadim first, before he lowered himself back down to pay closer attention to Dan's cock. When he slowly sucked down, Dan arched up with a groan and a string of expletives, softly cursed under his breath.

Jean grabbed the lube and poured some in his hand, slicking Vadim's cock up, which again made Vadim shift and push up slightly, seeking leverage, friction. Fuck, Jean thought. Was it really all that different that it wasn't Dan? Whatever. His idea, or was it? Hooch had come up with it, or had he? Wouldn't be different. He got on top and took Vadim's cock. Not different, not the pressure, or the breach, that forceful stretch. Vadim's groan helped, the way the man tensed underneath, how his breath went faster, unaware this wasn't who he thought it was. Hooch wouldn't go slowly. Jean grimaced and forced the cock inside, the sensation so intense it made his whole body tighten and tense. Oh fuck. He fought to remain silent and follow through with this, taking Vadim completely.

And Hooch helped. Leaving Dan who groaned in protest, but who accepted the replacement of lips, mouth and throat with a hand, just as he'd accepted the whole stag night game. Hooch leaned and arched across, all the time continuing to stroke Dan, and took Jean's cock in one swift motion down his throat, to counteract the discomfort. Jean couldn't help but groan, one hand on Hooch's head, feeling lips and tightness and that hunger and moved, harder and faster, fucking himself which was only really possible like that because Vadim couldn't see him, Dan couldn't see him, and Hooch kept him in a good place, wanting and aroused while he gave Vadim what he could. The Russian underneath was panting, moving his lips silently, and Jean moved harder, trying to force Vadim to come, to speak, to give up that control.

"Vadim?" Dan's voice, breathless, blindfolded head turned towards him. Hooch was stroking him irregularly, too occupied with sucking Jean, but Dan didn't know what was going on.

Vadim's arms bulged as he tried to move, unconsciously, pushing up into the guy on top of him. "Yes," he said, voice rough, then clenched his teeth again, breathing harshly between them, as the need built up further and the movements became more reckless, more demanding.

"What ..." Dan struggled, trying to move into that hand to get more, feel more, "do you feel?" Hooch then kept his head steady, throat relaxed, and allowed Jean to enter him as he could or needed, while focusing more on Dan.

"One's on ... top, on me ..." Speaking in sentences seemed like an enormous challenge to Vadim. "Hot and tight and ... the other's sucking him, I think." It was his best guess, with the hair brushing his skin. He remembered Jean sucking him off, or Dan, or both of them, then somebody squeezed his balls, added sudden pressure-pain to it, and he came, tensing and sweating, groaning, body pumping.

"Shit." Dan got out, was about to demand, want, ask, when limbs moved, bodies shifted, lips were once again on his cock, and he lost all orientation. Which man was where, whose hand he felt, whose thighs straddled him. He didn't know and couldn't talk, because suddenly there was cool air on his saliva-slicked cock, and then even cooler lube, which made him shudder and curse, but then he stilled, whole body tense like a drawn bow, when he could feel the tip of his cock against something tight. For all he knew it was Jean, Jean who rarely did this, and only with him. Jean, who trusted him enough, and who right now lowered down slowly, ever so slowly and carefully, like he would, never as reckless as he himself was.

Hoch paused, looked at Jean with an intense gaze in his dark eyes, as if asking for something, then moved once more in small increments. Stretching, breaching, filling, nothing compared to the self-inflicted cruelty of most of his life. More like the 'fun' and vanilla stuff he did, putting all the emotion he was capable of for the very few people in his life, into fucking himself on Dan, who could do nothing but moan, open-mouthed.

Jean felt sluggish and weak from his own orgasm that had very nearly surprised him when Hooch had made him come, close to Vadim, and he moved to Hooch to kiss him; maybe that was what he wanted, he had no idea, but it seemed like a good enough response, because Hooch clearly relished how Jean kissed him deeply, passionately, tasting himself on this strange occasion, but what did it matter, they were all enjoying themselves. His hand pumped Hooch, slow but intense, giving more friction than he could have managed with his throat.

Speeding up, yet more carefully than he would have, Hooch fucked himself with long, slow, but powerful thrusts, enough to force Dan closer and closer to the edge.

Dan was muttering nonsensical words, of "what..." and "how ..." and "oh shit ..." as the body on him sped up after a long time of riding him steadily. With a ferocity born from lust, Hooch was thrusting himself down, forcing Dan to topple over. He came with a shout, lost, intense, hardly noticing the cum that



splattered his chest as the man on top of him, Hooch/Jean, came as well, but without a sound.

Jean managed to get off the bed, feeling sore, but he got to the bathroom to clean up and returned with towels, one for Hooch and one for himself. Grinning, because those were nice images, nice things to remember. Hooch's way to do it, and both Vadim and Dan pretty much helpless with no idea who it was they were fucking. He stretched out on the bed, lazily wiping himself and then Vadim, who smiled tiredly and blindly.

"I would ..." Dan moistened his lips, "ask what you're up to now ... if I could think." Stretching into the touch, while he was wiped down.

Hooch's voice close to his ear after a moment, between the two on the bed, so that Vadim could hear as well. "We could feed you, water you, then wait until you get it up again, and make you watch. No touching allowed."

"Watch what?" Vadim asked, not sure what Hooch implied.

"Us." Hooch cast a glance at Jean and flashed a grin. It was all open to negotiations, but they had all night.

Jean nodded at that. He was game. As long as it didn't involve him getting fucked again, he was game. "Yeah. Would you like that?" Jean teased.

"But you ..."

"We made up," Jean murmured and Hooch let out a small sound of agreement.

"In that case ..." Dan moved his head as if trying to peek through the blindfold, "I'm not adverse to begging. We've only got the once chance of a stag night in our lives."

Hooch huffed a dry laugh. "Whisky first, agreed?"

"I'd agree to anything at that prospect."

Hooch filled the two glasses and handed one to Jean, clinking them together, "to Dan and Vadim and a long night."

"That, and blindfolds and handcuffs," Jean laughed, taking a mouthful and winking at Hooch, who grinned at the dismayed expression on the two grooms beneath them.

\* \* \*

The next day, Dan and Vadim were glad that the ceremony didn't take place before the early afternoon, and that the Baroness had arranged a luxurious and extended brunch for all of the assembled guests, including those who arrived in the morning.

The chance to have a lie-in was very much appreciated after the stag night, which had lasted well into the early hours of the morning, and left them wondering about what exactly had happened at times, but also utterly sated and feeling every single year of their age. In a damn good way.

After brunch, a colourful affair where everyone talked to everyone else, enjoying conversation and laughter, trading stories and tall-tales, they went back up to their suite. Like the guests, they were dressed for the ceremony.

“Are you ready to get knocked out by the best looking Scotsman ever to grace Afghanistan?” Dan grinned, leaning against the doorframe to the bedroom, where he’d hung his exquisite outfit, wrapped in its cloth bags.

Vadim pulled the jumper over his head and regarded himself in the mirror. “I think I deserve the best-looking Scotsman to ever grace Afghanistan,” he said. “Don’t you think? After all, this is a commitment for life.”

“Another twenty-five years, you think?” Dan grinned, studying Vadim with an interest that had never waned, and neither had the scars. ‘Cunt’, pizdar. A lifetime ago. “How am I going to bear that?”

“With all the grace and strength you’ve had so far.”

“Aye, that’ll be a doddle.” Dan flashed a smirk and Vadim glanced at the clothes bag. “You’ll have a captive audience for whatever you’ll wear.”

“Best I get cracking, then. No peeking until I’m done, it might be a while.” With that Dan pushed the door open with his cane and went through.

Vadim grinned. “No. I’ll change in the bathroom.” His suit already hung there. He stripped in front of the mirror, thinking that, indeed, for his age, he was doing alright, but of course age was slowly getting to him, or not so slowly. Lines in his face - frown lines, across the forehead, around the eyes, and even lines that suggested he smiled every now and then. And it took far more effort these days to maintain his own standards. Being blond helped, the silver hardly showed. He headed into the bathroom, had a shower and shaved. Well-worn routine. He’d been to a hairdresser a couple days ago, everything else looked like he wanted it to look. He towelled himself and unzipped the bag. Running his hands over the fabric which looked and smelled carefully ironed. The tailor had finally got him to take one of those; smart black trousers, dinner jacket, matching shirt, black tie and cufflinks. Dan would appreciate the irony that the stone was blue with golden specks.

When he got out of the bathroom there was some muffled cursing coming through the bedroom door, and the sound of something clattering to the floor or against the side table. Eventually, the door opened, and Dan appeared in the doorway, smiling. His hair brushed, gleaming, more silver now than dark, and his face, lined these days, still tanned and still striking. Even the scar in his face had faded, as if it had accepted that the years of danger were well and truly over.

He stood in the most exquisite dress kilt the Edinburgh tailors were capable of producing. Handmade and tailored from finest wool, wearing the McFadyen hunting tartan in elegant blues and greens on black. Even the mess of scars his knees sported seemed suddenly of no importance. The short black Prince Charlie jacket with its square polished silver buttons accentuated his trim and fit body, and so did the snugly fitting black waistcoat underneath, with the same elegant buttons. He wore a white shirt and an understated black silk cravat, his only deviation from the truly traditional outfit. The sporran was made from smooth black fur, with silver decorations. His polished brogues were laced up neatly over the knee high off-white hose, leather laces tied off just below the knee, and the tartan flashes there as well. He’d slipped a bejewelled Skean Dhua

dagger into the hose at his right calf. The kilt pin glistened understated, silver and garnets, a copy of one of the magnificent ancient Scottish brooches.

He'd wound the lapis lazuli prayer beads around his left wrist, making a faint noise whenever he moved his hand. "You look stunning, Russkie."

Vadim smiled and moved closer to kiss him, remembering, weirdly, the slap against the chest he'd received from Katya, a lifetime ago, about not kissing the bride (and possibly smearing the lipstick). No such concerns with a man, which was funny, in its own way. "You should dress up a bit more often, it suits you," he murmured. "And we both look stunning."

"Only if you are taking advantage of me in my kilt this time. I am, after all, a proper Scotsman."

"Let me take advantage of you after the party." Vadim grinned. "We shouldn't head down all crinkled up and sweaty."

"That is a very good point. Maggie has organised a photographer through all of the day and night to take candid shots and not posed ones, because I really can't stomach posing. Thank fuck." Dan reached out to run a hand through Vadim's short hair, and smiled. "You think it's time yet? Who has the rings?"

"Jean has the rings. He keeps making jokes about losing them." Vadim took Dan's good hand and squeezed it lightly. "Yeah. That's it. Are you ready?"

"I'll just pop some more pills and I'm ready to go."

"Okay." Vadim went to the door to open it, keeping it open with his back while watching Dan vanish to get his pills and then return. He let it fall shut behind them and offered his hand again. Somehow, he wanted Dan close, touching on the way down, and Dan gladly held Vadim's hand.

"You know," Dan mused on the way to the elevator, "If anyone had told me at thirty, that I'd walk along in public, holding hands with a man, I would have punched them. If they had told me I'd actually marry a man, I would have punched myself." He chuckled.

"Yes. And I swore never to marry again." Vadim let Dan step into the elevator first, then followed. "But, come to think of it, we're not doing too badly as ageing middleclass faggots, are we?"

Dan laughed out loud as the doors of the elevator closed behind them. "You can call me a faggot any time, but middleclass? That's an insult." He winked, and leaned against the mirrored wall. He really didn't want to use the cane during the ceremony itself.

"Aye, we're as bourgeois as they come these days. Respectable." Marxist or Leninist rhetoric had faded, sometimes it returned, like an ironic commentary from a long bygone era.

"Bour... what?" Dan grinned and shook his head. "After we step out of that elevator, what are the chances we won't have a single second for each other from then to when it is all over?" he leaned close, close enough to kiss.

Vadim smiled. "Just stay close. Because they might decide on some prank like the one we pulled at Jean's party. I'm not sure I'm in the mood to get abducted again."

“I think we’re too old for such shit.” Dan chuckled quietly, before Vadim kissed Dan, but the doors opened right then; he didn’t draw back, merely smiled and kissed Vadim again. “Off we go,” he murmured.

Still holding hands, they had hardly taken a step out of the elevator and onto the first floor area, when Kisa’s voice cut through the noise of the crowd of people.

“Here they are!”

There was cheer and clapping, and some of the regular hotel guests who didn’t belong to the wedding party, turned their heads at the two splendidly dressed men, who were walking hand in hand towards the crowd. The heads turned even more, when a gentleman in full US Army officer parade uniform stepped towards them, closely followed by another handsome man, blond, and elegantly dressed.

“Ready, buddies?” Hooch smiled at them from beneath his peaked cap.

Looking at Hooch, Vadim hoped he’d get a photo of him in that striking outfit. Jean, by comparison, looked very normal, if expensive, but it was understated - a true reversal of the men’s actual dispositions, or what they usually portrayed. “Got the rings?” he asked Jean, who gave him a mischievous grin, but patted one of his pockets and nodded.

“I think we’re ready.” Probably have been for years and just needed the world to catch up with us, Vadim thought.

The Baroness appeared out of the crowd, the epitome of elegance in her silk mauve suit and elegant hat, smiling at them. Dr Williams, in a dinner suit with bow tie, at her side.

Vadim inhaled deeply, feeling a little nervous as everyone made their way into the room. Everybody’s eyes on them, as the guests filed through, for a moment it felt as officious as a military parade on Red Square, but they were all friends here, and Vadim managed to relax a little. He could almost hear Jean, who stood behind them, telling him to ‘lighten up’, and he tried, smiling, if a little stiffly.

“My dear friends, would you mind waiting a moment?” The Baroness stood at the door, smiling at the two grooms and their best men, when everyone else had found a seat inside. “You have to forgive me, but I am terribly old fashioned and also incredibly delighted to be able to organise this wonderful occasion for you. If you could just follow the ushers, everything is arranged for the important moment.”

Dan grimaced a little, realising that what she really meant was for them to have a ‘grand entrance’, but after a glance at Vadim who gave a small nod, he bowed his head and smiled at her. “Anything you wish. You know, Ma’m, I would never not follow your orders.”

She gave a small laugh, eyes twinkling, before stepping into the room herself, being seated at the front by one of the ushers, who had seen to the guests being seated on either groom’s side, depending on whose family or friends they were - or indeed of both of them. Not a single one of the guests was dressed in anything but their best, from the ‘Sunday best’ suit on some of Dan’s ex-mates

from the Gulf and the Balkans, to expensive suits on some of the other guys, including the ex-crew of the chopper, and many long dresses with big hats on most of the wives and girlfriends. Culminating in the vision of beauty and elegance that was Solange, seated in the front row as one of the best men's wife. She sat beside Matt, as the other best man's partner, and they looked as if they belonged to each other, with Matt in a sharply cut suit that accentuated his impressive body.

The Krasnorada family, with Kisa in a long bright red dress that showed just how tall and lithe she was, with her unruly dark hair in a lovely up-do with glittering pins holding the mane together. She sat beside her mother, was dressed as coolly elegant as ever. All of the Krasnoradas including Anya's partner were seated in the front row on Vadim's side. Dr Williams sat with them. The other side of the room saw the entire McFadyen family, which needed three rows by the time the Baroness had settled in the front row as well. All of the men of the McFadyen family had come in tartan: each of them wearing the full Prince Charlie outfit with the McFadyen hunting tartan, the same that Dan was wearing, even though Dan's outfit was clearly a cut above the rest. Duncan sat proudly, beaming from ear to ear, with Mhairi at his side, who was dressed rather splendidly in a tailored suit with long skirt and tartan throw over her shoulder, fastened with a thistle brooch. She had splashed out for once, unlike her usual self, when Duncan had encouraged her to go to one of the best 'mother of the bride' fashion shops on the Royal Mile. She, as well as her daughters in law and fiancée, were all wearing wide hats. Even the boy toddlers sported kilts, the girls wore fine dresses, and the newborn baby had been dressed in a tartan romper, which made everyone chuckle. Duncan and Gordon, the two chaps from Glasgow were in their kilts as well, and so was Dougie, the ex-Sergeant from the Gulf, with whom Dan had rekindled a matey friendship in the last five years.

The ceremony room, decorated with thistles, was full to bursting, and when finally even the last of the guests had been seated in extra chairs, the remaining usher asked Hooch and Jean inside, to stand at the front. They had both been waiting patiently, beside an ever increasingly anxious Dan, who had a hard time pretending that he wasn't nervous, while holding Vadim's hand tighter than technically necessary. Vadim reached over with his free hand and placed it on Dan's arm, which was taut with tension. "It's not a parade," he murmured. "We're just getting civil partnershiped."

When they were finally asked by the usher to make their way into the room, and to walk 'down the aisle' towards the registrar at the front, a hush came over the guests. Music was starting up, the Baroness had hired a piper, a fiddler and a drummer, all of them in full Scottish regalia. They played a moving piece that Dan wondered for a few moments about. It sounded fairly Scottish, quite traditional and yet not, until he realised, just before they reached the front, that it was Promontory from the Last of the Mohicans. He smiled at Vadim, touched by the way the Baroness had gone for a mix of the traditional and the modern. Just like their lives together: twenty-five years, a mixed bag of

extremes. A past that had been overcome by the present, no more Soviet Union, no more ban on homosexuality in the British Forces, equal rights for same sex couples, and most importantly, no more wars for the two of them.

Dan felt all eyes on them, and for possibly the first time in his life he became oddly self-conscious, until he saw Jean and Hooch smiling at them.

After a while the music stopped and the registrar's face brightened with a smile, while waiting for silence to settle, before he addressed the two men.

"I would like to welcome you to the Balmoral Hotel in Edinburgh today. We are here today to celebrate the commitment to each other of Dan and Vadim, and on their behalf I would like to thank you for joining them to celebrate this happy occasion, hopefully a day to remember for the rest of their lives."

Vadim glanced at Hooch right next to him, who had taken his peaked cap off and was carrying it under his left arm; if he hadn't known him so well, the uniform allowed no guess at what kind of man was inside. Different to the camo, which he thought never quite strangled the character in such a way. Jean, on the other side, looked in a way the most civilian, most harmless, his face always ready to break into a smile, to mock, lie, or joke. Then the registrar, who's little speech had sped up his heartbeat. He was nervous. It wasn't that the other groom could run away, or that it was, after so many years, anything but a ceremony. But it was a very public statement of what they were, and a bold one at that, at least for their generation. After everything they'd seen and encountered, after the shame, the humiliation, and a prison term, after the secrecy and the excuses and lies. From the first meeting with the Baroness, where he'd told her he needed to find an enemy because he respected him, to acting as if they were just comrades when meeting Dan's family. All the lies had slowly melted away. These days, they on the outside what they truly were inside, deep down. No more need to hide or trick. Even if that had had its own rewards – he wouldn't want to have missed Katya or her children, hers and his.

The registrar pulled Vadim out of his thoughts when he continued. "We are here to witness the formation of a Civil Partnership between Dan and Vadim." He paused, nodding to both of the two men and their two witnesses, and then addressed the room.

"If any person present knows of any impediment to this Civil Partnership they should declare it now."

He paused once more, and for just a moment, Dan felt ridiculously anxious. Like an old fear creeping up his spine, the old order, the old world with its rules, duties, threats and destruction, but then there was nothing but silence in the room. Nothing but the hushed sounds of the guests sitting, breathing, and waiting with anticipation. Dan turned his head to glance at Jean, who grinned at him, mouthing something he didn't get, because the next moment the registrar spoke again.

"Dan and Vadim have found love in their relationship with each other, and now they have chosen to offer to each other the strength and security that comes from the commitment of this legally binding contract."

Dan felt a knot in his stomach, the silly, sudden fear had turned into nervousness, and he felt even sillier. Why were there ants racing around his guts? He was fifty-six years old and had been with Vadim, one way or another, for twenty-five years, but when he now glanced at Vadim, his face flushed.

The registrar continued, once more addressing the whole room. "I am sure all gathered here today wish you both every happiness and success in your future life together. May your trust and understanding of each other increase your contentment and strengthen your joy in living."

The reaction of the guests was unexpected, some cheered, others clapped, and the solemn occasion turned for one moment into a jolly party. Even Hooch gave one of his customary half-grins. The registrar waited until the cheer had quietened down, then asked the guests to stand. This was it, the moment had come, and Dan's stomach went from knots into flip-flops, while Vadim cast a glance over his shoulder, but he only saw a blur of people.

They turned, facing each other, after the registrar had asked them to. "Each to repeat after me." He turned towards Dan. "I, Daniel Ewan McFadyen ..."

"I, Daniel Ewan McFadyen," Dan only grimaced a little at his middle name.

"... promise to share my life with Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada."

"Promise to share my life with Petr... Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada." Dan flushed a deeper shade, suddenly so nervous, he was garbling his words. It hit home, well and truly, what the words signified and what the pledge meant.

"I promise to respect, support and care for you, to honour and encourage you."

Dan looked at Vadim's face, knowing each line, angle, each touch and kiss, and speaking got difficult. The emotions had become full force and with no quarter given. "I promise to respect, respect ... support and care for you, to honour and ... and encourage you."

"I will respect you as an individual and be true to you through all the changing scenes of life - in good times and in bad. I undertake to fulfil this promise until life's end."

Dan repeated the words, managed the first part, choking up at "changing scenes of life, good times and in bad." Those they had had, plenty of them. There was no doubt. A lifetime of good and bad, testimony to their love, strength and determination. They were still together. His voice became firm, when he finished off, "I undertake to fulfil this promise until life's end."

Yes, he would.

Vadim, in a way, had it easier, used to wearing the mask and abide by all the pompous rituals of his past. Yet the words reverberated through him, like the beating of butterfly wings that could cause turmoil, far away. "I, Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada ..." Petrovich ... the son of my father who will not understand and cannot understand, yet who was there with me in the worst hour ... "promise to share my life with Daniel Ewan McFadyen." He had to breathe, feeling his pulse up in his throat. "I promise to respect, support and care for you, to honour and encourage you." I would have killed and died for you, too. "I will respect you as individual and be true to you through all

changing scenes of life - in good times and in bad.” He realised he’d dropped an article, which these days only happened when he was very emotional or nervous. “I undertake to fulfil this promise until life’s end.”

The registrar had been prompted that there would rings, and he took hold of a velvet lined board. “Dan and Vadim are now invited to exchange rings. Would the ring bearer please hand me the rings?”

At that, Jean produced the rings. Vadim had bought them with Solange; they were from a small workshop in Paris, where he’d been agonizing over what material to use, gold, white gold, platinum, the simple rings had seemed too simple, and anything over the top Dan would veto. They’d have to wear those rings for a few decades more, every day. Eventually, he had decided on Damascene steel, from which blades had been made. The patterns were formed from different kinds of steel to make the blades strong and flexible. Vadim thought that these were perfect. Blade steel. Weapons had brought them together, it was only right that they kept them together.

The registrar nodded when Jean carefully placed the rings onto the velvet board. “Repeat after me.”

Dan took hold of one of the rings, both of them were the same size. The moment he touched the cool steel he remembered all those other tokens and symbols of who they were and had been, of their love, what they meant to each other, and what they would be in the future. Prayer beads, energy bars, boots, scars, blades, and a bullet. He looked up and into Vadim’s eyes, as he took hold of his hand. Suddenly the nervousness was gone, and the ring was just a logical continuation of everything that had gone before. Twenty-five years. From hatred to this.

“I give you this ring as a token of my love and a lasting reminder of the promises made between us today. I promise to care for you above all others and cherish you throughout the rest of our lives together.”

Vadim’s hand closed involuntarily around Dan’s fingers when the ring slid on, and he had to smile to bear the emotions. He couldn’t remember having ever been so nervous, not in this way, not in ways that had to do with emotions rather than his public face. He cleared his throat to make sure his voice was steady: “I give you this ring as a token of my love and a lasting reminder of the promises made between us today. I promise to care for you above all others and cherish you throughout the rest of our lives together.” Token. Scars. Steel, and memories.

Dan looked down at his left hand, a ring there for the first time in his life, and the swirls of steel echoed the irregular pattern of scars on his hand. Functional and fucked up, just like them, but when he lifted his head and smiled into pale blue eyes, he knew that they were everything but merely functional.

The registrar’s voice pulled them out of their silent intimacy. “We now come to the signing of the schedule, which will bind Dan and Vadim together in law. Each partner to repeat after me. I declare that I know of no legal reason why we may not register as each other’s civil partner.”



Dan repeated the sentence, still looking at Vadim, still holding his hand, and still smiling. Seemed he'd never stop to smile that day. All that mattered were the warmth and strength of Vadim's hand in his and the words he repeated.

"I understand that on signing this document we will be forming a civil partnership with each other." Vadim repeated. A formality, a legal act, and just as binding and emotional as the 'man and wife' thing. Vadim wondered for a moment what Katya thought of that, at the front of the crowd behind him.

The registrar nodded and half-turned towards the narrow table close by. "Dan and Vadim, will you please now be seated at the ceremony table to sign the civil partnership schedule." Turning towards the guests, "you may be seated as well."

The fiddler and the drummer quietly played a melodic tune, while Vadim helped Dan sit, unobtrusively so, then sat next to him, watching him sign with his full name "Daniel Ewan McFadyen," and put his own "Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada" on the indicated line.

"May I now invite the two witnesses to add their signatures." The registrar said.

Jean invited Hooch to go first, grinning, watching the man step in his tailored uniform to the table, to bend down at the side and sign in the place indicated. Hooch flashed a smile at both Vadim and Dan, before he stepped aside to let Jean take his place, who signed right after him.

The registrar indicated to Dan and Vadim to stand up once more, this time Dan accepted Vadim's help with even more good grace. The guests, too, were asked to stand once more. A moment's silence settled over the room, before the registrar raised his voice.

"Daniel Ewan McFadyen and Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada, you are now partners in law. Ladies and Gentlemen will you please congratulate Dan and Vadim as they celebrate their partnership."

The applause and cheer drowned out even the piper and the drums, and came to a crescendo, when Vadim stepped a little closer, and, ringed hand against Dan's face, kissed him – the other arm around Dan's shoulders. He'd wanted to do that all the time, the 'sealing' kiss, and then placed his forehead against Dan's. "I love you," he murmured.

Dan smiled, felt the smile etch itself into his memory by the magnitude of emotion. His voice was shaky and thus he whispered, in Russian, "I love you, my cunt."

Vadim laughed and shook his head, then noticed that Jean and Hooch stood there, Hooch offering his hand. He let go of Dan to shake it, then Jean's, who congratulated him, too. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the photographer shooting away, and he grinned that moment – a photo that turned out really well, showing joy and alertness and Dan and friends around him. Not isolated, not alone, and from that photo, nobody could have guessed their story.

Then the guests came to congratulate, Katya embraced Vadim and kissed him, much like a sister would have, and he held her for a little. “Thank you, Katya, it does mean a lot,” he murmured in Russian to her.

“I know – it means a lot to me, too,” she said, stepping back and squeezing his hand, then she turned to Dan and embraced him, too. “Good luck with him,” she said and gave a laugh.

“Thank you, I’ve had a few years to get used to his finer points.” Dan laughed, then let go of her when his daughter threw herself into his arms and he held her tightly. Laughing even harder when she asked him if that made Vadim her stepfather, and he claimed that it was all too confusing to ponder at the moment.

She had hardly moved to embrace Vadim in the same exuberant fashion, when Duncan and Mhairi stood before Dan, smiling brightly, from ear to ear. “It got you finally, aye?” Duncan grinned, “congratulations big brother.” He pulled his Dan into a bear hug, covertly handing the cane back to him, which made Dan grin with relief and wink. Mhairi, too, embraced him, and kissed his cheeks, before both went to Vadim.

“We have long ago welcomed you into our family.” Duncan said to Vadim, with his warm smile, arms open, “let us welcome you once more, brother in law.”

Vadim embraced him with no second thought, just the word, “brother” held a strange magic for somebody who couldn’t imagine how it could have been, growing up as a team, sharing blood like that. Brother and sister in law. “Thank you, thank you,” he murmured, not quite sure what else to say.

“No, thank *you*, Vadim.” Duncan murmured into Vadim’s ear, “thank you for having given me my bother back.” Duncan smiled when he stepped away and Mhairi embraced Vadim, then the whole family followed, the whole large clan of McFadyens.

The embrace from Vadim’s daughter and her pregnant girlfriend was more reserved; Anya was playing along, for appearances sake, but Vadim was sure that she either resented him or expected more of an apology from him than he’d given her. Probably something like he’d given Nikolai, but his son had been easy to talk to, easy to connect with. Whereas Anya was much like he’d been when he was young. Aloof, masked, fierce in her dedication to follow her own way, whatever the cost, whatever the sacrifice. A narcissist of the highest order. He could respect that, and thought, ruefully, that he’d somehow taken his own father’s place - unable to truly connect to his offspring. Too similar; even in the preference to her own gender, but Lizabeta wasn’t Katya’s calibre, she looked shy and pale and feminine.

Nikolai hugged him, too, and Vadim held him only too gladly. No misgivings here. When Nikolai was anywhere near Australasia, he flew over for a few days and they caught up. He seemed happy with short, physical affairs with women, and had partnered with a former boss and a financial firm that invested in resources. He was involved in finding deposits and marketing the exploitation rights--which meant he got to travel a lot and worked hard, for ten

years longer, he sometimes said, then he'd do something else. Vadim wasn't worried about him. Nikolai really just needed two things; freedom and his own space, and plenty of that, 'so I can hear what I'm thinking', he used to say, grinning. "Congratulations, dad," he said now, close to Vadim's ear, and Vadim smiled at the 'dad'. As if. It was a gift, but probably nobody else understood that.

"My congratulations." Dr Williams had appeared out of nowhere, suddenly in front of Vadim. His remaining hair was bright white and he was smiling at him, eyes crinkling in a wrinkled and kind face. He shook Vadim's hand in a firm grip. "I don't think I can express satisfactorily how happy this today makes me."

"Means I'm sane enough to not drive everybody off," Vadim said with a good measure of irony, which held the knowledge that it could have been very different. "Thanks to you, sir."

"No, this was entirely down to you, you had the strength and the determination." Dr Williams gave Vadim's hand a last firm shake, before he, too, stepped back into the crowd, to congratulate Dan in turn, replaced with Dima who came to stand in front of Vadim, Markus at his side.

"Congratulations, Major," Dima said, and the rank was less of a joke and more a reminder between them.

"No saluting, please," Vadim said and embraced him. "Thanks for coming, Dima." He shook Markus' hand, and touched his arm. Never quite sure where the welcome touch ended, but Markus closed his hand over Vadim's and gave a squeeze when Vadim said, "thank you. Must have been a bit of a pain to organize."

"That's what fierce admins are for, I told her that there was nothing more important than attending this ceremony, and she wove her magic. If I hadn't managed to get my deputy to take over for these days, Dima would never have forgiven me." Markus grinned. When they stood side by side, Dima had his arm around his waist, and the taller Markus had his arm around Dima's shoulders. Casual, intimate and tender. "We'll see you later." With that they let Vadim go, and turned to congratulate Dan.

Dan didn't know any longer who was who nor where, and kept shaking hands, left, right and centre. He even got a brief half-embrace from Beauvais. He kept laughing, smiling, a blur of faces, Manke, Gordon, Douglas, all of the American crew, his old mates from the Gulf and the Balkan, the men from the Spa and many of their partners, wives, girlfriends, voices, congratulations and music above it all. Matt embraced him at some stage, and at another he had the slender form of Solange in his arms. Eventually, he wondered where the Baroness was. Looking around, he found her standing a little to the side, watching the commotion of the guests, with a bright smile on her face. Like an onlooker who could not get enough of the spectacle of joy.

Dan managed to get through the last well-wishers, before walking over to her. He smiled at the Baroness. Tiny now, a little stooped and deceptively fragile, but the steel was still there, and the mind as sharp as a cut diamond.

“There is something I’ve wanted to do for many years.” He stuck the cane under his arm and bent down, wrapping his arms around her frame in a tight embrace. Holding her close, and after a split second, she embraced him back, with surprising strength.

Dan murmured into her ear, “I love you, Maggie.”

After another squeeze, he straightened back up, grinning down at her. She reached out for him, and her eyes were dangerously bright, shimmering with a rarely expressed emotion, as she patted his cheek.

“I know, Dan. I know.” Her voice had a tremor in it. “Now off you go to your husband.”

He chuckled, “I have to get used to that.”

“You will.” She smiled and shooed him off, but when he turned his head, he saw how she dabbed at her eyes with an emblazoned handkerchief.

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The afternoon was spent with the ‘wedding breakfast’, a phrase that never ceased to make Dan laugh, and which consisted of an abundance of champagne, cakes and savouries. The Baroness had thankfully foregone the fully traditional route and there was no wedding cake to cut, instead a magnificent cake selection had been spread out.

The guests enjoyed themselves, each of them wanted the grooms’ attention at some stage, and thus Dan and Vadim never got a chance to even look at each other, except for across the room. At some stage Dan had to sit down, but that did not stop the laughter and the conversation around him.

When it was time for the formal dinner, the assembly retired into the splendid dining room, with its magnificent gilded ceilings, its ornate mirrors and its crystal chandeliers, decorated in the most elegant way with silver, thistles and ivy. Dan murmured to the Baroness if the silver had the special meaning of an anniversary by chance, but she merely winked and then ushered them to their seats of honour at the top table. At long last they sat together, and while the piper, the fiddler and the drummer played quietly, everyone enjoyed an exquisite five course meal, during which the aperitifs, the wine and the spirits continued to flow freely.

At some stage, the Baroness announced that it was her pleasure to say a few words to celebrate the union of her dear friends, and her short speech left Dan with a lump in his throat. She invited others to say a few words if they wished, and to both Dan’s and Vadim’s surprise, more people stood up for an anecdote, a bon mot, a toast or simply a “well done, mates” than expected.

Jean and Hooch were the last ones to speak as the best men, and both their speeches were humorous yet full of emotional impact. When the guests demanded with a lot of laughter, cheer and encouragement, that the grooms should make a speech as well, Dan looked at Vadim in horror. He hadn’t even thought about it.

“Okay, I’ll do it,” Vadim murmured close to him, to give Dan more time, then stood. “Of course I haven’t prepared anything, so I’ll take the opportunity to embarrass myself.” Smiling, he gave a small pause, ordering the sentences in his head while he picked up a wine glass. “I ... and I’m sure Dan agrees, we’ve been together long enough to pick up on such details, am deeply honoured and pleased today. One of our oldest friends has taken it upon herself to arrange this occasion, and to her, Baroness de Vilde, go our heartfelt thanks for everything she has done. From the day she told an obviously lying Soviet soldier where his wounded enemy was being treated, to this, brighter and far more cheerful day. I wish to thank our families, for having been protective and accepting of our nature, as much as we were struggling with what has been our destiny. For the mentors and teachers that we encountered, some of which are here today, and others that have left us before their time. To our friends, witnesses and their partners, who have stood beside us, quite literally in war and peace, to those we hold dear and who crossed our paths. Thank you for sharing this day with us, but even more, thank you for the past, and, of course, the future.”

The applause that branded up was only cut short when everybody drank a toast to Vadim’s speech, and then Dan got up from his chair. He leaned in to place a kiss onto Vadim’s cheek, and while Vadim sat down, Dan grinned into the round of guests.

“First of, I need to thank Vadim for rescuing me. I’m not a man of words, certainly not of eloquent words, and apart from a string of swear words, I am not known to come up with speeches.” He let the laughter and the friendly hackling die down, before he continued, more serious this time. “I would also like to thank all of you, for sticking to our request not to bring any presents, but to donate instead to the Pascal Durant Foundation.” Dan turned to glance at Jean with a warm smile. The best men and their partners were seated beside them, at the same table, and he saw Solange’s fingers press Jean’s arm. “If it wasn’t for you, each and every one of you, all of you in your own ways, I wouldn’t be running the Spa and Foundation. Instead I would be in need of its help. Without you, my family, old and new, dead and newborn, and you my friends, close and far, deep and loose, I wouldn’t be as human as I am today.” He raised his glass, then turned to look down at Vadim, “and without you, Vadim, I just wouldn’t be at all.” He paused, the room had gone very quiet, until Dan let out a huff of laughter to try and hide the sudden surge of feelings. “Let us drink to what you’ve all turned me into: a damned old fucking emotional fool.” When everyone laughed and stood up to raise their glasses to toast the grooms, he called out into the room, “to love, loyalty, friendship and trust!”

“To love, loyalty, friendship and trust!” The whole room erupted, and everyone drank.

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When the table was broken up, hotel staff quickly came to transform the grand dining hall into a ballroom, with plenty of space for the revellers. Clann An Drumma, the band for the evening arrived, to play their version of Scottish traditional music, delivered with such electrifying drums, it made everyone move or at least tap their feet. Soon Jean and Solange claimed centre stage, dancing.

A while later, Jean met Dan outside on the balcony that overlooked Princes street gardens, they were both in search of place to smoke a cigarette in peace. Lighting up, he glanced at Dan, then inhaled deeply and looked at the sky, while Dan kept staring at the illuminated skyline of the most beautiful city he knew. The castle, the buildings, the lights of Princes Street. It couldn't be any more different to the Afghan mountains, and yet the sense of majesty was the same.

"Who would have thought, aye?" Dan said quietly, exhaling into the cold air. The sound of music and revellers came muted through the grand doors behind them. He turned his head to look at Jean. "And you are such a big part of this, my friend."

"That's good. It's good to be part of something." Jean smiled. "I guess that's really why I did the things I did, you know, marry, have kids, get that huge house, become somebody completely different. Too many guys end up alone, fucked up, betrayed or just simply broken. We're the lucky ones. I certainly am more lucky than I can say. The old lady that left me the house when she died, I'm sometimes thinking about her, how that really started everything. I was drifting through the country on R&R, sick of life, and god so fucking angry at everything and everybody." Jean inhaled. "Helping old ladies was the last thing on my mind, but there was this guy who was bothering an old lady. She was carrying some shopping and he didn't do anything to help and instead was shouting at her. I thought, what a jerk. I was itching for a fight anyway, so I got involved. The guy didn't have the guts to fight a legionnaire, and fucked off. I didn't actually want to get involved in any way, no tea and cake and whatever in her kitchen, but I guess I did. That's how I got the house - we signed a contract that I'd make sure she's okay for the rest of her life, and she'd leave me the house. She told me I should get a 'lady' to make sure I have a home. And then I realized that was what I really wanted. Have a place, a community, the people in the village and be a part of all that. I worked through the anger, I didn't want to turn into a feral animal. Okay, I wanted to not be a feral animal any longer, because at that point, I was. No more than a rabid dog, really good at killing and not giving a shit about anything but the next battle, the next war, the next meal, the next bitch. Pretty much in that order, too. Not easy to wean yourself off that anger and all that blood." Jean shook his head, working through a memory he pushed away eventually. "You're such a big part of all that, too. I kept understanding myself better, could let the defences down, you know. Trust somebody who wasn't ... isn't weaker than I am. You mean a lot to me, Dan."

"I know," Dan smiled, stubbed out his cigarette and leaned against the wall to be able to pull Jean into a tight hug. "You mean a lot to me, too. Perhaps we've both helped each other become human. You certainly helped me."

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“The blind leading the blind,” Jean laughed and held him.

Dan held onto Jean for a long time, until he chuckled quietly, “let’s go back inside, aye? That fucking wind is an icy draft up my kilt!”

“Aren’t you Highlanders supposed to be all manly about that?” Jean grinned and kissed him, when Dan laughed. “Alright, let’s go back.”

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Inside, the guests were thoroughly enjoying themselves at the party. People dancing to the music, children amongst them, and even some babies sleeping in a corner, as if the drums and the pipes and singing voices were but a lullaby. The alcohol was in great demand, too posh to be called booze in that place, even though many of the ex-soldiers had long gone over to beer from the tap.

The Frenchmen had stayed with the wine, and while Maurice was still – or again – sitting and talking with George, with no one the wiser if talking had been all they’d been doing, the young Legionnaire walked across the ballroom. A glass of wine in his hand, one of many he’d already had, he smiled at the dancers. A free, relaxed, somewhat drunk smile, a rare sight. Nearly bumping into Gordon, who was talking to Matt, and who laughed when St John grunted a slurred apology, before being sent along with a wink. Hooch was close by, right where St John was heading to, talking with Beauvais. Hooch looked up when the young man approached, and something in his face, or the smile, seemed to tell him something, because he finished his conversation with Beauvais with a few words and turned to join Matt and the others. Matt lifted his head to smile at Hooch when he arrived, and placed an arm around his waist for one easily overlooked moment.

“Sir?” St John smiled at Beauvais, standing too close, and clearly worse for wear from all the wine, but a happy drunk. “Would you like to dance?”

Beauvais’ eyes lit up with clear alarm at the request, the reflex too deeply ingrained to be suppressed, especially after some wine as well. Maybe they’d already been pushing their luck, the framework, the mask, and he felt a sense of nausea at being exposed, even in friendly surrounding, even with just friends in the room. It was out in the open, out of the box, and how would he be able to put it back into that box? It seemed like a shocking indulgence, too emotional by far, especially regarding what they were. “I would like to,” he said softly, “but it is not possible. I cannot dance.” I must not. I cannot.

I won’t.

St John nodded, no defiance, no anger, not even disappointment, as if he never dared hope for much, but that night, with the joy and happiness all around them, nothing could put him down. He still smiled. The smile turned his face into more than just handsome. Open, warm, and achingly attractive. “Would you come with me to another room? I just want to kiss you. Please.”

Beauvais’ features softened and he nodded, indicating a direction. He led, away, outside, and St John followed, like he always would. Beauvais took them to the adjacent cloak room, deserted and quiet, with racks of the guests’ coats

and jackets, and nothing else. There was a small emergency light above the door, but when they stepped inside and closed the door behind them, the green glow was the only light, casting their uniforms and their faces into a surreal play of fractured shadows.

“I wanted to kiss you all night.” St John said quietly in French. A little slurred, but undoubtedly lucid. “Wanted to touch you, like the others do.” The alcohol had loosened his tongue, allowing his thoughts and feelings – usually cut off and shut away – to come unguarded to the surface. “I love you, mon Commandant, please let me kiss you.”

Beauvais felt that love like a pain, too intense to be spoken. He even had to force himself to speak in bed, of needing and wanting, because for the rest of his time, it choked him. “Granted,” he said, voice strangled. How did he deserve this man, and how much was he a prisoner to those two things, his job and his emotions. It didn’t bear thinking about.

There were no more words, when St John embraced Beauvais, and kissed him with those pent up emotions. With the love that he felt, and that ran deeper than even his loyalty to the Legion. But Beauvais did not exist without the Legion, and thus St John put everything he was and felt and wanted into that kiss, that soon had Beauvais’ back against the wall of coats, and St John all over him, murmuring words that would have been senseless out of context, but within, they declared feelings, needs, and hopes. Demanding, pressing into him, breathlessly, open-mouthed kissing and grinding against him. Forgotten the guests, the occasion, and any loyalty except to each other.

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Inside the ballroom, Hooch suddenly stood beside Vadim, his hand in the small of his back. “Are you one of those who think we Americans get a medal every time we cross a foreign border?” he murmured into Vadim’s ear with a grin. He shifted to stand in front of Vadim, in all his glory. The uniform accentuated the lines of his body, and true to his quip, his breast was a treasure trove of medals and ribbons.

Vadim laughed. “I know you do.” He could read Hooch’s whole career from those ribbons, every mission, every medal, and it was a busy career. “But crossing lines is clearly heroic. Lines in the sand, lines we set ourselves, imaginary lines ... challenging what’s there. Yes. That’s heroic.”

“Then you are clearly a hero.” Hooch smiled, “and one without whom I would not be able to keep redefining mine.” Hooch turned round to a waiter who came along with a tray of wine glasses, and took two, holding one out to Vadim, who took it. “You mean a lot to me, Vadim. You are my friend, and I do not say this lightly.”

“I know you don’t. That makes it worth something.” Vadim raised his glass. “It’s an honour and privilege to be your friend; even though you’re just a filthy American.”



“That’s alright, since you’re just a Russian peasant.” Hooch clinked his glass against Vadim’s and winked. “Whatever happened to the Cold War ...” Instead of taking a sip from his wine, though, he leaned in and placed a brief kiss onto Vadim’s lips. More than a buddy and less than a lover, but no one seemed to have noticed. “To many more years of friendship and of crossing lines.”

“Oh, I sure hope so,” Vadim said, smiling.

Hooch raised the glass to his lips and drank, dark eyes on Vadim. He commented with a smirk, when he put the glass down, “I hope you’re creative, because one day I’ll be too arthritic to kneel.”

“There are ways to get around bad knees,” Vadim said evenly, and smiled. The kind of smile that showed he was examining ideas to put into practice at a later date. If anything was good about age, it was the ability for patience.

“I bet there are, and I know you’ll find them.” Hooch’s own smile held the promise to experience all of them.

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The party went on, and there was no one who didn’t enjoy themselves. Kisa was seen dancing with her youngest cousin, then her brother, chatting animatedly with the Baroness who she had met a couple of times before, and ending up for another dance with her uncle. After that, she picked up each and every military man she could find, to grill them about being in the Forces. She was still adamant she was going to join the Hungarian army after school, no matter what anyone said, and that she’d one day whop her father’s arse in rank. She was so exuberant and happy that no one found her annoying, and she even managed to grab Hooch, who was too amused not to answer her questions when she grilled him, too, but none the less glad when she found another victim after a while.

He had sat down with a glass of wine to watch the revellers, when Matt sauntered towards him.

“Well, buddy?” Matt grinned at Hooch, sidling onto the deep window seat beside him. The corner was mercifully dark and fairly quiet, with a view over the magnificent city to one side, and over the whole ballroom to the other.

“Buddy?” Hooch rose his brows.

“You’re not?” Matt flashed an impertinent, toothy grin.

“What happened to darling, lover, honey, or stud?”

“I would never call you shit like that.” Matt laughed.

“Not even stud?”

“They must have put something into your drink tonight.”

Hooch quirked a grin, more relaxed than usual. “Perhaps I’m just, like, glad to be here, with you, for this particular occasion.”

Matt tilted his head, resting his hand on Hooch’s thigh. No one was watching them, and if anyone did, it was highly unlikely they’d take pictures as evidence and reported the incident to the US military. “You know what, Bozic?”

Hooch let his brows arch up at that name.

“There’s no one, absolutely no one, other than Captain Hubert ‘Hooch’ Bozic, I want to be with. And if you are too tired tonight to make good on yesterday’s promise, I’ll kick your ass.”

“You and whose army, kid.”

Matt leaned close, whispering into Hooch’s ear, “me and my ass, which I’ll wave into your face because you can’t say no to *anything* if I do that.”

“You think?”

“No, I don’t think. I know.” Matt grinned.

Hooch answered the grin with one of his own rare, full-blown ones, and in the relative safety of their corner he reached out to touch the handsome face in front of him. Fingers stroking the warm, smooth skin, he murmured the three words that he’d hardly ever said. “I love you, Matt Donahue.”

“That, I know, too. My darling, my lover my ... you can fuck right off when it comes to baby, honey and stud.”

Hooch laughed and Matt chuckled quietly, far more touched than he tried to let on, and he let his lips touch Hooch’s for a brief but tender kiss.

They didn’t realise that they were being watched from across a table, but watched by a man who smiled and quickly looked away to give privacy. “Seems today has a soppy effect on everyone.” Markus reached out to take Dima’s hand, squeezing it with a warm smile. “I wish we could do the same, albeit with a smaller celebration.”

“We can do the same, it’s just not legally binding,” Dima said. “Austria’s not quite there yet. Might never get there, either.”

“You think we should have a celebration, and forget about the legal side of things? We are safe, what with insurances and everything set up, but I would like to celebrate our life together, with our family and friends.” Markus smiled warmly, “would you not-quite marry me, Dmitri Starov?”

“Yes, I would.” Dima kissed him. “But you don’t know what you’re getting yourself into. The place I come from? It’s a backwater even compared to the places we end up working.”

“You ask me if I know what I am getting myself into?” Markus laughed, “we’ve been together for how many years? I know all about your annoying habits. For example, you do snore at times, despite your claims to the contrary, and you still can’t cook a decent egg Benedict, but I still love you.” Markus reached for his glass to take a sip. “Next year, then? In our house in France? My mother will be absolutely delighted, but you know that, you have her wrapped round your finger.”

“Well, it’s obvious where you have your charm and intellect from, that much is clear.” Dima pondered. “Why wait so long. What about spring ... May? We don’t need to make nearly as much of a fuss about it, your admin should be able to put everything together in an idle afternoon.”

“If she ever has an idle afternoon then I am doing something wrong.” Markus chuckled. “But you are right. I’ve got R&R in May, and since we originally planned to spend it at home, why not do it there and then? I’ll get things rolling when we’re back in Africa.” He leaned closer with a wink, “it’s a

shame, though, that we can't get properly married. I quite fancy your name. If I had the choice between Starov and Kaltenbrunn, I know what I would go for. I might have a chance of the BBC getting the shorter one right."

Dima laughed. "I wouldn't know who they talk about with 'Mr Starov' giving oh-those-carefully-worded statements to the press, shooting down their need to get all worked up about a little genocide or other humanitarian catastrophes. I would think I had suddenly wizened up." He pressed Markus' hand. "But if you want to, you can use the name."

"We'll see." Markus smiled. "I might be too high up the food chain to change my name, after all, but in here," he tapped his chest above his heart, "I've been your husband all these years."

\* \* \*

Much later that night, some guests had retired, while many were still dancing, drinking, chatting and partying. Those with the young children had eventually gone to their rooms, and so had several of the elderly. Some were worse for wear and had had too much to drink, while others wanted to make the most out of the rest of the night with their significant – or not so significant – others.

Dan and Vadim finally found themselves in the same place at the same time, and they sat down in chairs side by side. Dan stretched out his legs, rested the cane beside his chair and downed a large measure of whisky. He leaned back and grinned at Vadim. "Well, it's late and there's the wedding night looming. Are you going to carry me over the doorstep?"

"I thought you resented the thought you were the 'girl' just because you're wearing a skirt," Vadim teased gently, but stood. He was still solid on his feet. "Come on, then." He offered his hand.

"You're fucking kidding me, aye?" Dan laughed, but took the hand and let himself get pulled up. "I'd flash the whole ballroom with my kilt, and I'm not sure that all of them appreciate my shaved bollocks."

"Maybe not all of them, but a fair part." Vadim grinned. "I can cover you with my back." He bent down and lifted Dan, who let out a sound of protest and then just laughed and clung to Vadim's neck.

Vadim was careful to move in a way that didn't screw up his lower back - at least not worse than it was. The hours he spent on working his stomach and back to minimize the pain had to be worth it, and so far, he managed the weakness, but he'd still slipped a disk a few years ago and while it had moved right back, there was always the potential he'd need an operation to fix it when it happened again. When, not if.

"Hey, look!" Someone exclaimed, and several of the dancers turned, pointing at Dan and Vadim and the mind boggling sight of two men like them, one carrying the other in his arms.

"The bride's getting carried to the wedding night!" Someone else shouted, and then an unmistakably American voice added, "he's the one wearing the skirt, after all."

Dan managed to stop laughing long enough to shout his own abuse: “careful, or I’ll fucking have you, it’s a *kilt*, not a skirt, and I’m more of a man in a kilt than you are in a whole damned pair of trousers.”

Vadim laughed, shifting Dan’s weight, and it was an effort, but he was okay. He’d definitely make it to the elevator, and he did crossing the entire ballroom with Dan in his arms, to the cheers and wolf whistles of the remaining revellers. Still, he was glad when he’d got into the elevator, and soon after, the doors opened, and they arrived on their floor. “Do you have the key card? Or I’ll have to set you down.”

“Aye, in my sporran.” One-handed opening the flap, Dan quickly rummaged in his sporran to produce the swipe card, and managed to reach and open the door. “I keep wondering if I should be embarrassed, or touched, or just piss myself with laughter.” His toothy grin nearly split his face.

“You clearly didn’t have enough whisky.” Vadim finally got them through the door, closed it behind them with a kick, then dropped Dan crossways on the huge bed. Dan ended up on his back, arms and legs sprawled, when Vadim followed closely to lie next to him. “Here we are ... feel any different?”

Dan didn’t answer for a while, looking up at the brocaded ceiling of the four poster bed. He finally turned his head and smiled at Vadim. “Aye. I don’t know quite how nor why, but I do. It’s good, though. Damn good. And you?” he reached across to take Vadim’s hand into his.

“I like wearing that ring,” Vadim said, clicking his ring together with Dan’s. “Always liked to wear a ring on that finger, as a reminder, when the other isn’t close. To remember.” He rolled over onto his side, and Dan followed suit, lying face to face. Hands still clasped, Dan reached his free hand to cup Vadim’s face.

“Twenty-five years, aye? We’re two fucking lucky bastards, all considered.”

“And in the meantime, the world has changed. Just for us.” Vadim grinned, liking that preposterous idea. “They ended the Cold War, made marriage possible ...” Just for us. As if. But it was a nice indulgence to joke about it.

“Sure, just for us.” Dan chuckled softly. “And they made sure they put a lot of people into the world, just for us, to have friends, mates, and family.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. After all, many of those people were also enemies and ... other things.” Worse things; rivals, torturers. Victims. “In the end, most of what we did happened because of our decisions. We’re back to one of the favourite topics for discussion with my father ... how free is our will really. How much is our fault.” Vadim groaned. “And I’m too drunk to care.”

“Oh no, Russkie, don’t go all deep on me. Not on our wedding night, when we should be shagging like rabbits, if we weren’t too old, too knackered, and too pissed.” Dan grinned, leaned his forehead against Vadim’s and murmured, “it has almost become impossible to remember the hatred I once felt for you.”

“That’s good. You wouldn’t marry somebody you hated, right?” And thank you for feelings changing; for that strange human ability to adjust and adapt and survive; for black becoming white, and white becoming black. That we are not carved in stone, not like marble statues, endless and immortal and unchanging, but human.

“I wonder how it all happened.” Dan let his hand slide to the back of Vadim’s neck, fingers splayed. “I guess if any of our grandchildren ever asked, we’ll just claim it was magic.”

“Good answer.” Vadim moved closer, not caring about the suit, he didn’t want to get up, certainly not get undressed, because he was content and tired and it was simply a good moment to lie there and touch Dan. “But they won’t ask. Every generation has its own hang-ups and its own problems. Which is just as well.”

Dan stifled a yawn, then wrapped his arm around Vadim to hold him close. The sporran was wedged between them, but he couldn’t be bothered about it. “It’ll remain our secret, then. Our very own story.” He smiled and leaned in for a gentle kiss, and whispered, “for no one to tell.”



The end of Dan and Vadim's story