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Special Forces: Soldiers (1980-1989)

By Aleksandr Voinov/Vashtan and Marquesate

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Soldiers—1980-1989
1980 Chapter 1—The Sum of All Evil
August 1980, Kabul

Vadim Krasnorada's nostrils flared at the smell of smoke on the wind. A whole lot better than the dust and sand of the open plain, or as open as it ever got in this place. And standing on his own two feet was better than sitting on a rolling, grinding, howling tank like a parasite on a bucking animal.

He took a deep swig of vodka and let some drops run down his chin. When they'd arrived, the Afghans had greeted them with tea, sometimes flowers. Those goat-fuckers didn't have the beginning of a clue, but that was how Vadim liked them. Jump them full force when they didn't expect it. The city was in for a hazing. His lips spread into a grin.

He hitched a ride on a truck, to the outskirts of Kabul, where he knew the boys were already setting up a place to crash.

They had used a tank to smash open a house. It must have been a shop, Vadim reckoned; only part of the front needed to be torn out to make it serviceable. After the long dusty ride, Vadim was itching to get trashed. The curled up energy, the power, the tension, and he had expected, no, wanted a fight, more than anything in his life. After weeks of waiting for deployment back to Kabul, his skin was crawling with the need to do something, anything, but Kabul wouldn't do him that favour. Instead, the city welcomed the reinforcements he was officially a part of. Liberators. And as nice as it was not to get shot at, he felt like a wild bull penned up for too long. He absolutely needed a fight, and there was this time-honoured tradition in the Red Army: where there's vodka, there's trouble.

Heading into the bar, he pulled off the rag covering his head and rubbed his face. Sunburn. If the sun kept going like that, he'd get skinned alive. What a shithole.

The din of soldiers having fun. Drinking games, tall tales, everybody had seen action, been shot at, yeah, right. Losers. If those tales were to be believed, there were no goat-fuckers alive between Tajikistan and here. Vadim grunted with displeasure and headed towards the makeshift bar. The sight of his rank and some roubles bought him a bottle. Turning around, he watched the patrons and started

drinking. Back in the corner were some of his boys, he could see the same restlessness in their eyes. He headed over, was greeted, and they drank, warming up. Just warming up for the welcome party.

* * *

“And here goes a cocksucker!” laughed Vadim, finishing the fight with a double-footed kick to the other soldier’s face. The bloody conscript went down like a .50cal slug had gone through his head.

“Bulls eye!” Vadim shouted, and his men jeered. That should teach the bastard to move quicker next time. Granted, the bitch had been drunk as a plane full of officers, but any excuse would do. Vadim looked down at the bleeding body, and his stomach tensed in that dark, good way. Had from the moment he had known there was an excuse to spill blood. It raised the crimson flood in his veins. Raised it? It was already at breaking point.

He sneered, and kicked out again. The bastard didn’t twitch. Jaw breaking move was a good one. But also a finisher. Not so good. He poured some vodka over the inert man’s face, hoping he’d get up and maybe have half a fight left in him, but that was the end of the story. Fuck him. Not enough fun. Never enough fun.

* * *

The noise grew so loud, it reached the bored man a couple of streets away, making him stop dead in his tracks, softly swearing under his breath. What a fucking joke. His cover of ‘Dan McFadyen, Canadian Press Correspondent’, sweat-stained military surplus kit, cameras, multi-pocket vest, shoulder bag and dusty boots gave him the perfect excuse to be there. Seemed like he was about to get lucky on this dead-beat mission at last, with action looming around the corner. That sort of laughing, shouting and yelling could only mean Soviet soldiers and the Glorious Fucking Soviet Army on the loose.

He hurried to get to the source of the ruckus, re-adjusting his heavy camera. The bloody thing kept hitting him square in the chest. Once he got close, he slowed down keeping his hands in his pockets, casually strolling towards the

drunken noise. Perhaps the recce wouldn't be a complete fucking waste of time after all.

He'd almost reached the smashed-up building when a multi-voiced jeer erupted. Light inside, hordes of Russkies. "Bingo!" Dan snorted, "Gotcha, you bastards. Let's see who's come to the party."

The camera slipped out of his grasp, forcing him to stand still and rummage deeper inside the pocket. "Bollocks." He grabbed it at last, hurriedly snapping pictures. Shots of soldiers inside. The mess of bodies. Capturing all of them, the tall, the short, the blond, the dark.

He was standing directly opposite the building when a vehicle passed, bathing him for a moment in bright light.

* * *

Inside, Vadim was tossing back some more vodka amid the drunken noise. Suddenly, his eyes narrowed, bottle poised ready at his lips when he saw a man in the light. Tall, broad shouldered. Looked like he could pack a punch. Dark eyes and hair, but no goat-fucker. Something decidedly European about him. Press. Vadim wanted to take a handful of those camera straps, and twist them, choking the man. He inhaled sharply.

There. Hunger.

His comrades were discussing whether Afghani women were shaved ("Serious, they all are!"—"Not true!"—"They are!"—"They are not!"), and he knew where that discussion was going. By finding one to prove the point. They said women here fought like cats, but he was in the mood for a tiger. Something much stronger than vodka. "Fuck it, go and find one, but make sure it looks like it was somebody else." Cut her throat afterwards, he added with a gesture, but his boys knew what to do. They'd done this shit before.

Cheering like there had been a pay rise (as if that ever happened), they streamed outside. Vadim followed, keeping his eyes on the reporter, the other wolves now out of his way. Judging from the quarry's looks, it might not be all that easy.

A broad, strong form stepped in front of him. Good old Vanya, his second. "Stop," said Vadim, touching his arm briefly. His comrade turned and looked at

him. Vadim saw understanding. They had been through a lot at the barracks, abroad, and elsewhere. Flank man, always willing to lend a hand. And more, if asked properly. Like bash this peasant's head in, and he was perfectly willing to do that, too.

Vanya started to move, hunting a prey now apparently aware of the attention, because the man was stepping back into the shadows.

Too late. "Fuck," Dan hissed tonelessly. His sixth sense warned him he'd been spotted while taking photos. He turned slowly to walk away from the drunken Russians.

He strolled along, fighting the urge to run. Had to keep up his disguise of being nothing but a reporter. Red and white maple leaf flag crudely stitched on his shoulder bag. Canada. Yeah, that's what he was, Canadian. He cursed the sixth sense that hit the pit of his stomach like a sucker punch; even though it had saved his life more than once.

The two Soviet soldiers in the alley exchanged glances. Vanya moved to flank, hands signalling quickly, using his body as cover.

Vadim glanced up at the houses, gauging how best to gain height. He slipped into the alley, jumped, caught the rim of a house with his hands, and pulled himself up. Nothing like a little exercise.

Think in three dimensions, his sniper trainer had advised. *There's always an above, or a below*. Vadim crouched and moved on the roof, careful not to make a sound, following the reporter who was moving away from the makeshift bar. Good. People had probably left the immediate surroundings or were huddled in hidden places waiting till the ruckus died down. The killzone was deserted.

Vadim peered over the rim, saw Vanya and the quarry. Dark alley. Silent takedown. He pulled a knife, hid it behind his arm, and jumped down, a good three yards in front of the man.

Dan felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up before he'd become aware of the movement in front of him.

Shit! The Russian bastard had come out of nowhere, and he sensed the other coming up behind him. What would he have, a wire?

Attack was Dan's first instinct, but his fears were confirmed when he saw the second soldier from the corner of his eyes. Fuck. Two. No way back out of the

alley. He needed a shitload of luck to take them both down. Calm, calm Dan. Assume nothing. Why would they want to attack a reporter?

He opted for the smokescreen, calling out: “Hey mate, you scared the living daylights out of me. What’s up?”

The Soviet bastard smelled of menace like a beggar stank of piss. Not a joke. No play. The Russian was on the prowl. A predator; he knew the look, the threatening stance, had been there too many times himself. Drunken soldiers, rulers of a shitty place full of nothing but dust, out for a punch-up.

Vadim could tell from the tension the quarry was awake, aware. Heat sweat trickled down his back. Up this close, the man was potentially his match, unless the width of his shoulders was all weight lifting and no fighting. Good, deep chest. He could take a lot.

The English made some sense to him, but a couple of words didn’t. The grin, anxious, nervous. Fuck it. Vadim walked closer, took another swig of the bottle, acting relaxed and slightly drunk, then, in mid-swallow, hurled the bottle at the man’s head, smirking.

“Good evening.” In Russian.

Vanya’s signal to strike and slip the wire around his game’s head.

Dan had caught the sudden movement in front of him, glass catching a glint of light. He ducked while the knife slipped into his hand. The bottle shattered against the wall, just a yard away. The cunt behind him did have a wire but he missed, too. Shit, the cunt’s motion had morphed into a punch into his kidneys, a short, vicious jab with the left, the right hand still leading with the wire.

Dan went down, pain exploding. He lost his breath, but rolled to the side, gasping, scrambling back up onto his feet.

Vadim had seen this kind of skill a thousand times and more: knife fighting lessons, real life, a barracks pastime. He moved his hand forward, blade pointing towards his elbow, fingers holding the hilt securely, readjusting it for a quick slash across the other’s face, or a threatening one to imbalance him. Rage, the crimson flood inside him, moved up several notches when their quarry came back onto his feet. Vadim’s blood tasted of acid, heart racing like a horse. He grinned as he beckoned the man forward with an open hand. “Come to Daddy,” he said in accented English.

“Fuck yourself, Russkie!” Dan snarled, still breathless from the punch. He spun around, ignoring the taller Russian who spoke while he attacked the closer one. His blade flew upward, connected with an arm, tore into flesh. He pulled the knife back and grabbed his one and only chance to run past the first bastard.

Vadim’s nostrils flared; he heard Vanya’s curse and smelled more than saw the blood. The man was a good fighter. Now was the perfect moment for the second hunter to strike. His prey unbalanced, hurting, distracted. His synapses had to be burning with fear.

When Dan tried to run past him, he followed the sideways motion, lunging so he met the sprinting body in a full force, a no-holds barred tackle, smashing him into the nearest wall.

Vadim felt the coiled muscle close, smelled the man’s adrenaline. Bliss. He grabbed a handful of the dark hair, and smashed the head into the wall, pressing close, waiting for the other to lose the fight, keeping the arm with the knife locked and away. Vadim laughed, breathless. “Said: Come. To. Daddy.”

Dan’s mind raced, engulfed in pain. Instinct kicked in. Bones: check. Body: check. Knife: fucked. “And I said,” he gasped out, “fuck you!”

Breathing hard, Vadim’s body changed gear again, one higher. There was always one higher. It seemed he had never had so much fun. Not in the last months, not since he had been pulled back after the first mission of securing the airport and getting rid of the president last winter.

Dan’s head slammed forward in a Glaswegian kiss head butt, but no space for knee jerking, too close.

Vadim merely turned his neck, his reaction a matter of instinct. Still, the forehead hit his eyebrow with a white, splitting pain. That would have broken his nose. The fucker. He pressed closer, could have licked the sweat from the man’s upper lip. The man was glistening under the dust, the smell of combat, stress, fear. So intense it distracted him for a heartbeat, too wrapped up in the raw physical reality of close combat.

Both he and the fucking maniac were high on adrenaline and the madness of the fight. Dan knew he was losing, yet he was fucking SAS, goddamnit, he’d never give up, never surrender. Twisting his leg as far as he could, he slammed the booted heel right into the Russian’s ankle bone.

Vadim's high boots took most of the impact, but it fucking hurt, sobering his mind, cutting through the vodka.

Struggling for breath, Dan smirked, but the satisfaction was short-lived.

Vadim snarled at the arrogance, pressed the knife to the other man's throat, his pupils widening in appreciation of blade against flesh. Flesh so alive. Eye to eye.

Dan froze in fear, but not panic. Not yet. No fucking chance. No doubt the fucker would use it. His thoughts raced, judging his chances, slim as they were. No situation was ever hopeless. Fuck! Dan's eyes caught hold of the other Russian bastard. He remembered. Two. His breath rattled, eyes narrowed, sweat running down his neck. "What the fuck do you want, Russkie?"

Vanya, touched his shoulder with his right hand, cursing. "Bastard cut me," he said, sounding more surprised than angry as he pulled the pistol and cocked it.

Vadim knew exactly what his comrade was thinking. Feeling. The hunt was over. The tension was still there, the man hadn't quite given in yet, but Vadim listened into the body, listened to the song of tendons and blood and sweat. Waiting for the shift of tune, subtle as it was. There was realisation. He could detect it in the man's eyes, narrowing as they were.

Vadim never answered. The fight and stress had made him hard. A short, intense burst of energy surged right into his groin, transforming him into fire. He needed to destroy, but he was savouring this moment, the moment of understanding, which still did not change into capitulation. As much as he enjoyed that, drawing it out too long was too dangerous. A trapped tiger. He couldn't let him go. He moved the hilt of the knife subtly, then lashed out to knock the butt against the man's temple.

The way the body slumped told him his quarry wasn't faking it. It became a heavy, satisfying weight against him, the moment broken, dimmed, the intensity reduced, and he was aching to have it back. Be eye to eye with somebody as quick and as smart as the man had turned out to be. Vanya was no challenge. Even with a gun in his hand and a hundred reasons to hate him, Vadim never felt afraid. They were comrades. That held a world of meaning.

He nodded to him, giving hand signals. Silent. Retreat. Find safe place. He hoisted the man up, across and over his shoulders, like a wounded comrade.

Vanya took the knife that had slipped from the man's fingers, and they retreated deeper into the alley. Vanya broke, shoulder first, into one of the buildings. A quick scan and search, but the place was so dusty it had to have been deserted for months. Up a ladder into a primitive cave, dark, but there was light from outside. The moon. Enough to see by.

Vadim put the man on the ground, patted him down quickly. Money, a rolled-up wad of filthy Afghanis, but no ID, not even a press ID card, no accreditation. It gave him pause. Then again, stuff did get stolen, and it was entirely justified not to carry around a passport or anything difficult to replace. It was a hassle to get into or out of the country without papers. He had probably bunked up with locals, or some press office.

Even unconscious, there was tension and power in the body. Warm, firm flesh. He rolled the man onto his stomach, sat on his thighs and took the scarf off, then tied his hands. Not great, but it would suffice. "You okay?" he asked Vanya.

"Flesh wound," said Vanya and took the moment to wash the cut with vodka, hissing through his teeth. "Fuck. I want to rip his fucking head off!"

"Get me the oil from the gun kit." Nice, round ass. Vadim would enjoy this, even more so because he was bleeding himself. He could smell the drying blood on his face, and the itch at his eyebrow. Seeing the man under him, feeling him alive and helpless.

He pulled the knife again and cut the belt; then the knife blade whispered through the fabric of the camo trousers. Reporter or not, he wore army gear. Good boots, too. He inhaled sharply when he realised the man wasn't wearing any underwear, revealing firm flesh.

Vanya came closer, watching him with wide eyes. Vadim could see his comrade was getting hard; he was too drunk to hide it or probably even notice. Oh yes. He already loved Kabul.

Vadim squeezed some oil into his hand. He'd done this before, usually with somebody who had challenged either of them. Or just somebody random in the barracks. Sometimes, officer games. Survival training. Play abduction and interrogation. The young ones never spilled the beans. It was perfectly acceptable to be terrified of Vadim or Vanya, and nobody guessed how deep some of that fear ran. How physical it was.

Dan was surfacing more, sensed touches, movement, voices. Warm hand, cold steel. Comfortable, rare sensation of hands moving over his flesh, warmth spreading on...

A sudden jerk. Consciousness returned like a sprung coil, snapping into action without a moment's grace between muddy darkness and shocking clarity.

"What?" Dan's voice was strained, dust tickling his lungs and then heaviness across his limbs. "What the fuck?" He lifted his head, had to try and know and see and fight. He forced his upper body off the ground, hands tearing against the restraints. He twisted within the confines, fighting against the hands on his body, the blade, the weight, and attempted to throw himself onto his back. No one should be strong enough to have overpowered him. No one. The fight wasn't over yet. Survive, by any means. Victim—never.

"Fuck off, you Russian bastards!" Not thinking the unthinkable. Impossible. No.

Vadim, holding the man's thighs in a vice-like grip, enjoyed the resistance. He opened his fly as the bastard started to struggle again. He had the skull of a mountain goat. The ones with the long horns, bashing foreheads against each other, recklessly, while climbing up a vertical cliff. He snarled, but Vanya was already moving, kneeling beside them, putting one strong hand between the man's shoulder blades, pressing him down, using a knee for additional leverage.

"Pistol," said Vadim.

Vanya cocked the pistol and pressed it into their quarry's neck.

Dan froze when the muzzle dug into his flesh. Breathing hard, harsh, forcing down fear.

Vadim enjoyed the sight. The sudden stillness after the bucking. And it hadn't even started. He opened another button, took out his cock and began oiling himself, watching Vanya's eyes as he did so. Vanya knew the sight well enough. There was this unspoken link, the savage hunger they both shared, especially after an encounter like this. Vanya would suck him off tonight, remembering what they had done.

Vadim shifted enough to bring a slick hand to the other man's ass, trickling more oil there. "Now. Pray you're not virgin," he said in a rough voice in English. The power was heady, the mix of triumph, and the strength of the victim. He hoped he would keep fighting. Please, keep fighting.

Virgin? The Russian's mockery hooked itself into Dan's mind. Animal snarls tore from him. It was not fucking possible. He'd never believed that kind of shit really could happen to men. Not to him, not in a dark fucking alley in fucking Kabul in a rat infested shitty place of a fucking ramshackle deserted house. No. Just...

No!

He finally realized it was true. Got the message loud and clear. Everything inside screamed and fought against this insanity that wasn't supposed to be happening. Shock. Terror. Focused on what he knew and what he had dealt with before. Cold steel. Muzzle of deadly force against his neck. He had survived those. The rest was impossible. Situation unbelievable. Couldn't happen, no way.

Despite the gun Dan fought. Fuck the recce, fuck the army, fuck the Not-So-Special Forces. Fought against the impossible; fought until the pistol pressed so hard against his neck he felt the steel eating into his brain. He found no words to protest, just thoughts of creeping-crawling blinding bloodied violence. Death, destruction, slow cutting of the Russkie's flesh and skin, the baring of bones. Imagined the bastard's screams of terror and pain. Had to survive, had to kill, had to destroy. Revenge.

Death to the Russian bastard.

Virgin, Vadim thought, or incredibly spirited. He would have to severely wound the man to stop him struggling, resisting him with all his soul, all his strength. He kicked the legs apart, used his knees to keep them open, spread the man, legs against legs, his cock brushing the naked flesh every time the man bucked.

He needed his complete weight to get anywhere, spread him open further, he was impossibly hard from the struggle, thumb digging into flesh to separate it, then followed, pressing cock into the heat, the tenderness, the man bucking, trying to get away, even though his movement was as restricted as Vadim could make it. Closed, tight, pressing. He could feel the body yield, yield only in that place, as the rest of the man was hard as wood with revulsion.

Vadim closed his eyes, forced more in, could hear his own breath, loud, lips open, feeling the pain and discomfort and the delicious and complete closeness. Nothing like that, nothing, certainly not Vanya. It was like trying to fuck a fist, and he was hard enough to do it.

Dan didn't scream. This pain was too complete, too all-encompassing, too unbelievable to allow any sounds. Still, he tried to fight, thrashed, fought against the impossible intrusion; that which could not possibly happen.

But it wasn't enough, never enough against the penetrating force and the Russian's brutal strength. Dan struggled to buck up and get away when this *thing* brutally breached his body. Continued to fight against the fucking impossibility that had no name. It couldn't be happening. No! He opened his mouth as if to scream but nothing came out, not a sound.

It was like riding an earthquake. Vadim could feel the man's ragged breathing, could feel the tension deep inside, inside that raw heat, still fighting. Some victims went limp and started crying, and he sometimes goaded them to see if there was any fight left. Never had one fought him like this. He needed more force to get deeper, using his weight, his strength, not out of cruelty, or maybe that, too, but more so he could savour it to the utmost.

"Leave me some," whispered Vanya.

Vadim grinned, feeling sweat trickle down his face. Finally, something gave, and he moved fast and vicious, riding his own adrenaline, almost resting on the man to get as deep as possible. His harsh thrusts ran like fire through his own body, each motion of their bodies intense. The vodka had drained away, so he was fully here in the present, fully struggling and enjoying himself. The force of orgasm seared through his body, and a few more, nearly desperate thrusts brought that message home.

Dan was pain. Torn apart inside, raw, bleeding, horror so pure and intense, he couldn't put a name to it. This agony had no name, because it wasn't meant to be done to men. Men like him. Alpha males. He was everything and everyone and owned every hole and he was not and would not and could not... He made no sound; every scream, every moment of terror and hatred was locked inside in silence. No one would ever know, no one would ever find out—if he survived, and fuck, he had to survive, had to destroy, had to wreak his revenge.

Vadim pulled out, panting, resting for a moment, kneeling, then drank some more vodka. The vile stuff burned and cooled, soothed the thirst, and dulled part of this. He pulled his own pistol, and took Vanya's position, muzzle in the man's neck, knee in his back, staring into his face. He wanted to see the defiance, the pain, and the strength as Vanya mounted him.

It was only fair Vanya didn't get the best of it, was left with the scraps. His comrade didn't care much for the whole thing. He did whatever Vadim did, emulated him, like a twisted mirror image. Vadim watched him, then watched the body underneath being moved by the thrusts, the cock moving in and out and the still struggling flesh. It would take a platoon to take fighting out of this one. Absent eyes, but burning with intensity, as if he wasn't even in the picture, as if the man was inside himself, not letting anything, anybody touch him. The precious moment was gone, Vadim reflected, feeling somehow lost himself, his body getting heavy and tired, that pleasant sluggishness after sex. Vodka taking away some of the emotions. Vanya's grunting meant very little, the man underneath him only struggled on instinct, automatic. That mind-searing flash of something profound was gone.

Or he was starting to get drunk. Vadim put his uniform in order, gun still trained on the prone body, and took another deep swallow. After the battle. He didn't really care.

With a curse that sounded almost tender, Vanya came as well, and remained on top, catching his breath. "Ah, my little bitch," he said, something which seemed almost funny.

It was over, just like that. Gone.

Vadim crouched to put the gun into Vanya's hand. "Finish him off," he said in Russian. "He's press. You know what they say, dead press bad press. Hack off his hands and head and dump them somewhere outside the city." The press didn't like it when one of their own vanished. Kill a thousand Afghans, and nobody glanced up. Manhandle one of those vultures, and the fucking United Nations came down on you.

"Yes, comrade captain," said Vanya in Russian.

Vadim smirked at the address. A forgivable mistake. He had the rank on his shoulders, after all. "See you later." Vanya stared at him, knowing what that meant. Burn off the rest of the adrenaline. He shared in the kill, and that was generous.

With that, Vadim left. Moving on when he saw no point in staying. Walking out into a clear, starry night, the sounds of soldiers in the distance.

One hell of a welcome party.

Dan had been listening to the voices, disjointed words, scraps of sound. He was engulfed in the stench of blood, sweat and fear, but most of all hatred. This

smell would never leave his nostrils again, no matter how much he'd try to scrub the bastards off his skin.

No movement any longer.

Dan's thoughts gathered, pulling himself back together. Survive to kill and wreak revenge. Focus slowly returning, ignoring the pain. Didn't matter. All that mattered was the voice that trailed off, the steps that were retreating. Not the man he was left alone with.

His hideout knife. He remembered with sudden clarity, felt its reassuring presence strapped to his thigh. Breathing slowly through his nose, he focussed on nothing but the sounds behind him. He was ready. First he needed to fool the remaining bastard into safety.

Let them believe he was broken.

The man got up and prodded him with a boot, then bent down and untied the knot securing the scarf around his wrists. Hopefully he thought he was nothing but a reporter. Out cold—no danger. Clothing rustled, sounding like he was securing the pistol and shoving it into his belt.

Dan listened to the steps, registering every single movement with a clarity beyond anything he'd ever seen or felt as the fuckwit moved a couple steps away to piss. This was his chance, he couldn't afford any more mistakes. Fuck the Army and his mission. He owned that Russian's life. The bastard's blood would be spilt for no one but himself. One down, another one to go. He'd get them both.

He moved slowly, forcing his body to comply. His hand delved under the waistband of his ruined trousers for the three inch folding blade.

He moved silently, hatred dulling the pain. Crouched, using the cover of darkness to get closer to the standing shadow. His faint shuffling noises were easily over-shadowed by the piss that came out of the Russkie's blood-smearred cock. His blood.

No. Not thinking.

Then, at last, a lightning strike, Dan's arm around the fucker's neck, hand firmly clasped over the mouth. Cold steel pressing against flesh.

Hissing into the cunt's ear, "Fuck you, bastard," in Russian.

He caught the man just as he'd been about to turn around, obviously surprised, his responses dulled by alcohol. He felt a shudder run through the body, probably nerves and fibres firing into overdrive.

Dan didn't feel any pain at that moment. He felt nothing. Nothing other than his blade pressing against the fucker's throat. His embrace of the other's body almost tender, loving, if he weren't burning with so much hatred. Gently whispering the words in Russian: "Go to hell."

With a rapid, precise movement he slit the throat open from one ear to the other, pushed the body forward and away from him, avoiding the worst of the blood that erupted from the severed jugular. He needed his trousers, after all.

Dan watched the twitching body on the floor dispassionately. The bastard was taking for ever to die. He had to get back to safety as quickly as possible, and fabricate a believable lie about what had happened.

Fingers stiff, he struggled to get rid of his boots and the cut-off clothes. Crouching beside the body and avoiding the pool of blood, he hurried to take boots and trousers off, putting on the latter. They were too wide and made from Soviet camo, but they'd do.

Hissing between his teeth, he wondered how the fuck he was going to pretend he was physically unharmed. Couldn't possibly ask for medical attention. No. Fucking. Way! He had to pray he hadn't caught a disease from those Russian perverts.

Haphazardly wiping at the sticky shit running down his legs, before pulling the dead man's camo trousers up. Fumbling for the small camera, he stuffed it into the shoulder bag, tightened the trousers with the brass-buckled belt, and laced his boots. He looked around, waited, but didn't hear a sound. Good. He moved into the shadows before forcing his battered body to run.

One down. One to go. He'd get the other Russian cunt. He'd make him pay.

* * *

Vadim had jogged back to the barracks. Taking in the night air, not a care in the world. The tension was gone, gone in the best way possible. Much better than anticipated. He might get shouted at for general conduct of himself and his men, then again, the senior officers didn't give a fuck. If someone was going to throw a fit, it could just as easily be him.

He sorted out his gear, his bunk. Space was limited. They'd build more barracks for all the troops being moved here. Tens of thousands. The juggernaut

that was the Soviet Army in motion. Not elegant, not pretty, but he'd be fucked if he cared right now.

After storing his kit away, he sorted out Vanya's stuff as well, all the time carrying on a half-drunk debate with himself about how best to set up routine in this place. Keep the men sharp, focused. He'd have to work out how the senior officers ticked. Who was a medal hound, who was a braggart, who was a complete waste of space, and who didn't get out of the bottle. The usual stuff.

He went to the washroom. He wanted to spend hours in a shower but water was rationed in this waste of map space. When he returned, Vanya wasn't there. Bastard. He'd probably got wasted. Never knowing when enough was enough.

After a while, he started to become restless. Vanya was his second, and they had served together for quite some time. He had ordered Vanya to be here, and he wasn't. That was unlike him.

He woke a driver, who took him back, finding the house again easily. The grey light of beginning dawn made Kabul the most joyless place in the universe, and that included the barren expanse of the moon. After telling the driver to wait, he entered. Careful, even though he didn't know why. He half expected Vanya to have passed out before the job was finished. He had the stamina of a horse, but couldn't hold his vodka.

The smell of blood sent his hackles up. Proceeding, pistol out and ready.

Upstairs. The place reeked of blood. He saw Vanya. Bare feet, trouserless. Boots lying close, cast away. That told him everything. There was only one person who had needed trousers badly enough to take those of an enemy.

He crouched, and by instinct checked the body for booby traps. Numb inside. Tiredness. Vanya would never snore again. Never imitate him. It used to annoy him, and he had meant to wean him of the habit. Now Vadim would have to write a report and send a letter to the family. Accident. Vanya had fallen off a tank, whatever. Nobody ever questioned those anyway. Vanya would go home in a metal tin. His war was over.

Vadim had the feeling his own had just begun.

* * *

A trek back to camp for Dan unlike any before. If his stiff movements weren't so fucking pathetic it would be sickeningly funny. He could hardly walk because of the searing pain.

He caught a ride on a lorry, crouching on the back, grinding his teeth. In agony at every pothole on the dirt track; each jarring thrust tearing into his insides. Reminding him that Nothing had happened. Nothing that made him want to scream in pain. Nothing that required most of his willpower to shut up and remain silent. Nothing that made him swear he would get back to Kabul as soon as he could to kill that fucking cunt. He would find that bastard, maim, and pay back slowly, with extortionate interest, what he had not done to him, for what had never happened. Then kill.

He'd killed one man tonight, would hunt and take down another.

This time it was for revenge, not duty.

1980 Chapter 2—The Wasteland

August-September 1980, Kabul

The next two days saw Dan reaping the rewards of his iron constitution, his body fighting an infection that never fully materialised. Remaining silent with gritted teeth, visions of death and destruction, and pretending to be fine. Taking a shit was the hardest; even the coke he'd managed to score on the black market wasn't enough to dull the agony. Biting into his sleeve whenever he had to take a dump, almost choking on the fabric, just to keep quiet in the rickety shelter that served as the loos.

He'd handed the camera in to develop the pictures, got back images of Russian soldiers, drunk, out for trouble, sating their appetite for destruction. Searched amongst the nameless faces until he found the right one. Tall, blond, and a fucking bastard, destined to die. His research was legitimate, setting resources in motion and the bloodhounds onto the trail of the 'Soviet Hero'. He soon got what he wanted: Name, rank, and more beyond.

Captain Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada. Paratrooper in the 'Glorious Soviet Army'.

He'd get the man, sooner or later, to obliterate the memory of Nothing.

* * *

A week passed, and his body managed to heal untreated. Dan coped until he got his next mission. A fucking press conference. He stuck to his disguise of a messy-haired commie-loving hippie reporter with suicidal tendencies, covering every war-torn scrap of a shitty country. It was a far safer look than the close-shaved, military appearance he could have mustered had he been in uniform. Instead, he wore a crumpled mix of army surplus kit and civilian clobber, all sweaty and wrinkled, the standard outfit of any war correspondent.

Dan was late, deliberately so, had lingered outside and missed the bigwigs' arrival. He couldn't give a monkey's arse about the speeches. Except for his height and build, he blended into the crowd. The accent fake, doing a passable job as

Canadian press by hiding his native Scots Highland accent, smoothed down by years in the army.

He entered the lounge, quickly checking over the press already assembled, seated like sardines and frying in the hot air. He stood up the back, staying close to the doors, casting his gaze to the front.

Suddenly he froze.

The Russian bastard.

Recognition hit him square in the chest with the full force of a punch, yet he didn't flinch. Nothing. Just a twitch of his hand. Hatred surged and pooled in the pit of his stomach, but he forced himself to stroll casually towards the centre of the room, leaning against the wall. Watching.

* * *

The rank on Vadim's uniform was real, but the unit symbols and para captain rank weren't. He had polished the star on the peaked cap; then made sure it was at exactly the correct angle. Wearing uniform was a bitch in Kabul. He was sweating, but he was a military advisor, and that meant keeping up appearances. Just another trick in the book.

This was not an invasion. It was brothers helping brothers in a civil war that could tear the country apart. He remembered the party line, remembered what they'd told the conscripts, about building schools and protecting Afghanistan from foreign influence. Invaders didn't host press conferences in run-down hotels in central Kabul.

The place swarmed with soldiers on security detail, and plenty of officers, more senior than he was; he was mostly here for the cameras anyway. To look imposing and reassuring, maybe answer a question or two.

The room had been packed since before the conference started, and the Afghani politicians already appeared to be exceedingly uncomfortable in their ill-fitting suits. The General looked hung over, eyes red, meaty face profoundly dispassionate. Vadim had positioned himself near the Soviet flag, which, symbol of symbols, seemed very red near the Afghani flag.

Cameras flashed. It was a mob with a hundred heads, hundreds of lenses. Madness, to expose himself like that, but he forced himself to ignore it. It was the

usual stuff: We're friends, united in a big, happy, Socialist dream. A new order, marching towards peace. No talk of confrontation, no talk about how they were flexing muscles in the face of the West.

More cameras flashing. Some reporters noted down everything, others, a lot of disheveled long-haired *hippies* didn't bother writing. They were the smart ones, bored by the party line, waiting for Questions and Answers.

Such a decidedly non-Soviet pastime.

Vadim stared off into the distance, eyes unfocused, deeply bored, yet he was not supposed to move a single muscle. He was decoration, and decoration didn't move.

The crowd was one stirring, restless mass of shifting bodies. People heading for the toilets and coming back, or drinking water, some were eating, some fanned themselves. A lot of layered movements, following no order, no purpose. People moved because they were people. The constant, restless shifting of the herd.

The memory of a different crowd: Thousands of people, flecks of colour in the stadium. The sound they made. The roar that almost made his heart stop when he had heard it the first time.

He blinked and forced his attention back to the present. Began to take notice, singled people out, assessed them, didn't bother to store the information. It had no value. But then. Right in the centre at the back. A tall man.

Vadim's eyes narrowed. Was that possible? Press, just when he had convinced himself the man had been anything but press. He had put up too much of a fight, stayed operational all the time. Fought too hard. His stomach muscles tensed. It was him. The shock was like ice on his face. He scanned the man for weapons; no way was he a reporter.

The man raised his eyes, made momentary contact and smirked briefly. Even across the distance there had been a flash of recognition.

Vadim inhaled, kept breathing steadily. Fuck. Alive. It had been dark, right? The man should not have been able to recognise him. He had worn combat gear without most of the weapons, fairly casual. He was polished now, intangible.

Forcing himself to follow the line of questions, Vadim feigned interest while his blood surged. The colours in the room became brighter, much like on drugs. Combat instincts came back in full force.

Suddenly Vadim remembered the smell of Vanya's blood, the heat of the man's flesh, the desperation. Square jaw, dark eyes, tousled hair. Vadim liked the face, good features, cheekbones, chin, nose, all well defined. Judging from his build and stance, the man knew about potential, about discipline. Knew about war and struggle.

And he knew it had been Vadim. How on earth did he? There were plenty of captains. A few were even bigger than he was. Vadim's chest expanded, as if to take in more air as he returned that gaze. He should have undressed him, he reflected, but he had been too drunk. No opportunity to take time, to savour the full potential of that body. Bottom line: What a waste.

Never mind the bastard had killed Vanya—and deprived him of his favourite toy in the absence of real game, and put him in the position of having to answer questions. Why had comrade Ivan been mugged and killed alone in a dark alley? Resistance fighters, low level insurgents, sad, sad story, but it reflected badly on Vadim as his superior.

Q&A time. One of the Afghans allowed reporters to speak. Vadim watched the man raise his hand.

* * *

At last it was Dan's turn to join the circus of lies.

He kept his eyes on the medal-gleaming piece of Russian shit, making certain once and for all the bastard recognised him. That, and more. A deadly promise.

“Captain Krasnorada.” He'd done his intelligence homework and cherished the power that knowledge brought. “With all these reinforcements streaming into Afghanistan, Kabul especially, and numbers rising daily, how can you reassure the population that there will be discipline amongst your men and safety for civilians?” He smiled, a moment of sarcasm, shared between hunters.

The game had begun.

As the man said his name, Vadim felt tension in his shoulders. How...unless they had given out his name, as in: Your questions will be answered by...and then a long list of names. Secret service. Politicians. Functionaries.

Concentrate. The English language had articles, he tended to forget; not enough practice, and the language lessons had long since stopped. “We understand there is concern among the population.” He knew the General approved of the turn of phrase, the fact he didn’t say “I,” but “we”. He knew his doctrine. “And we assure you the soldiers are well-disciplined and well-aware of their mission to forge iron bonds of eternal friendship and mutual support with the Afghan population.”

There. A complete un-answer.

Dan briefly showed his teeth. He’d expected this sort of answer. “Thank you, Captain. I am confident your reassurance extends to everyone, not just the Afghans.” He slouched back against the wall, feigning disinterest while he could hardly wait for the conference to be over. He had to shadow the bastard, needed to know everything about him. What he ate, where he shat, who he fucked.

Vadim gave a curt nod, as if it was beneath him to correct himself and extend Socialist goodwill to the rest of the world. Fuck that. It was about competition, not about world peace.

At last the reporters left him alone. To them, he toed the party line, and tearing into a henchman when the General was in the room was pointless. Some reporters from other brother-states asked all the right questions. They had official approval to be here, and they made the most of it.

Vadim’s eyes moved across the crowd, but couldn’t help resting on the relaxed tiger. The looks, the power. He wouldn’t mind a repeat performance. He wouldn’t mind wrestling the man, fighting him. With a knife, without a knife, epee, gun, whatever.

He waited until the conference was over, the General and senior officers ushered out, the press types mingling a bit. Kept his eyes on the “reporter”, who made no move to leave. After muttering an insincere excuse to one of his comrades, he moved towards the man. Cautious, even though he had a pistol. But the main deterrent was that there were still press people around.

Dan slowly straightened when the Russian came toward him. He raised his head until it was level, his face showing nothing, devoid of any expression when faced with his rapist. But then Nothing had happened. Nothing at all.

He kept his hand close to his thigh, where one of the knives was hidden and mocked in a deliberately soft voice, “Well, well, I didn’t know they trained up Russian soldiers as circus ponies?”

“Term is ‘Soviet’,” Vadim automatically replied. He stepped close enough to be heard, yet far away enough to see any movement coming from the other man’s centre. Shoulders moved first in an attack, and it took a master to hide it.

“Soviet, Russkie, who the fuck cares.” Dan delivered the casual insult with a grin that never reached his eyes.

Circus pony. He had felt more like a potted plant, or a Christmas tree in that show. Vadim suddenly lost momentum., He liked the voice. Americans sounded as if they were talking around a hot stone, all sounds washed out, but there was structure in this man. “You, also, seem to be man of many talents.”

Dan shrugged, alert to the n’t degree. Awake and ruthlessly willing. “Talents? Yeah, I’m not just a good photographer, pretty good writer, too.” Playing dumb, but with little effort. Neither of them was stupid. Hunter and prey, roles undefined. For a moment Dan’s nostrils widened, as he wondered if he would be able to smell the Russian’s blood, long before he’d smashed the bastard’s face in. He’d get his prize when the time was right, and until then he had to remain patient. He bent one leg and casually pushed the sole of his boot against the wall. Appearing relaxed, but able to propel himself forward immediately.

Vadim stood tall, felt his blood pounding at the aura of danger, of challenge. The man was giving off the kind of heat that pulled him closer. One thing to get hard from a scuffle in a dark alley and because he was half drunk and bored, looking for random violence, but another to look the man in the eye, in broad daylight, with press close enough to enjoy an inexplicable stabbing between an American reporter and a Soviet military advisor. No, Canadian. Not American. Tree leaf, white, red, not the star-spangled banner.

To be alone. To allow the fire to flare up, no holds barred. Vadim wanted to press him against the wall, turn him around, fuck him again. Harder. Longer. And again. Until both their bodies couldn’t take any more, and then cut his throat.

He said nothing.

Dan smiled coldly at the tell-tale silence. “All on your own, Captain? Don’t you Russkies always turn up with a second in command?”

Vadim recoiled. Vanya. Fuck him. Vanya had borne the brunt of the fire, the raging torrent. Vanya who fought and resisted and still sucked him like his life depended on it. He tensed, just as if the attack had been real rather than words. This was getting too close. A fascination for a strong body did not go together with the same man having killed Vanya. He needed a fuck. Or a fight. Both. If only he could have both. “My second is inconvenienced.” And grinning a double grin, festering blue and green in a hot metal tin in storage at Kabul airport. He would probably explode before touching home soil.

“Inconvenienced?” Dan smirked, revenge coiling in his stomach like a lazy snake, sunning its smooth muscled length in the glow of hatred. “I’m sorry to hear that, Captain.”

Sorry? That grin was not sorry and his dark eyes were cold.

Dan glanced at his watch, pushed himself slowly away from the wall and shrugged. “Look at the time, I got things to do. Well, I hope your ‘inconvenience’ won’t be too much trouble.” Shouldering his bag, the Canadian flag grubby, but still prominent. “I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

The man’s voice had turned even softer, smiling sardonically. A promise? A threat? Or just a platitude?

Vadim wanted to hit him, wipe the grin off; then realized the bastard had turned the tables on him. He didn’t step back, followed the man’s motion and almost got chest to chest with him. Smelling distance. Close enough to feel his heat, and remember. “I do not want to keep you longer than necessary,” Vadim said in a low voice. “I am sure your mission is more important than indulging me. I have feeling I know exact place where we meet again.” His eyes narrowed with challenge.

Dan’s smile faltered for a moment. The bastard had come physically too close. The same scent again, the same heat. “Do you? Really?” He got himself back under control and his dark brows lifted. “Good for you.” Yes, he knew the place, too, and he would be there. Tonight.

Dan turned to walk away, leaving a throwaway comment in Russian, “Until next time, Russkie.” A dangerous game, his Russian accented but fluent. Cat—mouse, tiger and moth. The dance in the flame had begun.

Vadim snarled. The man was full of surprises. Special Forces. He had to be. Mercenary, most likely, because there were no western troops in the country. That

made him an enemy. He would do nothing forbidden. Meet with an enemy, try to capture and interrogate. He'd return sated, with knowledge. And ash on his skin.

* * *

Vadim picked a fight just for the relief it brought. Somebody said something about Vanya. Implying Vanya had been too fucking drunk to see what was coming.

Absolutely legitimate thing to say. And absolutely legitimate to react to it. Vadim dropped the long bar of the weights, the cast iron hitting the concrete with a metal thud. He was instantly in fighting mode, blindly attacking the lieutenant who thought he was tough. Eventually, it was a bunch of other junior officers who pulled them apart—after the lieutenant looked like losing. Up to that point, people were too busy betting on the outcome.

He snarled, then left; blood and death in his gaze, but of course not for the hapless comrade. He wanted to ram down a wall, wanted to take the energy and do something with it, something outrageous, tiring, satisfying, something as real and cruel and intense as he could possibly do.

Still no showers. He had to clean himself with a rag and a little water, shave, too. His hands were shaking, as if he was on withdrawal or dehydrated. He tried to find a moment's peace, tried to jerk off, but couldn't take the spike off. Not enough. The physical reaction happened, sure enough, but he was still on edge, worse than getting shot full of drugs before a competition.

The country got to him, and the memory of the one perfect moment, equal powers hell bent on destroying each other. Vadim left the barracks as soon as he could, wore his camo, knives, and a pistol. Could have taken the AK, but didn't. Too much noise. This was, strangely enough, also about restraint, cleverness, and control. And that was what was driving him insane with need.

* * *

Vadim arrived at dusk, hiding in an alley with camo paint smeared over his pale features and darkened hair. He climbed up a ladder after checking the surroundings for booby traps.

Dusk had settled by the time Dan dressed in camo trousers and army boots, shirt and jumper and a well-worn dirty parka. It got cold at night in this hell-hole. He'd covered his head and part of his face with a dark rag, not only to protect from the dust, but to disguise his features.

By the time he arrived in the city, night had fallen. He cautiously circled the scene of the crime, before silently pulling himself up a wall. The bird's track across the roofs, the safest option in the dark.

He waited for what felt like an eternity before checking the surrounding buildings, roofs, windows—finally he slid down through the roof into the abandoned building where a scent hit his nostrils. Sweat and blood, death and decay, bringing back memories of a physical pain he'd never believed he would ever encounter.

The air was dusty, laden with threats, but the dark rag around his head ensured he breathed in his own sweat, not the putrid air. He crouched motionless in a corner, blending into the darkness, waiting, focused, all senses alert. The bastard would come, he counted on it, for reasons he couldn't decipher, but it didn't matter jack shit to him why the Russkie would be drawn back, right into his extinction. All that mattered was his own reason. Revenge.

Finally! Over the ghostly shuffle of dry wind, Dan's senses made out the systematic presence of a human. Even an expert couldn't disguise the sheer bulk of a heavy body. The Russian, no doubt. His personal enemy. Willing him nearer, the knife firmly in his hand. He'd always preferred the up-close and personal blade; bullets were for wusses.

Vadim moved away from the hole in the ground and crouched near it. The darkness could hold a platoon of men. While his eyes were adjusting, he wished he was a cat, a lion, an owl, or, indeed, a bat, one of the various unit symbols. Recon. Move silently, see and hear everything. Even if bats were technically blind. He could feel his throat vibrate, as he sensed like a snake. The instructors had told him to trust his guts, see with his mind. Sometimes, the animal part of his brain picked up things the human part discarded as white noise. He was wide open, feeling out into the darkness.

The place hadn't changed. Vanya's blood had to still be here, the place smelled of death. Over there, where he had died, a dark stain, specks on the wall opposite.

Vadim moved deeper into the room, still crouching, to be as small a target as possible, moving his feet carefully, not shuffling, not grinding bits of rubble into the ground. Using an age-old trick, he reached for a piece of stone or dirt, and tossed it into the corner, where it rolled, clattering. ‘Where are you?’

Dan’s senses were so alert, he felt his nerves strumming against the confines of his spine, burning lines inside the marrow of his bones, mixing with the white noise of the blood in his ears. There. A sound. Blood and bones, sinew and flesh; tonight he’d cut him open.

“Welcome home, Russkie.” Dan whispered in Russian.

Vadim’s lips twisted into a smile at his native language. He had trained this one well—he already spoke a civilized language. Something strange and arousing about the fact that the man spoke at all. Like speaking during sex, when every word was more intense and went straight through the skin. He knew where the other was now, his eyes found the silhouette, and he straightened a little, as if in greeting. His body shivered from the voice, like breath on his face. Or in his neck, and he was still so far away. Hard to guess, but he’d say about two and a half yards.

His own voice similarly low. “Your Russian is not bad. You haven’t lived in Russia, but you had good teachers.” It was the salute just before fencing. He could be terribly old-fashioned against an equal.

Dan chuckled softly, an eerie sound in the darkness. Deceptively gentle and strangely amused. Then a soft shuffle, and his body melted in one smooth motion out of the shadow, into a square of moonlight from a window that gaped torn and wide open like an eternally screaming mouth.

With all the confidence only a justifiably arrogant motherfucker like him could muster, Dan casually pulled the rag from his face, revealing teeth, gleaming in the dull light. A grin like a baring of fangs. “I’m afraid they didn’t teach you much. Haven’t you ever heard of the first maxim? Never leave a comrade alone.”

Vadim studied the way the moonlight traced the man’s cheekbone, the line of his ear, the darkness of his hair. Stubble. Firm, strong skin he wanted to sink his teeth into. Wanted to draw blood. Vanya. He missed the things he could do to him. Their silent communication. “If he had followed orders, he would still be alive.”

The absolute, shocking truth. Instructors had stressed the point that sometimes, some people were too stupid to survive.

“Don’t be so sure he would still be alive, Krasnorada.” Smooth words, soft voice. Dark as a caress, hiding the venom of hatred.

“You know my name.” Vadim moved closer, made sure the light didn’t interfere with his vision, but also allowed the man a closer look at him. No dress uniform this time, and nothing hid his features. “And I know what you are.”

Dan didn’t react, only his head followed the movement, studying the Russkie. Same build, same muscles. One dark, one blond underneath the camo paint. His own body slightly less bulky and perhaps half an inch shorter, a negligible difference. Watched the Russian dispassionately. Just a man, a man who had done Nothing and would die for Nothing. Yet he couldn’t help being struck by the eyes, glowing in impossibly pale brightness in the darkness of the room.

“I know your name, your rank, and probably your number.” Dan knew a lot more, only that afternoon some of the requested research had come back. A sports hero, a pentathlete, well-well. His brows raised, once again the amused chuckle. Civilised conversation, not two beasts on the prowl. “You know what I am, Russian cunt? Go ahead. I’m all ears.”

Vadim shook his head at the insult. Enough to draw knives in the barracks, yet it seemed like twisted tenderness to him. Like Vanya had called him a bastard when he jumped him and fucked him in the night.

The man seemed to thrive on the same energy that coursed through him, reluctant to start, savouring the quality of time. It made him ravenous with desire, the same dark flood he had unleashed before. But this time, the tiger knew what he planned.

He saw how the silver light tore one side of the face out of the darkness, but the rest remained in twilight. Perfect. ‘Don’t move’, he thought. ‘Stay there, right there’. Magnetic fields, pulses he could feel everywhere in his body. It was an effort to breathe.

‘You are what I want, you are what I need,’ thought Vadim. A merc. A soldier. The heat he needed, to burn, to turn the world into ash. He was the glint of a blade at midnight. He breathed laughter. “You are a memory. A perfect moment.”

Dan raised one brow, higher than before. “What?” The Russkie was fucking insane. Then sudden anger, the amusement gone in a flash. *Perfect memory?*

Perfect fucking memory of fucking what? Of the Nothing that still burnt deep inside? That perfect fucking violent memory. Anger, too much anger struggling to be unleashed, but he had to remain focused.

“You can stuff your memory down your throat, motherfucker.” Dan heard the darkness in his snarled reply. No softness, now, but the pulsating energy of hatred and anger. “It’s the last thing you’ll take with you.”

Old rule, Vadim thought. If you fight, don’t talk. The shift in the man’s voice gave away the shift in his intention. Vadim jumped back, feeling the other’s blade rip through the air and slice across his chest, just catching the shirt. ‘Good one’, he thought, the man knew how to fight. He pulled back, one hand sliding to the sheath against the small of his back. If he could incapacitate him once more. If he could taste all that strength just once more. No, that would be a mistake, fighting meant being willing to kill. But a dead body could offer nothing. Before he fucked a corpse, he preferred his hand. Much saner option, too.

“Yes. And I’m your memory, too,” Vadim snarled, waiting for the next attack. “You won’t forget me. Ever.”

Dan laughed coldly. “You’re Nothing, Russkie. Nothing.” Dan guessed the Russian’s next move, judged the distance and his booted foot sped upward, straight toward the other man’s chin.

While part of his mind was distracted, Vadim committed too much into the attack. He overbalanced, dropping his knife in the process. The kick hit him in the face, rattling teeth, bruising his lips and splitting them in several places. That man had a talent to make him bleed. He staggered back, trying to catch his balance, and wasn’t quite sure where the knife was. He tasted his own blood. That sobered him for a heartbeat, just in time to hear, close, a sound that turned his blood into acid. The whoosh of a rocket propelled grenade.

Absolutely everything paled against this threat. “Incoming!” Vadim shouted, and dived for the ground.

“Fuck!” Before Dan could follow, he was thrust backwards with the full force of the impact, losing his balance. The building turned into a sudden hell of deafening sound, dirt, bricks and dust.

Vadim hit the ground, covered his head and neck and felt the explosion wash over him. Deafened, ears ringing, the world turned into one high-pitched sound and clouds of acrid dust. Debris rained down on him. The explosion must

have taken the front of the house clean off, and the whole structure could easily collapse, burying him.

Dan's head was knocked sideways, hitting a wooden beam, knocking him out for a moment, sprawled on top of something... something hard and yet soft and yet hard and.... He was disoriented, blinded and choked by dust, desperately trying to breathe.

Vadim thought a beam was coming down, and tensed, using every muscle in his body as brace against the weight. His ears rang, painfully, the dust bit into his lips, he moved slightly to pull the scarf over his mouth and nose, still choking. He couldn't hear a thing, expected the ground to give way, but it was impossible to say, or see, or even guess what had brought on the attack. No surprise, this was Kabul, and there were insurgents. He only hoped it was a random attack. He coughed violently, felt close to retching.

Eyes stinging, watering to wash the dust out, and with a groan he could feel, but not hear, Vadim checked around with his hands. A boot. For a moment he thought it might be his, but that would mean his boot was touching his hip.

No pain. But they said it didn't hurt at first. He wanted to scream, then, breathing harshly, and choking, he forced his mind to work. Fuck it. Panic now, and you are fucking dead. Think of fucking Vanya.

Turning around, he tried to assess the damage and his position. He felt like he was in water, needed to work out where the rest of his body was, relative to the other parts, and finally understood he was in one piece. He rolled, feeling the weight on top of him shift and realised it was his enemy. He wiped the tears from his face with his arm, and forced himself to breathe as little as possible, tasting nothing but blood, dust and all the shit his body came up with to cleanse his mouth and nose. Spit, more blood, tears.

Vadim reached up for the other body, felt his chest heave, and despite the situation, savoured that weight and that closeness, dangerous as it was. He was hard, he was alive, and the man's leg pressed against him just right. He had hardly enough oxygen to think, let alone think straight, but the lack of air made his body tingle. The enemy was so fucking close. Maybe wounded, maybe unconscious. Clearly alive. He took the leg and pressed it against himself, baring his teeth at the feeling. Fuck, yes. He didn't care about control just now, he wanted, needed to take

advantage. Vadim's hands moved to the other's belt between their bodies, pulling it open.

Hump him, anything, just needed to purge that madness. He started to pull down the trousers, moving underneath to get some friction. The very fact he was still alive and all the stuff pent up inside made him insane with need.

Resurfacing, Dan felt manhandling, and was suddenly eye to eye and face to face with the Russian bastard, staring straight into the ice blue insanity. The sensations of hands on his body... The same shit again, violent grinding and pushing against him. That was enough to give a surge of strength and the pain in his lungs exploded as he bucked upwards, freeing himself. He drew in a breath, forcing in more of the fucking dust, before breaking down on his knees, convulsing violently, throwing up shit from his lungs and crap from his stomach. Coughing up dust and hatred.

Vadim went right after him, wanted to finish it, grab the man, have him, take him, rip him apart, fight. No way. The other was in no state to fight. He grinned, still hardly breathing, but he was a swimmer; he could control breath.

The man was mindlessly retching and thrashing blindly, even vomiting. Vadim grabbed him anyway, crashed into the ground on top of rubble, which hurt in several places, then a wild punch hit him right in the groin. The force was enough to stop breath, stop heart, stop all thought. Fighting what was not pain, but the fucking sky coming down.

The punch had been completely instinctive and didn't register in Dan's oxygen starved brain, still blind, still struggling to survive. Frantic gulps as dusty, stale air reached his lungs. Finally breathing, painfully, doubled over on his knees in the rubble.

His eyes were watering, but he could see the shape writhing on the ground. His sight improved with every lung-wrecking cough, and when he wiped a sleeve across his eyes, he smeared blood, sweat, tears and dust into a camouflage of pain.

"Fucking bastard!" Dan staggered to his knees. Full-on hatred for the curled-up man on the ground, he could barely keep his balance, but the strength he managed to get behind his first swing was born out of seething anger.

"Fuck you!" Dan kicked into the bastard's ribs, once, twice, harder, putting all his weight behind the attacks.

Vadim tensed what little of him wasn't already taut. He needed to get away from the rain of kicks, as they pierced through his consciousness. The man could kill him right there. Getting up was impossible. It felt as if every tendon in his body had shortened. He saw the ripped open wall, and decided he could easily make that fall, but needed to move at least another three yards first.

The sight of a boot coming for his face stirred him into action. With more strength and control than he thought possible, he retaliated. It made him almost scream with pain, but he suppressed the sound.

"Shit!" Dan howled in agony when the Russian's boot impacted with his shin. He staggered backwards, and lost his balance, hitting the pile of rubble opposite the torn open wall.

Fuck, it hurt. Dan shook his head. He had to bring pain to that cunt, and how fucking good it was, how all-consuming. He'd never felt anything like it before. He needed to smash that face in so badly, he could feel it in his throat. It tasted of blood and sweat, of anger and hatred. With a hoarse cry Dan lunged forward, throwing himself onto the bastard.

Vadim couldn't find enough breath. His ribcage hurt, even though that pain was nothing near the pain searing through his groin. The weight of the man on top of him was too much to drag to the hole in the wall, he needed to get away, absolutely needed to retreat, because winning wasn't even a possibility any more. There was a cold, white blue feeling. Fear. Fear so intense he hadn't felt it in a while. Especially as a *somebody* caused it, not a *something*. It was like drowning, drowning with his hands tied behind his back.

He defended against the punches to his face as well as he could, but he was too sluggish, too damned hurt to threaten his enemy's life. Couldn't reach his shoulder knife, as the enemy rolled over him like a tank. Fear became madness, he struggled again. Forget the pain, he could hurt later. His hand found a piece of rock, nice, sharp, pointy end. Gripping it like a caveman who had just invented murder, he brought it down with all the force he had left onto the enemy's kneecap, twice, each blow rewarded by howls of pain.

Blinded by the blows to his face, he jabbed again at the tense thigh muscle, and was suddenly free. Feeling as if he was trying to lift a car, Vadim pushed himself up far enough to belly crawl over the rubble towards the torn-open wall.

It looked like a dragon had taken a bite out of the side of the house, and before Vadim could even consciously decide whether he could risk the fall, the much tortured floor gave way and he fell, hitting the ground so hard he almost passed out.

The patter of feet. The next thing he could see with his blood encrusted half-blind eyes was a bunch of goat-fuckers moving towards him. With absolute certainty, he knew they were not the ones who had invited them into the country.

No pistol. No strength.

* * *

Dan needed minutes to fight the all consuming pain, throbbing in legs, joints, everywhere in his body. Some parts on fire, others dull and torturous, but sound pierced it. Steps. Voices. Shit. Insurgents?

That Russian bastard was his to kill. No one else's. Crawling towards the open wall, Dan didn't lose his balance, gripping with torn and bloodied hands on wooden rafters that stuck out from the tormented building like an old hag's rotten teeth in a collapsed mouth.

"Fuck." The Russkie wasn't going to cut it. Afghans. Five of them, no fucking chance, the hated bastard lay helpless on the ground.

Dan let go and jumped onto the street below, hardly staying upright as the impact jolted his knackered knees.

* * *

Amid the curses, and the rocks they picked up to pelt him with—a stoning like in the Middle Ages—all Vadim could do was wish he had his pistol, or could properly move. His ribs were on fire, he couldn't even scream. Blood ran down his face, blood and spit, both eyes starting to swell shut. If he didn't get away soon, he was dead. He was already halfway there.

And one thing they had told him: Don't let the Afghans get you alive. Stoning, hurting like shit as it did, was one of the 'nicer' things they did to an enemy.

Curses. Son of a dog, dog, swine...

Stones, less painful than the blows he'd received just a minute ago from his other enemy. He spat out a mouthful of blood, and began to crawl, leaning on his left side. Something was seriously wrong with the ribs on the other. Every movement, every breath was agony, and he didn't want to check his teeth.

As he started to move, they began kicking him. Always count on the enemy being cruel. He grabbed one filthy skinny brown ankle, pulled the Afghan towards him with what strength he had left, pulled the small knife strapped to his shoulder and sliced through the man's Achilles heel. Take that, goat-fucker.

The answer was a howl, hopefully loud enough to attract attention from a Soviet patrol. He would get shit from them for the rest of his posting here, but fuck, did he want to see some MPs or just a bunch of groundpounders, even conscripts would do, as long as they were armed and came in force. He kept the bastard's foot in his grip, and stabbed it, piercing it with so much force the blade hit the road underneath. If he had to fight with his teeth, he would. He would.

Nobody took him alive.

* * *

Dan's thighs were in agony, kneecaps on fire, fists bleeding. He had to grab the wall to steady himself until he could catch his breath. Fuck. It was dark, too much movement, too many men and one body crawling on the ground. Good. The Russian fucker wasn't dead yet.

He hadn't come without a weapon. Not the rifle he would have preferred, but a knife and a pistol were better than nothing. He reached for the pistol in the bulky folds of the parka and aimed at the guerrilla closest to the Russian bastard. He wasn't supposed to kill them, but he'd be fucked if he let them kill his prey.

One shot and the sound of a man dying. Hit in the hot square where it killed the fastest. The one being stabbed was still screaming, Dan didn't bother with him. He trusted the Russian motherfucker knew how to kill.

Three insurgents left. As he threw himself behind a pile of rubble, he almost laughed when one brought out an AK-47. Keeping up his speed, crawling towards them, unseen, ignoring pain and exhaustion until he was close enough to the one with the automatic. He smirked. The throwing knife was in his hand, then it

whistled through the air and embedded itself in the Afghan's throat before he even bothered to think about what he was doing.

Simple task: take out those men between him and his ultimate target. Two left. Thank the fuck for their piss-poor equipment and lack of decent weapons.

* * *

Vadim was reacting with only his brain clear and intact; everything else hurt too much. The adrenaline blanked off the pain, helping him deal with the bloody, bruised, screwed-up mess that was his body, and he still wasn't home yet. The guy with the AK shot in some other direction, having sense enough not to shoot his still squirming friend with the unpleasant hole in his foot. His friend who would find it very hard to stand up, now, or perhaps ever.

He withdrew the knife and pulled himself along the man, in an obscene crawling/mounting motion till he was lying face to face with him. Resting on the squirming body, he punched the knife straight into the side of the Afghan's neck, and moved out of the way of the arterial spurt. Fumbling around the dying body for a gun, he found something even better. With a quick flick of his wrist, he pulled the pin off and counted; cooking the grenade, because he was just that side of insane, and because it was Russian make, meaning the timer was anything but reliable. It was like holding the world in his hand, death, madness, and the inevitable hammer of a Norse god. Sweating like an animal, he tossed it amidst his enemies, then rolled off the body he was lying on, pulling it between himself and the grenade splinters. Another deafening sound.

Debris rained down around him again. This time it smelled of dust and raw steak.

* * *

Dan would have laughed if his ears weren't ringing so loudly and if he weren't covered in fucking shit again, this time with the added pleasure of scraps of flesh and bits of bone raining around him. He peered out from behind the rubble, and scanned the alley, but none of them was alive. Except for that big pile of a blond asshole over there, but he wasn't going to allow him to die. Not yet.

He didn't have much time; patrols would be here soon and he couldn't get caught. No Soviet soldier would buy the pretence of a reporter, not the way he looked, not in the middle of carnage.

Vadim was breathing, gathering strength for escape. He hoped the merc was too wounded to give chase. Maybe, maybe, he could attract some positive, helpful attention. He could do with some backup. His eyes were throbbing, and he could feel blood run out of the corner of his mouth. He turned his head enough so it could drip out. He didn't have enough strength to spit.

He sensed something draw close, a motion from the corner of his eyes. The merc was still around. Oh fuck. Vadim usually had tricks up his sleeve, but this time, he was exactly one trick short. The merc shouldn't be able to walk. He should be just as messed up as Vadim was.

Dan looked down at the bleeding mess, half-covered by the dead body of the Afghan. "Good." He delivered another kick into the Russkie's face, not giving a shit that his fucked knee was trying to kill him. "You're still alive."

The force spun Vadim's head around, his neck protested, one of five hundred voices in his body railing against everything that had been done to it. The pain was excruciating. He wouldn't give up. He wouldn't pass out. Stay there, he pleaded with himself. Stay focused.

Dan turned, the sound of soldiers on patrol coming rapidly closer. Even in Kabul, grenades being thrown in the streets wasn't a daily occurrence. He sneered, once more in Russian, "Until next time." Limping as fast as he could away from the patrol. Retreating to a safe house run by the Pakistani secret service.

Something hoisted Vadim up. Hands. A car. Soviet uniforms. Comrades. He let his head fall back.

* * *

The absence of agony woke Vadim many hours later. For a while he just lay there staring at the white wall, feeling blissfully free of pain.

The hospital was still all make-shift, gear hadn't arrived in sufficient quantities yet. The flood of wounded or dying hadn't started.

Some men were parading around. Afghani politicians. From the way they acted, you would think they were still the bosses in this blighted country. Vadim

was presented with a hand to shake, mumbled something, was patted on the shoulder.

Poor man had walked into an ambush. Let him rest.

Two days later, a medical officer showed up. “You are one lucky comrade,” he said, clearly avoiding the ‘bastard’ or whatever he wanted to say. “I found something in your uniform.”

Tired, Vadim glanced at him. “What? A packet of weed I go to the brig for?”

The doctor shook his head, stepped closer and dropped something onto the bed sheet. It was a lump of reddish metal. Vadim recognized the shape.

“Human molar. This is gold.” The doctor grinned as if Vadim had managed to somehow rob a bank while unconscious. Teeth flew everywhere in an explosion. They sometimes had to be peeled out of living flesh. The thought that one dead insurgent had tried to bite him and failed even in this, made Vadim laugh. “Yeah, thanks.”

Fucking gold tooth. What a twisted reward. His family would freak if he sent it to them.

A week later, there was a blue ribbon for his uniform.

‘For valour.’

1981 Chapter 3—Hatred and Hell

May—June 1981, Afghanistan

Skirmishes, Hind helicopters and plenty of firepower. They came low over the hilltops, blew the shit up, then went in on foot to kill the survivors. Men, women, children, goats and sheep, nothing was left breathing when they were finished. After the deed they tossed the poison canisters into the wells.

Another mark on the map: We encountered enemy forces, here, there and there, and Vadim was being generous with the term ‘forces’. The Afghans were still in the Stone Age, speaking from a military perspective.

As Moscow had ordered, they were taking the war into the mountains; creating secure zones for transport, troop movement, and demonstrating superior strength.

The next village was half nestled into a valley, and the military machinery sprang into action again. Vadim took up a sniping position, and everybody was ready for carnage. It grew on a man. It was better than being penned in at the barracks. He’d come to fight a war, not to jerk off in the toilets in Kabul.

He signalled. The radio guy relayed the order.

Then, like something impossibly beautiful and dreadful in an insectoid way, the Hinds closed in. Their gunship helicopters. Unleashed technological might. The village was protected enough down in the valley that not all rockets would hit. That was what gas was for, and Vadim’s men.

He remained prone, watching the stage play down below. This place couldn’t be reached with tanks. Those villagers were helping the enemy, providing food, water, and above all, courage. *The partisan needs to swim like a fish among fish to thrive.* The Kremlin wanted to dry up the ocean. This was just another drop.

Increasingly, his superiors were starting to get interested in intelligence. If he could provide any. That was why he was here. Paratrooper Captain Vadim Krasnorada. Directly reporting to the Interior Ministry.

Vadim’s men advanced quickly, everybody pumped up after the waiting.

He was ready.

* * *

Dan had been training some goat-fucking losers, been fighting with the frustration of setting up a guerrilla force without the resources of an organized military machinery, but he thrived on the job. It was a challenge, and he fucking loved a challenge.

The last two days had been fairly good. His band had finally found an intact village. They were cautious, stayed inside the cradle of houses, while the women and children and old men went about their work outside. At last they were able to get some rest, provisions, and sleep.

He had been going on empty for too long, stamina pulling him through, but his so-called freedom fighters hadn't been trained enough. Not yet, perhaps never.

He was lying on the ground, scanning the horizon with binoculars while smoking one of those Russian coffin nails mistakenly labelled as cigarettes. Suddenly the shape of a Hind appeared, the sound travelling far behind. "Fuck!" Adrenaline shot into his body like a junkie got his heroin.

Keeping low, he moved as fast as he could, relaying the danger the moment he was in ear shot.

"Russian attack! Get them out! Out!"

Villagers. Women, children, fucking peasants, none of them had a goddamned clue what any of this was about.

Rifle in his hands, safety off, ready to kill if those Soviet bastards dared to show themselves. "Leave here!" Knew it was useless, those fucking goat-herders would never understand the way the Soviets fought their wars. Human life? They didn't give a shit. Civilians? They were there for target practice. Geneva Conventions? Fucking useless jokes. He hated those Russian bastards.

Targets galore. The women were screaming and screeching, running like black, panicking birds, with their torn wings fluttering. Children crying, men shouting. Mayhem, panic and hell, Dan tried what he could to bring those useless peasants into some semblance of order.

* * *

They swarmed like a poked anthill. Vadim trained his rifle on a woman--a black crow in her head-to-toe veils. Pulled the trigger. Leg shot.

They would try to save her. Bind the enemies' resources, even if this enemy didn't have any. He found a new target, yet another one he'd wound, not kill.

They had killed Sasha. Vadim had received the letter a week ago, and it had been a bunch of fucking partisans. Sasha who had dared ask him something absolutely impossible, and absolutely human. And he had agreed.

He had agreed because he knew what Sasha had felt, and Sasha was a comrade, even more; Sasha. He knew what Katya went through; he had been envious of the thing they'd shared. Sasha's death had made him larger, looming in his mind.

Please, we need to talk, Sasha had said. Vadim had feared he wanted to talk about that night, that enormous risk to bring him home, home to meet the wife, drink and eat together. They ended up in bed, a mass of limbs, a strange harmony, two men, his wife. Risky as hell, irresistible.

Please, Vadim, let her go.

The Hind closed in, fired the rockets. His orders: reduce this village to rubble, then move in and kill everything. The ant hill was on fire.

You know I respect you. But I love your wife. I love her son.

The way Sasha neither said 'my son', nor 'your son'. Whoever's son it was, ultimately, it was Katya's kid, and Sasha would love him just the same. A much better match for the fencer than the Spetsnaz. Sasha was a pilot; he was far away from the worst of it. Far away enough to not get blinded by dust.

Please, Vadim, let her go. I'll owe you so much more than I can ever repay.

He squeezed the trigger, purely mechanical. Remembered Sasha's body between him and his wife. Remembered every motion, every whispered word.

One night, and then another.

He had brought Sasha home to do just that.

Sasha had his blood type.

The attack was like the rifle range. Targets pop up, shoot, reload, shoot again. No different from shooting rabbits, only these rabbits moved in straight lines. The village exploded, rockets brought fire and death, Vadim could feel the heat on his face, and it warmed him in so many ways. Sasha. This is for Sasha, and our son.

He bared his teeth when his men advanced into the village to finish the job. His role was to be overwatch, a remote killer, every bullet a hit, just like in training.

He was a good marksman, his shooting much better even than his swimming or fencing.

Legs spread to stabilize himself on the ground, cover behind rocks, the best vantage point anybody had. The Dragunov was exactly what you needed to save the day over long distances; he preferred it to the other sniper rifles.

He didn't have time to wonder how and where to strike, he just did, took them down, one by one, especially when they came to help or rescue the wounded. Sniper games. Hurt one so they scream, and take out everybody that comes to help.

* * *

Horror and death all around Dan. It was no good; they'd all lost their heads when the children started dying, small heads exploding into blood, gore and brains, sending the remaining Afghani into a frenzy of panic and shock.

Crouching, he used every scrap of cover the barren ground offered, scanning back from the slaughter and mayhem for the only constant: the sniper.

Rifle in his hands, snaking forward on his belly. The chaos around protecting him.

He stopped. Watched. There. The sniper had to be hiding behind that formation of rocks. He turned sideways to reach the hornet's nest from behind. If there was one thing he hated, one thing his comrades, mates and superiors were unified in loathing, it was enemy snipers. Humans were nothing but moving targets, a carnage going far beyond anything that made sense in a motherfucking war acted out along rules he'd never encountered before.

Closer, ever closer he got, finally reaching his destination, silently creeping behind. Heart racing, mind razor sharp, senses alert. One false movement and the Russian marksman would be warned.

Another silent movement, and then...immediate recognition.

“You fucking cunt!”

Anger exploded. He jumped to his feet, swung the rifle, butt first.

Movement, words, hatred, all in one heartbeat. No thoughts, just action. The sniper was turning, his hand going for the pistol at his side, but the rifle came down on the Russian's head before he could even taken another breath.

Dan wasn't thinking. Didn't have a fucking clue why he hadn't just killed the bastard when he had the perfect chance. It would have rid the world of some pond life cocksucking piece of scum.

The mayhem was starting to quieten down. No more lives left to kill. His rabble unit of insurgents had been wiped out, and so had old men, young children and countless women. He didn't feel much for them, he was just doing his duty with goat-herders who had no meaning to him—expendable lives as far as he was concerned, but he despised the Soviet war crime. Genocide. Fucking genocide.

He'd make the Russian bastard pay for this mess, but first he'd get the arsehole to experience the excruciating moments of fear, feeling the muzzle pressed into the base of his neck. 'Dasvidaniya, fucker'.

Dan wasn't sure how long his enemy would remain unconscious, and how long it would take his comrades to look for him. Hastily checking the prone figure for weapons, he grabbed knives and pistol, and secured them about his own body. 'Always prepared', he thought as he grinned coldly to himself, while fastening the cable tie around the Russkie's thick wrists, arms behind the broad back, then tied the ankles.

Wrestling the lifeless bulk onto his shoulders in a fireman's hold, he staggered and nearly broke down, but sheer determination and something sickeningly cold-sliding slithering through the pits of his stomach kept him going. He picked up both rifles and started to walk.

* * *

Thankfully, he didn't have too far to go. The dead weight across his back was killing him. What irony. Reaching a ragged rock formation with a narrow overhang that provided shelter, he snorted at the sight of a dead tree, still looking strong. Perfect.

The enemy hadn't even twitched yet. Had he broken the Russian's skull? He wanted to make him pay and understand what it was like to die. Slowly. Inevitably, but not immediately.

Hell, the bastard would see his death coming.

Dan felt a twinge of satisfaction at the dull thud when he let the heavy body fall onto the ground. He stored the rifles under the overhanging rock, then it was

time to focus on that thing he had been carrying. A hunter, bearing the trophy home. He laughed, and it was an ugly sound.

He kicked the body until it rolled over onto the back, then patted the front down, checking inside every pocket. Packet of nuts in the first, and the other brought a garrotte to light. He stashed everything in his own pockets, since he hadn't been able to bring his bergan, only the webbing he was wearing on his body and that had to be sufficient to survive. Additions were always welcome. He found spare magazines and slipped them into the pouch at the small of his back. Opening the Russkie's tunic, he discovered a map with some yet indecipherable Cyrillic code, and then a small item that made him frown: a carefully wrapped pill, Sniffing the thin coating, he frowned even more.

He wasn't going to cut the tunic and shirt off. If he got rid of the Russkie insignias and turned them inside out they'd come in handy during the cold nights. He took the dust scarf off the thick neck before rolling the body to the side to cut the ties around the wrists. Removing the clothes off the upper body, revealed another knife, strapped to the shoulder. He smirked.

Soviet Army were Killers and Bad. British Forces were Defenders and Good. Or some other propaganda shit that didn't have much meaning in a war that had been cold for too long.

He checked the Russian's boots and, as expected, found another knife. That was it, nothing else. Just belt, camo trousers, socks and boots on the man.

Dan dragged him towards the tree, kicked, punched, pulled and prodded the heavy limbs into position, until he had the Russian half-kneeling under a low, sturdy branch. Propping the dead weight up against his thighs, he forced the arms high up between the fucker's back, the body automatically falling forward, but he kept it in position. He pushed the arms back down, sturdy wood between biceps and elbows. There.

Crucified on a beam.

Smirking again, he pulled the wrists together in the front as close as he could, using all his strength. Forcing muscles, sinews and bones almost to breaking point. Rope cut deeply into skin before he was content the fucker wasn't going to move. He stood back and admired his work. That was where the bastard belonged: on his knees.

"Wake up, Russkie!" he shouted, before delivering a kick to the bare chest.

* * *

Vadim's shoulders hurt, his chest was constricted, his arms felt...bad. His skull was thudding with a dull pain, and a massive blow to the chest sent more pain through his body. He coughed, trying to loosen up the tightness around his lungs. His head jerked up, eyes opened, and he saw. Saw the reporter, merc, reporter, merc, whatever, hands raised in fists, just moving back from a kick or punch.

Slowly, ever so slowly Vadim realized what position he was in. On his knees. Bound. Helpless. He looked up again, at the dark-haired man whose face shone with hatred and downright glee. The thoughts registered like dripping acid. No way to defend. No way to fight. He was somewhere else, he couldn't smell the smoke on the wind, couldn't hear the copters. Alone. His arms were starting to get numb, so he focused his attention on them. Tried to take some of the stress off. Meanwhile, a nameless, unspoken dread crept up inside him. Thoughts of mutilation, death, more beatings, even, yes, castration. He'd seen all of those, on dead and dying bodies. It was a distinct possibility. Focus, he thought. Focus on the captor. He was alive. He wasn't severely wounded, only dazed, and there was one human factor in the equation.

But that human factor was the man whose body he had possessed, broken into, in a fit of vodka and aimless rage. The man who'd given him something he still, somehow, in an odd way, kept close. The memory of strength, and, ultimately, victory. Vadim studied him, tried to judge the man's intentions, what he was capable of.

Everything.

Put yourself into his mind. *Try to become the enemy and you will know.* If he was this man, he would interrogate, then kill.

Interrogation meant he would eventually talk. Vadim's main enemy now was the dizziness. He needed to think clearly, sharp and fast. He would talk. The other soldiers would come back and look for him, tomorrow. That meant twelve hours of torture. A very long time. Only, the enemy probably knew of these time constraints, too.

The question was what would be the result? Would the merc kill him? Yes, he would. So, withholding information meant he would be kept alive. He turned

these thoughts in his mind, tried to find other solutions. Truth was, he didn't want to die. Truth was, the man had every reason to kill him for what he had done. Would kill him for it.

Now, if he could accept the fact of his death – that he wouldn't see the next morning – if he could accept it, he could make it the basis of his actions. Part of him screamed in terror at the concept. He felt his breath accelerate, fighting off a wave of panic. Accept you will die, Vadim, he repeated to himself, and suppressed the thoughts of home that came up. It didn't matter where he died, or even at what age. All people die.

But not all people turn traitors before they do. He did know things, and above all, what his job was. And he needed to keep it secret. That meant torture. So these would be the least painless, the most pleasant moments he had left. He cherished them.

“Awake at last?” The man smirked. His handsomeness had vanished. Hatred was turning teeth into fangs, high cheekbones into a glaring skull and dark eyes into empty, menacing sockets.

“Nice to meet you again, Russkie.” Dan fumbled in a pocket, pulled out a battered packet of coffin nails, took his time to light the fag, then inhaled deeply. The smoke curled into the cool evening air, curb-crawling along the edges of sanity.

“I wish...I could return sentiment,” said Vadim. Not nice meeting him. Less nice than the other times, and that included the meeting the grenade had cut short. He tried to lean forward to get into any position that would take off even a fraction of that stress, but his own bulk made it difficult. A skinny person would be far less uncomfortable.

“Para, eh? Sniper.” Dan nodded, holding a conversation with himself. “You're good, I have to give you that. The way the brains of those terrified kids were splattering all over their dying mothers' burkhas. That was skill. Really.” Taking another deep drag, holding the nicotine deep in his lungs for a moment.

Vadim watched the smoke trail, wondering how many men he had shot because they had lit up on guard. Sniper. The natural enemy of the common soldier. “Yes, sniper. Marksman. Different target, same skill.”

Dan didn't try to hide the satisfaction at the Russian's obvious discomfort. Good. It was meant to hurt. Like he had hurt, like...

No. Nothing. Nothing had ever happened and he hated the fucking Russian for Nothing. Nothing but the war crime. Nothing but the unnecessary deaths during the slaughter.

Nothing else. Nothing.

He was too intent on studying the other man and fighting his own thoughts. Cancerous thoughts, mutated cells eating away at others. The tumour had to be destroyed before it could grow any further.

“You should be proud of yourself and I guess you are.” Dan pulled on the fag again while his fingers searched in another of his parka’s pockets.

Pride. Fuck him. Vadim would have been proud if he could have been positive these people had killed Sasha. He would kill a thousand people on the chance to get the one killer.

Producing a small, wrapped item, Dan stepped closer, holding the pill under the Russian’s nose. He had to lower his hand, right in front of his groin, to be on the bastard’s eye level. “This, though, tells an interesting story, don’t you think?” The gleam of the cigarette end turned bright red as he inhaled again, then let the smoke escape between the words. “Who are you really, Russkie?”

Vadim stared at the man’s crotch for a long moment, then at the hand. The packet was wrapped against the humidity, but it might dissolve if he swallowed it whole. Nobody could save him then, there was no hospital, not even a medic. He relaxed, looked up, as if to say ‘I have no idea’, then lunged forward, trying to snatch the pill with his teeth.

Dan’s reaction was fast. He laughed tonelessly as his fist closed and pulled away.

Vadim’s teeth clacked empty, and at the same time, a tearing pain shot through his arms. He suppressed a groan, breathed hard against it, against the sudden stress. “Am...phetamines,” he gasped. “Drugs.”

“Try again, fucker.” The fist that had pulled back flew towards the Russkie’s nose. Knuckles connecting with cartilage and bone.

A bullet of agony shot through Vadim’s skull when he felt his nose break, smelt blood, and felt it run out of his nostril. He opened his lips, suppressing the pain, eyes watering, everything turned into a blur of tears, of throbbing red, metallic fire right between his eyes.

Dan shook out his fist, aching from the impact, and pulled a last drag from the fag in his other hand. He looked down at the glowing end. “Try again.”

Vadim looked up, saw the cigarette come close, tried to get away, but he might just as well have been tied to a concrete pillar. His breath accelerated, a nauseous shot of stress. He screamed as the cigarette was slowly stubbed out with a sizzling sound of evaporating perspiration and seared flesh on the skin between his collar bones, right under his throat.

Blood and sweat ran down his face. This is the real thing. Torture. Not a simulation, not a course to determine how suitable he was for command. He lowered his head, blinking away tears, watching how the blood trickled into the dirt. Nose one agonizing mass. It was just a beginning. He had a cover story, but if he gave it up too fast, the merc would know it was fake. He could only yield the information when he was so close to the breaking point there was almost no distinction.

“Cocaine. Surface...analgesic. Just in case I get shot up.” Vadim’s body coiled, awaiting more pain from the merc. “I’m para. You know that.”

“You’re as much a para as I am a reporter.” The evening was getting darker, but never as dark as the hatred inside Dan. He had all the reasons in the world to hate that Russian. A sniper. A ruthless murderer. Watching the bleeding face dispassionately, he slipped the wrapped pill back into a pocket. His eyes were drawn to the angry red mark in the hollow of the Russian’s throat. So many shades of red. Blood, swollen flesh, burnt skin.

“I know your name, your rank, your number.” He didn’t even bother to check the Russian’s papers. He knew, he fucking well knew. He’d done his homework before the press conference. “Sports hero Krasnorada.” Dan snorted mockingly. “You’re more than that and you will tell me before I kill you.”

A shudder ran over Vadim’s skin. Sports hero. It had been ages. He had only been a tool for the USSR to prove Soviets were better people. Worked harder, were more selfless, more devoted. Mentally and physically sound. If not for Boris, they might have won that medal. Who knew? Vadim shook his head, tried to think clearly. Swallowing hurt, the small dot of agony near his throat. The pill was a giveaway. If the merc knew what it was—and he could certainly guess, alerted by how he had reacted at the off-chance to get to it – he knew what it was for.

Dan glanced up at the darkening sky; it would get freezing cold overnight. “Let’s face it, Russkie, you’re going to die. The only question is how long it will take.” He shrugged, “I have time.”

Voicing Vadim’s own thoughts back to him struck deep. Accept you will die, Vadim, he repeated to himself, once again. Accept there is one thing nobody can win against. Death. The last, worst defeat of every human being.

“You should have killed me when you had the chance,” Dan said.

Vadim craned his neck when his captor moved around him, stepping behind his crucified body. A hand crept along his jaw to cradle his chin. If the enemy took his head with his elbow, he could easily break his neck. Vadim’s shoulders tensed. He could hear himself pant with stress. The hand felt good on his skin, menacing, but strong, and sure. He tried to shake his head, tried to purge the fear. Exist. Breathe.

“I was...drafted after my career was over. I became officer. To pay people back what they have done for me. They made it possible.” Official party doctrine. He was nothing special, just one that rose, briefly, carried up by the will of the people.

“You’re a fucking liar.” ‘While cradling the face with his left, Dan slipped his other hand into the pocket of the PLCE closest to his heart. There was nothing holding him back. He had to know, needed to know the truth, to understand how he, Dan McFadyen, member of the Special Airborne Services, could have been overpowered, undertaken and abus...

No.

He must know. Who and what was this Russian, the only one who had ever won the upper hand, and who...who...

“Who are you?” Quieter now. The man’s dark voice as much a caress as the calloused fingers that lay in mocking tenderness against the edge of his jaw.

Vadim shuddered. Hard. The absence of pain made this erotic, and he was beginning to listen, really listen to the nameless madman who had captured him. Felt his weight shift, smelled his hand. Fucking insanity to feel anything, to not be stone. His body wanted to live, so everything was intense. The voice, rough with hatred, the hand, strong, as strong as he remembered the body. He remembered that body.

“Who are you really, Russkie.” Dan forced the head back, as far as it could go. The thumb of his other hand pressing against the corner of the Russian’s mouth. “Who are you?”

“I swear, I am Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada. I can’t fake my past. Can’t fake what I did. I have thousands of witnesses.” Vadim tried to see what it was in the hand, anticipated a knife, and tensed. Fear. The other would blind him, cut open his face. He shuddered, violently, felt his neck being stretched, and looked at the man looming over him. His racing pulse thundered in his throat. Vanya had died like this. Maybe also on his knees.

“It’s standard issue for my rank. They don’t want officers to get captured. I’m supposed to kill myself. I’d rather kill myself than fall into their hands.” ‘Your hands’, his thoughts corrected. His body shifted.

Dan moved even closer to steady his hold. Cradling the head against his groin, looking down at him. “That’s bullshit.” The Russian wouldn’t be able to continue to lie to get out of this. On the contrary, he expected him to say nothing but the truth when he was done. If he was ever done. “You will tell me who you really are and what your job is. Your affiliation, your regiment, whatever you want to call it. You’re not a para,” Dan smiled. “You’re too good to be a para.”

Vadim closed his eyes. What if the enemy knew? What if there had been a leak, a double agent? Maybe somebody had been captured and talked. What if they had intercepted communications? But then, there was no regiment. No codenames were ever used. Officially. He couldn’t be the first one to break. The first one to confirm. He felt the man close, could smell him, feel the heat from his body. It was cold, and the other man was warm.

The thumb began to force its way between his lips and the vice grip holding his head against the man’s thigh and groin made it impossible to bite. He couldn’t close his mouth. That was how he breathed now his nose was completely swollen shut.

He struggled, threw his weight against the branch that held him crucified, but the hand insisted. It was holding a rag stained with gun oil. A gag, to keep him from screaming. As if anybody would listen. Vadim recognized the smell, the taste, thought of the improvised lube and the merc’s body against him. Oh fuck. What if the enemy set this alight, burned his mouth, his face? The panic was so intense, his mind clouded, choking him worse than the thing in his mouth.

Your mind can defeat you, Vadim.

Dan forced the fabric deeper and deeper into the mouth, down the throat. Pushed relentlessly, to obstruct it from the inside out.

Intruding. Entering. Forcing. Breaching a body.

He didn't realise he was getting hard.

Vadim tried to hold his breath, his heart racing so fast, every fibre in his body in a state of fear that ate the lingering oxygen. He struggled, tried to swallow, but nothing worked, and there was a wordless sound from deep in his throat as he wanted to scream. He stared at those gleeful eyes, and couldn't stop his own eyes watering. Tears, a normal response, but he felt pathetic, would do anything to be able to breathe.

Dan studied the man's reactions, noted every change, each sign. 'Interrogation techniques', he'd been on the receiving end himself. He knew what it felt like, and experience made it even better. He'd never thought he would excel in the subject so well.

"I'll make it easy for you, Russkie." He leant down, speaking close to his captive's ear. "You tell me the truth and I might let you live. You lie and you die." He knew panic could make rational thought difficult. The body was so tense and tight against him, the Russian felt like a statue hewn from stone. Warm stone, hot flesh.

Another push, deeper. Not much time, the enemy would collapse soon. His fingers inside the heat of the mouth, moisture wicked up by the rag.

"I've heard enough about your so-called Spetsnaz, your Special Forces, there's no need to pretend they don't exist. Answer me, cunt, are you Spetsnaz?"

The panic overwhelmed Vadim. His throat hurt, stretched, raw, but nothing compared to the panic.

Spetsnaz.

Nothing mattered, he knew. He fucking knew. His cover story. Spetsnaz. No. That word was okay. Not the other. Vadim nodded, nodded on the verge of collapse, fought again, struggled to break free, not die like this.

True to his word, at least that—always that—Dan pulled the rag out.

Vadim fought. Breathing in short hard gulps, trying to fight the nausea that welled up from his body.

Why suffer? He let his head fall, freed it from the hand long enough to throw up the bile and whatever had been in his stomach. Tried to wipe his lips on his shoulder.

Dan's legs were touching the other man's back, those bound arms digging into his thighs, and he felt nothing at the confession. Nothing, until the flood of relief took him by surprise.

"Special Forces. Preparing the offensive." Dan nodded, his hand still resting on top of one overstretched shoulder. Something wrong, though, something nagging in his subconscious, a physical sensation that was lingering in his body. "Tomorrow you will tell me which unit you are attached to."

There could not seriously be a tomorrow? Vadim saw no camp, no provisions, no water. No insulation against the elements. "105th Guards Airborne Division." It was close enough. Spetsnaz had moved in to secure the airport before the 105th arrived. And amidst those people, his branch. Vympel.

Don't even think the word.

"Airborne Division?" Dan took a step back and the warmth of his body left, exposing bare skin to the biting cold that was beginning to settle. "We'll see tomorrow if I believe you. That is," he stepped into the line of his enemy's vision, "if you are still alive."

Walking over to the bundle with the Russian's uniform shirt and tunic, he slipped into the latter, for additional warmth against the elements. "There is a reason you are here and I want to know it."

Dan had some water in his PLCE. It would have to do. He'd gone without food for longer. Tomorrow; tomorrow he'd kill the bastard and then find his way out of the mountains.

"What...are you?"

Dan stopped when he heard the question, and turned to look at his captive. Hell, what the fuck did it matter, the man would be dead soon. "I am SAS, cunt."

With that he turned and moved beneath the shelter of the overhanging rock, reaching for his SA-80 and all the additional clothing he could find.

Vadim felt his throat constrict with laughter, and knew he was being hysterical. SAS. The very model for the Spetsnaz. Why invent the wheel again? The only Special Forces unit in the world the Soviet Union coveted. SAS. Father and mother and sibling. As good as family. The model, the cast.

Vadim craned his neck to watch the man, as the pain in his face, in his throat slowly subsided to be replaced with a dull throbbing. He couldn't feel his legs anymore. His shoulders tightened up, felt like they were twisted several times, and then more. No way could he sleep. He didn't want to. This was his last night. He didn't want to waste his time.

The first thing that felt really cold was the watch on his wrist. A kiss of ice. Vadim breathed, stared off into the sky. So many stars. He wished he knew their names beyond the ones he could use to navigate by. Ursa major. Ursa minor. Big bear and small bear. He could read the time from them, how they changed position with the rest of the sky.

Dan was reasonably sheltered against the cold, rifle clutched in his hand, lips so close he almost kissed the metal. Alone with his thoughts and the human shape amidst the darkness, faintly illuminated from a sickle moon and an overwhelming abundance of stars.

Inside he felt nothing, except for a lingering relief the man who overpowered him had also been Special Forces. Spetsnaz. After the SAS, the best there was. He'd already forgotten there had been two and not just one. Didn't matter. It had been this one, the still shape in a silent night, who'd caught his eye, back in that goddamned din in Kabul. Who had taken him by surprise.

He'd have to die. Dan knew his duty, understood the rules, but...

No words—no thoughts. He had to do it, remembered he wanted to. Yet executing one's fellow man was never an easy task. Perhaps later... tomorrow.

The cold grew worse, much worse. Vadim was shivering uncontrollably before the night was halfway over. The cramps in his arms and legs, and the stinging, throbbing pain everywhere kept him awake. Every now and then he managed to tear his mind away and think of Sasha. And his family. The place in Moscow he had called home. His parents.

Most of all he regretted being captured. Disappointing them. Leaving them behind. The pain became so bad he could barely think. Every minute a bone wrecking cramp, he couldn't feel his legs, but everything he could feel, hurt.

He was ready to die when the sun came up.

Dan woke up when dawn broke. The Russian seemed to be alive. Good. He had the last of the water, then stretched while sitting, searched his webbing and

reached for the compass, but it was gone, lost. “Fuck!” He ignored the dread. He’d been in worse situations. First deal with the Russian.

Vadim was being wrecked by cramps. Everywhere. His chest, his legs, his arms, his shoulders. He bit his lips to hold back a scream, because he didn’t want the other to come over and put a bullet through his head.

He wanted to at least appear a little dignified. Breathing harshly against the pain, trying hard to suppress any sound. It gnawed on his body like a thousand hungry rats. He wanted it to stop more than anything. He was exhausted from the tension, the cramps and the shudders that his body had used to stay warm. Run down, worn out, cold, above all cold.

He turned his head, saw the SAS emerge. He’d been right, all along. They were equals. Equals who had so far failed to kill each other. But this time, they were alone, and the other wasn’t drunk enough to leave the killing to a comrade, like he had been.

Stupid fucking mistake. It all had been a fucking mistake. Jumping him that night in Kabul and taking him, even though that had been the only thing he had needed, the only thing that could sate him and make him feel content. A mistake. Even though it had been the best fuck in his life.

Vadim laughed to himself, tonelessly, a small sound that failed to expand his cramped chest. “Good morning,” he murmured. Vicious envy at the clothes, the gun, the fact the SAS could stand and even move.

Dan’s brows rose while he walked closer to the Russian, studying him with interest, like a professor would examine a bug.

“You got stamina.” The words were out before he thought twice and with them a strange sense of respect for the strength of another. He frowned, a heartbeat off track by that unexpected sensation. He pulled his pistol out of its holster, checking the magazine. All without another word and with professional precision.

Vadim was in agony, but he couldn’t allow the enemy to see. So that was what the other had in mind. Take him out, now. Why the fuck had he even waited the night? He tried to straighten, and failed. Nothing obeyed him. The body the last thing to betray him, after his unit and his luck.

“So, Spetsnaz, ready to tell me your affiliation?” The weapon weight comfortable in Dan’s hand. He’d never executed a fellow man in cold blood before.

But what did 'cold blooded' mean? Anything away from the adrenaline insane hell of the battlefield could be considered 'cold blooded'.

It was a necessity. Despite the moment of confusion and uncertainty he'd felt watching the dark shape in the night, he believed if he pulled the trigger he could lay the Nothing finally to rest. He raised his hand.

What had the Russian said? *One perfect memory.*

Vadim's heart stopped when the pistol touched his forehead. He stared at the enemy, denounced what he had finally accepted a hundred times over during the night. He wasn't ready to die. Just cramps. They would stop, eventually. He didn't want to die. Couldn't just let go.

"I told you, 105th Guards Airborne." Vadim suddenly laughed. "And you can't drink the water from the well. You can't drink any water from any village around here." He grinned with his parched lips. "There is water, but you won't find it." He raised himself up in a final gesture of defiance, and took the muzzle between his lips. He didn't trust that intended shot. Through the roof of the mouth was more secure. That was how he executed.

Dan's eyes narrowed, lips tightened into a thin line. Fuck. *Fuck!* Anger flared the moment the realisation hit home. The fucking Russian wasn't lying. He leant close, muzzle steady between those lips, his voice snarling in hatred. Defeat. The loss of his fucking victory. He'd never imagined he could hate the Russian even more than on that night in Kabul. Abruptly pulling the pistol out of the Russian's mouth, he flicked his hand and brought it crashing down against the temple.

Vadim felt nothing but relief. Then a sharp pain, and the lights went out.

Then on again. He woke up. Acid searing his raw throat, mouth, vomit mingling on the ground with dust and stone. He saw the SAS pull his leg back. The bastard had kicked him in the stomach. No blood in the bile, so the kick hadn't been hard enough to rupture anything.

He was lying on his side, the wood was gone, he could feel his legs, even though the only thing he felt was pain. They were tied with a length of rope that would allow him to shuffle along. His arms were behind his back, wrists crossed, and attached to something. Something around his neck. More rope. What...? He groaned, and spat out more bile. He felt dizzy with dehydration, couldn't have been unconscious for long. Minutes, not hours.

“Get up.” Dan’s voice spat out the order. His SA-80 trained at the man on the ground, the Dragunov rifle tied onto the webbing across his back. He’d had some of the nuts he’d found in the Russian’s pockets, but he was hungry, as well as thirsty. Couldn’t be helped for now.

“Get the fuck up and find water.” He studied the other’s struggle dispassionately, while anger oozed from him. All he wanted to do was put a bullet through the Russian. Instead, he had to depend on him.

Nothing in Vadim’s body seemed capable of supporting his own weight. He felt like he was broken in several places, but then the parts of the machine that was his body realigned and started to fit together, muscles and tendons. What had been prime shape was now merely workable. His stomach pressed up bile again as he staggered to his feet, his upper body agony, his stomach one hard, hurt, jagged piece of shrapnel inside. Glancing at the man, Vadim didn’t even know what he felt, maybe relief the enemy hadn’t killed him. But that relief turned into a sinking feeling.

“No tricks, fucker, or I take you to the Mujahideen.”

At all costs, no. He’s playing with your mind. He needs you. He can’t deliver you into their hands. He kept his glance down, didn’t want to show the man anything, nothing in his face, nothing in his eyes, sullen and stoic just like one of the donkeys.

Dan knew the Russian needed water more urgently than he did. To lead him to a poisoned supply would be suicide –and since the fucker had been so obviously keen on living, it was highly unlikely. He intended to take the asshole to the British embassy or perhaps the Yanks or Pakistanis.

One of them would make a P.O.W. out of the bastard, put him in front of a war crime tribunal and Dan would never have to hear of him again. That was, if he managed not to kill the cunt after all.

Vadim started walking. He knew the direction, vaguely, as soon as he had worked out his bearings. The neighbouring valley to the one where they had attacked. He knew how the karez water tunnels ran here; it had been part of the recon, and he always ensured he understood where the basic resources were.

Moving over the broken territory with his arms twisted and tied up, he eventually found a rhythm, even worked out how to deal with the rope between his

feet that seemed intent to catch rocks or make him stumble when he tried to fall into his normal stride.

The sun came up and started burning his shoulders, collarbones, nose, face, burnt down on his shorn head. He really could have used that dust scarf now, but he was sure it would be declined. Sunburn, and worse. A splitting headache grew by midday slowing his thoughts so much, he had to reach ahead for the next slow thought as soon as he finished the last one. The SAS could be played. He had already won by staying alive this long. He could, if he did it right, find more ways to defeat him, to keep his own morale up, because that was the best way to deal with the constant pain.

Hour after hour, Dan watched the forcibly short steps that rarely faltered. Somewhere in the back of his mind the professional soldier admired the stamina. The way the Spetsnaz managed to keep himself from choking for such a long time spoke of tremendous mental and physical strength, but then Dan knew all about that, didn't he? He had tasted the physical power.

The Russian stopped.

Body functions. Vadim really wished there weren't any. Not when his hands were tied. He turned around and looked at the man who seemed just as dizzy as he felt. His shoulders were killing him, but he knew what would happen if his strength waned. Choking, unconsciousness, probably a hard fall, again, and more pain. Definitely humiliation. His parched throat swallowed uselessly. He almost expected a rifle butt, a fist or a kick. He was not supposed to stop. "I need to piss."

"So what?" The fucking Russian had to be joking. "Just piss then."

"Listen," the English was unwieldy in Vadim's throbbing brain, while he tried to appear less stoic, less stony. "Untie me for second, I won't run. I can't run." He had worked so hard on the words along the way. There were plenty of good, pointy rocks on the ground. More than he would need. "Come on."

He lowered his gaze, to appear meek and diminished, as if he had learnt a lesson. This last fight could easily end badly, but better try it now while he still had a little strength left – and while he knew where he was.

Dan laughed. It sounded dry and scratchy; he hadn't had much more water than the Russian. Only a couple of mouthfuls. "How fucking stupid do you think I am?" He stepped closer, pushing the muzzle of the rifle into the bastard's stomach.

Vadim inhaled sharply as the hot muzzle touched his flesh. Thought for a blinding moment he'd be shot in the guts and left to die slowly, really slowly. The fear was back, acid on his brain, eating. He closed his eyes, tensed his muscles, ridiculous protection against a high speed bullet.

"I tell you what, Russkie. I tell you what I would do in your situation." Dan's lips were chapped, his tongue felt swollen in his mouth, and his voice was rougher. "I would try to get my hands free, grab one of those rocks over there, and attempt to knock my captor out." He grinned, baring his teeth. "I'm SAS, you are Spetsnaz. How much fucking chance is there you aren't planning to do the exact same fucking thing? No," the rifle slipped, pushed against the metal plaque of the belt, forcing it downwards, "you piss without your hands."

The Brit could shoot him in the groin. No need to ever piss again. Vadim tried to control his breathing, but he was already panting through his mouth like a dog. No passageway through his nose. "Listen." That bit came out too fast, and Vadim wrestled with fear for a long moment. "Don't be complete bastard." He looked up.

Dan's eyes narrowed, looking straight into the other's. He remembered them to be icy blue, too pale, too striking. He hadn't forgotten them since Kabul. Now one was half swollen shut, the other red and bloodied, and yet they still were this same motherfucking piercing colour.

Vadim continued, "Last time I pissed my pants was basic training. And I hadn't slept for week. You're soldier." He noticed he'd slipped the articles in English. Both languages waltzed through his overheated brain and whirled around so it was impossible to tell which one it was. English. Articles. Restricted sentence structure. "Come on."

Yes, he was a soldier, Dan hadn't forgotten it, but what was the other? "Why the fuck would I grant you that dignity?" He pushed the sun-heated metal further down.

"You said, I'm Spetsnaz. Yes, I am." Vadim inhaled deeply, fought the fear and nausea, his body, the weight of his arms. "You've defeated me. How much further do you have to go? Are you scared?" Fuck. Too far, too much. Far too much.

“Scared?” Dan’s anger exploded, drove the rifle home, deep into the abdomen, but the lack of swing kept the worst force away. “You fucking piece of shit!”

Reaching behind the Russian’s neck, he grabbed the short rope that connected neck and arms. “The only reason you’re alive is the water. Make no mistake, shithead, I’d rather die myself than let you go.” He stepped closer, body to body, gave a sharp, brutal pull on the rope. Watched it dig deeply into the throat.

Vadim inhaled sharply, the pull making him sway on his feet. The rope dug in, burnt, burnt, blurred his vision. The SAS bastard was strong, and he couldn’t help it, but the strength did something to him; he was on the receiving end this time, and he needed to remember what that was like. Could have been like. He tried to focus his eyes as his body screamed at him for lack of oxygen.

“Please,” his lips formed, soundlessly. He couldn’t say more. It had been ages since he had actually meant it when he pleaded.

One word, where endless arguing would have achieved nothing. That one, simple word. “Fuck.” Dan hissed, anger defeated. He let go of the rope and eased the pressure behind the rifle. “Fuck you, Russkie.” The words lacked most of their earlier venom.

“Shit.” He didn’t want to do this—could *not* do it. He put the rifle down. No way would he let the bastard trick him right now. He’d beat the shit out of him before the Russian could try anything. Fiddling for a moment with the square belt buckle he knew by heart, just like his own uniform’s. Those goddamned hooks were meant to be opened by the wearer.

Vadim shivered badly as the SAS unbuckled his belt. In this situation? He could leave him like this, punch him again. His stomach was tense, a pattern forming through the skin. The pattern he had taken so much pain to develop. Crunches until he couldn’t breathe, with weights, without weights, tilted, straight, dangling from one of the metal bunk beds, bringing his torso up, agonizingly slow.

Too close, too fucking close. Dan smelled heat, skin, blood and pain. Pain, yes, could smell its essence. It crept into his nostrils, dried blood, sweat and bile constricting his parched throat further. This could be him instead. It had been him in Kabul.

Calloused and scraped fingers managed to push buttons through their holes, his movements full of disgust. He dropped the camo trousers as if they were

contaminated, didn't care that they slipped down the hips, stopped at the knees, threatened to pool around the tied ankles.

Vadim couldn't even look down at himself, the shoulder held him in that awkward position, his own body defying him. In other circumstances...he had needed help dressing and undressing when his wrists were broken, both at the same time, an inconvenience. He hadn't minded the touching.

"You must be fucking joking." Toneless, Dan stared at the briefs, but fuck, couldn't say the words that were on the forefront of his mind. 'I'm not taking your motherfucking cock out! I'm not touching your dick, asshole.' Couldn't say them out loud.

Damn. Had to get this over quick. Handling another bloke's cock? He wasn't a fucking fag. Like this one. Shit-stabber. Fucker. Rap...No. Nothing. Fucking faggot arsewipe of a Russian cunt had done Nothing.

Dan didn't notice he had stalled for a moment, staring unmoving at the bulk in the briefs. Grabbed the waistband at last, pushed them down with one angry movement, forced to take hold of the cock with his hand to free it sufficiently.

Vadim tensed up more, wanted his hands free, to cover, to protect, to dress. The touch made him nervous, not exactly something he wanted to think of up here in the mountains, tied up and beaten as he was. Nevertheless. He'd had him. They had been closer than this, much closer. It couldn't get any closer than inside that amazing, struggling heat. Vadim's body reacted to the memory, and Vadim fought hard not to smirk.

A tiny victory, almost inconsequential, but he knew the man was fundamentally honourable. Empathetic. Which meant he wasn't ignorant to what he was thinking – or thought Vadim was thinking – and that meant he had a weakness he could exploit.

"That's it, faggot." Dan grabbed the rifle, stepped back, moved behind him to avoid staring at the Russian's exposed groin. "Piss, pizda."

Cunt. Pizda in Russian.

Don't care about it, Vadim. Don't let them ever tell you what you are feeling. It keeps you from winning.

So long ago, it unnerved him, Vadim had known he wanted things that made him disgusting, despicable, made him the worst curse that the other boys could imagine. He doubted they even knew what it was they cursed. The treasure

of feeling, the one place in his heart where he wasn't the Soviet Union's property, wasn't the young model athlete. Not propaganda poster material.

He'd been fascinated by the stories he had heard from other athletes. About people who did this openly, blatantly, still nervous, but no longer scared out of their minds.

He followed the SAS soldier with his eyes, turned his head. Saw that the man was far more unnerved than he was. 'I may be a faggot, but I held your life in my hand', he thought. 'And that is what counts'.

He focused on pissing without hitting his trousers. That would give the SAS soldier plenty of time to study his backside; the straining, twisted arms, legs apart as far as the rope allowed, ass tensed, his skin paler past the belt line, but still tanned enough to betray he did catch some sun every now and then. The parallel dimples over his ass, lines of muscle that ran from his hips to his groin, strong legs with blonde hair. The body the cameras had liked so much.

Vadim remembered the snide remarks, had read the newspapers. He didn't trust his English then. A lot of people laughed when he spoke. They said he sounded endearing. Insecure. He was nervous about mingling with the others, only relaxed when he could focus on what he knew.

"... and Krasnorada perches on his horse like a swimmer. Or should that be a wet Siberian tiger cub?"

They all knew he'd been part of the swimming cadre, and then reassigned, because Vadim was never fast enough to compete with the fastest. And that was it. The fencer that should be plowing water, the rider that didn't ride a wave, but a horse. Only with shooting and running did the comments subside a little. He was fast, and accurate.

The cameras, however, loved him. Even Vadim's coach had shaken his head.

"Cameras become you. You're already booked for lots of interviews." 'And you haven't even won anything yet', was what Vadim heard, but nobody dared say.

More opportunities to speak halting English. Cameras. People handed Vadim free stuff, so he wore them, clothes with labels, mostly. People sent him letters. They could write pages and pages about how he looked on the TV screen, even though he was, by doctrine, not allowed to show emotion.

Vadim laughed dryly. Those people should see him now. That thought cut deep, and he cursed his vanity. It didn't matter. The SAS would end it all with a bullet. Unless he could twist him around enough to survive.

Vadim glanced over his shoulder. "Nurse. I'm finished."

Dan didn't respond. He was standing, just like before, gazing at the back of the Russian's arse. He didn't have a clue how long he'd been staring before he caught himself with a jerk. What the fuck? What the bloody goddamned motherfucking fuck had he just been doing?

Bastard!

Dan said nothing and stepped back around him, grabbing the damp cock with obvious distaste. Distaste. Disgusting. Tried to stuff it swiftly back into the once white briefs, and failed. He had to pick up the waistband first, handle the cock again, the rifle still secured under his arm. He hissed a curse through his teeth.

The question, to Vadim, was what was more tantalising, the rifle within kissing range or the man standing right before him. Seemed the Brit grew meek, or was it disgust, and more. The 'more' caught Vadim's attention, and he tried not to flinch. He could hardly expect the man to treat him nicely and maybe suck it. That would be asking too much. He breathed laughter at the thought, nostrils widened. He controlled the laughter, but not the grin. "Thanks. Now I take you to water."

Vadim immediately began to walk away. The small rest hadn't really refreshed him, not nearly as much as his enemy had done with that little show of nerves.

Dan was walking behind the Russian, carefully checking the terrain. Not for a moment trusting the apparently weak state of his enemy. No matter how much it seemed the Russian was in a useless condition, it could well be a ruse. He'd certainly use any trick he could, if he were in the fucker's position...

Vadim walked on, found the saddle to the next ridge and crossed the line in his little internal map. This was one of the killing zones. Cleaning. Nobody was allowed here who was not Soviet or affiliated. He recognised the characteristic structure in the rock... the covered karez tunnels. Vadim stopped. "Lift that cover. Water's down there."

Dan took in everything. Formation, location. He might need this knowledge in the future. Although he was thirsty, he'd let the Russian drink first. The water

could be poisoned, after all. Kneeling down, he checked on the enemy before lifting the cover and motioning him over. “You better be right.”

Vadim was so grateful he could drop to his knees. Tied to a thick beam of wood spanning the opening was a goatskin bag on the end of a long piece of rope. Several yards underneath, deep in the eroded tunnel ran a natural water course. He could hardly wait, but forced himself to discipline. Fuck. Not going to get overexcited. He checked the surroundings, no poison canisters, no dead animals, they probably hadn't poisoned the water.

The bag came up, spilling water, and Vadim bowed down, lips almost touching the ground to drink. Like an animal, but that really didn't matter now. His arms killed him, but it was water. Forcing himself to drink slowly, the water was cold, fresh, tasted of stones, of the whole forsaken landscape.

Dan was watching the Russian, rifle always trained on the man. Helpless or not, he wouldn't trust him for one second. The water was going down, and then he waited. Nothing. No sign of poisoning. He was desperate; finally, after several minutes, he reached for the goatskin and drank in large, thirsty gulps, but stopped himself after half a dozen. It wouldn't do to get sick, not with that cunt nearby.

Vadim watched the SAS drink. Amongst his comrades, he knew one of them would joke by faking stomach cramps, but the man was so unnerved he would shoot him. Besides, nothing to gain by it.

Dan closed his eyes for a split second, relishing how the water ran down his parched throat, loosening the swollen tongue from the roof of his palate and quenching a thirst that had started to become debilitating. He kept the Russian in the corner of his eyes while refilling his bottle.

Vadim wanted to lie down and sleep, without his arms being twisted out of their sockets. They hurt so much he wished they'd stop, forever. His strength started to wane. He could feel the rope dig into his throat, and he knew he couldn't hold out much longer. Soon. He leaned his head against a rock that provided a little shade. Rough, hot, dry. He could feel sweat trickle down his face, down his back. He was dizzy, and everything hurt. His nose was a dull ache that he tried not to think about.

The SAS was pulling up another bag of water, when Vadim heard the familiar heartbeat of a copter. Hind. With more speed and energy than he would have believed possible, he crossed the ground between himself and the SAS soldier.

Dan lifted his head and was about to grab the rifle, but he was too late. When the fucker jumped into his back, both feet forward, he had nothing to grip onto. Howling in anger at the way the Russian cunt had outsmarted him again, he lost his balance and fell into that goddamned hole, banging his shoulder on the beam in the middle, but unable to grasp hold of it.

Vadim hit the ground hard, but with utter satisfaction at the sight of his enemy vanishing. He forced himself up again, began to run, trot, move out onto open ground, could see the copter now, was pretty sure the pilot saw him, and tried to shout. Saw the copter come in low, circle, to check the ground for danger, then gain altitude and move away.

Dumbstruck, Vadim just stood there. He couldn't believe it. Either the pilot hadn't seen him, or thought it was too dangerous to land.

What a coward.

Dan, had hit the wet sand shortly after falling into the tunnel. He could see daylight at the top and the sand leading towards it, even though right now he was stuck in the water.

"Fucking bastard!" he yelled, out of his mind with anger, not even taking the time to check himself, or his situation. Fuck, bastard, bloody hated cunt of a Russian piece of shit. He'd get him, the son of a bitch couldn't get far, and when he got him, he'd destroy that shithead forever.

Vadim looked back to the hole, saw his rifle lying there, but it was impossible to do anything with a sniper rifle when he was bound. All he could do now was kick and headbutt, and he had a feeling that wouldn't be enough. He looked up at the mountain, at the rocks and crevasses. If he could hide there long enough. If the SAS lost him somewhere.

He started to run as fast as the rope between his legs allowed, stumbling more than once because fear took over. He wouldn't make it, wouldn't find a hiding hole in this merciless landscape before the SAS bastard freed himself. He might run into Mujahideen, he might fall and break something, or die of exposure. Shit.

Eventually he found something that looked like an abandoned mining shaft. He crawled into it as far as he could, hoping the other wouldn't see him. Slim chance. Everything hurt. His shoulder felt worse than before, the side he had

landed on, another splitting pain that slowly filtered into his awareness. He clenched his teeth and forced himself to breathe steadily.

Dan was so angry, he didn't feel any pain from the impact, couldn't see the bleeding fingers and didn't give a shit about anything but getting out as fast as he could. He climbed, pulled, pushed, and soon, his head emerged from the hole. Nothing. Of course not. The fucker had run away.

"I'll get you." he hissed. Grabbing rifles and water bottle, he found the other's footprints immediately. Dripping wet, he followed some of the steps while scanning the landscape. Where the hell could the fucker be? There. He smirked, started to run, followed it to a rock formation, close by. It was all so obvious, he had to laugh.

Vadim saw the shadow of the SAS bastard fall over the opening. If he had had any chance, any chance at all, he would have used it. He couldn't even kill himself, no poison, no gun, no way to die in this rotten place. It was cool in here, cool and dark, his skin felt raw, half cooked, and there was absolutely nothing he could do.

He'd given it his best shot, and the game was over.

Everybody dies, Vadim.

But not from the hand of an enemy. He thought of mutilation, of a gun in his mouth, could almost taste the metal. The SAS would do it, this time.

He shook his head and leaned his forehead on the dusty ground, resting for the moment. Let this be over. Let it just end. He didn't doubt the bastard would come and get him, or point a rifle down and shoot him in the hole like a rabbit. He was fucked, completely and utterly, and all he could do was fight off a sense of defeat.

"Hey, cunt!" Dan shouted, rifle aiming at the hole where the boot prints ended. "Get your fucking arse out of there or I'll come and get you."

Vadim crawled back out. Every movement agony. The only good thing was that it would end soon. He remained on the ground, didn't have the strength to move. He awaited the shot, the boot, the knife. And tried to not be scared to die.

"You Russian cunt." Dan repeated quietly, an odd sense of calm, dangerous stillness before the tidal waves of anger broke loose. Still, he did nothing, watched the enemy crawl on his knees. That's where the bastard belonged. Death was too good for him.

“That’s three times you tricked me.” His brows raised. He started to walk towards the man on the ground, stopping right in front of him. “Get up, asshole.”

Vadim looked at the dusty boots and expected one to kick him in the face. Nothing he could do about it. He might as well die on his feet. Unless the SAS meant for him to get up only so he could kick him down again. There was no dignity in dying, he thought, but he could look him in the face. Then again, he didn’t want that bastard to be the last thing he’d ever see.

He rolled onto his side, got one foot on the ground, then pushed himself up, face twitching with the pain. He swayed on his feet, felt dizzy, nauseous, badly sunburnt. Vadim looked into the dark eyes, steadied his gaze on them. Tried to show no fear. One last act of ‘fuck you’.

Dan waited with sickening patience, merely an arm’s length away, but the distance shortened when he took another step. “I should have killed you.” He shoved the rifle into the bastard’s guts, the movement deliberately slowed down. “I should have cut your fucking ears off.” Another push, this time faster, somewhat higher. “I should have stuffed them down your throat to stop you screaming while I cut your fucking nose off.” Again, faster, then once, twice, thrice sharp and vicious stabs. “But it’s never too late to start!” He flung the rifle into the sand, and his fist connected, a boot, knee, fists again; punching, kicking viciously, beating the shit out of the body.

Vadim tried to stay on his feet as long as possible, stupid pride, but the pain took over. He fell again, couldn’t stop himself, didn’t have the strength, went back to his knees then onto his front, trying to take the worst blows with his muscles, but felt his strength deserting him. He wasn’t Spetsnaz, after all. He was flesh, pain, agony and fear, over and over again. Just hoping at some point it would end. Blood running from his face, he didn’t have the strength nor the air to do much more than grunt, panting, lips open, kissing the fucking dirt.

Suddenly the punches and kicks stopped. Dan breathed hard, a rattling sound hissing through burning lungs. It was hard work to beat a man to death.

“No.” He reached down, arms underneath the chest, grabbed sand and dirt, then bleeding flesh, pulled the heavy body upwards. He was getting splattered with the other’s blood, but didn’t care.

Vadim didn't want to be that close. Every square millimetre of his body hurt; he thought about internal bleeding, hoped it would happen soon, he had heard it didn't hurt much to bleed to death.

"No fucking way, Russkie." Dan pulled until the body was upright, leaning against him, one arm steadying the bastard. Violent mockery of an embrace. "You won't die yet. Fuck you, Russkie, I'm not done with you yet. You deserve worse."

Vadim smelled the blood running down his chin, the dust and the heat. He managed to scream with pain, the shoulder he had fallen on felt hot and distorted. Strength gone, he was strangling himself, hoping that the burning sensation at his throat would stop. He still heard the threat, and wanted to disbelieve it, but the stories he'd heard about the SAS, and their private little war, made it all possible.

Better believe it. Think. He's killing you, and he'll do it messily.

Nothing he could offer, nothing he could bargain with, the SAS bastard was about to kill him. And all that because of what he'd done.

Dan grabbed the rifle, started to drag the body back to the water hole, didn't give a shit if the other was passing out or not, just handled the man as if he owned the mass of bloodied flesh.

Vadim remained limp, hoping he'd pass out from lack of oxygen. He was halfway there, everything danced around him, a hectic flickering that might be anything, probably was his eyelids. All because of the rape. That kind of hatred could only have one single reason. The one mistake.

"Don't," Vadim breathed. Had no idea which language he spoke. "I do whatever. Don't. Just...do what I did...and we're even. Whatever. Just stop...hitting me." The thought felt rational. He remembered the man had been hard when the torture started. He knew the feeling. Beating another into submission made him feel that way too. He had done it in the barracks, and assumed it was the same everywhere else in the world. He could survive that. He couldn't survive what the SAS bastard was doing right now. It might cool the anger. Repay in kind. It was only fair.

Those words blinded Dan into a rage; blazing terror of a Nothing he had fought so hard to forget. Words that brought alive a beast he'd never encountered before. Blood-red haze descended upon his senses and he snarled, out of his mind. "What?" He let go as if he'd been stung, letting the limp body fall to the ground.

Reminders. That disgusting staccato of words again. Voice harder, sharper, “What the fuck did you say?” Dan kicked the body on the ground, aiming at the kidneys. “I’m not like you, fucking fag, shit stabbing bastard, goddamned motherfucker!”

Before the cunt could take another breath, Dan knelt down, knife in his hand, right in front of the Russian’s eyes. He cut the throat halter and twisted the arms to the front.

The worst thing was to be free, even for a moment, and nothing Vadim could do. His shoulders were absolute agony, one arm just fell on the ground, like dead meat, the other... was then pulled. Fuck, that hurt. He could breathe, suddenly. Wrong thought. Wrong offer. Had been worth a try.

Snarling with anger, unintelligible words of rage, Dan tied the lifeless arms in front to the thick beam in the well. “See how you like this, you bastard!”

Vadim brought his legs together, to protect himself from kicks, or worse, felt a sweaty hand between his shoulder blades, one knee in the small of his back, and thought for a strange moment he’d been wrong.

“I’m not like you!” Dan shouted.

Vadim felt a blade sink into the flesh in the middle of his back. Fucking SAS bastard! Cold steel, hot and cool at the same time. It wasn’t just a superficial cut – it went deep. He felt blood run before he felt the pain. Then it hit home. A glaring, bright, horrible thing inside him, a caged monster. He screamed, voice and throat raw.

Dan’s breathing became ragged, short bursts of air that never reached his mind, burning deep in his lungs. “You’re a cunt and the world will know it.” The knife lifted, then blade touched skin again, this time moving from dry heat into thick blood. Another line, amidst the screams, cutting the next part of the first letter of ‘pizda’.

Cunt.

He cut, slowly, line after line, curve after curve. Deliberately, concentrated on nothing but skin beneath the blade, under his knee, against his hand. Blood mingling with sweat and dust, while he murmured quiet words now and then. A flick of a blade, another move, and yet another line. Cyrillic was oddly suited to cutting words into human flesh.

Only one way to deal with that pain. Screaming. Screaming because it was tearing him apart inside. Vadim could feel the blade slice into the muscle right next to his spine. He could feel the fire, his blood running down and pooling in the hollow curve of his back. The terror was complete.

The scream turned into sobbing. Ages since Vadim had cried like that, with pain and fear. Basic training. Spetsnaz training.

The belt was in the way. Dan's knife cut through that as well. Leather, flesh, no matter. Didn't have to cut off the trousers, unlike...

Flesh, heat, blood, pain and power.

Unlike...Nothing.

Buttons gave, slipped out of holes, when Dan pulled hard on the garment. Exposing that arse he had stared at earlier, and hating the other even more for it. Hated the stare, the heat, the goddamned body, the Nothing. Cut the next letter, moved down towards the small of the back, towards the muscled flesh, noticed the way the muscles twitched, the perfection of smooth lines. The lack of any softness, tight curves, sharp angles and hardened planes.

His hand moved downwards through slippery blood, red-coated fingers pressing down into the flesh. Staring. Forcing. Knife moved slower. Minute, deliberate cuts.

Vadim's mind was spinning, felt like it was breaking. Glass now, stone, no more. He tried to move, all he could do was squirm, then a moment's pause. His ass tensed, his legs tensed, he knew the knife was poised to...poised to...go there, the blade there would finally kill him. After what would be the worst pain of his life.

He was panting so hard he was dizzy with oxygen, completely exhausted, mind frozen in terror. The SAS bastard would fuck him with a knife.

What a way to go.

Think.

Can't.

Think, damn you.

Just can't.

Vadim shook his head, hit his forehead on a rock, felt more blood, wasn't sure where all this was coming from. Quivering mass of terror.

“Cunt,” Dan murmured, knife blade slipping further down, poised to make his last cut.

“Kill me,” Vadim whispered. Russian. He had no thought left in English. “Kill me...like soldier. Don’t. I’m...soldier...don’t... want...can’t...go like...this. You SAS, not...bandit. I have family.” He felt the tears run down his face, thought of Katya, the kids, fragile, so fragile, little heads and faces. He tried to stop the tears, hoped the bastard didn’t notice that he cried like a child.

Dan’s mind registered only one word. *Soldier*.

Soldier.

Kill me. More words.

Soldier.

Hand stilled. Knife poised. Stared at his other hand pressing down on the smooth flesh. It shook, hadn’t noticed before. Shook violently, from sounds and movements that felt like white noise amongst the one word that kept echoing through his empty mind.

Crying. Sobbing.

Soldier. SAS.

For Queen and Country.

“Oh God.” Whispered. Where was the rage? ‘Kill him. Kill the liar. Kill him.’

“You lie.” Dan’s eyes transfixed on the poised knife, couldn’t tear them away from the carnage. Trail of blood, fascinating to watch it move slowly, just as deliberately as his blade, move towards the cleft and trickle sluggishly down and vanish.

Something between his ass cheeks. Blood. Running down like the kiss of death. Vadim screamed again, this time in terror, not pain, felt how his mind slowly moved away from the broken mess that was his body, his pride, his honour, his life.

“You can’t have a family.” Dan’s voice without inflexion or emotion. Lie, what a lie. Screaming silence inside, inferno of ‘soldier, soldier, professional soldier’ and ‘t.o.r.t.u.r.e.r.’

“You’re a fag.” *You*, not ‘Russkie’, nor ‘bastard’, nor ‘cunt’.

‘You’. Soldier.

There was something in him bordering calm. It would still happen. Vadim felt filthy because he'd told the enemy about Katya. His family. His little dream out there in Moscow. A life he couldn't lead. Had failed to lead. "Give me...a bullet. I...will even pull the...trigger, just...not like this. Give me a clean death." How other Spetsnaz would laugh at that idea. Clean death. It was still splattering his brains out.

Katya. If only I could have been...that other man. More like Sasha. Vadim sobbed again, bit into his shoulder to suppress it. "For my...family. She'll want to know...how I died."

"You're a faggot." he shook his head, couldn't be. Impossible. "You're a liar."

Family? It had already stopped mattering to Dan. No consequence, just that word, that one word reverberating in every corner of his being. *Soldier*.

He was torturing a man not for information. But for...

"No." Quieter. Oh fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. War crimes. Unit. Regimental pride. No. No. He'd become as bad, stooped to the bastard's level.

Blood began to dry on his fingers. It kept oozing from the body under him, like the thought, the memory, this knowledge. Noticed his own body at last, aware of the unbearable.

Hardness where it couldn't and shouldn't be.

Torturer.

"No."

His hand trembled. Mustn't let the enemy see this weakness. Lowered the knife, wiped it to clean the bloodied blade, before fumbling with unsteady hands, slipping it back into its sheath.

So easy to make things undone, just clean the blade and sheath the knife. No. Not easy at all.

He left the man on the ground and went to pull up more water from the well. Couldn't bear to look at the bleeding mess. Couldn't speak. The voice inside was unbearable. It screamed 'Torturer!' at him. 'Tribunal'... Dismissal! A disgrace to the unit and the British Forces.

For Vadim, it had stopped. The SAS was going to get the pistol. A wave of relief flooded through him. Whenever he had thought about dying, he imagined it would be quick, like a light switched off. A sharp pain, then over. In a minute, it

would be just like that. Maybe if the man gave him a gun, he would help him hold it in his hand. He might even be able to squeeze the trigger. Tension left him again. At least it would be over. No God to thank though. Maybe Katya. Her memory. The kids. She was tough, she would find a way to go on. He only regretted that just after Sasha, she would lose him, too. Two blows. So close together.

Vadim lay on the ground, felt the sun burn down on his mutilated back and head, saw the expanse of dusty mountains stretched before him. Wondered idly why he had hated this country so much. It provided air to breathe, and blue sky, and ground on which to lie. It wasn't so bad.

He glanced up as boots scrunched closer, saw the dusty leather, the thick shit-kicker soles. Squinted his eyes to look at the man, who avoided meeting his.

Not looking, just not looking, thought Dan, open water bottle held ready. *Soldier*. It's you who is the liar.

What beautiful brown eyes, thought Vadim, turning his head a little more. Kindness. Now they weren't enemies they had gone beyond that. He was so grateful he almost cried again. It was so simple to be happy, finally at peace. Just hand over your life, and accept death. He felt he had realized something impossibly true and profound, something he needed to share. He looked at the man and smiled. It wasn't about forgiving or asking forgiveness, it was about the simple kindness of knowing he would no longer hurt.

The touch at his lips was strange, unexpected. He shook his head. "No. It's alright. It's all good now."

Dan didn't understand the ramblings. He glanced down at what he had tried to avoid seeing at all costs, noticed that strange look on the bruised and bleeding face. A smile? Oh fuck.

He tipped the bottle towards the bleeding lips again, but no reaction. Reluctantly slipping his hand beneath the head, he lifted it enough to force bottle and water between the lips. He'd seen delirium before. They'd drink eventually, reflexes and instinct to survive were strong.

Waiting until sufficient water was swallowed by reflex, he grabbed the goat skin bucket and poured the cool liquid across the back. Odd. How sand and dust were forming intricate patterns when mingling with the blood. Shit, no bandages. He grabbed his own rag that shielded against the heat and sand and unwound it, shaking out the dirt. That would have to do.

Soldier. The word kept creeping up on him, gagging his senses in a stranglehold of guilt. *Soldier.* Not torturer. Wages paid with tax payers' money. All that shit.

He draped the top of the rag over the man's face to shield it from the sun and carefully let the rest fall. Before it did, he could clearly see the word he had carved into the flesh.

Pizda. Cunt.

Then it was hidden beneath the fabric and away from his gaze.

Fumbling for cigarettes and matches, he turned and stared across the mountains, his back to the enemy he had defeated.

"Fuck." Fag between his lips, match came to light with a hiss, pulling a drag deeply into his lungs. *Soldier.*

The Russian had to live.

* * *

Cool. Wet. Shade. Water. Of all things, Vadim missed the water most. He just lay on the ground, his whole body one throbbing mess of pain, fire, pressure, swelling. It didn't matter. He could rest now. Sleep. He moved his head to find an area which didn't hurt when he rested on it. Found a patch on the side of his forehead. Felt water and blood run down his sides, pooling around him.

He would go to sleep now, and not wake up again. That was alright. Probably the best way to die. He closed his eyes, and relaxed, relaxed all the tensed, torn, bruised muscles, let his breath flow freely, and sank back into darkness.

There was a memory, or a dream. He smelled water, disinfectant, remembered being cold and wet and glowing with exertion, rubbing his arms to get warm again after the training. He was dry by the time it was his turn to head into the masseur's office. Then, warm hands on his body that took cold and tension away, a low voice that told him to relax.

They didn't speak much. Vadim was too busy soaking up the feeling of being thoroughly pampered, of somebody knowing exactly where he needed that firm touch. Sometimes with a little pain, when he was too tensed to let go. When he had been defeated again, or couldn't get what he wanted.

Those hands started at his toes and ended with his head, and the smell of oil and leather enveloped him. A very special warmth. Often, he grew hard. The masseur pretended not to notice. Vadim thought maybe it happened to the other boys as well.

One day, those hands spent much more time on his ass, thumbs working on the place between them, and then sunk into his body. Vadim hardly dared to breathe while the fingers sent shivers through him, slow, and then faster, and the shudders blended into one, and he bucked against the cushioning until he came.

He was mortified and mellow at the same time, and the masseur turned away from him as he told him he was finished. He could barely focus on the training, paid close attention every time somebody mentioned the masseur's name. Nobody seemed suspicious. Vadim couldn't wait until the next time, and the man did this again.

Whatever they do, Vadim, never believe what you feel makes you less able to win. It's simply not true. Just a whisper against his ear, and in that moment Vadim understood what he felt.

They shared a secret, in this place where none of the boys managed to keep a secret for long, where everything was poked and prodded and forbidden, and Vadim felt guilty and excited and even thought he was in love.

* * *

Dan stood in the waning heat, blowing cigarette smoke that blurred the endless landscape of mountains, rocks and desert. There were only patches of dried grass, shrubs and the occasional dead tree. He didn't give a shit about the Russkie's life, but he gave a great deal about what his death would mean. If the Russian died, he'd be a murderer, not a killer.

He had long accepted that killing was his job. 'Defence', they said, but when it came down to it, the SAS training had made him into a killer. Fine. That's what he did. For Queen and Country and the Glory of the British Special Airborne Services. He had proven to be tougher than the Royal Marines Commando troops, fiercer than any infantryman and more resilient than anyone else in the goddamned Forces. That included training in interrogation techniques, survival on insects,

snails and roots, the whole fucking hog and all the trimmings. ‘Interrogation’ was justifiable, not torture for no other reason than revenge.

Soldier. You’re a soldier.

“Murderer,” he murmured with disgust, taking a last dreg of the fag, before he flicked the butt behind him. “No. The bastard has to live.”

He didn’t think for a second about what the hell he’d do with his enemy even if the man survived all the beatings. Right now, it didn’t look too good. He knew the power behind his boots and fists, and the knife? Flesh cut open like a ripe tomato. Dan wondered how many bones he’d broken. Nose, clearly; ribs, surely.

He was in for the long haul. Best organise something to eat and a disguise for the Russian. The fucker would be minced meat with extra curry flavour if an Afghani passed the water hole and realised what the messed-up man was.

Dan’s stomach growled, but he’d long emptied the packet of nuts. Water was more important than anything, but first he needed shade for the Russkie, shoot a goat and get a fire going. He took a deep breath, before he turned towards the man on the ground. First things first. If the bastard was to have any chance of surviving, he’d better make it the best one.

Walking in ever increasing circles, Dan found enough larger pieces of wood to construct a makeshift shelter using the natural overhang of rock that provided protection for the water hole. Only one piece of fabric would do: his own parka. He couldn’t use the Russian’s uniform tunic, too dangerous in case Afghanis passed during the day, best roll it up and use it as further cushioning. He made sure the Dragunov rifle was out of reach and out of sight. No way he’d leave the Russkie unbound, even at this stage, but what was the need for a man more dead than alive to be trussed up as he was right now?

Dan knelt down beside the unconscious body, reached for the waistband of the trousers and pulled them further up over the exposed arse. He didn’t look, didn’t want to see, but he was unable not to notice how the rag was soaked with blood already. “You’d better be tough, Russkie, or you haven’t got a fucking chance in hell and I won’t let you fuck off and die.”

Then he checked over the rope, untied it from the beam, but didn’t free the wrists or ankles. He was about to try and lift the limp body when his eyes fell on the shoulder.

“Fuck.” Dan hadn’t noticed the strange angle before.

Vadim was aware he was lifted up, he could feel part of his body leave the ground, then something constricted him, like somebody standing on him. Weight and pressure, suddenly he was awake as the pain in his shoulder became unspeakable. There was a sickening sound, a feeling like something ripped his arm clean off and took the whole shoulder up to the sternum with it. He screamed again, surprise and pain together much worse than pain alone, then he was dropped to the ground, no, was let down. He panted, fighting the pain, and the fear that returned with it. Staring at the SAS soldier, wondering what was next.

Slowly, it dawned on him, his shoulder had been dislocated. That explained the pain there. And the SAS had put it back into its socket. He dared not move, felt nauseous and hungry and sweaty. Battled the pain. No gun. No knife. The man tried to help? Why? Vadim looked at the enemy, tried to guess, then the darkness welled up again. The last thought was somehow unpleasant, but it slipped from his mind.

Dan caught the brief inquisitive look, remembered eyes as pale as a block of ice, see-through transparency against the blue of a winter sky. They were darker now, and he couldn't understand for all the money in the world why he remembered the fucker's eyes so vividly.

Never mind.

He lifted the limp, heavy body with a groan, managed to get it over to the makeshift resting place and lowered him down. He left the rope around the ankles the way they were, but he undid the laces and pulled the boots off. It wouldn't do to have the Russkie survive only to have his feet rot away, unable to get him to...yeah, where to? Time would tell. The ropes were looser now, he didn't figure the man was up to running away, so he re-bound the wrists, leaving some movement. The shoulder would hurt like fuck, but that would be nothing compared to the broken bones and the cut-open flesh.

He secured his parka as windbreak and shelter, which would keep warmth in from the fire he was about to make. It would have to be small, but there was enough wood to keep them going for the time they'd have to stay. Cut short only by the man's death, if it happened. The option remained bloody likely.

It would get dark and cold soon; time to find something to eat. Dan set off, his own rifle under his arm to find and shoot a goat or anything else that provided food.

* * *

When Vadim awoke the next time, it was from fire. A different warmth from the feverish heat that possessed his body. The smell of something edible.

He lay still, noticed his hands and feet were bound, but had no strength beyond working that out. SAS soldier's skin appeared red in the firelight. Dark eyes and hair. The thought grew into a suspicion. He tried to open his lips, felt they were dry, and tried to clear his throat. It took a while, he didn't have much control.

Dan was turning over the piece of goat meat that was roasting on the fire. He'd cleaned the back again, poured some water down the Russkie's throat while he was out cold, careful to use reflexes and not choke him, then washed out the bloodied rag and covered the back again. Every time he lifted the cloth, 'pizda' was staring at him.

Cunt.

"Why?" Vadim's original question was longer, something about Mujahideen, and bounty, but it was too much. Not that he expected an answer. He might be back in the dark place before the SAS answered. If he did.

Dan frowned. What else did the fucker want? Nursing, food, water and now conversation? He had even placed the Russian's uniform shirt and tunic back over him to ward off the cold—inside out and hiding the insignia, and he'd be fucked if he knew what he himself was going to use at night. The cold would surely kill the bastard this time, and that just wouldn't do.

Dan tested a strip of the meat, tore it off when it was sufficiently cooked and stuffed it into his mouth before he walked over to the Russian. He crouched beside his head and pushed a small strip of meat against the lips.

Vadim smelled the meat, and yes, that meant he was supposed to live. Which was odd. The bounty on his head? There were bounties around for any Russian soldier. Officers were quite valuable. It didn't matter whether the head was still attached.

He wished he'd been high-ranking enough that his side would actually try to get him out. Maybe they would, but they wouldn't like the fact that he had been interrogated.

He opened his lips and took the hot meat, manoeuvring it between his molars and very slowly chewed. His jaw ached like he had been chewing steel for several hours. He looked up at the man, expected, deep down in his guts, more pain. Before now, he had looked at him with a mixture of lust and dark pleasure, then respect, then fear. It all mixed now. He realized why he had chosen this one that night in Kabul. Drunk as he had been, adrenaline-crazed, bored and vicious. Perfect match. An equal. He swallowed the meat, felt how even that hurt.

“Vadim...Krasnorada. I...am from Moscow.” If he was a prisoner, there was one duty, and that was to stay alive. He had tried to escape often enough. Now it was about working within the confined space. And that meant getting into the head of his captor.

Dan shrugged, tore off another strip of meat for himself, then for the Russian. He spoke at last. “I know who you are but I don’t give a shit.” His voice fell back into the smoothed-down guttural accent of the Scottish Highlands.

“Don’t ever make the mistake of thinking I give a flying fuck about your life.” He pushed meat against the lips again. “But you’ll live.”

He took the last bit of meat and chewed on it before reaching for the water bottle on his belt.

Vadim chewed carefully. It required a lot of concentration to not bite his tongue. Took forever before he managed to swallow. “No. No more mistakes,” he murmured, half closed his eyes because the lids were too heavy. “If...you go into the village. They often have food...hidden away. Check for...cellars. Small...cavities. They...store stuff in all...kinds of places. Don’t touch the water.”

He needed another rest, felt the chill of the night. “I think I will be...worse soon.” He could feel heat, and sweat, and knew his body was gearing up to fight trauma, blood loss and probably infection. That was how it was. “Her name’s Katya. Daughter’s Anoushka. Son’s Nikolai.”

Fever. Of course. Dan listened to the ramblings, even though he didn’t want to. Not much else to do, face to face with another man. Whatever those names meant. Daughter, son, wife, whatever. How could he? How could that fucker anyway? Why had he done what he did and...no. Don’t go there. There be dragons, but there should be Nothing.

Dan put the water bottle to Vadim’s lips and let some of it pour into the mouth, waiting for him to swallow.

Vadim knew he had to, knew it was better, improved his chances, but it was hard work, and he'd rather just drift away.

Fishing in the back pocket of his webbing belt, Dan pulled out a small tub with white pills. Antibiotics. His last ones. "Take that." He pushed a couple between Vadim's lips.

Vadim woke up a bit more, mistrustful, then remembered it didn't make any difference. He took the pills, swallowed them dry, which took even more effort. Half formed thoughts in his mind, one clouding the other. Spetsnaz. SAS. Family. He started to shiver, felt every sore muscle in his body protest. Opened his eyes again, didn't want to slip away. Now that he had a small hope, he had something to lose.

He tried to touch the other man's arm, squeeze it, but was too weak to lift his hand much and there was still the rope.

Dan trickled more water between Vadim's lips to help wash the pills down. The more water the man swallowed, the better his chances. Simple equation and even simpler reasons why.

Live, or I will be a murderer.

After watching the Russkie rapidly descend back into unconsciousness, Dan turned to stoke the fire. Despite the shelter and the source of heat, it was beginning to freeze as it always did in these goddamned mountains. Peering outside and into the sky, he wondered when he had stopped being amazed at the vastness of the night sky in this country, and the incredible clarity of the stars. Perhaps he had forgotten about it when the killing started, the fighting and scheming, or maybe since that night in Kabul.

Didn't matter. He sat down to roast more meat. He had to keep going or the goat would be off come the heat of the following day.

Two hours later and with as much food down his neck as he could manage, he kindled the fire again and set up the meat in a circle around the flames, positioning it on spikes to keep it roasting. Exhausted, freezing cold, he glanced over at the shelter, the man and the coverings. Damn.

He drew in a deep breath, watched the exhaled vapour curl into the crystal coldness of the night. Couldn't be helped. He moved over to the Russian, lay down beside him on the patch of padding. If he kept his guard and never turned his back, the other shouldn't pose a danger in his condition. He moved as close as he could,

and draped the tunics and every scrap of fabric he could find over both of them. Fuck. How bloody ironic. Mortal enemies sharing body heat. He'd laugh if he could find it funny.

He fell asleep within a heartbeat.

Vadim woke up because he was burning; it felt like somebody poured fire down his throat. He felt worse than before, the headache was back, sunburn in all the places that weren't black and blue.

He wanted to beg for water, then noticed something close. Somebody. He didn't feel the cold; he was sweating, but it was feverish heat and nothing cooled, not the night, not the sweat. He saw the man up close, eyes closed, face relaxed, no hatred, no fear, no anger, no nothing. Just a man asleep. He couldn't help noticing he was pretty. No, wrong word. Stunning. He tried to laugh, but didn't have the strength. Stunning alright. Smashing, even.

He could study him all he wanted. And how stupid to even notice how attractive he was. You thrive on pain Vadim. You are insane. Look at what he did.

But he understood. He understood why, and he knew that he wouldn't have shown any of what the other had. No mercy. The pain and weakness raging in his body.

He ignored the thirst, tried to move his left hand. Worked. All five fingers. That was a start.

That movement was all that was needed to enter Dan's sleep and alert his mind. His eyes opened, his face turned from one second relaxed to the next awake. He said nothing, his mind still clouded with sleep. Dark brown eyes met pale ice blue. There they were again. He felt like laughing, but it still wasn't funny.

The face in front of his was so bruised it was grotesque. One eye almost swollen shut, the other looking straight at him. Black and blue, dried red of blood and grime and dust.

His brows rose, but he didn't move.

Excellent instincts, Vadim thought. He barely managed to shake his head. Being so close without hitting or kicking him must be bad for the SAS. Bad feelings. Bad memory. He tried to moisten his lips, wasn't sure what he would say, or could say without losing the remainder of the other man's good will.

"Just woke up," Vadim said. "It's alright."

It was. He had got used to the pain. He'd live. What for--he didn't care right now. I really like your eyes, he thought but didn't say. That would kill him. But he did like them. Irony. Noticing these things after he'd had that body. Noticed eyes and hair and that long, thin nose that looked like that man had never broken it. "I owe you," he murmured.

I owe you? Dan's brows rose higher. "You're talking bullshit." *It's alright?* Just as ridiculous. "Water?" One-word communication when he didn't want to talk at all. Not with this one. It made the Russkie too human instead of a mass of muscle, skin, bones and flesh.

"Yes. Water." Vadim struggled to keep the eye open. So many things to ask. Who are you? He still didn't know the man's name. The other would never give up that advantage, if only psychological. No, every advantage.

Dan reached behind himself for the water bottle and moved to lean on his hips. Unscrewing the top, he took a swig himself before holding it to the other's lips.

"Stars, eh?" Vadim grinned a little. Milky Way. Stars, stars, stars. "Moscow, no stars."

"I told you before," Dan frowned, "I don't give a shit who you are, where you're from, who your family is, if you even have one, what fucking stars are in whatever motherfucking country and least of all who you've fucked with or not." He had no idea where the last bit had come from.

Vadim drank and acknowledged the tirade. He tried to get as much water down as he could, and the thirst began to grow a little less bad. Still not great, but he didn't want to have to piss. Certainly not. He was about to say something more, something like an apology for keeping him awake, then thought it didn't really matter. Relaxing again, feeling the sweat bead on his body. Lying awake, feeling the fever rage inside.

Dan was cold, tired, but at least not hungry. "You'll live, but that's it, and if you don't shut the fuck up that's getting less likely by the minute."

"I understand." Vadim felt as if he'd been backhanded, and the man slipped away like a fish in a pond. It was important that the SAS soldier saw him as more than just an enemy. An enemy he kept alive, but there had to be more, and that was work, but he had to do it. It would improve his chances of survival and maybe escape.

Dan had an inkling the Russkie didn't understand anything, but that didn't matter right now. He put the top onto the bottle after a swig for himself and lay back down, shifting close to the sweating body. He'd feel uncomfortable if he didn't know about necessity and if he hadn't slept arse to arse or chest to chest with gangs of squaddies before. Die of cold or push your body into another man's so his groin was rubbing against your back and be snugly warm. No contest.

“Sleep.” An order, not a request.

Dan slept until dawn, fairly undisturbed, as if his subconscious had adjusted to the shifting and tiny movements of the feverish man beside him. Pouring more water into the Russian the moment he woke, he refilled the bottle after taking a piss nearby, deliberately facing away from the Russkie.

After checking on the cuts, he washed his back again with cold water and then gave him more of the meat to chew. He fed the man like a child, but everything Dan did, he did with obvious reluctance. Live, yes, wanted him to live? In too many ways, no.

He left the Russian with the goat skin bucket full of water beside him, and the tunic rolled up and stashed beneath his head. Every bit that clearly marked him as a Soviet soldier was hidden away. He'd have to take the chance that no one would stop by and realise who the sick man was, but he had to be off to scour the mountains and climb down into the next village.

A few hours trek and he found some primitive huts, deserted and laden with the rotten stench of animal corpses. At least the humans seemed to have been buried. Digging inside the huts, he soon found what he was looking for. He burdened himself with every tin he could find, dried fruits, dried meat and a wooden tub of what seemed to be animal fat.

Up in the mountain, Vadim was drifting in and out of sleep. Realising he was alone, and thirsty, he managed his one triumph in that day. Drink from the bucket with his own strength, nearly toppling it three or four times, his back a bushfire of pain as he collapsed, nearly sobbing with frustration.

Couldn't move.

Couldn't get away. He ate two bites of meat he had found close enough to reach, but that took forever. He covered his head as well as he could. The sun hated his fair skin; people like him should stay wrapped up to the tips of their noses and then some.

He stared at the ground, tried counting to see how bad his mind was, lost track of his numbers, drifted off again, woke, and the shadows were long and deep. He forced himself to drink more.

Dan found his way back to the water hole with ease, orienting himself by the sun and the rock formations, grabbing fire wood on the way, arriving back at the makeshift camp with his burden an hour before the darkness of evening.

Putting everything down beside the now burnt-out fire, he rekindled it, using some carefully stashed embers, before walking over to look down at the man. Wordlessly, he studied the sweat gleaming side of the Russian's face and neck, the thickly muscled arms and then the expanse of back, hidden beneath the rag that protected the open wounds.

He didn't know if he felt hatred anymore. It was more the sensation of a most disturbing lack of anything.

Nothing.

When Vadim awoke next time, the SAS soldier was standing there, watching him like a dying animal. He looked up, answered that gaze. Good, you're back, he thought, but knew saying it wasn't welcome. The other man didn't talk. Not to him, anyway. "I'm...prisoner, yes?" English.

Good question. What was the man, this Spetsnaz soldier? Dan shrugged, "I guess." Did it matter? He didn't *want* it to matter. The Russian was his responsibility for now and that was bad enough.

Checking the surroundings, Dan saw the bucket had been drunk from, the bits of meat were gone. Good. Reaching into his pocket he got a handful of dried fruits and placed them into the Russian's left hand. He understood that the right would be useless. He had a fair idea from experience of the pain and complications of dislocated shoulder and broken ribs.

He turned away again to sort the foodstuffs he'd found, before refilling the water bottle and opening one of the tins. Spam. This time Dan did laugh. A private joke that tickled his humour from a place and time far away. Shaking his head while letting out that laughter, belly deep although short, and sounding as relaxed as if he were down the pub with his mates.

Vadim looked up. The other man wasn't as dour as he made out. The sound felt good, assured him he'd be alright, because this man had more feelings than

anger. He wanted to ask what was funny, then had the feeling the question would stop the laughter and all humour immediately.

Dan got some of the meat out with his knife and cut it into small pieces. Grabbing the tub with animal fat, he knelt down beside the Russian, placed the tin with the cut-up spam in front of his hand. "It's good together with the fruit."

Vadim froze the instant the man lifted the rag to study the wounds. His shoulder blades moved as he felt tension again, and he forced cut muscles to move. Vadim pressed his forehead into the ground and tried not to think, not to feel. He had no idea how bad it was, only that it felt very, very bad. And it scared him, not knowing.

Dan's eyes narrowed at the angry red lines that spoke in Cyrillic letters, drawn with dried blood. *Cunt*. Yes, Dan knew. All too well. "Eat now, it'll still hurt later."

Uncovering the tub, eyeing one of the worst bruises over the ribs, slowly pushing into it to check if he could feel any broken bones.

The pain was immense. The touch was probably gentle, but it caused agony; Vadim could feel his ribs move in ways they shouldn't. That was why breathing hurt. He had wondered what the noise had been. That was them breaking.

And yet. Pain. Touch. Something got confused in his mind, something about that man touching him. When Vadim dared to breathe again, he looked at the other. Wanted to be sarcastic, congratulate him on reducing him to this in only a few hours. Couldn't dredge up the feeling for it. Punishment for what he had done? Then it was punishment for both of them, and that didn't make any sense.

"I wish I could offer you money." In Capitalism, everything had a price, and nothing value.

"What for?" Dan didn't look up, watched his hand instead, fingers slowly moving across the ribcage. Yes, broken, damn, but he'd expected it. He knew his own strength, but he was glad at least for the bones remaining in place. Wondered for a moment why he was glad, shook his head. At least if the Russkie survived, he wouldn't be a murderer.

Vadim tensed at the probing fingers, and by instinct, hit his forehead against the ground. Fuck. That hurt. His breathing uncontrolled, panting again. He tried to slow it down. Don't panic. It's just pain. It's cleaning up after all the fun you've had.

“I told you, you’ll live.” Leaning over, Dan’s hands moved more carefully up and down both sides of the chest. Massive chest. Strong, hard, and lacking even the slightest hint of softness. He moved his hands up again, then down, lingering at the waist. Not thinking, just checking. Once more up, slowly. Sensation of skin, hot and smooth, over muscles. Slowed and marvelled, not thinking, never thinking. Stayed, felt, remained too long.

The hands felt soothing now, calming, and Vadim was stupidly grateful for that touch. He tried to relax. It wouldn’t help if he freaked every time that man checked his wounds. There would be a lot of that.

Dan suddenly caught himself, looked up, met the Russian’s eyes at last. “I don’t need your money even if you had any.”

“It’s not...about needing, it’s about wanting,” said Vadim, and paused, because those words ran too deep. He didn’t actually need to jump anybody, hadn’t needed to ambush this man. It was all about wanting. Money, sex, combat. He closed his eyes, hoped the other wouldn’t notice. That kind of sentence got people hurt or even more.

Dan’s hands stopped, he tensed, but said nothing. Peering at the cuts, he tilted his head to glance down towards the trousers. He frowned. The last letter was reaching below the waistband, he could already see the fabric rubbing against the angry welts, which would make healing impossible. Shit.

“I broke your ribs.” Matter-of-factly. “Your legs, you feel pain?” His hand rested on the waistband with its cut leather belt. Reluctant to push the trousers back down, equally hesitant to let go.

Dan didn’t like being confused.

“The spine is alright. I can feel and move my toes. Just not the legs.” Because that would mean moving a muscle in my back, and that hurt really badly last time I tried. Vadim snorted laughter. “I’ll tell them I fell off a mountain this time.”

“No one is going to believe that story.” Dan’s dry tone belied the carnage across the back. “No one.”

Vadim shook his head. “Guess not. But I’ll cut the doctor’s balls off if he writes anything else into my file.”

Dan snorted, then pushed the camo trousers down, half-way over the arse. Stopped. Hand still poised on the fabric. He exhaled one breath louder than he

should, caught himself staring for a moment. Holy shit. The sun was low in the sky, hitting the smooth flesh at an angle that made the blond hair shimmer golden on pale skin. Perfection.

All of a sudden, he hated the Russian again.

Vadim paused, listening, every sense alert. Resisting? No. He didn't even know what to expect. Or maybe...Maybe. He didn't believe the other capable of doing that. Not casual, not like this.

"Eat." Curt, almost angry, Dan nodded at spam and fruit. "I found a tub of fat, it'll do to stop your muscles from cramping, but it'll hurt like a motherfucker." He turned away to tend to the fire once more, leaving the back and arse open to the air.

Vadim reached out with his hand and began to eat the fruit. Raisins, apples. They actually made him hungry, and he didn't have to chew them much, just swallow. The meat didn't offer much more resistance, and he concentrated on getting some calories inside.

Dan chose the tougher foods, keeping the easy options for the other man. Caring? Bullshit, being realistic. Returning after food and water, he watched the Russian swallow the last bits, before handing him the water bottle. He figured he'd manage on his own by now. If not? Tough shit, he wasn't the bastard's nurse. Almost murdering him, torturing him for revenge didn't make Dan detest the fucker any less.

Straddling the Russian's legs, reaching for the tub and slapping some of the fat onto his hands he lowered himself to sit on the thighs.

Sitting on him. Vadim couldn't crane his neck--didn't want to risk it--not enough to look at him. His legs, thighs, ass, everything tensed, partially to support that weight. The weight. Vadim could feel how much he would have liked it if the man had actually been open to that possibility. No, wrong. Part of him liked that weight on top. Period.

"If I don't do this now, you'll be screaming by tomorrow."

"I have a feeling I'll be screaming anyway," Vadim murmured in Russian.

"I guess you will." The dry voice again, in Russian this time. Dan moved his hands, avoided the cuts, believing that air on the wounds would be better than anything, and fat would not stop an infection.

Water, air, and covering them from the worst. That would have to do. The grease could come later when the cuts had closed. His hands moved along the sides, not too much pressure, just enough to tend to the bruises, mindful of the fractures. He had no intention to dish out agony, even felt the need to avoid it. Leaning forward, avoiding contact with the back, Dan worked his way up to the shoulder, before moving down along the arms, then back to the shoulder.

He had no illusion how much more pain he was causing, but if he didn't work on the muscles now, they would seize up later. He took his time and concentrated on nothing but the body.

This goddamned body.

Vadim pressed his forehead into the ground. The pain was nothing like the one he remembered--even though it was hard to remember the whole size of that fucking monster. But it was still bad.

If this hurts, breathe with me.

He forced himself to exhale when the man leaned in, and inhale when the pressure left. His body remembered that much. Of course, his shoulder felt no better, probably even worse. The way he'd been tied up--not good. And all the punches and kicks--he tried not to remember. Instead exhaled when it hurt, groaning in pain. That was permissible, but no screaming. He was close enough, but he didn't. Spetsnaz fucking joke. His drill instructors would tell stories about soldiers that had rather been torn to pieces than scream. Vadim wasn't that calibre. Those stories stayed in the barracks, like all the other fairy tales. Spetsnaz don't feel pain, and Baba Yaga is your dad.

And the weight on top. Reassuring. Painful, but reassuring.

Surprised at the silence, Dan couldn't help but feel respect. Didn't fight against that feeling, had long ago accepted the notion of respect—even for an enemy. When it came down to it, they were all just men. One a rapist, another a torturer.

No! His hand dug into the shoulder much harder than before, then eased again. Had to focus on what he was doing, couldn't let thoughts interfere. He just looked at the body before him, ignored the sight of the cuts, instead worked on the arms, the neck, the shoulders. All this took much longer than he had intended, but time didn't matter. Darkness was falling, the shelter illuminated by the flames of the small fire. Still his hands moved, smoothed, wandered over skin and muscles.

Vadim concentrated on the hands until there was nothing else but the weight and the hands on his skin. He breathed against the pain, focused on it, taking it in. Accepting.

It got better. Much, much better. His body remembered all the important things about relaxing, about calming and resting after exertion and fear. He slowly relaxed his legs, ass, felt the man move, slightly, leaning into the motion. He was far from skilled, but all the bits were in place. Strength, and knowledge of the human body. Knew where the muscles were and how to reach them.

The SAS soldier didn't stop after the pain had turned to a dull, if angry glow, his shoulder, the ribs. No longer the muscles themselves. They were soothed, returned to how they were meant to be.

Dan was aware of hardness and sharp angles, no smoothness anywhere, just contained strength. Hands slowing, the movements more deliberate, less focussed. Just touching, new sensations. He had never felt a man before.

Not in this way.

Smooth-sliding up one arm, following biceps and triceps, dipping into the hollow of the elbow. Gliding along sunburnt skin, covered in blond hair, finally ending up at the ropes that held the strong wrists.

The massage went on, sliding over Vadim's skin, strong hands, calloused, short fingernails. Vadim felt his body welcome that, felt a slow, careful desire, even though that was madness; not for this man, not in this situation. But something about it aroused him. He closed his eyes and only opened them when the other spoke.

"I cut your back." Out of the blue and in Russian. Quiet, dark voice, somewhat rough. "It says pizda."

Pizda. For a moment, Vadim didn't care. He was alive, in one piece, scars meant nothing, not even when they formed words. But that word.

It would be hard to explain that. To anybody. Doctor, anybody who could see him under the shower. It meant he had been defeated and allowed this to happen. Somebody had done it to him. He kept his forehead on the ground, felt...felt again, humiliation, shame, self-pity. Explain that away? How? He nodded, feeling numb, but on a deeper level, things weren't all that clear.

Being called a cunt and...that.

"Yes." Accepting reality.

Silence. Dan didn't know what he had expected, but not this. This lack of anything. Hands slowed, more, then more. Stopped.

"Why did you rape me?" Silence inside.

Vadim tried to move, no, merely shifted, he couldn't actually get out of it, and he didn't want to. Why? He could have fucked Vanya. Or anybody else. Plenty of opportunity. He thought of an excuse, but before he could even start putting one together understood that the question was deeper. Why him? Or was it why rape?

He clenched his jaw muscle, thinking. "I was..." No, the beginning of an excuse. I was drunk, I didn't think about it, I needed to break something.

"Because...you looked like you had a fight in you." Very close to the truth. "I needed a fight." Excuse again. Justification. "I wanted you." Truth. I want you even now, damn it.

Nothing for a long time. No sound, no movement, no reaction except for a narrowing of Dan's eyes, and then they closed for a long while, but the other could not see him.

Movement at last, a nod that was transmitted to where their bodies connected, and then Dan's hands left the oily shimmering skin. The weight lifted, the rag was put across the back and then the tunic to provide warmth.

He never looked back. He pulled the Russian's shirt over his own head, on top of his jumble of clothes, grabbed his rifle and walked out into the night. Fuck the freezing cold, he didn't care.

Out of sight, swallowed by blackness and stars, the sound of a match being lit, and the smell of cigarette smoke wafting back into the shelter.

Then nothing.

Vadim raised his head and peered into the darkness. He expected a shot. There were a few recruits--conscripts--that killed themselves. Sometimes it took the tough ones, while the ones that had seemed so fragile suddenly grew steel around their hearts. He half expected the other to kill him now. It was either making excuses, or speaking the truth. He doubted he could have got away with excuses. He listened into the night.

Nothing he could do but wait. He felt worry and compassion, oddly enough. This whole thing had screwed him over, but he had achieved his objective. His captor had opened up. He had opened up.

That was why it was so difficult. He had to let down the mask and be a person. He waited for a long time. Had the SAS just walked off? He might be able to stand tomorrow--provided he could get through the ropes. But walking or marching? Out of the question. First step would be to try and find the rifle--any weapon to defend himself.

He had to have fallen asleep again, for in the morning, when Vadim woke, the SAS soldier was moving about the camp, tending to the fire while eating out of a tin, crouched on the ground with his back to him.

A short while later he stood up and walked over, more fruit and a different type of meat in another tin, placing them down on the ground.

“Drink.” Dan pushed the water bottle into the Russian’s hands.

Nothing had changed. Nothing had ever happened that night in Kabul.

Nothing.

* * *

Vadim slept a lot. Sleeping meant he didn’t have to move. He slept when the SAS wasn’t there, and even slept when he was around. Always watching the other when he was awake. Not that there was much to watch. The other man ate, did camp duty, and cleaned his weapons. Even the Dragunov. It felt strange to see the man handle the sniper rifle. Vadim had always considered that weapon to be much more elegant than any assault rifle, sleek killing power. His rifle. He could shoot with most things and had been trained to shoot with enemy weapons. The first time he had captured an antique 19th century Enfield he had amused himself with that. Amazing that the Afghans still shot with that kind of weapon, and what kind of fight they could raise with gear like that.

He watched the man wash, watched how his shoulders shifted under the filthy shirt, those firm, round muscles. Dark skin. Saw him fill up the bottle and take the rifle and vanish in the mornings when it was still relatively cool.

When he was gone, Vadim started isometric exercises, tensing every muscle, beginning to work on his body again, arms and shoulders, stomach, chest, tried to keep everything else to a minimum. He was still hurting badly, but he needed to move, if only a little.

At night, they were sharing warmth. Having rested all day, Vadim found it hard to sleep. One side was cold, the other warm. He could smell the man, his skin, his hair, and it was strange getting used to having him around.

He always watched him with thoughts that had nothing to do with the war, or indeed, escape or weakness. Unprofessional thoughts. Touching him, their bodies being even closer together. He'd turn around if it took that, allow the man to press up against him, give the man a hand job. Fuck. The same man who had tried to kill him. He was in no state for sex, but that didn't mean the thought couldn't creep up on him. And he knew he was no longer that man's equal. He'd be the bitch, but it didn't matter. He still wanted him.

They didn't speak. The SAS only spoke when absolutely pressed, and Vadim was never quite sure what to say, if anything.

He concentrated on healing. Eventually, he could crawl again, then sit up, survey their little mountain kingdom, and spend days staring out over the mountains, thinking. Working on excuses, worrying about capture, being a prisoner. He was not ready to accept that. The British weren't in this war officially. Even the Americans weren't.

He wondered about the laws. This was an internal affair, the government in Kabul wouldn't try him for war crimes, and wouldn't assist anybody who attempted prosecution. Moscow probably wouldn't even answer any request like that. And the secret service might bargain to get him out. As long as the superiors of his captor played by the rules, Vadim was untouchable.

It was a different matter with the Mujahideen, as they called themselves. Warriors of Allah. Oh please. If God existed, he would certainly not need a band of ragtag goat-fuckers to sort out his stuff. They were bandits, dushmans, pure and simple. They saw a vacuum of power and tried to fill it. Physics, nothing more. Jihad all you like.

He was worried about the ways they would kill him if they got their hands on him. Savages. Savages with a mission from God, and he was a servant of the Devil. Nothing like religion to make people unreasonable.

Days passed, and Vadim began to get up and walk a little. Stretch his legs. It was more staggering than walking, but if he rested every now and then, he could manage. Careful to hide the progress as long as possible. It was fifty or sixty

kilometres to the nearest Soviet outpost though. In his state, he needed to be lucky and walk into a patrol.

Dan's thick beard stubble was annoying him like shit. Some men shaved every other day, but he needed to do it twice daily when in uniform. He'd been cleaning the two weapons regularly. Now it was time to clean himself. He stunk.

He waited until the sun was high before he got up and brought the goatskin bag out of the water hole. Stalling for a moment, a thought crept into his mind, what if that shit-stabbing bastard was going to stare at him? So what. No crumb off his plate and nothing to see other than what most of his mates had seen before.

This cunt was different, though.

No. Nothing different. Nothing had happened. If he turned away now, hiding from the Russian's view, he'd admit weakness; defeat.

The shirt was already off, and Dan pulled the filthy t-shirt over his head. He felt self-conscious for a moment, before discarding the thought. What the fuck, indeed. He was just a bloke, with a body like everyone else's.

Vadim was leaning with the good side of his back to a rock, aimlessly playing with a piece of stone, rubbing it clean with a thumb, looking at it closer. Ammonites. He remembered school. All this must have been sea floor at some point. Afghanistan had once been covered with water. He looked up to share that bit of wisdom, and saw the man strip off his t-shirt, throw it down, then stretch like a cat, all muscles rippling, before bending down to unlace his boots, facing away from Vadim.

The pebble dropped from his fingers as he snorted quietly to himself. The Brit didn't seem to realise how inviting that looked.

He'd been right about his body. He should have taken more time. The SAS looked like an athlete. Leaner than he was. Probably not as obsessive about lifting weights, but still muscular and strong. A powerful dark tiger. Smooth skin, naturally tanned, betraying some Italian ancestor, and perhaps some Arabic or Asian genes thrown in as well. Who knew who had come to that island in the Atlantic.

Dan stepped out of the boots, then held his breath when taking off his socks. Fuck, that stink could kill a man, but he'd just have to do his best. As long as they kept dry, he'd be alright. He stood for a moment, barefooted just in his combats, running a hand through his unruly hair. Right. Water. Washing, then trying to

shave with whatever he could find. That would be his knife and the remains of the animal fat. Oh joy.

Vadim could feel his own hair and stubble, resented it. He would much rather be completely smooth, and when he was gearing up for the Olympics, he had been, so it had become a habit. No beard, ever. His skin didn't like the shaving, but it liked a beard even less. He watched the preparations. He got up to shuffle over.

“What about a deal. You shave me, I shave you.”

Dan was about to throw the bucket of water over his head to wash the dust and loose dirt off. He laughed, once again that careless sound that didn't seem to have a place in these mountains, right beside an enemy. “Yeah, right...”

He tipped the water bucket, shuddered under the onslaught of cold water, swore under his breath. Damn, the Russkie had a point, but he could manage with peering into a tin or feeling his way around with his fingers, or...oh fuck. He really did hate it when the arsewipe had one over him.

He shook his head like a dog, water flying everywhere, running down his face. Small rivulets making their way along his chest and back, reaching the waistband of his camo trousers, creating an odd sensation. He should really get those off, give himself an all-over scrub as best he could and wash his gear to get it dried in the sun. Yeah, fuck the shitstabbing fag, he didn't give a damn. Really. Not at all.

Dan fumbled with the belt, undid the buttons and let the trousers unceremoniously drop to his ankles, stepping out of them. He didn't care. No, not at all. Why should he?

Leaving the Russian standing where he was, Dan grabbed the goatskin bucket-bag and trotted back to the water hole. Stark naked. “Want me to sponge you down as well?” Snorted over his shoulder, “or will a towelling and blow-dry do?”

Vadim breathed, but just barely. Naked skin gleaming wet. Water. Life. Blow-dry. Blowing would be fine, thank you. Glancing down at himself, tried to think of something less appealing than digging his teeth into that dark skin and the round muscle.

“Only if you must,” he answered.

Vadim noted how the man seemed to be reluctant to look at him, even after helping him to piss, eat, after washing the blood off, after feeding him and ensuring

he was warm. He still minded. Probably because that entailed a knife. He followed to the water hole, ten yards or so, and felt exhausted when he got there. He'd cancel the next marathon.

He studied the man's backside, smooth muscle, nice, no, better than nice, ass. He could see his cock move. Showering with comrades was nothing like this. In the communal shower it didn't affect him much. He still noticed the other bodies, sometimes selecting a target from the ones he especially liked, but this man was different.

Closer. Dan fought off the urge to look behind him when the Russian followed, hairs on the back of his neck standing up, but strangely, not the sixth sense of danger. Something else, indefinable and unknown. He had the instinct to turn round and let his fist fly loose once again, stopping that face from smirking and the mouth from talking. He forced himself to ignore the urge. The Russkie was still bruised and swollen enough.

"You'd be the first enemy that ever got shaved by Spetsnaz, and not in the way we mean 'shaving'." As in, cut throat.

"Hoo-fucking-ray." Dan pulled up some more water, turned to face the Russian and it was his time to smirk. "And you're the first Spetsnaz who has had the word 'cunt' cut across his back by an SAS soldier." He tipped the water over his head again, standing upright, letting it cascade over his entire body, washing away sweat and dust, grime and anger.

Vadim pressed his lips together, anger, and, yes, humiliation. That was true. And then again, this man was the first SAS to be raped by a Spetsnaz. Even better. Spetsgruppe Vympel. Interior ministry strong-arm. "You can't win this," Vadim murmured, darkly. "Stop it." Regimental pride, whatever. Only the scars, proved he had been at the mercy of somebody else. The spooks would love that.

"Fuck you, Russkie." Dan spat some water on the ground, wiped a hand over his face and slicked the wet hair out of his forehead. "You bear the scars. You're visible, and if I wanted, I could 'win'. Right here, right now." His eyes narrowed in distaste and something deeper, darker. "But I'm not like you." Spat out the last words, "Shit-stabbing faggot."

Vadim shook his head. Oh yes, you are exactly like me.

Dan turned, crouched to get more water, but out of easy reach of any attempt to kick. All the time, keeping the Russian in his vision. His body was tense,

obviously ready to fight, but then he turned without another word and walked back out into the sun, to where the knife and grease tub lay. Reaching for his pistol, stashed away in the Russkie's neck cloth, protected from dust and damp. He cocked it, safety off, pointed it at the Russian, sharp gesture of his chin.

"Alright. You shave." Dan had just entered a dangerous game, but he couldn't stop gambling.

Vadim reached for the grease and the knife, checked the sharpness of the blade. He'd have to be careful, but it should be enough. Again able to kill, if he wanted. But right now, he wanted to get closer. "Sit down." He knelt, opened his knees to have a firm position, motioned the man closer. Could study his features, now in the sunlight.

Dan knelt, even moved closer, close enough to be between the other's knees. Too close. Far too close and what the fuck had he got himself into? He forced the swallow back down, refused to show his tension, but couldn't quite manage to relax his body. Raised the hand with the pistol and pushed it beneath the Russian's throat, level with the cigarette burn, right in the hollow.

If the fucker cut his throat, he'd still have time to pull the trigger. Dan was self-conscious, naked, fought down the urge to jump up, thought of all the times he'd shat and pissed together with his mates. It didn't matter. Was just the same. Only a body, like everyone else's.

The sun was belting down onto the man's naked body, but his dark-toned skin greeted the vicious heat as if it were a welcome friend. Glowing like burnished copper, turning his wet, dark hair into gleaming quartz.

Vadim squinted, wondered where to start, then decided on the left cheek. Grease. Heated skin, stubble, the man's hair was wavy and wet, glistening in the sun. Wet skin and wet hair. Something amazingly attractive about it. He placed the blade on the skin, eyes narrow with concentration. Started near the ear, noticed the curve of his neck, the tan. He should be wearing dog tags.

A slight smirk. Scraping the hair off, slowly, deliberately, the whisper of blade against skin. He was conscious of the pistol, and that made it almost better. Almost. Glint of steel against that dark skin. He took the man's chin in his hand, tilted it to the side to follow the jaw bone, then wiped the grease onto his trousers, high on his thigh. He didn't want to move away.

Dan tilted his head when the blade began its journey, brown eyes fixing on narrowed ice, the sensation against his skin had a strange effect, almost relaxing. Minute movements, tiny increments of released tension, as his head began to simply move with the hand that guided his chin.

Fuck. This was good.

Dan could smell fresh sweat and the heat of the other body, scent of sun burning on glistening skin. His eyes dropped away from the face, watched the movement of the shoulders. Muscles rolling slowly beneath smooth skin, sunlight gleaming off nearly white-blond hairs, almost a girl's.

He blinked slowly, lazily.

Nothing like a girl.

Resistance to him stopped on some level. Vadim felt the other falling in stride. The way, maybe, he breathed. Down the trace of stubble, down to the cheek. He broke contact only for a moment to rub some more grease onto the face, cheek and chin, but he'd save the chin for later, shaved the cheek first, neatly tracing the line of bone. Moved the man's head to the side, more grease, shaved the other side, jaw, cheek. Instil...trust.

Dan hadn't been touched like that in ages. Wrong. Couldn't remember. Wondered if anyone had ever been that...That what? Determinedly intimate? He'd shake his head, or shrug his shoulders, if he didn't have the blade close to his lips, and if he simply didn't lack the will to do anything at all.

To relax, even just for a few moments, had been impossible since he'd come to this motherfucking country. Ridiculous to wait till now, his throat and face under an enemy's blade, his pistol shoved into the groove of the same enemy's throat. Yet relax he did, gave himself over to the steady change of movement, blade, fingers, grease and the comfort of an all encompassing heat.

You're fucking insane, Dan!

He closed his eyes for a moment, bloody suicidal, this one precious moment, and allowed his body to give in and react to the rare physical comfort. He was getting hard, and didn't give a damn. He could always kill the fucker later. He'd never gambled in a more dangerous game.

The next bit would take longer, and more concentration. Vadim carefully worked around the round, broad chin, doing small strips of skin every time, only stopping to wipe the blade on his trousers. Then he raised the other's head and

placed the blade against his upper lip. The curves there, the way the man could sneer and mock and...other things. He forced himself to breathe, and shivered as the blade made contact.

Vadim was hard; it didn't take much in the last few days. This man did it, did it just like his favourite memory. Vadim would have killed to touch those lips, instead finished the upper lip, and wiped the knife again, changed the grip, relaxed his wrist.

Saw the man's small dark nipples, hard, yet no water was left on him, and he clearly wasn't cold. It turned Vadim's own arousal into lust; he was perfectly capable of exploiting a reaction like this.

It had to be the knife. They both liked the control it brought, the dangerous possibilities. Vadim took a bit more grease and began to prepare the throat, the sides thick with muscle, but the long neck, powerful, maybe slightly too long, definitely the way he stretched it now.

Dan parted his lips to let out a breath that seemed to be heavier. Telling himself he was a bloody nutcase, but still he bared his throat and closed his eyes again. What if the Russian used the knife to cut his throat? He had plenty of reasons, hell, if it were him, he'd kill a fucker like himself in an instance. He wasn't suicidal, never had been, just a bloody great big screw loose right now.

Vadim tilted the head back and began to scrape upwards, starting at the sides again. As he made the last stroke to finish the shave, he shifted his weight slightly, bringing one knee between the other's legs. Close enough to brush against. Feigning ignorance.

Dan shuddered when the knee brushed his cock, breathed out "Oh fuck..." instead of shooting the wanker.

Vadim felt them go right through his body, those two words. There was still the pistol, and the things people did when they came, he'd heard a story about a rape at gunpoint, and the stupid soldier had pulled the trigger when he came.

Almost funny. Almost.

He inched closer, offered more friction, his free hand—fucking right hand, and it still hurt to move that arm—found the cock, heavy, hot and silky. Good moment to pull the trigger, Vadim thought, idly stroking the other man. He wanted him. Truth. He himself looked like warmed-up death, felt exactly like that, but he had always and would always want. This. Man.

Dan's thoughts went into a frenzy.

Shit. Oh shit. Fuck. Goddamned motherfucking shit and damn and fuck and...a litany of swear words jumbled through his mind. Sensations. Too much. That hand knew what it was doing. Fuck the man, destroy him, the Russian knew too much. Too much to live and tell the tale; too much and more than he himself had ever known. With a ragged breath, Dan tipped the other's head back even more, pushed the muzzle of the pistol harder into the throat. Simultaneous actions, dark mirror images of insanity. Wrong, goddamned wrong and much too right.

Muscles tensing, pronounced ropes beneath sweat gleaming skin, and more feeling, every stroke. Much too much, far too good, couldn't...mustn't...

"No!" Dan's head moved like a sprung coil, eyes open, body ready for flight. "I'm not like you." Thick voice, breath heavy. "I'm not." He pushed the knife away from his face, then the hand, slapped it away with the pistol. Loss of friction, bereft. The hardest thing he'd ever done. Should have pulled that trigger, a week ago.

Vadim looked at him, dropped the knife, knew the other was in a mind to shoot or fuck him or both. And how sick of him to find that arousing? He'd been in this country far too long. Too long in the army. It made sense in the army, it didn't anywhere else.

"I'm not like you." Dan repeated his prayer. "I'm not a fag." I'm not I'm not I'm not I'm not I'm not I'm not...

He got up, too fast.

"No, you're not," Vadim murmured, finding it very hard to speak. "Not a weak-ass sissy boy like me." He laughed. It wasn't funny, not with what he wanted and couldn't get. "Vanya wasn't, either. Man you killed. We would fuck, but he wasn't...homosexual." Vanya much preferred women, but he got hard in a fight, and he enjoyed struggle. Had enjoyed.

Looking down at the Russian, Dan hadn't noticed he was aiming the pistol at the other's head. A repetition of another time.

"Then he was even more of a sick fuck." He felt nothing for the other man's death, nothing but a memory of satisfaction. That 'Vanya' got what he deserved, another dead body, stacked up amongst nameless, faceless others.

Women. Girls. Remembered their bodies, just as nameless and faceless as the men he had killed. Fuck a cunt, blow a brain; shoot your load down a bird's

throat, cut a man's windpipe. It made no difference, it had no impact. But this had, and Dan sensed a truth he would kill for, if it were spoken out loud. He wanted that hand back on his cock and it did matter. It had impact.

And he fucking hated that man because of it.

"I'm not like this 'Vanya'."

Too close to the truth.

On his knees, pistol pointed at his face, and Vadim was hard. Nothing new there. It had become a bit of a habit. The only new thing about it was that he found defeat almost as arousing as struggle. Or victory, for that matter. He liked the rage, the confusion. If he had been into mindgames right now, he would have fulfilled another objective. The enemy was confused, conflicted, had been pushed out of his stoic equilibrium, and was confronted with reality. Reality as much as he could present it, anyway.

The other man wanted to bolt, but he probably wanted to get off even more. Vadim raised his hands, universal sign of surrender. "Nothing sick about getting off," he murmured in Russian. "Do you believe I would tell anybody? I'm your prisoner." He just about managed to keep the smile away. Hoped the term 'prison' in that context would strike a chord, the one that said 'revenge' and 'situational homosexuality'. "It won't matter. It won't matter if you make me suck you off." He closed his eyes for a moment. "You have the gun. You control the rules. Simple."

"You really are a sick fucker." Dan's eyes widened, suddenly understanding the situation. Perhaps not with all its implications, hidden meanings and ulterior motives, but he got the message. Too loud, too clear, and shook his head. "No." He wanted, wanted, needed, wanted too fucking much.

"You want me to force you." Dan took a step back, the pistol was still aimed at the other man, but it had no meaning. This whole mess was going over his head. Just this promise in his mind, as irresistibly snake-like as the hatred had been. Suck you off. Suck you off. Put those lips around your cock, let you fuck my throat and suck you off.

"You want me to make you."

Vadim inhaled. The man kept dodging. It wasn't desperate measures. It was something he wanted and something that would fulfil an objective. Crawl into the

man's mind. Into his fucking pants. His body. Now, this was starting to become a mind game, and he could tell that the other didn't get it.

He remained on his knees. "No. I want to go home after this." A half-smile. "But that gun could make sure I'm not going to bite." His body open and vulnerable, tense. Hard. "Or that knife." A glance towards the discarded weapon. "You just have to love that kind of control."

"No." Dan's anger was rising, the aggression of a man who found himself out of control. He wasn't up to this shit, had never been a man of anything but actions. "Sick fucker." Frowned, felt ridiculed, confused, because he didn't understand. Unfortunately, his body was still clinging to this man's offer with desperate greed.

Suck you off.

But that wasn't what rooted Dan to the spot. It was far more, ran much deeper, and the only weapon he had, was this one stubborn word. "No." No rifle, no pistol, no blade could stop him from falling prey to...to what?

Dan forced himself to turn away, stalk over to the water hole without another glance back. Wanted to shout with frustration for having torn himself from that poisonous promise. Got water, scrubbed his face, washed his body, anything, everything, like a machine, while every fibre of his being was screaming in protest.

He had to get rid of that Russian. Get back to who he was before. The man he was familiar with. Himself. Before. Before what?

Who did he hate now?

Vadim shook his head, then lowered his hands and put them on his thighs. Never mind his own desire. The only thing he could force was a stand-off, and the other had pulled away too soon.

Remembering the man's face in his hand, the way that throat, the jugular had pulsed under the knife, he could have come right into his trousers. He was that fucking close. He lay down, exhausted, felt his mind return to blunt waiting, all the knives and edges hidden, snapped back to stoic acceptance of the fact he was a prisoner, and he couldn't...then again, this kind of manoeuvre took longer. He needed to be patient. No defeat yet. It would give the other something to think about. Next night. Sharing warmth. He was pretty sure he would remember. And the night would cover them both. Much easier to lie to yourself when it's dark.

Vadim rested, waiting for the arousal to subside. Wouldn't do to show him that now. The other was too close to rage, and that meant kicking and punching and hitting. Just as he was making progress.

When the sun was past the mountain range, Vadim stirred again, and decided to wash.

He undressed, slowly, carefully, could feel his back and the wounds, one line of...letters. Only glad that sometime in the last days, the other had taken off the rope. He could walk. In theory. His hands were tied, but the rope was long enough to help him ease the strain on the shoulders. Just the way he was tied up, told him the other didn't consider him a very serious threat. Then again, he wasn't.

He staggered to the water hole and reached for the rope that held the water bag. He wouldn't ask for help. But he needed to clean himself, and wash the remainder of his clothes. The stones kept the heat, and it might be enough for them to dry if he started now. Then again, sharing heat was much more effective when both were naked. He couldn't help smirking at the thought.

Dan had washed his gear and laid it out on the stones in the sun, but had only the trousers back on. Still damp, but a damn sight better than being naked. There was something uncomfortably vulnerable about nakedness right now, not something he usually felt. He blamed the bloody Russian.

He glanced over when the other made his laborious way to the water, then returned to his task of preparing the excess meat he had shot the day before. A tin of unidentifiable vegetables and a rabbit would make the day's feast. The meat was lacking salt, but it would have to do, at least the tinned veg were in some sort of brine. Letting everything heat up on the small fire, he walked over to his clothes to check if they were dry. Once the sun had set, they would get damp in the cold of the night.

"Damn." Dan muttered, they were still damp. Nothing like putting wet clothes on one's body when it was freezing cold, eh? Bloody stupid! If he hadn't wasted time with that fucker, they would have dried. Glancing over, he watched the Russkie trying to wash.

Massive. That was the word that came to mind when looking at that body, even though Dan was a broad, tall motherfucker himself, there was something different about the Russian. What had the files said? Olympic pentathlete. Go figure.

Gazing back out over the setting sun, bathing the mountainous region in a disgustingly picturesque burst of colour, Dan called over. “Hey, cunt, what about that shave.” He didn’t give a flying fuck about the bastard’s discomfort, but fleas or nits in a growing beard while forced to share body heat? No bloody way.

Vadim looked up. He used his left hand to wash, the right just didn’t want to do it, knuckles resting on the ground, not even stabilizing much. His shoulder was covered in patches of red, yellow and purple; and a rainbow of other colours from the receding bruises. Left hand.

Remembered Katya. Left-handed fencer. Pristine technique. Out of the top ten fencers in the world, more than half were left-handers. Vadim never got his head around where she would attack. It was fighting a mirror, disconcerting. That was why he had married her. When he thought he could still try and be...what he was not. She guessed it, even then. They had ended up in bed with Szandor, another athlete, and everything followed logically from there. Alcohol helped. Being out, free, unleashed.

Vadim shook his head, proceeded to wash the dust off, the dirt, bowed his head to wash his hair. Too long. Looked up again. “Sure.” Half a smirk forming. The knife to his skin? The man wanted to see him horny and defenceless. Alright. Maybe that would push him over the edge. Maybe that would finally break through.

Dan gestured towards the fire, no point not utilising what little warmth it gave when the sun was setting. There was still enough light for at least another half hour. He prepared the knife, grabbed a rag he had lifted from the destroyed village, and got the remaining fat.

“Kneel.” Pointing to a space beside the fire.

Vadim got up, laboriously. Hurt in his ribs, hurt in his back, only his shoulder didn’t mind unless he moved the arm. He walked towards the fire, knelt down again. Knees open, bound hands hanging down between them, protecting his groin. Just in case the other felt like he should kick him. Looked at the man, then lowered his gaze. The very image of a docile beast.

Dan didn’t like that. He frowned, it felt wrong. He took a slab of grease and grabbed the man’s chin. Yanking it upwards, angry. Annoyed that he should play the obedient prisoner. Preferred to deal with the Russian as the bastard, not the victim. Strange thoughts.

He rubbed the fat into the blond stubble, taking his time, thorough; it would be difficult enough to shave like that. He smoothed his calloused hands over the angular planes and sharp jaw line, up to the high cheekbones and down the soft tissue of the throat. Heated skin against his hand reminded him of the night, the massage and the question, several nights ago. And an answer that made a painful amount of sense. *'I wanted you.'*

He took the knife, tilted the head to the side and began the blade's journey, like the Russian had done, near the temple, working his way downward, intermittently wiping the blade on the rag.

Everything else vanished when Vadim felt the blade. Yes, he had manoeuvred himself into this situation, the other did exactly what he had planned. For the objective, and his own needs. And what if the man decided to cut another word into his flesh? What if he decided to render him unfit for service? It would only take a short stab to the eye.

He held his breath, looked up into the man's face. The focus. And the strange introspective expression. The man was thinking. That didn't happen a lot. Something vulnerable about it. The knife scraped close to the jaw line, towards his jugular. He remembered Vanya's wound. He had had plenty of time to look at that wound on the way back. Strength, determination, and skill. Vanya had bled out like an animal.

Vadim swallowed, felt his body respond to the danger. Anything could get him hard now, and that closeness definitely did. Vulnerable, but still somehow in control. Because he was working towards an objective: open him up.

Concentrating on his task, Dan didn't tend to focus on several things at the same time. Too damn straightforward, one of his officers in command had once said—too bloody perfect for this job, the board had agreed. Not officer material, but a Special Forces soldier par excellence. He did the dirty work, turned elaborate hopes and plans into reality. But fuck, he wasn't an intellectual.

Moving below the jaw line, the blade meticulously shaved off stubble, never nicking the skin. His gaze fell down, away from the face in his hand, and he stopped moving the knife. He frowned, trying to understand. "What the fuck is it with you?" Pointedly staring at the hard-on. "If I cut your throat, would you come?"

Vadim's nostrils flared, then he was gulping for air. Trying to understand the question. Oh well, there probably was a good reason why the SAS guy had looked down there. Sex and death. No, lust and death. Dying. He felt the tension, wanted to bare his teeth in a grin. Bit back the smartass comment, discarded a 'Maybe. You want to try?' Don't provoke him. You are not a threat. Remember. Don't threaten. He had no way to cash in on any threat. That was not the objective.

"I lied." Vadim looked into the dark eyes. "I used...Simple Past when I told you why. It is not Simple Past. Simple Present. Not 'wanted'. It is 'want.'"

"What?" Dan's frown deepened, he had the vague sensation that he was being taken the piss out of again. Didn't like feeling stupid, hated confusion, and this goddamned bastard was confusing the hell out of him. "What the fuck are you talking about?" Hand still poised, grip on the chin intensified. Fingers splayed, cupped closer, subconsciously increasing contact.

Vadim breathed hard. He had the enemy flustered again. It should feel more like a victory; less real. How much of this was a stratagem now? He briefly closed his eyes. "It's quite simple." He expected another explosion, like a dog that had been kicked too often. But he couldn't afford one of those ribs to go into a lung.

"I am...homosexual." The English word the closest to the Russian one. "Or let me rephrase. I indulge in indecent acts with other men. I'm quite fond of shit-stabbing. I have sucked men off. Mostly, they suck me off. You, whatever is your name, I don't think you will ever tell me, you are dangerous. You have given me fight of my life. Beating of my life, too, but that is part of deal. You are...fucking attractive. You are naked, I am naked, and that is whole thing. Nothing complicated about it."

No doubt at all, no ambiguity and not a margin for uncertainty. It was exactly the kind of answer Dan preferred. Straightforward, black and white. He remained still and silent. Scrutinising the kneeling man. Long, drawn-out, worrying moments of silence, and then he suddenly burst into movement, and sound.

The sound of abandoned laughter, not hysterical, just simple, straightforward laughter. Shaking his head in the end, like a kid that couldn't stop, a boy unable to understand that others might not find it quite so impossibly funny. In fact, he didn't even know why he was laughing so hard, but it all made sense, and the sense was insanity.

The laughter made Vadim turn his head away. Prepared to be finished off, bullet, now, the final conversation stopper. The man was going insane, or maybe it was the pressure that finally broke. Which was a good thing. Like opening up a festering wound. He waited, patient, but no shot, no explosion.

Dan calmed enough to be able to speak, “Tell me one thing, Russkie. Just one more.” His chuckles hadn’t completely subsided yet, “Would you do it again, if you could?” He was growing more sober along with the words, until he finally stopped even the last of his smirks, and turned serious. “Tell me, would you rape me again if you had the chance?”

There, the word again, dredging the Nothing out of Nothing. Strange, it had become easier. As if dealing with somebody else.

The question. The fucking question. Oh indeed. Yes, he would, thought Vadim. He would take more time, maybe wreak less damage...mostly to be able to do it again, and again, feel that submission, the other mind at breaking point. Wouldn’t order him to be shot. Wouldn’t share him. But violence? Yes. Fucking him? Absolutely.

Vadim looked up, felt the other’s seriousness settle on his shoulders, a weight being lowered down. Yes, was the wrong answer. If he wanted to screw with this guy’s mind, an apology, or maybe regret would be in order. Only he did not feel enough guilt for an apology. He had done worse than that.

And it remained the perfect moment. The moment of complete and utter clarity, of urge and instinct and knowledge. Battle of wills. “Yes. I would. Differently, but I would. If I could have you, I’d take you.” Any way I could. So much for the mind game.

Now Vadim was losing control.

Strange, really, that for Dan, this was once again the perfect answer. Truth, cutting to the bone and sharp like iron spikes. Simple and crystalline truth. He didn’t like dealing with anything else. He nodded and said nothing for a while. His usual habit. Think first—speak later, and more often than not, don’t speak at all.

“You know, Russkie, you’re a goddamned fucking wanker and I hate your guts, but I appreciate your honesty.” A long speech for him. “I can’t stand liars.”

His hand went back to the chin, as if nothing had happened in the last five minutes. The knife was back, poised at the last remaining patches of stubble. The

blade moved down once more as he tilted the Russian's head. "Best make sure you never get the chance again, eh?"

Nerve. Fucking nerve. Spine, guts, all the qualities that Vadim respected. Next objective: Get him to use his name. He needed to take control, win the initiative, at least part of it. "Name is Vadim."

Dan finished the last bit of stubble, then moved the head backwards and forwards, studying his work before letting go of the chin, wiping the blade with the rag. "I don't care what your name is, Russkie. To me, you're a cunt."

The light had grown dim. Dan glanced out at the horizon where the sun had vanished behind the mountains. He could feel the chill starting to creep towards them. Pointing at the fire where the veg with the pieces of rabbit meat were boiling away in the tin, he said "It'll be freezing soon and my gear's still damp." Adding after sheathing the knife and moving it well out of the Russian's reach. "It'll do as cover though, on top of yours."

He sat on the ground, warming his toes on the fire, reached for the tin, and placed it between the Russian and himself. "Eat."

Vadim wasn't hungry. He could feel his strength sap away again, like a tide. He was either full of energy or lethargic. Now the tide had turned towards lethargic. He was getting cold, so he rubbed the remainder of the grease over his face, felt the sunburn bite, his shoulders. Didn't need his skin to dry out and get even worse. "You eat yours."

He pulled his legs up to place his elbows on the knees, and leaned against a rock, careful not to touch any of his wounds, checking his wrists that looked more raw than they felt. He'd been tied up for a week. And the stronger he got, the more likely it was that the other would do bad stuff to his shoulders again. He missed running. Fencing, too, the white, clean, precise, tactical sport. He'd had enough shooting recently to last him a while.

He looked at the steaming food. "You are the fathers of Spetsnaz. Did you know that? The Kremlin wanted something like you, and it created...us."

Dan chewed the bland meal with gulps of fresh, cool water in between. He'd run out of cigarettes two days ago and would murder for a strong coffee and a fag. Fag. He got one. Right here beside him. Turning his attention to the man, Dan nodded, chewing on some rabbit. "They didn't get it right, though. They turned us

into killers and you lot? You're murderers." Washing the food down with some water.

Killers. Murderers. Probably a linguistic fine point. "We operate behind enemy lines. The rules are different there. We do what we do to get the job done. We fight irregulars here. They do not wear uniforms. Even you are not officially here."

"You're strange, you Russians. You don't give a shit about human life. Kill one, ten or ten thousands, even of your own people. It doesn't matter to you, you just throw more lives into the machinery. As long as you reach the objective." Dan had finished three quarters and pushed the tin over. This time he didn't offer but ordered. "Eat."

Strange that the man would talk about Russian lives. "It matters. Do you think we don't feel pain? We have families. We are not assembled like tanks or planes. We are people. If you had attacked Germany and got your act together, you and those American cowards, we would not have lost millions of soldiers. Truth is, we won Great Patriotic War, every square inch of our soil drenched in our blood and that of enemy, while you waited. Glorious British Empire. Kept back and let Russians do job. You thought every Russian dead soldier is one you will not have to fight. If it had not been for us, you would now speak German."

He stood up laboriously, felt the pain. "And you call our sacrifice...what? Inhuman? Machine-like? We do this to build better world, where people are not exploited. Your system is enemy, and you are poisoning rest of world." He knew he was raving, but that particular itch had been with him from childhood. The main thing he had against Europe. This man wasn't responsible. He shook his head. "Our leaders are not perfect. Of course they are not. But we are people."

"Fucking hell, have they indoctrinated you that much with their party routine and political bullshit? What are you, Russkie, eh? KGB? No, can't be, you're not smooth and slick enough for that."

KGB. That sobered Vadim. The one thing the other should never know. He was more political than a normal soldier, even para. Part of a select elite. KGB was too close a guess.

"You think you are better than us?" Now it was up to Dan to stand up, facing the other.

Same height. Same build. Two worlds apart.

“You and your bloody glorious Soviet Army, you went and destroyed those villages, but, oh no, not cleanly, fuck no, you poisoned the wells, you killed the children, you murdered the women, and why? Because if it’s in the way of your political target you don’t give a shit. Fine. Accuse us of crap the Brits might have done over thirty years ago, but you better face the present if you want to compare.” Dan stepped closer, face to face, eye to eye. Neither giving in. “You can accuse the British Forces of being stupid for trying to avoid the loss of civilians, I would probably even agree with you, but you say your villages and families make you people, and I say, trying to spare lives makes us humans.”

Vadim frowned, “The difference between civilian and guerrilla is AK. These villages are in our security zones. They need to leave, they don’t. We kill them and make sure they will not return. These villages feed and shelter enemies. And if killing a thousand of them means I get my men back alive, I kill two thousand.”

Dan glared at the other, trying to stare him down like one prize bull to another. “You want to know why I didn’t cut your balls off, stuffed them down your throat and watch you die? You want to know? I don’t give a shit about you, Russkie, I don’t give a flying fuck. I saw you take down the village, I watched you bring out the mothers by splattering their children’s brains into the dirt. You call yourself a killer? I call you a murderer, and if you had died under my hands, cunt, I would have been one too. And that’s why you live—no other reason. I didn’t continue because you asked for the mercy to die as a soldier; because you called to me as a soldier. That’s what I am. I’m not a murderer.” Dan snorted, so angry he didn’t realise he was giving the longest speech of his entire life, eyes ablaze, fists clenched, every muscle in his body tense and pronounced.

Because you asked for the mercy to die as a soldier.

Vadim stood his ground against the anger, but was confused by the backlash. This showed, clearly, that the other man wasn’t stupid. Nowhere near stupid. There was more beyond that animal cunning every Special Forces soldier worth his salt possessed.

And yes, that one moment, no, during the whole last part of the torture, he had asked for mercy. Bargained his pride away and got his life out of it. He wasn’t the type that would die just because propaganda told him he should rather die than betray his pride. Ultimately, a failure, and a victory. Vadim’s eyes were narrow. “I

have obligation. Duty. I have received my orders, and nothing will stop me fulfilling them.”

“I understand.” Dan snarled, barely brought his teeth apart. “You’re ‘just following orders’. I congratulate you, comrade, you will go far. The perfect soldier.” He snorted. “Just a shame you’re a sick bastard who’s ruled by his cock, isn’t it?” Short, stab of laugh, this time sharp, cruel. “That fucking cock of yours will get you killed one day, and if not that, then it’ll get you into shit so deep, your ‘obligations’ won’t get you out of it.”

Ruled by his cock.

Vadim swallowed, sobered up more, felt those thoughts move into the back of his head. Sick bastard. Now, those were proper insults. And they actually went through his skin. “I will execute the next one myself,” he snarled, “don’t you worry about it.” He moved back, away from the fire, not turning his head, and walked over to the bit of bed the other had built. Sickened by the thought he still depended on him.

Dan took the last words, kept them in the back of his mind. ‘Next time. So the fucker would be out again, raping and killing another. Fuck. By granting mercy because of his selfish need, he’d created a monster. No, not created. The Russian had done that himself. Dan took a deep breath, inhaled noisily, forcibly unclenching his fists. “Eat now or I’ll stuff the food down your throat. You’ll live, until I’ve taken you to the embassy, and after that, good fucking riddance, Russkie. May you never see me again, but if you do, watch your goddamned back.”

Embassy. The other had finally given away his intentions. Vadim needed to get away, somehow. Needed to find his own people before that happened. He sat down, heavily, tried to lie on his side, but his ribs or shoulder didn’t allow that. Whichever way he turned, he felt every stone dig into him like a muzzle.

Dan looked at the leftover food, debated if he should make the threat real, decided he couldn’t be bothered. The enemy was strong enough to survive by now, best he stuffed the veg and meat down his own throat. It took a few minutes and he had finished the rest, gulping some more of the water.

Vadim was on his stomach again, resting his head on his hands. So much for trying to get into the man’s mind. So much for using his superior education and intelligence. He’d blown this. Breathing deeply, trying to force himself to sleep, or, if that failed, to act as if he was sleeping.

Dan seriously, deeply and utterly, resented having to share body warmth with the Russian that night. Even if his gear was dry, he'd spend one night freezing out there in the mountains. No. Best to see the arsewipe as a useful source of heat and forget that he hated his guts.

Grabbing the bundle of clothes he walked over to where the Russian was lying, starting to drape bit after bit over him, before lying down himself, as usual, on his side, facing the wanker. Facing, but he closed his eyes. He didn't want to see that face. It had been too much, testing the resolve of even the strongest man.

Dan didn't know nor care if the Russian was asleep, shuffling close. He was falling asleep quicker than he had thought. His waking mind despised the closeness, but his body didn't.

Vadim couldn't drift off to sleep, even mentally exhausted as he was. He needed to get out of here, needed to get away from this man. Wanting him, desiring him, still, but he had heard the warning shot. He turned his head and looked at the Brit.

Watch your back.

Indeed. The anger was back, and that told him he was on the mend. He'd got too close, up to the point where he saw things he'd rather not.

Degenerate.

Pervert.

Don't think you can't win because of this.

No. Quite the opposite. He knew people would have expected him to fail, and that made it impossible to accept defeat. Even if his talents were actually limited. He was good, but not exceptional. He had dedication, but he didn't have that edge. That was why they had finally given up on him, and didn't send him to the next Olympics. He could have competed, maybe, won respect, looked good on camera, but not won a medal. But the fact they hadn't wanted him in Moscow. In his own country, his own city.

This man made him feel that defeat. He would need to get away, tomorrow. Maybe the day after that. He would have to risk it. Find his boots. Without water, without food, through territory that was as difficult and hostile as it came. He'd try it anyway. Better to die trying than be delivered into the enemies' hands.

He was back at square one.

Dan was asleep. He never remembered his dreams, wouldn't this night either. He twitched, muscle spasms when slipping into deep sleep, almost violent movements, then they ceased. Breathing deep and regular, his face relaxed, smoothing the lines of wind and sun, softening the curve of the lips. No more anger, just a man, asleep, not thinking.

A small sound, then movement, shuffling closer. Head seeking heat, burrowing into the crook of Vadim's neck and shoulder, a hand reaching, moving, then resting on a bare hip.

Stillness again, peaceful calm.

Insanity.

Vadim was even more awake now. Bastard probably thought he was a girl. Nearly two hundred and twenty pounds of girl right there. He sneered, and closed his eyes. Fuck you. I'm still running tomorrow. And you'll have to kill me to stop me.

Unaware and uncaring, Dan slept throughout the night.

* * *

The next morning was like all the others before. Dan had moved away during the night, and never knew how he had been sleeping. Water, food, getting his gear on and grabbing both of the rifles, he was off once more to shoot something to eat. They were starting to run low on meat.

He didn't speak all that morning, seemed he had used up his quota of words the day before, enough for weeks to come. This time, he bound the Russian's ankles again, having seen him move the day before. He was already thinking of taking more drastic measures, but then there were the ribs and the shoulder. But in the end, what would it matter? Bloody bastard would be taken across the border into Pakistan no matter what.

Vadim tried not to show the frustration when the other bound his ankles again. Those knots were a bitch, but if he worked hard, he could free himself. He would have to get out of the camp. He put on his passive act, docile, like he was exhausted. Keeping his strength, his determination as fuel inside.

The morning was still cool when Dan left camp, scouring the mountain for a goat, rabbit or other unsuspecting provider of protein.

When he was out of sight, Vadim started looking for his rifle. Couldn't find it, and gave up. Another piece of kit he'd lost. They sent him out, and he came back with only the uniform on his back. No knife to sever the rope.

Anyway. He needed to get up the mountain, cross it, and that would be hard work in his state. Couldn't even put his clothes on, his hands still bound, but he grabbed his scarf and tunic. He managed to pry the knot loose that fastened the rope between his ankles, found his boots, then began to walk up the mountain. Step by step. Willpower against weight and wounds. He should have been soaked in sweat, but the sun took it before it even cooled. Nothing to take, nothing to carry it with. No strength to carry anything.

On the way up, he more often than not bent over and needed to use both hands, to prevent himself from falling. He needed to attract attention. Out into the killing zone.

The first time he doubted he could do it, he could still see the campsite. Everything hurt, breathing, most of all, and he was so unsteady, he risked falling with every step. Broken terrain, stones, some so loose he felt as if he was walking on snow. Resting when he had walked for an hour, starting to feel despair. No challenge at all if he had been alright.

He walked on, saw a trail snake around the mountain on the other side. What passed for a road in this place. He should avoid it, really, but chances were, he might walk into a patrol. And he could see far enough to get off the trail before Afghans showed up. At least he hoped he could. He nearly collapsed again, but made it to the trail. Towards the territory the Soviets occupied. Controlled area. He walked on, concentrated on every single step, then just walked on because he couldn't pause and risk not being able to get up again.

Dan had been lucky that day and returned two hours after he left with a rabbit. Returned to an empty camp site, no Russian, no shelter, nothing left except for a length of rope that had once tied the ankles together.

"Fucking bastard!" He threw the rabbit down onto the ground, ready to storm off to catch that wanker. The Russkie couldn't be far, in fact, how the fuck was he even going to make it? One thing the bastard had, that was stamina and courage, and Dan could respect that, even if he wanted to rip his throat out right now.

Then he stilled. Let his eyes wander across the abandoned campsite, old bloodied rags and finally the mountains for a moment, began to grin, at last laughed out loud with relief. This was it. The shit-stabber wasn't his responsibility any more. What a bloody convenient solution. Let him die of thirst, break down in the mountains and crawl in the sun until the fucker was done and over with.

Dan didn't have to give a shit anymore. The Russian was out and on his own. No Pakistan, no embassy, no annoying bastard he had to keep as prisoner. "Thank fuck." He muttered, and started to pack what few items remained, the Dragunov rifle across his back, his own SA-80 in his hands. He was done. That was it. No need to ever cross paths with the fuckwit again. The bastard would die and it wasn't his fault or his responsibility.

Dan grinned when he refilled his water bottle, scanned the horizon before making his way down the mountains. He knew his path by now, he'd get back to the villages, then eventually into Pakistan. He was long overdue a stint of R&R in Old Blighty. Booze, laughter, mates and pussies.

The thoughts of a long fucking session, ramming his cock like a piston into a willing bird who thought he was a demigod because he was in the Special Forces, made him quicken his step and in good time, march down the mountain.

* * *

Along the trail, Vadim crouched as he saw people. Not a patrol. Those men didn't walk in formation. He squinted, could distinguish ammo belts crossed over their chests, and one dragged a trail of donkeys behind him. Low tech solution to a low tech problem.

Vadim broke off the trail into the rocks, crouched, moving as fast as he could. He was dusty alright, what he wore blended into the terrain, but not much. Found a crag to press into, behind more rocks, but he couldn't get further away. He could only lie flat on his stomach and hope they didn't see him.

He could hear their chatter. Always chattering. His command of their language was limited, even though he was probably able to tell them to stop firing, lay down their arms and surrender. That was about the extent of it. He heard them come closer. Shuffling, sounds.

Congratulations, Vadim. You located their camp site before they did.

* * *

Dan heard voices before he crossed the outcrop of rocks, knew there was a trail behind it, leading into some of the nearby villages. He couldn't quite make out what they were saying, but he'd just about scrape by in Pushto.

Best not let himself be seen before he could figure out who they were. Good chances he might even know them, or at least, they would have heard of him. 'Daan', the infidel with the tactical knowledge.

He slipped onto his knees, crawled closer, until he could see the men and the camp they were setting up. Fucking beards, they all looked the same. He had to take his time to figure out who they were. Barely a stones throw away, he let himself down onto his stomach, sliding forwards and closer to the camp. So close, he could hear every word. He kept his head low while searching with his hand for leverage to pull himself closer, when he grabbed hold of something very much unlike a rock.

Leather. Fabric. Strong bone and warmth beneath his hand.

"Oh fuck." Breathed out, lifted his head a fraction, heart racing in those moments he knew decided over life and death, until Dan recognised the body before him. The bloody Russkie.

He dropped his head back into the dirt and started to laugh in silence, body shaking soundlessly.

Being pinned down and laughed at was bad. The combination especially. Vadim was sweating so hard, he feared they would smell him. Highly unlikely, but it was enough if one of them stepped outside to take a leak. Without a weapon, nothing he could do. He checked the other over. One of the rifles, or the knife, and he'd have a fighting chance. At least that. Let me at least have a fight before they kill me.

Don't lose it, Vadim. Don't you lose it.

"Your friends," Vadim breathed.

Dan pulled himself closer until he lay face to face, the indication of a shake of his head while pressed into the dirt. "Not sure yet. If not friends, certainly not foes," he whispered, "at least not for me."

Dan craned his neck to check the Afghanis, trying to figure out which one of the bearded wonders was the leader, and if he might know the fella. “Whoever they are, you’re fucked.” He looked back at the Russian, breathed the words with greatest caution, and he actually frowned.

Vadim felt the sweat run down his face. “Give me that gun.” He indicated his hip, meaning the gun in the SAS holster. “Only need one bullet.” Breathing hurt. Lying still hurt.

“Bullshit.” Dan whispered close to the Russian’s ear, his lips almost brushing it. He smelled the sweat, understood the reference. The faint sound of helicopters cut him short. Still far away, but it could only be Hinds. Approaching from behind, out of the light. “How fast can you move?”

The whisper set Vadim on edge, gave him goose bumps all over his arms, the way it felt even in his face. Vadim craned his neck, fucking hurt again, but he could make out the insectoid shapes. A patrol. If he was really lucky, they were loaded with paras. And medics. “Right now? Like a horse.” He glanced at the mudjas, who, over their chatter, would soon hear the copters as well. “If I don’t make it...”

He glanced towards the Dragunov. Accurate shot at almost a mile.

Dan nodded, looked into those pale eyes for just one moment. “I will. I promise they won’t get you.” With complete sincerity and lack of any anger, amusement or aggression. “Crawl back, use the rocks, I’ll distract them.”

No further words and none needed. When it came down to it, they were brothers. SAS and Spetsnaz, a family of its own. Dan slunk forward, shouted out in Pushto and Dari, “Friends! I am Dan, you heard of me? Don’t shoot, I’m your friend.”

When he had their attention, he stood up slowly, lifting the rifle high into the air. Made sure he wasn’t a threat, and, at the same time, creating as much movement and distraction as he could, when one of them seemed to recognise him.

He could be loud, the boisterous foreigner, the infidel commander, and he was all of that right now, to perfection. Their attention was on him, and part of his was on a man he could not see.

Vadim crawled back like a snake, a snake that sweated and could hear his blood thunder. Under the cover of the rocks, he began to crouch, half-sliding down

a ravine, then ran, ran faster than he could have believed possible just an hour ago, towards the distant thud-thud of the copters, hoping that a pilot would touch down.

He ran out into the open, feeling the Dragunov like a stare in his back. Don't think, run. Dodging, mostly because he was unsteady and didn't know exactly where he was going, waving the dust scarf. A fold of the rocks shielding him, he hoped, from the bandit campsite.

The Hinds hovered, oblivious to the camping rebels, and Vadim could see with utter clarity how one gunner swivelled the front MG. Fucking bitches, they had to recognize his uniform. He fell, then felt wind and dust whip all around him.

The Hind touched down, the most beautiful sight in the world. The stark insect grace of the 'hunchback', as they were affectionately known. Not a pretty copter, but few, if any, matched it in firepower.

Vadim reached out, covered his face with his arm, breathed through the fabric.

A strong hand grabbed his arm, pulled, and he almost screamed as he was forced to stand. Paras.

"Captain Krasnorada," he said, was dragged into the machine, where he collapsed.

It was too late when the insurgents realised what the Hinds were after, too late for them to stop the touchdown in the distance. Dan was forgotten when chaos erupted around him, and he stood still, watched the helicopters with the Dragunov in his hands. His fingers smoothing over the barrel, caressing the trigger.

He shouldered the weapon when the man had been pulled inside the Hind that had touched down. "Dasvidaniya, Russkie," He muttered to himself before he turned away.

1981 Chapter 4 — Home Truths

June - July 1981, Mother Russia

“I have read the report,” said the kommissar. “May I?” He sat down beside the bed.

Vadim, still dizzy from surgery, attempted to nod. The nose. They said something had been broken so badly they needed to operate so he would be able to breathe properly. He had forgotten the terms. It had made sense when the doctor told him.

Everything was bandaged. His hands, his wrists, somebody had cleaned the burn wound on his throat, and his back was heavily padded and bandaged as well. He felt weak, but at least there was no pain.

“You have obviously been tortured.” The kommissar didn’t smile, didn’t scowl, just presented him with the conclusion.

Yes. Massive physical trauma without killing him. They could see he had been tied up. Dislocated shoulder. Wrists and ankles raw. Cigarette burn. Knife wounds. One week out in enemy territory, returned without any of his kit, barely alive. His burnt skin told them of exposure to the sun. But some torture didn’t leave marks. Sleep deprivation. Hunger. Thirst.

“Now, I wonder, comrade, how could that happen?” The kommissar placed his fingertips together. “Not how you could fall into enemy hands. But how they could take you alive.”

“I was knocked out before I could take countermeasures.” Like, committing suicide.

“And your unit left you behind. Yes.” The kommissar looked at him, glance from his feet to his face. “I assume you resisted torture at first and gave in later?”

Vadim swallowed. “Yes.”

The kommissar looked displeased. “Who were they?”

“They spoke English.” Vadim pressed his lips together. Being taken by a group of enemies was less humiliating than by one man. SAS. It wasn’t worth much, apart from restoring some of his reputation as a tough bastard. Being taken by one man wouldn’t do. And they assumed by default it had been a group. “I was blindfolded.”

“Did they mention names? Units? Any operational data? Surely, if you were meant to be executed, they would not be as careful.”

“They left me just outside camp.”

“How many?”

“Best estimate is four or five.”

“How many tortured you?”

Vadim shuddered. “I don’t know.”

The kommissar smiled. “But at least they gave you a shave.”

Vadim’s hands formed fists. “With a knife. They threatened to cut my throat.” He felt the terror well up, despite whatever they had him shot full of. “Maybe Americans, maybe CIA. I don’t know. I was too busy staying alive.”

“You are supposed to stay resourceful under strain.” How pretty that sounded. Resourceful. Tough, mentally intact, thinking, perceptive. Strain, too, was a prettier word than torture. Like a soft kind of pressure; not like a competition between the capacity to inflict pain against the capacity to resist it.

“A week is a long time.” Everybody would have broken. Absolutely everybody.

The kommissar nodded. “We assume American mercenaries and secret service. It is interesting they operate so close to Kabul. Unfortunate that they captured you of all people, but then, it could have been much worse.” After all, you know nothing, he seemed to say. “What did they ask about?”

“Units, deployments, strategic information. Our intentions here.”

Rather than being surprised, the kommissar seemed thoughtful. “Do you assume you will be fit for duty in a month?” He paused. “Desk duty, for the moment. We will send you to Moscow to heal the worst, but we are short of manpower, and your skills are valuable in this place. You will do training.”

No question at all. Vadim felt he needed at least six months rest, or maybe a year, but that was really self-pity. Indulging himself. The worst of it all was how much he had wanted that other man. Insanity. Offered himself, offered things he wanted. To test the other’s nerve, resolve, prod him into emotions, away from executing him to keeping him alive. It had made sense at the time, but now he was ashamed. Ashamed that he could still see the face close beside him, half-hidden by moonlight. Feel the Brit’s heat against his hand. “Yes, kommissar.”

The man got up, put the cap back on. “Do not worry,” he said. “You will have plenty of opportunity to show us you recovered well.”

Decreeing his recovery. Planning ahead. Ordering him to recover. Like he was some kind of mechanism that had to meet a target.

“And even more opportunity to go out hunting mercenaries interfering in our ability to provide aid to our socialist brothers.” The kommissar gave him a curt nod and walked out.

* * *

Vadim couldn't even carry the suitcase. He stood at the bottom of the staircase and wondered how he'd get up there. He felt two hundred years old; nothing in his body had retained even the slightest amount of strength. Placing a hand on the railing, he pulled himself up. One step.

The direct flights had been full. He'd had a long wait for the connection in the Urals so it had taken more than twenty hours to get from Kabul to Moscow. Tired and sore. In the Metro station, some bastard trying to catch a train had run into him, forcing him to stand for a while, one hand against the wall, fighting the pain.

An old man had watched him, both hands placed on a cane, doubtlessly reading the full story on the front of his uniform. Paratrooper. Captain. Afghanistan mission. Valour.

Vadim had returned his gaze, unable to say anything. He was probably a hero of the Great War for the Motherland. Might have shot Germans in Stalingrad. Been hungry and frozen in Leningrad. Escaped annihilation at Kursk. The great names of that war. A life and death struggle. The way war should be. Face to face.

Much better than a long distance war by proxy in a dozen countries.

First landing. He rested for a second, staring at the wall in front of him. Seeing mountains. Moscow was grey and glum, this place smelled of mould.

Three more floors.

Another step up the staircase. Every shift in his body was taken up by the muscles left and right of the spine. Even completely still, the broken ribs hurt with each breath he took. Nothing anybody could do about them, apart from painkillers and rest.

Second landing. Difficult to remember a time without pain; and the man who had done this still in his mind. The man who had nearly taken his life, then handed it back to him. Covered his escape.

Third landing. He was in pain, his heart thudded, his chest burned. He'd have to rely on Katya, which galled him. Even though he knew she coped well, despite having to look after two small children as well as her mother and aunt. More than that, the whole family, parents, sisters, brothers, children depended on both of them. No nerve to let anybody down.

Fourth landing.

Turn left. Knock. People were talking inside. He felt nauseous, didn't want to hear anybody, see anybody, just wanted to lie down and sleep.

The door opened. Katya. Her eyes widened, she reached for his hand and almost pulled him inside. Yes, her mother. No sign of the kids. Already asleep.

He accepted tea, drank it. He was back, in one piece. Grateful chatter, nothing important. No serious questions, only about the flight. He wouldn't have told them. He made a point of not telling anybody anything.

Finally, her mother left. Pressed his hand. Vadim couldn't lean in to have his cheeks kissed. She noticed when he tried and told him off.

He sat down on the bed, looked around. All the stuff that marked a civilian life. Bookshelves. Pictures on the wall. Decoration. Her epee, wire mesh mask, her kit on coat hangers, drying between the kitchen and the corridor. She'd been fencing. His own kit was stored away somewhere else—in a carton on one of the bookshelves. He doubted it would fit anymore. Too much weight-lifting. He had increased a fair sixty pounds in muscle and strength since then. He'd look like a gorilla in the white.

He opened the coat, the belt, loosened the boots. Couldn't quite get them off without bending down. More pain. Katya knelt down and pulled them off. Her pale golden hair, cut at the chin. Honey. She removed his socks, helped him undress.

Her hands paused on his feet. She could see the effect of long marches in that terrain. He had written her about the injuries, she must have expected him to be so worn.

She pulled off his shirt. He helped her with the trousers. It was all put over the back of a chair that needed a paintjob. The whole place did.

After she lifted his legs and helped him stretch out, he lay back on the mattress and closed his eyes. The mattress was too soft. Springs dug into his back, a woollen blanket kept the worst off, but they needed a new mattress at some point.

“How are the kids?” He asked with eyes closed.

“They wanted to stay up, but it got too late. Fell asleep right at the table,” she said.

Nikol’. He was reasonably sure Anoushka was his. Katya had been a few weeks pregnant when she got silver with her epee. Precise like a surgeon, deadly with that thin, flexible piece of steel. If it had ever been for real. Two hundred years ago, a woman fencer like her would have caused a sensation.

She had beaten him many times in friendly matches. Her style intrigued him; highly mobile, sheer skill neutralising his longer reach and larger mass, and cold-blooded like a striking cobra. No, a king cobra. Snake-eater. He’d been drunk, high on freedom. The things he did then.

He’d never found a woman attractive. Some fumbling around because he felt that was expected, that was how things were, but the interest was mostly scientific.

His masseur had started fucking him long before the Olympics. Jerked him off with so much control, he made Vadim dizzy with lust. It had always needed to be quick; the old man seemed wary, tense and nervous, but couldn’t resist the temptation. Vadim never wanted him to resist. He had wanted to feel the other inside himself. An extension of the massage, making him feel special. It had never felt filthy. Forbidden, yes, he had understood that from the start. But never bad. A man three times as old as he when they started fucking, who had held back, merely entering him with his fingers, once or twice then turned him around and sucked him off. Told him how beautiful he was.

Katya knew. Even somebody far more stupid than she was would have realized that there were things missing in their marriage. They never talked about it.

He assumed she was sleeping with the occasional man. Bored wife of a deployed officer.

Seeing her with Sasha had felt right—face flushed, her body radiant, strong, lithe. Sasha probably hadn’t known what hit him. She had asked Sasha whether Vadim was welcome, and Sasha was too far gone to object.

Vadim assumed he didn't mind—maybe had been fucked before, maybe even desired him as well. He'd been careful, and gentle, feeling oddly mellow with the both of them in bed. He'd had Sasha after that, the next morning. Fucked him nice and slow, with Katya watching. Absolutely screwed Sasha's mind—the woman he wanted, and her husband. Vadim needed to encourage him. Katya had told him that there had been “one of your people,” meaning Interior Ministry, “asking whether I was happily married to you.”

Or, short, whether their marriage was more than a pretence. He needed another child to prove it, so he'd used Sasha as a stallion.

This did her a favour as well. She'd always wanted more children. he could have obliged her if he could have brought himself to do it. He was biologically healthy, enough friction, and things went alright. But it felt like sleeping with a sister. And her knowing that it was willpower, and not lust, made it close to impossible. She deserved better than physiological reactions.

He rested, felt her hands soothing his neck, turned around and could smell her hair when she placed her head on his good shoulder.

“I'm sorry about Sasha,” he murmured into the darkness.

“Yes, he told me...what you said.”

Vadim inhaled. I saw how happy you were. I watched you look at him when he stood there in the doorway, dark hair, freckles, those dark blue eyes. I can still see you astride him, writhing on his cock, glancing over your shoulder, hair falling into your face. That smile. The way you lifted your ass to show me his cock burrowing into you. You snake-eater. He placed a hand on her shoulder, pulled her a little closer. “We have Nikolai.”

“Yes.” Her voice strained. “Nikolai.” She fought back tears. How could she mourn her husband's ‘comrade’ without betraying what she felt?

As far as Vadim could tell, nobody knew. Even her mother had told Vadim that Nikolai looked absolutely like his father. With only the eyes a darker shade of blue.

She was silent for a long time. “Don't *you* get killed down there,” she pleaded.

It would have been so much easier without that caring. He had opened the cage, but she hadn't left. Another prisoner in a web of lies.

* * *

Anoushka pulled on his arm like a plough horse, tiny legs pushing against the ground. Beautiful bright day, the sun was out, a mild, forgiving sun that didn't burn his face. Katya had said he looked very tanned, like after their honeymoon in Sochi. Vadim had felt self-conscious then. He was the second-rate pentathlete who had impregnated a first-class fencer. As if they expected Anoushka to breed true and become a champion in her own right as soon as she had grown up.

Soviet model family, with properly proletarian background. Her ancestors near-starving peasants in the Volga district, his ancestors industrial steel workers in Moscow. That wasn't the whole story. His father had been an intellectual before he was forced to work with his hands, his grandfather had been too close to the Whites during the revolution. But turned himself into a traitor, and was allowed to change sides. Denounce yourself, and the great leader will have mercy. Unless he sends you to a forced labour camp. He shook his head. Dark times. The lesson was clear: Keep your head down. Never become a target.

He followed his daughter, who insisted on heading towards the goats. She plucked some grass and offered it to one of the small pointy snouts, squealing in delight at the rough tongue. "Look! He likes it!"

Vadim smiled and glanced at Katya, who had Nikol perched on her hip, handling the heavy toddler with ease. He couldn't even carry him yet. His daughter also had the unfortunate tendency to cling to him, and he had to push her away every time she tried to climb on his lap. That a child could ever inflict pain on him was unspeakably bizarre.

"Look, the goat is from Afghanistan. A present from the government," said Katya, pointing at a plaque.

"That kind doesn't taste so bad," he said.

Anoushka stared at him in horror. "Nooooo!"

Katya glared at him; then went to great lengths to explain that daddy had been joking. Anoushka was not convinced and frowned at him, darkly, and his daughter could look exceptionally dark when displeased. Vadim laughed and went to make amends with ice-cream.

* * *

“I think we can take the dressings off now,” said the doctor. Vadim fought the urge to pull a knife and place it against his femoral artery. The doctor started pulling them off, a line of plasters, one for each letter. He knew the word, he’d checked the wounds, given him painkillers for his ribs, not nearly enough, but he mentioned “withdrawal” and Vadim understood.

His back felt naked. As if people could see through the uniform.

Everybody would be able to read the word. No more cameras. No more swimming. No more sauna. He must keep it hidden forever. He’d switch off the light before he took the undershirt off. He didn’t want Katya to see it. Didn’t want her to know he’d been tortured. And that he was only alive because she had given him the strength to ask for mercy. He needed to live to provide. As long as she stayed in her cage. As long as she chose to stay.

And what if Sasha had been alive and she had gone to live with the freckled pilot who was head over heels in love with her? What if there’d been no family in his mind when that bastard pointed the gun into his face? He couldn’t have said, couldn’t have thought, but there was despair at the thought. He pushed it away.

He felt her body beside him in the night, long limbs, close; Nikol’ mewling in his sleep. The kid was slightly ill, nothing serious, but his bed was in their room. What he had here had saved his life, not mercy, not strength. He placed his face on her arm, chin against her elbow, felt her fingers brush his cheek.

In the morning, she brought him tea and buttered, fresh bread. He’d been awake at five, as usual; then forced himself back to sleep. The medics told him to get as much rest as possible. He could stay in bed all week. He reacted too slowly, too late to cover himself. Her left hand, deadly instrument with a blade, shook as she served him tea.

He couldn’t eat, but took the tea. Sitting up in bed, leaning against the wall, to hide the healing wounds. Saw shock in her face, speechlessness. She looked at him as if trying to grasp what she had seen, or what it meant. He hoped she hadn’t seen the whole word. At that moment, Vadim hated the SAS bastard, felt his chest constrict under the weight of her pain.

“It’s nothing...” He winced. “...important.”

She accepted the lie like all the other lies. Black is white, and up is down. As long as we both understand the code. “An enemy?”

“I hurt him, too.”

She nodded, eyes narrow. “Good.”

He loved her in those feral moments.

* * *

He was reading when she returned. Dostoevsky. *Crime and Punishment*. He would be struggling to finish it before going back to Kabul. He never took books with him. First, he still couldn't carry much beyond a glass of tea and secondly, he could just see what the others would think of a collection of the classic writers. It was nice, however, to immerse oneself into language that was free of all profanity—beyond the things it described. Poverty, despair, darkness, and humanity. It made him think, and it was as far removed from the war as he could make it. The occupation. Raskolnikov broke over the fact he had killed one old woman—went almost insane with guilt. It was comforting to imagine some people felt like that.

She vanished into the kitchen, to store away whatever she'd bought at the market. “Can you protect a conscript from the worst?”

He glanced up. Now, that was unusual. “In theory.”

“A son of a friend was just sent to your place. She is worried.”

“What kind of friend?”

Katya stepped into the room, a slight smile on her features. “A useful friend.”

Influential. Able to pull strings. If she felt it was necessary. He did need a new driver. The last one had been transferred to a different barracks. “Can he drive?”

She nodded, the smile grew wider, and she produced a photo. Typical clueless conscript, still looking shell-shocked from the hair-cutting. Dark green eyes. Broad, flat features, lips too pretty, too curved. He'd actually be attractive when he eventually filled out that frame.

“Why is she worried about him? Looks alright.”

Katya's smile grew a little darker, and she leaned in closer, as if to kiss him. Her lips on his ear. “I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't find something to...not talk about.”

And turned around to fix up some blinis in the kitchen.

August 1981, Kabul

After a decidedly non-remarkable welcome, Vadim changed back into his normal gear, weapons everywhere on his body. Welcome back to Kabul.

Things hadn't changed much. He sorted his clothes into the locker, took the ring off his finger. He got to work right away, met other officers, had a chat, mentioned Gavriil. After a signature, the young guy was officially his. Sent word for him to come into the office, to tell him of his good fortune. No mine sweeping. No truck driving. Instead, make sure Vadim and another officer got where they wanted to be.

The door opened, and the boy showed up. Correct assessment. Dark hair, dark eyes, a mouth that was more girlish than Anoushka's. Vadim shook his head. He needed to get out of daddy-mode. He stood to circle the boy, assessed him. Lean, bony, good frame, he'd done a lot of running, his knuckles looked a little swollen and red, like he'd been plucked fresh from a fight.

Gavriil tried to evade his gaze. Meeting somebody's eyes was asking for trouble. He figured Gavriil had learnt that lesson in the barracks. Not much different from any kind of prison, really.

Vadim stepped in front of him, leaned in closer, until those eyes blinked and focused on him. He could see the kid swallow and begin to sweat, could see tension in that body, and Katya's word made sense. Someone to not talk about things with. Like they never talked about the one thing that could ruin them both.

A friend. She knew Gavriil liked men. That was why people were worried. He could offer protection, pluck the boy from the ranks and keep him as a driver. And a toy. That part of the deal was the reason why Katya had smiled like that.

Gavriil's lips opened, he was nervous, wide-eyed, but Vadim could feel he wasn't repulsed at all.

That fucking cock of yours gets you killed one day, and if not that, then it'll get you into shit so deep, your obligations won't get you out of it.

Vadim breathed. Entirely possible. He placed a hand against the boy's neck, thumb brushing against his jaw line. Glad he'd taken off the ring. The boy shuddered. Vadim could see him on his hands and knees.

Too willing. This one didn't have a single fight in him. But it was safe. The safest bet so far. He smiled, letting his thumb brush the corner of his mouth.

Gavriil stared at him, stared like he could hardly believe his luck that Vadim might be interested. He closed his eyes, lips moving as if in silent prayer.

“What?”

“Whatever you want, comrade captain.”

Officer. Superior. Para. Gavriil was first class bitch material. Suka. Vadim smirked. “Isn't that the truth.”

* * *

At first he'd played innocent, but Vadim could tell Gavriil had had cock in his mouth before. He held him by the collar, not nearly enough hair to grab, but the uniform collar was fine.

It was strangely, darkly amusing, how embarrassed Gavriil was about how horny it made him, but Vadim was in no state to go for the all-out thing. Blowjob were the most they could do.

The boy's body left him strangely unaffected, just not worth conquering. And his ribs still hurt. He hooked a leg under Gavriil's crotch when the kid was giving head, allowed the bitch to suck him and press against his leg, rubbing against it like a dog to get himself off. Vadim was an officer. And with Gavriil, that gap was wider than ever before. He didn't care whether Gavriil came. Sometimes, he'd been nice to Vanya, but Vanya earned that with a fight.

He did, however, like the way Gavriil flushed, liked the way he was panting for breath, liked the feeling of tongue, sucking and eventually trained him to take him down the throat. That day he decided he'd keep him as a driver. Men with that talent were rare and to be cherished.

During the days, he did his job, inspections, military liaison with the joke that was the Afghan army. Might just as well have stayed home. A complete waste of time. The Afghans lost a third of their number to desertion, mostly people who

could fight or wanted to at least, but not for them, leaving only the bastards who were too scared to run.

That made for brilliant fighters. Especially since the insurgents were their friends and family. Vadim often had the feeling they only stayed around so they could steal more kit when they finally did leave. He wasn't going out of his way to be pleasant with them. He knew everything would crumble and fall to pieces again the moment he turned his back.

It wasn't until six weeks later, when his chest was much better, but nowhere near alright, that he fucked Gavriil up the ass. The slut came from fucking alone. Another excellent trait for a bitch. Needy, easily aroused, even easier finished. He came into his trousers when fucked against a wall or across a desk. Not just a bitch, but a proper whore. Breathlessly pleading with him. Harder, deeper, yes. It was arousing, but it was too easy. Vadim wasn't even sure if Gavriil could understand what a proper fight was, even if he tried to explain.

July 1981, Old Blighty

Two more weeks had passed since the episode with the Russkie, and Dan was ready for some well-earned R&R back in England. There was still no official Western intervention and even less interest. No one was officially there, no one would stay, and no one left for long. He'd collected a veritable colony of fleas, nits and lice, drowned himself in every bit of parasite poison he could lay his hands on. The joys. He'd never get used to those little buggers.

Enjoying the luxury of hot water, staying longer in the showers than usual, getting himself back up to his personal grooming level. Cutting his nails, scraping the half-moons of dirt from under them, getting a real good wet shave and...that was it. He'd never understood the need for anyone, least of all blokes, to do anymore than that. Wash hair, wash body, take off.

Go and find yourself a shag.

Shag. That was it. He couldn't wait to get out of this motherfucking Muslim country where women were swathed in drapery like black crows tumbling with ruffled feathers in the wind. He hadn't seen anything that tickled his fancy for

weeks on end, needed a bird with big tits to remind him of what he really wanted, a good, long, hard fuck.

He just needed to burrow his face in ginormous bazookas and he would be alright. Double E cup, at least, and a wide-load arse to grab hold of. Just like he liked them. Not those stick-thin girls who had no curves and no flesh on them. He'd always taken the piss out of anyone who didn't want to suffocate in a nice, big pair of tits. With his mates, when on the prowl and off duty. Fucking his brains out with a willing bimbo after a night in the pub. Pissed to the gills, getting his leg-over, then fucking off before the morning.

Just like the other lads. He was one of them.

At night, he dreamed. Of hard muscles, angular planes, the smell of fresh sweat and drying blood. Memory of smooth skin beneath his hands, pale blond hairs catching the last sunbeams over the mountains, and a strength that matched, if not out-did, his own. Barely contained power, but power he'd had in his hands.

He woke up hard. And wanting.

* * *

“Oi!” Dan raised the pint glass in his hand, laughing. Already pretty drunk, he'd been on the piss every night since he'd returned to Britain a week ago. “I'm off in a sec.” He winked at his mate, who was groping a brunette's tits. The girl was dressed in pink leggings and something that could almost be called a boob tube, if it wasn't more like a strip of fabric, stretched across fucking big pillows.

His mate lifted a thumb, “See ya!” before continuing to slobber the garish lipstick off the giggling girl.

Dan drowned the remaining half pint, turned his head to the blond bimbo in his arm and grinned. “So, you wanna know how Special a Forces guy can be?” Corny, but it usually worked, and she had long proven to be giggly and flushed enough to be flattered by his attention. The fact that his fingers under the minuscule mini skirt, had twisted her thong aside and were already half-way up her fanny, might have been a clue.

She was ripe, and Dan was looking forward to another round of fucking. He'd done his fair share since his return for R&R and intended to shag his way through as many tits, cunts and arses as he could fit into fourteen days. He

wondered if he'd get this one to take it up the backdoor, seemed he had developed from mere liking to a clear preference to ram them from behind while they were kneeling like dogs.

The things the bloody Afghan mountains did to a man.

“Sure, but we have to be quiet, I'm sharing a flat with a girlfriend. She might be in.” She giggled again and Dan smirked. Threesome? Perhaps he got extra lucky.

“Got some booze at home?” Dan stood up, just a minor sway, he was a big bloke who could handle his pints, no question. She shook her head, that motherfucking stupid giggle again. Dan was drunk enough to ignore it. “Wanna stop over at the off licence before they close, need some whisky, or whatever you Sassenachs call whisky.”

She giggled. What else, and he wrapped his arm around her shoulders, dwarfing the girl. Big tits, bleached blond hair in a Farah Fawcett wannabe-mane, round arse and killer stilettos and nothing in her brain. Just like he liked them. Especially from behind.

A trip to the local corner shop and a bottle of overpriced whisky later, Dan watched the girl fiddle with her keys, somewhat disappointed when she declared after checking the lights were all off, that her flatmate wasn't at home. No threesome, then, but he had another week to go.

“Let's get comfortable,” he grinned, walked to her room, the usual girly interior, fairy lights, cushions, throws and all that crap. Paraphernalia of princesses, he'd never understood the need for frills, doilies and tables full of bottles, pots and brushes. He preferred to focus on the bed, and that's where he sat down. Good. Not too soft, he probably wouldn't have to risk carpet burn.

She giggled. Hell, fuck, heaven and earth, of course she would. “I'll just make myself fresh, I'll be back in a sec.” She turned and swung her ass, giggling excitedly all the way to the bathroom, leaving the door ajar.

Dan rolled his eyes. If she continued to giggle like that he'd have to stuff her throat with something to shut her up. He grinned, he knew just the thing. She should be flattered enough by his attention to suck him off. He was pretty fit and well-endowed, after all. Maybe this one was better than most others, who didn't have a fucking clue what to do with a cock. Best to get some of the booze down his neck, just in case she was one of the clueless ones. Dan wiggled out of his shirt and

pulled shoes and socks off his feet, making himself comfortable on the bed in just his denims. She needed something to unwrap. He grinned, uncorked the bottle and took a long swig straight out of it.

Fifteen minutes later she still hadn't returned and the bottle of whisky was half empty.

He was well down the road of piss-fuck drunk, when she finally appeared, wearing her tits hanging half out of a push-up bra and a tiny thong with a glittery kissy mouth. A sight to behold. Dan grinned from ear to ear, his speech slurred. "Time to have fun, been waiting for you."

"I hope it was worth it." She giggled—hoo-fucking-ray—but at least she climbed onto the bed, eyed the whisky bottle but said nothing, except reaching out for it. Dan handed it over, nothing better than some booze down a bird's neck and her precious ring would hopefully open for some backdoor action. He could feel the need rising, watched her kneel and drink, the smooth neck tipped back, the soft lines, the small sips; the lack of an Adam's apple.

"You on the pill?" He was fumbling with his belt, ready for action, could hardly wait to get down and dirty. She nodded, but pointed to her nightstand. "Don't you think we should use condoms?"

He laughed, popping the buttons of his jeans, "Bollocks, I'm clean. Much better without a rubber."

She nodded and...yeah, right, giggled. He was ready to grab her hair and push that lipsticked mouth down his cock. Kept himself in check, couldn't do that with girls. Bad move, had to woo them. Had to be careful. He tried to remember what the next step in the well rehearsed manual was? Right. Compliments. While he pushed his jeans down, he watched her avert her eyes in a ridiculous sudden bashfulness. What the fuck? He didn't get that bullshit, either. Nothing wrong with being a slut, why the fuck did they have to come over halfway through like a miniature Madonna when they'd been down your trousers and up your body for hours in the pub? Free drinks, yeah, that's why, and attention. Always fucking attention.

"You're one of the prettiest girls I've ever met." He kicked the jeans down, wore no underwear, always went commando. Cock greeting her sight, or simply just greeting. Anything. A hole to stuff, preferably the tightest one.

"Really?" She flushed, leaned forward, tits bouncing into Dan's face.

“Sure, I wouldn’t lie. You’re fucking gorgeous.” Sure. Blah blah, the whole shebang, the usual shit—and I’m off in the morning. “Come on, I’m desperate for your body, you drive me wild, I really wanna shag you.”

Thank fuck, she reached to undo her bra, tits falling out and his hands were ready to grip the firm roundness. Pulled himself up, burrowed his face in the warm, sweetly scented flesh, soft and silky, giving way to his hands, fingers and face, not offering any resistance.

Thought of a heavily muscled chest.

“Fuck!” Dan recoiled, wiped his brow, she almost jumped back and squeaked.

“What? What did I do?” He laughed it off, the booze, too much fucking whisky.

“Nothing, just caught my nuts.” Drunken laughter, she seemed happy with the answer, snuggled back into his body, her breasts brushing his chest, her skin freshly showered, powdered, deodorised and perfumed. Smelling nothing. Nothing but fake sweetness and lack of anything. No sweat. No blood. No heat.

“Come here.” He grinned, grabbed her hips, fought and conquered the thong, made her straddle his abs, his cock stabbing with every movement against the voluptuous rounds of her arse cheeks. “You ready?” He grabbed her breasts again, did the nipple roll-tug-etc thing, the usual shit that counted as ‘foreplay’ in his book, then dipped a hand to rub her clit, ready for his fingers to find their way inside the wet heat of her body.

Everything hidden, all of it out of sight and out of mind, but ready to service his lust.

She writhed and moaned, looked ecstatic before he had even started. He was drunk and horny, couldn’t give a flying fuck if she faked it. Didn’t matter to him if she came, just needed a hole, would do the rigmarole beforehand, but never after, to shoot his load and get a proper leg-over.

“I want to fuck you on your knees.” He groaned, revving himself up by working her tits and cunt, “you got such a perfect arse!”

She hesitated, but he dealt the last joker from his pack of fucked-up cards, and pulled her down to him, to start snogging her like he figured she’d like. Tongue play, nibbling, show of greed, and intimacy. Gave her what she wanted to gain what he craved.

Power. Hard body. Strength and defiance. Muscles coiling beneath his hands. Dan shook his head, broke the kiss, she mewled, he resumed, grabbed her arse so hard she winced but he never relented. Girl. Woman. Soft body. Tits. Arse. That's what he wanted! That's what he needed! That's who he was!

"Come on..." he cajoled, she still stalled, he pushed his fingers up her cunt, never quite got into the habit of enjoying the slippery wetness. Useful, but somewhat off-putting, didn't like the smell, but hell, liked how a versatile pussy could eat his cock. She squealed, wiggled, tits slapping his chest, and he knew he'd won. "You'll like it."

I don't give a shit. I just want to come.

She nodded and he took hold of her, lifted the girl like nothing, just soft tissue and a few bones, nothing to hold onto, nothing to fight with. She knelt on all fours, compliant, willing, waiting for him to take and do. 'Do'. To be active, and he peered down her back, too drunk to focus.

"Wanna fuck your arse." Still-coated fingers sought the puckered hole, tried to stab more than push, too pissed to aim.

"No!" She shook her head, tried to turn around, get away. "No, I'm not that sort of girl, I don't do that. That's disgusting!" She struggled, complained, Dan's jackpot was threatened.

"OK." He frowned, but what the fuck, any hole would do. "Is OK, you're lovely. Really, I like you, however you like it. Sorry for that." Lie, lie, anything to get what you want. Fuck and shag, then be on your way. "I understand, you're a special one, you're a classy girl, sorry, love, we can always meet again, get to know each other while I'm on leave. Just have a good shag now, we can meet tomorrow, I'll leave you my phone number in camp."

Yadda yadda words, no meaning.

She giggled. Fuck! Again! Giggled and calmed, then pushed back and started gyrating her hips once more. Good. Better. Much better. Dan circled her waist, focussed on her shoulders, the smooth line of fragile bones, then went forward like every man had done for thousands of years.

Cunt. Cock. Sheath. Fuck. That's how it was meant to be.

She moaned, he groaned; she pulled, he pushed; she panted, he fucked. Rammed his cock into her as if he were trying to prove a point. Fucked her body with narrowed eyes, and ragged breath, felt sweat bead, then trickle down his neck

and chest. Watched her round arse, then flickered away, still not coming, not yet. Eyes on the narrow waist, then up to the thin neck, couldn't get to the point that tipped him over. Shut his mind off to her high pitched squeals and girly noises, finally shut his eyes, grabbed her hips. Too drunk to guard his thoughts, too pissed to reject the images, memories, scents and sights.

Fucked a hard body in his mind; fought muscled strength, gripped steel and power, tasted sweat and blood, sun-burnt flesh; watched a rope-like neck moving and turning, shaved blond hair, thickly defined arms and shoulders; wrestled and punched, kicked and battled a body like his own. A body unlike the one he was shooting his load into, unseeing, unhearing, shouting to the memory of a hard cock, ropey abs and a solidly muscled hairless chest. "Fuck!"

Dan came. Collapsed. Discarded the girl's unwanted body.

"Where the fuck is the whisky."

* * *

She'd thrown him out, crying, complaining, accusing. Her mascara turning her eyes into black-smudged panda eyes. He fled the flat, couldn't get the fuck out of there quickly enough.

He swayed while walking, had downed another good measure of the booze, but she'd kept it, demanded the remainder for her heartbreak and trouble. He was callous, heartless, rough and all the other wonderful terms he'd been called more times than he could count. Whatever.

Dan had no idea where he was, didn't care. Some part of London. They'd taken a taxi from the off-license. He'd paid the fare but hadn't bothered to check where they were heading. Didn't matter jack shit. Just the cool night air in his face and the freedom to be out of the confinement of her cute little bedroom. Cute. Fuck. Stupid cunt.

Cunt.

Dan growled and spat on the ground, wiping his fingers once more on his thighs. He could still smell her. Stupid bitch. Damn girls and all the shit he had to do to get them. Why not just walk up, decide to fuck and get on with it. Presents, teddies, flowers and compliments if he wanted a regular shag. Sluts and fishy pussies if he couldn't be arsed and just got too drunk and nothing else mattered but

a hole. Whores that sucked you off for a tenner or let you fuck their loosened arseholes for a fiver more. Stupid fucking girls. Not worth the hassle. This one definitely hadn't been. Sweet innocent girl, yeah, and his name was Abdullah.

Walking aimlessly along the streets, drunk or not, Dan trusted his senses to take him back into the centre of the city. Blurred vision, but the cool air was sobering him some. Enough to stagger on.

Fucking cunt.

He'd already forgotten the girl, her tears and accusations, eyes fixed on the pavement in front of his feet, wandered without a plan, his thoughts returned to places he'd refused to visit before.

Waking. Night after night. Hard. Wanting.

Dan snorted, staggered to the side, almost lost his balance, time to stop. Patted the black leather jacket down to find the packet of fags and leaned with his back against the wall of the nearest building.

Fag.

Fucking joke, that word. No way to get away from it, unless he stopped smoking. Inhaled the first drag as deeply as he could, stared into the sky while exhaling. Murky pinpricks of light, the night was nothing like the sky in the mountains. The moloch of the city managed to tame even the planets and stars. He laughed. Dry, without a hint of humour, while catching the unmistakable noise from across the street. Another seedy nightclub, haunts for cheap sex and drugs in a rundown neighbourhood of a run-down Thatcherite country. Another drag, listening to the sizzle of the glowing cigarette instead, and staring at the patch of sky.

Tame.

Unlike the other. The enemy. That goddamnedmotherfucking Russian who had crawled into his brain, hooked poisoned barbs into his mind, had changed everything. Everything. Made him different. Unlike what he'd ever been before. No. He was normal. He shagged girls. Not guys.

Dan pulled up his shoulders, took another drag from the cigarette. He'd never had those thoughts before. Couldn't remember the waking, night after night after...

He was a bloody bad liar.

Dan laughed, much like he had, back in the mountains, confronted with the simplest and most truthful of answers. ‘I want you.’ ‘I’d take you again.’ And fucking hell, how he had wanted the bastard.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.” Muttered. This time it hurt and it wasn’t the booze that did it. Thirty-two years. Thirty-two goddamned years and it took one enemy to break through the mask he hadn’t known he was wearing and the lie he had believed himself.

“What a fucking mess.” Words escaping through puffs of smoke. He was a soldier, a squaddie. He had to be what he’d always thought he was, or he’d be busted. He had to be like all the others, just like them—to belong. ‘Them’, since when had he started to think in the manner of them and I and they and us. Had to be the booze.

He flicked the butt onto the pavement, stubbed it out and lifted his eyes across the road while doing so. Froze. Stared. Mesmerized by a sight in the sickly yellow glow of a street lamp. Two men. Kissing. No, bullshit.

Devouring.

Eating each other.

He’d never been so envious in his life before.

Dan couldn’t take his eyes off, was transfixed by, the sight of those two men. He had to have been watching for a few minutes, standing in the shadows against the walls, before the two guys finally noticed him, one prodding the other, pointing to the peeping tom across the street who was gawping at them.

“Oi, you!” One of them called, gesturing over to him, but it took Dan a moment to register. “What the fuck are you staring at, asshole?” Both of the guys were now glaring at him. They were tall, broad, muscled. Shit, nowhere near what Dan, the gay-bashing bastard, had told himself a faggot would be like.

They were similar to the Russian. No. Not quite. Nobody was like that Russian cunt. At least no one he’d met before. Not even his SAS mates.

“You got a problem with us?” Dan noted with detached amusement how their fists clenched, their leather vests and studded straps wearing chests puffed up, and their bodies straightened to full height. Funny. He could kill them without effort, no matter how hard they thought they were.

The guys were taking a step or two towards him, but he relieved them of their trouble, making his way across the street with the deliberate steps and the slight sway of a fairly pissed bloke.

“No.” Dan grinned, suddenly realising that yeah, fucking hell, it was nothing but the goddamned truth. “I haven’t got a problem with you.” Holy shit, if only they knew, that before he’d gone to that shithole Kabul and its hellish mountains, he would have kicked their heads in. Just for the fun of it, just because they were fucking fags, shit-stabbers, queer cunts.

Dan laughed, shaking his head as he passed the flummoxed blokes, who stared at this idiot who was laughing his head off for no reason.

He passed the open door of the club, peered inside and caught a glimpse of men, bodies, leather, smell of beer and smoke and a mother-lode of testosterone. And he laughed, laughed so hard because of the insanity of it all, and the intensity of relief. Tonight, it was just hilarious. He didn’t care what it would be like tomorrow.

1981 Chapter 5 — Devils and Dust

September 1981, Kabul

“Right. You remember our dear departed president?” The Major looked so vicious that Vadim felt anticipation. He must have a high security clearance, or he wouldn’t know about the assassination of the president. The man wore the blue beret of the paras, but Vadim knew a predator when he saw one. He was far from good-looking, but the leathery, sinewy, lean, absolutely deadly body spoke volumes.

The others in the room looked up and grinned.

“Krasnorada will command the strike team. We make sure you guys get in and out like a well-oiled pussy.” The Major leaned in to Vadim. “You do like pussy, comrade captain, don’t you?”

“I prefer my rifle, comrade major.”

The Major laughed. “That’s the spirit.” Vadim smirked, while his heart pumped. Just banter. Just the usual stuff about sissy-boys. Oh fuck. He was Captain Krasnorada, leader of the strike force.

Remember that.

The plan was simple. Some self-styled rebel leader was expected to show up in Kabul. Unfortunately for him, the family whose ancestor had been killed by the ‘rebel leader’s’ ancestor had caught wind of it—and sold him for hard cash to the brothers in Socialism. There were probably other boons involved. They expected the target to be there tonight, and it was sufficiently high-profile for the higher-ups to send spetsgruppe Vympel.

They were kitted out, ran checks, Vadim inspected his team, his own gear. He’d most likely kill half a dozen men today.

He’d missed it. Missed how his body responded to the anticipation. He was back in training, back to lifting weights, running, press-ups, pull-ups, back to the shooting range. He pushed Gavriil aside when he came back from the shower. He wanted to keep that tension in his body, wanted to feel it build up, and he was too tired to play their little game. Or just too bored.

Finally off in a helicopter, hovering like an insect-shaped curse over Kabul at night.

The sniper in the copter shot the guard on the roof. First-class shot.

Vadim jumped. The impact rattled his legs, hips, impact so hard he thought he had lost an inch of height, down down down the stairs, light on the rifle tearing bits of the house out of the gloom that had settled. Through the sound of his breath rattling in the gas mask, he heard shouts underneath. Opened a trap door, shot, then tossed in a smoke grenade then a gas grenade, which began to hiss. Firing again to disrupt any incoming fire, the momentum carried him, as he took the sides of the ladder and just slid down without touching the steps.

Vadim grabbed a shadow in the smoke, somebody with a rifle, slung a garrotte over the man's head and pulled him away, broke through the nearest door with a shoulder, found himself outside in an alley, saw covering teams on the corners, heard gunfire, shouts, screams inside. Held the garrotte, the man's head against his chest. Wanted to finish this guard and...only the guard was not an Afghan.

* * *

Dan had been lingering in Kabul rather than organising the insurgents up in the mountains and villages. That night, he'd been told about this meeting of the rebel leaders and was sent into the safe house to act as a Western envoy. He hadn't been happy with the whole set-up from the start, something stank and the fishy smell was nothing like an old whore's pussy. It was worse, but he had no option. Orders were orders, like them or not.

They'd just arrived in the building, waiting for the other rebel leaders to arrive, when Dan froze, listening carefully, thought he had heard a noise, like an angry wasp of the deadliest kind. Fucking Russian copters. No opportunity to talk or warn any of the others before the lights suddenly went off, plunging the whole building into pitch-black darkness.

Dan was the first to react. "Out! Get him out, now!" He tried to locate the tribal chief, would have grabbed him to try and take him out of the building, but the stupid fuck had panicked and moved across the room. He'd lost the mark's location, but not his bearings.

Fuck, gas. He didn't have a mask, shit, of course not, the rag had to do, but he was losing precious moments, covering mouth and nose to keep himself from choking. Eyes streaming, impossible to see in this hellfire. He moved forward, kept to the side, coughing hard. Don't stop moving. Suddenly no air. Instead, a horrible pressure against his throat, and an unrelenting force that dragged him with it.

Dan fought. Struggling with every ounce of strength his body possessed, fighting for his life, air, just breathing, was going mad, trying to resist the power that swept him away like a puppet. Who the fuck was able to do that? Senses started to panic, jumbled, broken thoughts, fighting against his foe and for oxygen. He'd had it, he fucking had it this time, but the fight would never be over until he was dead.

* * *

Vadim took a few more steps, the other body fought him like crazy, then Vadim broke, back first, through another ramshackle door. Whoever lived in this place had just finished cooking. A spicy smell was in the air. Vadim heard people scurry away, upstairs. He tore the gas mask down, dropped the man in the same moment he pulled the pistol.

Dan fell, knocked out from the fight. Gasping for air, coughing his lungs out, unable to see through blurry watering eyes. Retching and grabbing frantically with his hands at his throat. Air, air, air!

Vadim recognized him before his mind registered. He knew the face, knew the man. Remembered his smell. Fuck. He glanced at the door, kicked it shut again.

The man he had shared warmth with. The man whose cock he had touched. The man who had pushed strips of goat meat between his lips. Who had tortured him until he wanted to die. The man who had stopped him from going into the sauna forever. Who had distracted the Mujahideen so he could escape to his own side. The man who had broken his nose so badly it needed an operation to get back into any semblance of shape. The man Katya wanted to suffer.

The whole lie collapsed. No team of Americans.

Vadim had repeated the story so often he had almost started to believe it himself. One man. This. Man. Vadim wiped his face on the black camo, kept the gun trained on the coughing bastard.

May you never see me again, but if you do, watch your goddamned back.

Vadim was sweating, every muscle in his body locked, because his instinct told him to shoot. Shoot him once and for all, end this sickening thing inside. And what would that be? Apart from you having offered to be his bitch. Vadim inhaled sharply through the nose. It had been a deal, nothing more. And to see him again, fresh from the struggle, panting for breath. Wanted him. Wanted him like he had in the mountains. No, not quite like that. He was healed, he was pumped, he was alive, wanted to be alive, too, wanted to fight.

This man was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. He wasn't the objective. Not the target.

End this, Vadim.

Dan couldn't sit up, tried to force his body, needed to know who the fuck had outsmarted him and had dragged him through a wall, but he retched again, gagging, eyes still streaming. Then the touch. The muzzle, cold steel touching his forehead, right between his eyes. Breath suddenly didn't matter anymore.

Dan's hands that had been scrabbling at his throat moved onto the back of his neck instinctively. Knew what he was meant to do, hoped if he didn't pose a threat he might have a smithereen of a chance. Didn't believe it, though, didn't try to fool himself, even before he laid eyes on his captor. Fingers interlinked, body complied at last, and his head was forced up and back and then...

Silence. Shock. Moment of recognition.

His dark pupils widened until his eyes seemed black. Sweat on his face, running in cold rivulets down his neck. This was it. This was the end. If it weren't so fucking ironically pointless, he might have tried to barter for his life. Anything. But not this time. With this man, he had nothing to bargain with. The muzzle slid down over the nose, down to Dan's lips.

Vadim imagined those lips around his cock. Those cursing, sneering, spitting lips. He pushed them apart, placed the muzzle against the teeth, stared down into the dark eyes. "Wrong place," he said. "Very, very wrong place to be."

The steel tasted of brimstone and fire. Welcome to your private hell, Dan McFadyen. "Guess I didn't watch my back well enough." Raspy voice from the coughing. Smoke and fear. Plain, all-encompassing terror.

This was it. It would be over. Dan finally found out what it was like. His mind consumed by one wish, one thought, ‘over over over, let it be over and done with’. Unbearable tension.

Vadim leaned in, crouched, parallel like they had crouched when shaving. His eyes were wide, intense, could see the sweat bead.

Dan was high on physical sensations and pure, crystal-sharp terror, surpassing any drug known to men. Insane, insane, so fucking insane. The man, the touch, death and fear, and most of all, himself. So absofuckinglutely insane and powerful.

Vadim was breathing hard, this was triumph, this was lust and desire, and he knew he was playing with a victim, savouring the moment. It was perfect again. Perfect like the yielding. He just got another shot of it. The best painkiller in the world. Could smell him. Closer, even closer, forced the head back, brought his face close to smell him, touched his lips to the man’s temple, caught a bead of sweat with them and licked it off.

Dan almost collapsed at the touch, ten thousand volt of electric shock right into the centre of his brain, blinding his vision, taking his breath. Ragged, desperate, nostrils flaring, breathing around the steel. The gun the only familiar equation in this moment of utter insanity.

Dreams, he’d had them every night. Memories of the mountains, until finally giving in to the most powerful image of all. Wanking off to smell, taste, feel of the Russian. This Russian.

My cunt.

But what he accepted in the darkness had no place in the light. This was no fucking dream. “How fitting.”

“Fitting?” Vadim shook his head, tried to pull away, out of the heat the other man radiated. “You don’t give fuck about me. And that is why I will shoot.”

Something broke. Just cracked and gave away. Something inside of Dan lost itself to the insanity, and terror gave way to an unstoppable laughter. This time manic. He’d lost his mind and he’d be meeting the fucker in hell. He laughed, the alternative was to cry. For you, my cunt, all for you, and because of you. But you’ll never know.

The laughter cut Vadim like a knife. Was he mocking him? No, it was defiance, or was it? This man would die laughing. He had goose bumps all over his body. Not mockery. This was something else.

Vadim glanced up as he heard more shots from the other side of the alley. He should be leading his men, coordinating the team. He was screwed. He had impressed the Major with a show of absolute balls, epitome of military bullshit, and now went AWOL again and cuddled with the enemy.

This enemy hadn't killed him. Hadn't. Because he wanted water. Because Vadim had screwed his mind. Touched him, pressed all the buttons on this man. He remembered the man's cock in his hand, his hand on his hips, remembered the way he tilted his head as he shaved him.

My cunt. Possessive. There'd been no reason for the man not to sell him to the Mujahideen. A promise, but a promise was nothing between enemies. Everything between men like them. Somewhere up in the mountain, they'd lost something. Lost white and black and came out with grey.

"Or maybe I'm kidding myself," Vadim whispered. "I must be." Stared into those eyes, knew the features too well to shoot him in the face.

Dan stilled when the pale eyes fixed on his own, much darker now than he'd seen them before, except...except for that moment, when he could not accept. Just breathed through his nose, rapid, small breaths. The fear was back but the insanity remained. This was it, then. This was it and Dan wanted it to be over, could think of nothing else. Every fibre of his being screaming for this to end. Now. End it now.

Vadim moved the gun to the other's throat, let it slide down, wished it was his lips, so he could taste the sweat, taste the skin, feel it vibrate under his touch. He didn't want to touch him with a gun.

Dan swallowed. Couldn't help it. Fear of death as palpable as the sweat that was running down his face. He was just a man, after all. Like the other man.

A man who suddenly placed his lips against Dan's and *kissed* him. The kiss was nothing like that shared by the men under the yellow streetlight in Soho, but Dan wouldn't change places with them. This insane kiss was his and so was his life, at least for a few seconds longer.

The crystallised moment before death intensified the touch of their lips, a thousand times and many more again. His first kiss, his last kiss. If he had any time left, he'd be addicted.

Suddenly, he was not envious of those men anymore.

“The leopard is a cruel lover. His tenderness breaks the gazelle’s heart.”
Vadim kept his lips against Dan’s as he placed the pistol against the left shoulder, could feel the muscle, sensed the correct spot. Pulled the trigger.

Dan had no time to understand. Muffled sound of a silenced shot, so negligent compared to the shock-delayed pain that hit his body, spread from the shoulder and sent his body onto the floor, instinctively pressing against the wound, hand coated in blood. He screamed.

He couldn’t be dead. He was in too much fucking agony.

Vadim crouched, watched him fight the pain. He was losing. “I’m giving you an alibi,” he said, in Russian. ‘I’m giving you so much more than that. I’m giving you your life. My desire.’ He didn’t think the other would appreciate it. He stroked his own lips, wondering why he had decided to act on that instinct.

He pulled the morphine loose from around his neck, placed it in a free hand that was desperately trying to do...something. He wouldn’t inject him. The SAS guy was perfectly capable of doing that himself when the worst shock wore off.

Dan wasn’t sure if he understood anything at all. It was all too fucking insane and it couldn’t be, shouldn’t be. Except for the pain, that was goddamned real, but then his fingers closed around the syrette with a will of their own. Realised too late he had reached for the hand, not the morphine. Insanity. Nothing but insanity.

Vadim licked his lips again, sweat and a kiss. “I’m giving myself a fucking alibi.”

Alibi. The word stuck in Dan’s mind, while he pressed his hand against his shoulder, stared up at the Russian, and could only see snapshots: Eyes. Lips. Jaw. Stubble. Camo paint. Lips again.

Vadim stared at the other man’s neck, that neck needed a dog tag with a name on it. He wanted the other’s name. Badly. Then it hit him. Dan. He had called himself that, with the dushmans. I’m Dan. I’m a friend.

Vadim wanted to take him with him, not leave him here like this. Wanted to tell him why and wanted to torture the fucking confession out of him. Wanted to

feel him underneath, wanted to hear him groan with lust, fighting him all the way, make it so much better for both of them.

“I’m at the tea house off the main market in one month. The one with the mosaics. We can finish it then and there.”

Dan was breathing rapidly, fighting enough of the pain to be able to listen. Uncomprehending, but memorising. Tea house. Market. Month. Mosaics. Too many fucking M’s and he was ready to lose his mind again, but then there was Morphine, and Mercy.

The Russkie was gone. Dan slammed the syrette into his thigh. This shit was strong, but he was alive.

No doubt rescuers would be on their way, scouring for survivors.

A month. He’d be there. Had to be.

He succumbed to the wave that dragged him under, collapsing back onto the floor.

* * *

Vadim reattached himself to his unit. Told a story about having seen a sniper opposite. But it had been just a shadow on the window. He was still yelled at for breaking away. The Major said he had good instincts, but was a fucking loose gun. The Major grinned as he said that, an impossibly frightening grin that was not amusing at all. It was the kind of expression that could make men piss themselves. Vadim just about managed to not do that, but he flushed darker than a schoolboy found jerking off.

He received a load of shit tasks, even more odious than usual. He wasn’t supposed to wander off by himself, sniper or no sniper. Not without communicating his intent. He completed the tasks, inspections, shouted at people in return. A small price to pay.

October 1981, Kabul

A month. One fucking long month for Dan, mostly spent in a piss-poor place that called itself a hospital, loitering in a twelve-man ward somewhere in

Pakistan. They'd rescued him, the only survivor. Flown in a copter across the mountains, they didn't even have to find the bullet. Close range, clean shot, right through. He'd regain the full function of his shoulder.

The questions, though, after he'd come out of surgery, weren't quite so clearcut.

'How could you be the only survivor?', 'Tell us, McFadyen, you were found in an adjacent building, how did you get there?', 'You were strangled, the garrotte was found in situ, who did this?', 'You must have a recollection, McFadyen, who shot you, at close range, and who and why did they shoot you up with morphine? The syrette was right beside your leg. Russian make.'

On and on and on, but he stuck to the one answer, the only one that would save his hide: 'I don't know. I can't remember. I did not see. I don't know. I am sorry, sir, but I don't remember.'

He did and yet he didn't. Remembered, but nothing made sense, except for the tea house in a month's time, in the Kabul market.

They left him alone at last, realising the debriefing would go no further, and he was on his own. Day in, day out, utter boredom. Nothing to do except think, remember. Scent of sweat, touch of lips, pain of a bullet and greed and need so intense he could not help but wank off under the thin blankets. Stealthily, silent, but with an inferno in his mind, behind closed eyes.

Three weeks later, they let him out of the hospital. Arm in a sling, stuffed to the gills with painkillers. Full motor function would eventually return, but they warned it would take weeks before he was fighting fit again. He didn't give a shit what they said, exercised relentlessly, and ran whenever he could, even unbalanced.

He had to be strong. Not sure for what, just a Month. Mosaics. Market.

* * *

At last, another week, making it four weeks from the day of the attack. Anniversary of the night an enemy had spared his life. Why. Only to take it? A life, or something more. Far more.

Dan had checked the place, knew everything about the market and the building where the tea house was. Done his recce several times, then walked towards the market in his usual camo trousers, army boots, inconspicuous t-shirt

and long-sleeved jacket. A rag around his neck. And the goddamned sling that his arm was still stuck in. More weapons hidden on his body than hallelujah-singing angels, dangling from a Christmas tree.

He didn't know what he was doing, nor what he wanted, just that he had to do it.

To end it.

Or a beginning?

* * *

The tea house was an unlikely place to meet. Full of what passed as petit bourgeoisie in Kabul, little shop owners, students. Dusty from the outside, the inner court a garden with springs, arcades sheltered from the sun.

Lice-infested carpets to sit on, and, of course, water pipes. Communal water pipes were a safe bet for TBC and worse, and Vadim didn't smoke. He could have got into weed. Hashish didn't cost anything around here, but it required smoking, and Vadim was particular about his lung capacity. As if. As if he could ever compete again. Swimming, hearing the roar of the audience even through the water. A maelstrom of noise when he broke through the surface.

After duty, he went straight there, saw Soviet soldiers walking patrol. This place was close enough to government control. He could drink tea here without getting poisoned. The owner still looked at him with the expression of a doomed man, and Vadim's mere presence cleared out half the place.

Keeping one eye on his surroundings, he drank black tea, too sweet. At first, he glanced up every time somebody entered, but gradually relaxed, stretching out his legs, leaning against the wall, enjoying peace and quiet.

He won't come.

Yes, he will.

You shot him in the shoulder.

Damn good shot, too. Didn't scramble his lungs, didn't bounce off the shoulder blade. First class shot. That's why he will come. That man only reacts when he gets hurt.

Debating with himself, pro, con, then pro, pro, pro again. The stricken expression. How he had looked at him, how close they had been. The man wanted

him. Might not know why, or when, but there was something pure and wild and feral in this. Something perfect.

And he wanted this man. Every waking moment was an echo from the time in the mountains. That long mindfuck. Surviving on his guts, on his wits, on raw power. And the other...decency. Mercy. A depth that he could feel, that resonated with him. That man was as screwed-up as he was. They were spinning towards oblivion together, but as long as he could control it, everything was good. But how long will you be able to stay in control, Vadim? There was an uneasy feeling deep in his bones. He wanted the man so desperately. Had wanted him like the bullet, like death, like going home.

He'd touched those lips, and kidded himself that by doing so he was breaking through, deeper, diving into him, into his mind. His own mind, too, twisted and dark as it was. But it left him wanting more. He wanted the danger of this man, wanted his uncompromising presence, the knife's edge.

One of them had to give.

And how far could he go down that road? He'd imagined tying the bastard up and fucking him, hard, all night, for days on end. Sate himself and the other, in something that would destroy the tension by destroying its cause. He wanted to eat, drink and devour all that strength, all that resistance. To break him.

He would let him go afterwards. Leave him, and forget him, keeping the memory. He'd transform the man into some part of himself, store him away like childhood memories, a pure and simple victory. Feed off that for the rest of his life. Use it to get through the war and the struggle that was Moscow.

Dan. That was probably Daniel. SAS.

His eyes were half closed when he knew he was being watched. Watched in a way that was not cursory. As focused as a red dot on his brow. He scratched his stomach lazily. Heat-dazed Russian in a tea house.

What could go wrong?

* * *

Dan had been watching the Russian across the court with the intensity of a sniper, face, chest, hands, build body and face again. He didn't know why he'd

come, realised that a man who was not fully fit was a target, and the sling made him into a prey, for all to see. Prey. He'd never be a victim.

Didn't know what he wanted except that he needed to know. What was this thing? Nameless, greedy, coiling in his guts, poisoning his mind. He'd accepted its existence, but he needed to know. Dan stepped out of the shadows of the entrance and walked into the light of the courtyard.

Vadim's lips moved into a smile, slow, deliberate, just this side of a smirk. He nodded to the waiter who stood close, hoping to take his order, hoping he'd finally finish and leave. "Two more."

Vadim pushed himself up with his shoulder blades and sat a little straighter, one leg up to rest an arm on his knee, fingers open, dangling in a show of relaxation. Then looked up to meet the eyes. Ah, fuck, he'd rather leave immediately and do all of the things he had been imagining. Eyes, intense as always, the tanned skin that made Vadim want to smell him.

"Please, have a seat," he said, in English. "I have ordered tea. One of the few things we should have in common." The 'we' carried two nations, not two soldiers. He counted the articles in those sentences and was reasonably sure they were all in place. Plodding through the language wouldn't do, not now. Not when he tried his hand at courtesy.

Dan did not give a sign of recognition except for a raised brow. "Lemon in tea is barbaric." He sat down opposite, sliding diagonally away from the other. More room for himself and better observation. He sat down with parted legs, slouched, casual, open.

Vadim regarded him from under heavy lids, playing anaconda. Lie in wait, look relaxed, even sluggish. He noticed with some satisfaction that the man was armed to capacity. He only carried the bare basics, a holdout pistol, a knife, another pistol nestled in the small of his back. A garrotte behind the belt. Painkillers. Just in case things got out of hand.

He waited for the tea to be served. The waiter topped up the filled sweets standing on a small plate on the low table. Vadim wiped his face with his arm. So many ways to start the conversation. No fight this time; the man wasn't fit to fight, the arm looked weak; the way he moved was unbalanced. What do I do with you, Dan? I've said all the things I wanted. Done a lot of them, too.

“Now that we are both here...” Vadim took a sip from the tea glass. “We should use this opportunity to get some things straight.” He loved that word for what it didn’t imply. “No shooting, no fighting.” He glanced around, inferred there were witnesses, people here.

“What a shame.” Dan shrugged, “No fighting? That doesn’t seem to leave much scope for ‘conversation’.” He took a sip, leaned back again, sprawled and using up all of his personal space and more. “I got rather attached to my knife in your presence.”

Vadim touched his hip to indicate his own knife was close. He shifted, leaned forward. “You didn’t come to fight. I’ve been obvious enough. Nothing happened. You didn’t come here to kill me.”

Dan grinned, a mix of bared teeth menacing grimace and a smirk of almighty proportions. It struck him as insanely amusing that he should have come to the tea room to kill the Russian. “I can still change my mind.”

What if he was wrong? Vadim thought. Then again, there was no humiliation worse than what had happened in the mountains. He had the scars to prove it. “Forget for five minutes what you are.” Vadim nodded towards the tea. “One drink. After that if you want, you leave. Or I leave.” Trying to lay down simple rules.

“You’re talking bullshit, Russkie. Neither of us can forget who we are, nor what we’ve done.” Dan was toying with the slim, small glass in his hand. The heat was soaking through his fingertips, travelling into his arm and through his brain. Heat. Perhaps it was heat that had brought him here, the heat he had felt night after night since that booze-ridden encounter in London.

What we have done. That sentence resonated, and Vadim agreed.

“You have more to lose than I do.” Dan studied the dark fluid, watched tea leaves swirl against the filtered sunlight. “The question is, why are you here?” He leaned his head back, watched the Russian through half-lidded eyes.

More to lose? Vadim didn’t care. This was costing him what passed for sanity with most people. Peace and calm and a clear mind. ‘I am here because I want more. More than shooting you. More than kissing you.’ He inhaled, deeply, and watched the dark liquid in the other man’s glass. “To make offer.” Snake coils slowly unfolding as he set eyes on his prey. “You. Me. Alone. No questions. No killing.” He wanted to retract the last two words, even though he meant them, but it

sounded cautious, nervous. As if he could be misunderstood. He stared into the other man's eyes. "No questions at all."

Too many responses in Dan's head, along the lines of outright laughter, declarations of insanity and the mockery of telling him to fuck off and die. Did the cunt really believe he was so goddamned motherfucking stupid not to realize the Russkie was out for revenge in ways Dan had encountered before? That one night. The night of Nothing.

Dan sat in silence, gazing at his tea, rolled the glass once across his smoothly shaved face, tipped it against his lips and emptied it in one go.

He had to find out and he'd kill or die trying. "Aye. Where."

Vadim abandoned his tea; too fascinated by the way the other man's throat moved. "Now, that was hard part," he said, in English. "I rented house." Vadim nodded towards the exit. "Across market. Two exits, one front, one back. I'll go in front. You follow me and enter from back. I'll open." Decrepit little place, but it had space and relative calm. And was close enough to the busy market to enter and exit with relative ease and little risk. He'd planned this as a safe house, just in case.

Don't lie, Vadim. You don't do things randomly. He stood, felt anticipation, felt his body enjoying the idea. "I'll be upstairs. Lock door."

Dan gazed up at the Russian. "You insult my professionalism." He placed the glass back on the table, stood up as well. A little unbalanced, but the way he coped with the weak arm showed he had been exercising.

"Walk right into a trap?" Dan's voice remained low, "I told you once that you're ruled by your cock. Don't assume I am." No, because you don't know, do you, Dan? You don't *know*, and you're desperate to find out. You sad motherfucker. Thirty-two years and not a fucking clue. "You have to do better than that."

"I don't look like honeytrap, now, do I?" Vadim laughed. "Yeah, that's me. Stunning beautiful KGB agent out to entrap poor unsuspecting enemy soldier." Voice so low it was only breathing. Saying the word KGB in jest made him suspect he was drunk or more reckless than he should have been. "I can't leave city. Or I would have found us nice cave somewhere." Only half a joke. He had considered it. Talk about being desperate. Strike that. Obsessed. "If you have alternative, go ahead."

Dan's brows rose again for a moment; then dropped. "I don't know anything about KGB agents or honey traps, but I do know about 'unsuspecting enemy soldiers.'"

The man's face was hard. No doubt what he was referring to. Vadim stifled the memory.

"KGB wears cheap suits," said Vadim. And when exactly have you become a specialist in male grooming? It was true, though. Every western reporter wore more expensive suits that fitted better. He opened his arms for a moment, indicating his camo, disorderly as it was.

"I follow." Hadn't taken long to drop your 'professionalism', had it, Dan? Insanity. Pure and complete insanity.

Vadim paid for the tea, then crossed the market place, feeling excitement and heat converging in his stomach—and below. He walked past the Soviet patrol, leant against the wall of the house, then unlocked the door and entered.

Inside, he bolted the door, shed his shirt and used it to wipe his face before walking through the building and unlatching the other door. In the kitchen he fished a plastic bottle of water from a bucket that had cooled it, opened it and drank deeply, then walked upstairs, the wood creaking under his weight. The holster in the small of his back clearly visible against his undershirt.

He opened the trapdoor and climbed in. Closed the shutters. Drank more water. It had been a while since he had been this horny.

He knew exactly when.

* * *

Surely, Dan had completely lost his mind, how the fuck could he even entertain the idea of following that bastard? He wasn't fit for a fight, and why the hell should he believe a single word the enemy uttered? He'd tortured him, cut 'cunt' in his back; kept him alive, been granted life in return, and why the hell would any of that be a reason to believe he'd survive the encounter?

Perhaps, but how? He'd had time to get acquainted with some of the Russian's psyche and he'd never forget the answer to his question: *Yes, I'd do it again.*

“I’m a fucking idiot.” Dan muttered, following but taking a different route to the house. Back entrance. How ironic and how utterly stupid. Leave, you must leave!

He couldn’t.

Tried the door. It was open. Dan drew his pistol, flicked off the safety and entered the gloomy house. Upstairs? Perfect place to shoot him.

Every fibre of his being alert, expecting a shot, kick, punch, attack of something-anything any moment. Still he moved forward and closed and bolted the door. Bloody insanity. Ruled by his cock, just like the other, and he didn’t even know where his cock was taking him.

Fuck, how pathetic. Thirty-two years, one rape, one touch, one kiss, one shot.

* * *

Vadim waited, drank more water, then splashed it over his face and neck. He let the water drip down his face, stood with his back to the open trap door. There was a bed, wooden frame, a thing of ropes and blankets, primitive but sturdy. He pulled his undershirt off, wiped some of the water from his neck over his chest. He’d kill for a shower. “Still not biting,” he called out in English. “Come. Be my guest.”

He turned towards the trap door, stayed away, a good three yards.

Dan didn’t answer except for a small snort. *Not biting*, yeah what the fuck ever. He peered upstairs through the opening and checked the surroundings. The pistol had to go back into its holster so he could climb the ladder; the damned arm was useless.

Rung by rung until his head came up above the edge, amazed that he’d neither been kicked nor shot yet. He pulled himself through the opening and stood up.

The Russian, grinning, chest naked.

Dan knew the rest of the body, but still stood transfixed, waging an inner war. What was more intense, the images and memories he’d used for wanking, or the real thing, standing there? Was that what he wanted? He didn’t have a fucking clue. Something...wanted something so intense he’d burnt his mind on it, scalded

his skin and etched memories into his mind that made him forget wet pussies and soft tits.

“Not very ambiguous.” Dan gestured with his chin to the bed. Bed. Nothing else. Left no room for interpretation.

Vadim gave a short, near-silent laugh. Ambiguous? What had ever been ambiguous about them? Double- and triple-layered. Ambiguous? Never. Most importantly, this place had no military authority that could kick them apart like dogs.

He drank more water, mainly to do something as he waited to see whether the Brit would bolt and run, pull a gun and tell him he was a pervert, a degenerate, or whether the man could be in the same room with him without shooting, fighting or otherwise trying to kill him. On equal ground, same level. “I did say, no questions. I don’t care.” He shrugged, debated whether he should close the distance. “Ah, and yes, I am offering.”

Dan let the jacket slide off the injured shoulder where it had hung haphazardly, delivering a kick to the worn garment once it landed on the floor.

“Offering what? Your arse, again? To be my cunt?” Dan sneered. The army had taught him attack was the best defence.

To be his cunt? If that is what it takes, thought Vadim, and was surprised. Would he go that far? Could he? Offer potential pain and discomfort, let a complete beginner do that to him. He had no confidence in the other’s technique. Then again, it would even the score. He’d only done it when he was young. Not since he joined the army. Too tall, too much fighting spirit. Much easier targets around. Vadim wiped his lips with the back of his hand, then offered the bottle, plenty water left.

Dan took a couple of steps towards the Ruskie, a safe distance away from the open trap door, and reached for the water. One step separated them, and the damp skin of his bare chest was too close. The parameters had changed, but Dan couldn’t fix their position. He knew. He put the bottle to his lips, and let lukewarm water run down his throat, all the time keeping the other in his vision. Didn’t know what he wanted, but wanted, needed, goddamned motherfucking *wanted!*

“So, do you offer, *cunt?*”

Vadim's doubt paled. If that is what it takes. Being the bitch. Vadim smirked, felt the heat rise. If the other lent a hand, it might even be good enough to sate him. "Guess I owe you one."

"Fuck you." Dan snarled. "Fuck you, Russkie, you think it's that easy?" He dropped the near-empty water bottle. "You owe me *nothing*, cunt." Crossing the final distance, Dan's fist flew into the smirking face in the same motion. He still had one good arm and he'd put it to use, to wipe that bloody superior sneer off the fucker's face.

Vadim blocked the blow with his arm, diverted it, his free hand taking the fist and placed it against his chest, on his sternum, and held it there. Relishing the fact that there would be no blow from the other hand. It was still too close to the solar plexus for comfort, but the comfort zone with this guy was narrower than a fly's ass crack.

Vadim leaned in, almost touching the other's face with his. "I'm offering, Dan. That doesn't mean I won't fight if you start one." Yes, and saying his name would put this guy more at ease? He released the man's wrist, carefully, slowly, and placed a flat hand against the other's chest. Felt like he was trying to communicate with a spaceman.

Dan? Since when did the bastard know his name? Dan's arm was trembling with barely controlled rage. Felt like a caged tiger, unable to fight, the anger consuming him. Setting him on fire. Heat. Deep burning heat that was far more than anger.

"Fuck you." Dan wouldn't relinquish control, not to the other. Part of him feared he'd already lost it. Too fucking close; he could smell the heat of the man's body, the fresh sweat, the scent of hardness, demanding, power and strength that he'd been seeking all his motherfucking life and had never found in any of his encounters with women.

"I fucking hate you, Russkie." Truth, intense and pure, pushing the other's hand off his chest, went for a low angle, intent on slamming his fist into the bastard's guts. Destroy the thing he wanted; safer than to take it.

Vadim blocked the punch again, body moving in the short jabs of Sambo, all strength, some technique, all toughness. He wanted to stun the bastard, defending wasn't his style, he attacked. He shook his head, not comprehending, not

sure what had pissed the man off so badly. He had followed him this far. It wasn't about anything more than raw need.

So close, within reach, and the other kept stalling. Vadim forced himself to breathe deeply, to not kick him through the nearest wall and rape him on the other side. He stared into the dark eyes, matching him for intensity. "Hate me. Hate me all you like," he hissed. He stepped away and half-turned, keeping his eye on the man. Another punch from him, and he would kick the bastard right through the trapdoor.

"That's a fucking lot of hatred!" Dan snarled. Heart racing, breathing in short gasps; all the symptoms of fight or flight and he hadn't been able to do either. Fuck this! At the back of his mind he knew he had no chance, but he had to try and beat the shit out of the man anyway. To destroy what he wanted; wanted to taste, to bite, to touch, to grab, to lick, to hurt, to...to...he didn't fucking know!

"Cunt!" He slammed with his good shoulder into the other.

Vadim laughed. Go body-to-body when unbalanced? Brilliant idea. He drew his shoulder back, allowing the blow to slip off him without making any real impact, then using all his strength, his balance and full weight drove the fucker into the nearby wall. That might hurt his shoulder, but he didn't care. Enough was enough.

Dan caught a yelp in his throat, pain still blinding, but fleeting, bit his tongue instead, now that hurt worse than a motherfucker. He swore with every expletive under the sun. Or moon. Suddenly confined, caught, and too near, far too close, scent overpowering, heat dangerous, wanted, hated, wanted some more.

Vadim held him to the wall with his body, legs carefully positioned to not get kicked in the balls, chest to chest, face close enough to feel his breath. Groin close, and fuck, the contact, the resistance felt much better than any part of Gavriil. His hands left and right of that solid chest, his right a little lower to block any punch, just in case.

He felt the dark flood surge, fought the idea, fought the memory of knife and pistol. Not now. Not like that. Not again. Force was simpler. But the other was no match with that fucked arm. And that was not what he had planned. He'd much rather have him willing and desperate.

Dan glared at the Russian, He'd already called him a bastard, cunt, wanker, arsehole, piece of shit, son of a bitch and a fucking fag, there was nothing left.

Breathing, almost frantically, in short sharp stabs, nostrils flaring. Body tense, nothing inviting, fighting the other, but himself even more. Resisting with every muscle against his growing urge to yield, to touch, to taste.

What do you want, what do you want, what do you want?

“What do you want?” Dan couldn’t stop the words. Lies. What do *I* want. Tell me. No. *Show* me, you motherfucker!

“You,” Vadim murmured, voice rough. “Want you, and you bastard know it. Doesn’t take rocket scientist.” He risked more, got closer, groin to groin.

You. The word shot across Dan’s brain. *You*. Again and again. Trapped, cornered, instinct for flight, too fucked for fight. A deer in the fucking headlights for one moment, before being pressed into action by the Russkie’s attempt to push his legs apart.

“No.” Dan murmured, didn’t know why he refused. Wrong. Stared at the face, too close; body, too hot; groin, too hard, wanted to invite in return. “No, fucker.” Yes! Fucking yes! Since when had he turned into a dithering girl? Fuck!

Sharp intake of breath, anger jumped a notch, flared with burning consumption. Not at the Russian, but at himself. He was a man, for fuck’s sake, not supposed to stand frozen like a panic-stricken bitch. Another breath, body tense, ready for the attack.

“No!” His body betraying the word, Dan’s good arm came up, around, pulled, clawed at the naked shoulder blades. Closer! More feeling, more friction, Never enough. Found his teeth attacking damp skin and hard muscle, groaned with the murderous onslaught of sensations. Hissed in aggression, lust, greed, and the final knowledge of his surrender. To what he was, and what he wanted.

This body; this anger; this man.

Vadim closed his eyes as he felt the fingers digging into him, and a groan escaped as he pressed in, groin to groin, feeling his own heat and that of the other man, reflecting, combining. Victory. The heady mix of victory and lust.

“Fuck.” Hardly audible, Dan hissed between teeth and flesh, biting harder into the muscle, dizzy with the taste of sweat. Fingers clawing at the scars on the back.

Vadim’s hand went to the back of the other man’s neck, pressing the vicious mouth against his flesh, wanting more, everything, while the free hand moved between their bodies. He needed two hands to open the other’s belt. The

bastards had designed it to make it difficult, so that it needed patience and rationality to get the thing open, things he didn't possess. He almost tore the buttons off, one hand forcing itself in to take the hot flesh that was ready and greeting him.

Dan's hips bucked at the touch, forcing his cock into the hand, couldn't stop even if he tried. Fucking lost, conquered by what he wanted, he punished the other man's flesh for his weakness. His teeth biting with reckless cruelty into smooth skin and muscles.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." The Russian had won, but Dan didn't care. No, wrong, fuck. Did care, had to, but couldn't. His body had taken over, sensations unknown and so goddamned needy, couldn't get enough, never taste enough nor fight nor hurt and least of all get enough of that strength and hardness.

The stinging pain only spurred Vadim on, going straight to his groin, to every muscle in his body. He tensed, let go of Dan for a moment to pull open his own belt, pressing into the body with his weight, knew the other couldn't escape, not this time; wall, touch, fist, he could feel how sweaty his palms were, stroked that cock.

Dan lost it. Pushed, groaned, bit harder, growled into flesh, attacked the other's back with renewed brutality as a whimper escaped him. Hated this weakness, wanted nothing more than this heady, completely insane weakness. Addiction.

Vadim pressed against the body that was still fighting the fact it was him; rubbed and pushed against him, knew that would be enough, like a dog in heat, the smell and strength, he had fucking missed this. He lowered his gaze, saw his hand pump, a quick hand job in the barracks, yeah, right, fool yourself, not that he had wanted to touch that cock, would have been willing to taste it; above all, had wanted that body close, should have cut his throat, remembered how he'd had him, and the biting added a spike to it that made him dizzy, the fact he'd had him, and could have him again.

Man. Cock. "Shit!" Dan hissed, friction. Heat, sweat-slippery hand and the insane lust that reached down to the marrow in his bones. Wanted the fucker. Hated the asshole. Fought the cunt and rubbed, pulled, pushed against the bastard. Hard. Cock. Loved that fucking feeling of the fucker's cock. Word on repeat,

hammering in his mind, the goddamned baseness of the whole thing, final understanding what the fuck he was.

Cock. Man. “Mine!” Dan growled. Too much, crashing down and pulling him under. Dan would have screamed, if not for the flesh between his teeth, buried deep into the neck muscle. The spasms that shook him with a new dimension of intensity, branded him finally as what he’d always hated before: a gay motherfucker.

He threw his head so hard back against the wall that the pain counteracted the crash-down of his orgasm, groaned between clenched teeth, eyes scrunched shut for a moment, then wetness. Heat. Smell of sweat, lust, hatred and cum.

He wanted more.

The pumping and twitching, the way the man tensed, couldn’t help it, was helpless now, completely and utterly in his hand, Vadim wanted this heartbeat to last, kept his hand busy, made him crash hard and good, felt the wetness up his wrist and arm and against his stomach. He could feel his own climax come down, fought it, pressed harder into him, hips bucking, hand digging into the other’s flesh, the taut ass, back, muscles shifting, remembered how the man had broken beneath him and came, biting down whatever sound was trying to come from his throat, felt the tension rip and himself crashing and burning against the other. Then staggered back, all senses barely together, only just himself. Breathless.

Dan tore his eyes open wide when the weight and violence left his own body. Fucking bereft. Blood pumping the too-fast heartbeat, panting for breath. Stood with his trousers open, shirt with large damp patches, his barely softening cock still out.

Stared. Shit. Holy fuck.

Didn’t say a word, knew a defeat when he encountered one, had never lost a battle—and won—with such high stakes as this one. Couldn’t feel the shoulder wound pounding yet, but felt the keen sensation of loss. Loss of weight, hardness and body.

Fuck.

Still battling for breath, Dan suddenly jumped into action, pulled the camo trousers back up, fumbled one-handed with the belt, forgot about the shirt and let it hang loose. Damp patches and all. Discarded any thought of the jacket. Have to get out.

Run, Dan. You fucking loser, running from the scene of your defeat?

“Fuck you, Russkie.” He spat at the other, before taking a dangerous one-handed jump through the trap door and onto the ladder.

Run, Dan? Where?

* * *

Vadim sat down heavily on the bed, wiped his face, heard himself panting. Wiped the stickiness onto the cover, could still feel it cling to his skin. Wanted a shower more than anything, wanted to wash the sweat away. He wiped himself down, pulled his trousers up, moved to the trap door and shut it, came back to the bed, sat down. Fuck.

He loved how the man battled him and himself, the guilt, the raw need. Could still smell him, still taste him. Not enough. He had risked a lot to get this, and it wasn't enough.

Fuck you, Russkie. More defiance, even then. He rolled his shoulder, checked whether he could see the bite. Couldn't. Oh well, Afghan women bit. Everybody said that.

He saw the jacket discarded on the ground. Only proof the other had been here. A token of confusion, fear? There would be nothing in there. The man wasn't stupid.

The situation was absurd enough to tickle him. Vadim gave a silent laugh and lay back on the bed.

1981 Chapter 6 — Sweat and Blood

November 1981, Kabul

A cacophony of smells, colours and sound greeted Dan as he wound his way through the narrow pathways towards the tea house in the overcrowded bazaar. The late autumn was unseasonably hot, giving no reprieve from the temperatures.

That same goddamned teahouse. For the umpteenth fucking time. Been, what, three weeks? Four? No. Exactly three weeks and four days since the bastard had shown him more about himself than he'd ever wanted to know.

Fuck. He wanted to know more and that bloody cunt knew it. Every damned night he jerked off, thinking of the Russkie and this 'more', whatever it was. The body, the heat, of that hated man.

Now he could hardly think at all; ruled by his cock. What had he said to the arsewipe? *One day your cock will kill you.* How ironic.

The courtyard was half-empty. Dan stepped through the entrance and into the cool shade and quiet. With its tables, cushions and rugs, it was a haven in the centre of insanity and heat. He'd known the bastard was there before he'd even set foot inside; he could sense the wanker, almost smell him.

Dan ignored his racing pulse and touched the familiar blade against his thigh through the hole in his trouser pocket. Casually, he stepped out of the shadow into the sunlight.

Flight or fuck.

* * *

Whenever there was a gap in the schedule, Vadim had been forced into exercises, alternating them with the staccato of missions into the mountains. Now he was resting and recovering. The tea house owner must hate him by now for ruining his business for a few hours at least twice a week. It had become his favourite place in Kabul. The tea was good, he was left mostly in peace, and yes, this was the place where he had met the other soldier. He spent his free afternoons reading and drinking tea, lying on his left side, head resting on his hand, elbow supporting him. This place was, strangely, the only place where he could distract

himself enough from the war to read. The barracks killed any beautiful prose dead. He hadn't intended to take up reading while he was here, but, ironically, there were now a lot of Russian books available.

Today, it was Gorky. From the corner of his eye, Vadim saw somebody step closer. His hand fell on the gun that the book conveniently covered before he glanced up. The sling was gone. Both hands free. Armed, of course, in both meanings of the word. He turned his head to look at the waiter who was clearing away glasses at the next table. "More tea," he said. As far as his Pashto would go.

"Double sweet." Dan turned his head, calling to the waiter, proud of his superior command of the language, "and extra strong."

There. Done it. Congratulations, Dan. You haven't kicked the fucker's face in yet, a whole two seconds. You haven't jumped his bones either, or cut his throat, or splattered his brains across the courtyard with the pistol you've got hidden. Or sucked his cock.

Fuck!

Dan prodded a cushion forward with his boot, then sat down opposite the Russkie. Far enough away from a sudden attack, close enough to smell his fresh sweat. He kept silent, didn't have a fucking clue what to say.

Vadim turned the page. The letters had changed from clear typeface to chicken scrawl. He pretended he was finishing the paragraph, lazily adjusted himself as if unaware of anybody watching, looked at the page number then closed the book, putting it down to cover the pistol. Pity he couldn't remember which number he had just stared at.

What to say? Welcome back, Dan? He had been secretly gloating in his mind about how the other would come and find him. But it was still a shock when it actually happened. "You made quick exit," he stated, deciding to start right where they had stopped. "Forgot your jacket." He nodded towards a bundle between them. The jacket that had smelled of the other until it took on Vadim's own smell. A trophy he would sometimes sleep on. He'd gone so far as to wear it. A private joke, like parading around in the skin of a tiger.

Dan shrugged. "You can keep it if you like it so much, didn't know they couldn't at least provide you with kit, Russkie." Insults came easily, but he was secretly glad of the other man's opening remark.

A room in the outskirts of Kabul, waiting.

Vadim smirked. “Guess I can always sell it.” Sadly enough, most of the missing gear in the barracks ended up on the black market. The Afghans bought everything, especially military kit. It was a huge problem, and one that was impossible to control as long as the conscripts were as hungry and as lonely as they were.

Dan smirked, “Got some water at last, or is the improvement in smell here due to something else?” He settled onto his hip, glancing up as the waiter returned with the teas.

A room. Secluded. His own.

Vadim was displeased at how much the other knew about the state of affairs in the barracks. Or maybe all the Brit had to do was keep his ears open. He himself was reasonably clean, nowhere near the standards that he liked to keep, but he looked positively polished next to half his comrades. Strike that. Most, unless it was a higher rank. The best way to keep clean was to remain shaved.

“Sorry if I offend your sensibilities.”

Dan was distracted by the motion of the Russian’s hand as he rubbed his chest, close to where the burn scar was. His gaze got caught. He couldn’t take his eyes off the burn scar. His mark. His cigarette. His cunt.

That fucking room was still waiting. Dan cursed himself, drank some tea, swallowing far too large a gulp of the scalding liquid. Took all his willpower not to scream and spit it back out. Fuck. That hurt. Hopefully his eyes weren’t watering and the rood of his mouth felt like it was hanging down in strips.

He fished for his fags, vowing he’d slit his own throat if his hands were shaking. Managed to light one. His mouth hurt, and the pain was making him angry. He snorted. That, plus the need that was gnawing at his insides. He inhaled the smoke deeply, forcing it back out. Wanted to finish the tea, get out of the place, never return.

To the room.

Dan extinguished the fag, half smoked. Pissed off, he had this overwhelming urge to not give a fuck anymore. Should just kill him, get it over with. Did the next best thing instead, leant closer.

“I want to smash your damned face in, Russkie. Kick your head, break your nose, reacquaint myself with the stickiness of your blood.” Voice lowering with every word. Near-whispered intensity. “I have a room. Follow.”

Vadim pulled his legs close until he was crouching, the movement uncannily elegant, an afterthought of a mind always ready to kill. “Stickiness alright,” he snorted. He gathered the book, allowed the other to see the gun as he holstered it, and took the discarded jacket. Some sweat-drenched bills paid for the last tea he hadn’t even touched.

How could he know what the Brit wanted? The other knew he was Spetsnaz, his superior might have decided they wanted him for interrogation. But then, he had made him come, and he had seen the look on his face. Stricken. Hooked. “Lead way.” Vadim had had long weeks to work out what he had suspected even longer. Gavriil didn’t cut it. Didn’t penetrate his skin, never got close enough.

Dan was still staring. Hiding his surprise. Shit. That easy? Getting off the cushions himself, he stood close, armed with the knowledge of his own weapons, hidden on his body, matching the other man’s.

“Slut.” He smirked, the word offering a stab of satisfaction.

Walking out of the tea house, he was aware of the presence close by. What was it going to be, Dan? Get yourself killed this time? Curiosity killed the cat?

He made his way towards the north entrance of the bazaar, meandered through the run-down streets of an already fucked-up place. He’d wondered every time when entering the area if he’d get his throat cut by a petty thief. He could have found the irony in it all, if he weren’t so aware of the Russkie’s presence.

Jump him, Vadim thought as he followed, but this man was more than two hands could handle. That made it exciting and fun, just being around him, feeling how tense he was, ready to fight, how he expected no quarter and would give none if things escalated. The truth was, he was hungry for it, slut, no slut, whatever. He could always punch him in the face later for that remark and the smirk that had accompanied it.

Dan stepped into a narrow alley that hardly allowed a man through, leading towards a place so dark it seemed impossible it could house a place to live. Senses alert, he slowed his steps while moving forward.

Regarding this part of the city, Vadim thought the Soviet Army should just rub this country clean. Destroy absolutely everything. Dump it into a giant trashcan, then sit down and think about it, before starting again from scratch. To him, Afghanistan was as close to irredeemable as any place he could imagine.

He checked the rooftops for movement or reflections, but this place was so bad it wasn't even suitable for an ambush, and that was saying something.

'Slut.' The word annoyed him. He would show him slut. He hadn't done anything about it so far, because he didn't want to cause a commotion in the tea house. But, the word was wrong. It could be as simple as wanting.

Dan kept to the deepest darkness, walking silently, checking the path in front of them.

Vadim covered while following, securing the way back. How amusing. They were united in the quest for a place to get off—without getting a knife in the back on the way there.

The alley was clear, and the small building appeared almost out of nowhere. One ground floor room, nothing more, yet it had windows for escape if needed and a door that was relatively sturdy. Dan stopped, took his time to ensure they were alone, then produced a key to open the padlock that secured the bolt. He didn't speak, just stepped inside into the gloomy light that came from shuttered windows.

Vadim almost laughed. He stepped through the entrance, careful to ensure the door wasn't slammed into his face, and gave the Brit space to lock it from the inside.

Dan had to turn his back to ram home the bolt. Couldn't be too careful, but there were always the hidden weapons in the room. The lock took a moment longer, oiled or not, the dust was settling into everything.

The moment he heard the faint click of metal, Vadim planted his boot in a vicious kick between the other man's shoulder blades, hissing sharply as he did so, venting his anger. He'd give him 'slut.'

"Shit!" Dan shouted. He went down like a felled tree, couldn't react fast enough, no time to answer with punches. How could he have been so fucking stupid? Wankstaining arsewipe of a bloody stupid, brainless cunt that he was?

"Fuck *you!*" Vadim snarled with feeling. He reached for the knife in the small of his back.

It was never over. Dan's hand fumbled despite the pain, found the trusted knife, slipped it into his hand. "Fucking *cunt!*" He scrambled to his knees. He'd cut the bastard's throat, cut anywhere.

Vadim's own knife whipped out to rest against the dark skin on the side of the man's throat. Stand-off, as at that very same moment he felt the faintest of

pressures against the inside of his thigh. One violent jab, and the other could sever his femoral artery. Such a messy way to go. Vadim breathed hard, eyes wide, catching every motion, every thought of a motion, the length of steel between his legs arousing him just as much as seeing his own knife against that panting throat.

Classical stand-off. Too fucking hard to think.

He didn't dare move a muscle. He was hard, hungry for a touch, anything. Those lips, they were close enough.

Dan froze. That cock. His hand brushed the heat, he could smell the adrenaline and sweat. He swallowed hard, but otherwise didn't move a muscle, didn't even dare to blink. On his knees, his body twisted, even more fucked up by the way his eyes were drawn to the bulge in front of him. Shit. Could smell the anger and lust, no mistaking the other man's greed. Like his own. No different.

No longer flight or fuck but die or fuck.

"Would be a shame to cut there, cunt." Dan pressed out the words against the knife blade at his jugular.

Vadim laughed, despite his body on edge. Needed, wanted, craved touch. "Would it? Glad you think so." Wrong words. Should have said something about cocksucking and that raping a dead body wasn't nearly as much fun. He inched closer. The other man's hand brushed his cock so lightly that he would normally not even notice, but it was impossibly intense with that knife. He licked his lips; put less pressure on his own knife. Still there, still potentially lethal, but no imminent danger to cut him just because he twitched. Inched even closer. Would kill to have him suck his cock.

Dan licked his lips, echoing the other's gesture. "Yeah," his voice raspy, throat dry, that fucking cock was still too close, "would be a shame, your blood would splatter my kit."

His knife blade ghosted up the groin, till it lay against the cock. Millimetres of movement that brought his hand closer to the hardness he wanted to touch. See. Taste...

"Fuck." Still didn't move, even his eyes. They were glued to the bulge. He inhaled sharply, deeply. The scent of musk and something so goddamned male. He lost it.

"Get your trousers down."

Great, Dan, issuing demands with a blade against your throat.

Vadim's eyes widened. He straightened, the blade down there made him want to stand on his toes. The thought aroused him even more. Like the shave in the mountains. Yes, he'd come if the other cut his throat. Truth. He stared at the Brit, not believing he could get what he wanted, not believing that the man who had run away after a handjob would consent to do this. He must be planning to bite or do something equally gruesome. But his cock was just as happy with that prospect. They break something in Special Forces training—and that something is common sense.

His hand was so sweaty he hardly trusted his grip on the knife, but the other hand moved to open his fly. If the bastard bit, he'd skewer his neck. Last thing he'd ever do. Promise. He fumbled and pushed his trousers and underpants down, cock nearly touching those lips. Vadim tensed, trying to control his breath.

“Oh shit.” Dan murmured, felt the blade move against his throat with every syllable. Scent so strong it poisoned his senses. Didn't know what the fuck he was doing nor wanted to do, just followed the freedom the two blades gave him. Moved his own knife, until it touched the hollow between thigh and balls, would cut them off if...

No clue what to do except open his mouth, moving his head no more than a fraction, mindful of the danger. He took that cock in, lips closing around its impossible heat and hardness.

Vadim nearly lost the knife. The tingle of the blade *there* went up to a place deep in his guts, his balls felt as if they wanted to escape into his body, and he wasn't sure who or what was in control. It definitely wasn't his knife, or his cock, or himself, and yet the other took him between his lips. The sight was impossibly erotic, the slow action, deliberate; clearly he'd never done this before, which was a rush in itself, far more erotic than Gavriil's whole bag of tricks, up to and including his excellent breathing technique.

Dan relished the taste. The onslaught on his senses, unknown, unlike any of the girls and nothing like he'd imagined when wanking alone. Better. A motherfucking revelation. He forgot all about the blade, moved his head forward, made himself take in more, because he wanted. Badly. Fucking cocksucking cunt of a British soldier. That's what he was.

Vadim stared at the change in the other's face and felt his cock twitch as he saw something he had never expected from this man, in this situation, with plenty

of sharp steel between them. Couldn't place it at first, then understood what it was. Lust. He groaned, his muscles tensed. Fuck the danger, he wanted to move, but that was impossible. He barely managed to keep his hand on the knife at the other's throat. Shuddered, rocked by that touch. "Just...don't kill me now," he whispered in Russian.

Kill? No thought of killing. Dan wasn't sure if he could think of anything at all. Except what the fuck was he going to do with that cock now? He should be disgusted with himself for kneeling and having that Russian's cock in his mouth, but he couldn't be arsed to care.

His own blade pressed against flesh, he sensed the Russkie's knife against his throat, needed it there, could pretend he was forced or whatever shit his mind might try to convince him of. Later. Not now; now it was only the scent and taste, and the sensation of hardness and heat.

Unsure, unskilled, he moved his head, and took the other man further in, tried to remember what the fuck the girls and whores had done. He'd never bothered to think about anything at all while on the receiving end. It was what *they* did, not what he thought that counted.

They. Undefined. Was he one of them now? He couldn't give a flying fuck. Breathed sharply, pushed down, tried to suck while moving, just to get more of that mind-blowing sensation but was as goddamned unskilled as a virginal bint.

Vadim's left hand formed a fist, wanted to grab a handful of that dark hair and pull him *closer*, force him to take more, but there were enough inches of steel between his legs to convince him that patience had to be a virtue. Heat, wet heat, no tongue moving, no hand to speed him along, no leverage, but an enemy sucking him. Because he wanted. His head spun, worse than with the sensation alone, the fact that it was the same man who had beaten him up, cut his back open, punched him in the face, had tried everything to kill him. Could kill him right now.

He tried to remain still, hips hardly moving, didn't dare with the edge of steel too fucking close to things he valued. But seeing those lips around his cock, seeing that face so close, so fucking vulnerable, intense, the man was always so incredibly intense, fighting, hating, and even more so when lusting. As much as he wanted to, it would still be a struggle to come. Not enough friction, not enough control.

It drove him slowly insane, every motion, just a fraction away from enough, but that fraction kept him wanting. Not a fucking chance. He was breathing harshly, muscles tensing, knotting up, thighs, stomach, guts, ass, back, and sweating. Building up the pressure like this was torture, and the other clearly didn't know what to do, how to trigger it.

Dan felt a growing frustration. He wanted this, but he needed more, had to achieve something, but he didn't know what or how, never mind the why. He wasn't the type of man to give up, never, no backing down, no running away. He couldn't just fuck off and forget he'd ever done this thing on his knees with a cock between his lips. The monstrous 'thing' that would follow him forever because he'd want it again. And again, because it was so goddamned intense and insane, bone-deep addictive.

Vadim rested his left hand against the door, making sure nobody would come in, supporting his weight, didn't quite trust the rest of his body. Still the fucking knives. Immobilised, worse than being tied up. Pressure getting much worse. No release. No control. Nothing to lose.

"Please..."

Please make me come. Please stop and turn around. Please.

Dan's thoughts stopped. That *Please*. The begging. He dropped the knife, ignored the blade, didn't know fuck-all, but remembered friction. Forced his head down and the hated-wanted cock into his throat. Deep. Deeper. Pushed himself relentlessly.

Vadim's knees almost buckled. He groaned, wanting more of it, getting closer. Fuck. Felt the tightness of the throat, felt it tighten more, realized what had happened, knew from too much experience that the other had no control whatsoever, but couldn't stop things now. He rammed his knife into the door near the other's head, and before the man even realized or could act, took a handful of his hair, and forced, forced his cock down that constricting throat.

Dan's hands gripped the other man's thighs in panic. Eyes wide open. Air cut off. Violent intrusion. No.

Vadim felt muscles spasm, tight and hot and quick; no fucking knife, and even if there was a knife, he just couldn't care. Head, mind, everything empty as he thrust into the other's throat, no regard for anything but the need to come.

The Russkie's hand was gripping his hair. Dan was suddenly consumed by terror. He had lost control, a nightmare finally come true, the control freak who needed to be in control to survive at all times. That cock wasn't what he wanted anymore, it had turned into an enemy, just like the fucking Russian. Convulsive gagging, body fighting against the intrusion, hands formed into fists, beating upon thighs, couldn't move his head, nor twist his body away and yet...Fuck! There was something dark and dangerous, raising its voice from the depths of his mind.

Take it! Fight it. Want it!

It's what you fucking deserve, you cocksucking cunt!

Retching the moment the Russkie came down his throat, finally releasing the grip on his hair. Violent spasms, once, twice, almost throwing up, retching like a miserable whore on her knees on a cum-sticky floor.

Motherfucking bastard! Sudden flare of hatred, like a flame touching match cord and powder pan. He remembered the dropped knife. There. Could hardly see, let alone breathe, still coughing, but the blade was in Dan's hand and his body off the floor before he could think. He attacked the still weakened Russian, knife aimed at the heart, but distorted aim and vision made his blade fly towards the arm. But in his mouth was the taste. God, he fucking loved that taste.

Vadim staggered back, breathless. For once not ready to grab his knife. Still stuck in the wood. Fucking trousers in the way, held them with one hand, shit, the other's knife, his body shifting gear, gone instantly from sex to fighting, no not fighting, defending, blocking, unprepared for the onslaught, the knife a searing line across his arm. He could feel the steel touch bone, and that sobered him, but he was falling.

He tensed his body to take the force off, to ensure his head didn't hit the ground, brought both hands up, one fending off the knife, the other to the Brit's throat, but the man evaded the blow. Vadim's body tried to pick up the pieces of his training. Saw the lips, wet, raw. This time, the other would cut his throat. They were too evenly matched, he'd known that from the start. And the other had the advantage.

Dan turned the knife, till the tip pointed and pushed into Vadim's throat, forcing the man beneath him to still. Sat on the bucking body, straddled the hips with the Russkie's trousers still down.

Hard, he was so goddamned hard.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t kill you.” Voice raspy, reminder of that cock down his throat only a moment ago.

Vadim was breathing hard, moved his chin up to evade the knife point, knew he was baring his throat even more. Vanya could have died like this. Afterburn and fear just didn’t mix; the two emotions nearly ripped him apart. He had no idea what he should feel, could feel, just wanted to stay alive. From under heavy lids, he stared at the man, his crotch, assessed him, knew what he would do in his stead. Force him to turn around, bind his hands and fuck him. Better than getting his throat slit.

Bargain. Think. He’s speaking, that means he won’t kill. And he’s hard. He liked it. “Wait,” Vadim whispered, speaking English. “I can...do that. Same thing. Suck you.” Easiest option. Take the edge off, even at knife point. They had left sanity and common sense behind long ago.

“No,” Dan hissed, “no fucking hair to force my whore.” Eyes ablaze, with more than anger and lust. Feral glint, betraying the basest desires. Like the taste that lingered, the sore throat, the wanting again.

Knife shifted, point turned to blade, pressed against the soft tissue at the bared throat. One flick and there’d be more blood than just from the arm. Dan moved up the chest, until he sat on Vadim’s biceps. Each knee forcing down one arm, uncaring of the blood from the cut that started to seep into his own trousers. Placing his full weight on his legs, knowing too damn well how much that would hurt. Left hand undid his fly, cradled his cock. Right there, in the bastard’s face.

Vadim pulled his lips from his teeth, hissing with the pain, felt his arm pulse, could smell his blood through the mist of sweat and lust and cum. The man’s crotch was closer. The man could fuck his face in this position. He stared at the cock close up, good size, fully hard, could see every vein, even smell it. His feet found the ground, knees up, regained some stability in this position. Bitch. Suka.

“You’re not just my cunt, fucker.” Dan murmured hoarsely, starting to stroke himself, staring down at the Russian and his own cock. Fast, efficient. “You’re my bitch.”

What...? Vadim thought. The Brit didn’t trust him enough, of course not; one rare moment of common sense, a vicious thought, and at the same time Vadim liked the way the other touched himself, fiercely, veins on his arm standing out, the look of anger and concentration, the way the cock responded to that strong hand.

His hands formed fists, muscles tensed, but there was still the knife at his throat. So, that was the idea. Shoot the load into his face. Vadim couldn't help but watch, and if the other had known how erotic he looked doing that, the man would have opted to punch him and break his nose—and really every bone in his body.

Fury and lust fuelled each other inside Dan. Angry strokes, bordering on painful. Face contorted with aggression and tension, climbing to that toppling point in pathetically short time. Apparently a blade on the fucker's throat, the taste of the Russkie's cum, and staring into the bastard's face and too-fucking bright eyes, was enough to get him off within seconds. If he could just get that one notch higher. Shit, left hand was awkward. Dan lost rhythm, almost there, almost, so full of bloody rage and lust, he needed to come or he'd cut the cunt's throat out of frustration.

Vadim snorted to himself. Orgasm with a knife to somebody's throat required too much control, more than he gave the other credit for. The Brit would come and cut his throat in the process. That was the punishment. Fear tensed every muscle in his body.

Dan dropped the knife again, safe with his weight pinning the other man's arms, switched hands and groaned. Faster. Well-practiced, harder and brutal. As if he were punishing himself, hatred in his face. Leaned forward, left hand beside the other man's head, supporting himself and coming closer.

Vadim's arm muscles tensed between the floor and the hard shins. Not enough movement to fight, but at least the knife had gone. He kept staring. He didn't want this, hated the idea of that stuff in his face, demeaning, yes, but that was the point of it, wasn't it? Treat him like a cunt, like a bitch in one of those porn films, money shot, whatever, at the same time felt an absurd erotic appreciation of the other's cock and his technique, could imagine his own cock in the man's hand, like this, his body liking the idea.

“Fuck!” Dan groaned.

Now. Fuck, now. That supreme moment of absolute pain and pleasure and perfect tension, before the crash-down of climax. Felt everything draw into his body before losing himself in release.

Close enough to bite, if Vadim chose to.

The moment the other stopped looking at him, when he was only a few heartbeats away from getting there, nothing more, Vadim strained and brought up

his head. He opened his mouth and took the angry, swollen tip between his lips. He sucked the cock in, not as far as the other did at first, tasted the sweat and the dust and could feel it twitch, before taking it deeper, as far as his neck would allow.

“Oh God!” Dan shouted, taken by surprise. Lost it, more than just the tension and his cum; lost himself in the orgasm and couldn’t help but push deeper into the willing throat.

Vadim took it, just swallowed because the other option was have the stuff come out through his nose, and that was less pleasant. He did this for the power, the power to have a man lose it; nothing demeaning about it, especially when the other didn’t hold a knife or a gun or any other way to control him. Sucked the other dry, took the rest of the cum as well, taking it deep, tongue, the whole deal, liked the heat and size, much more than the taste. Then, suddenly, it was pulled away, and he turned his head, felt it slip out against the corner of his lips, against his cheek, wet and hot.

In near-panic, Dan stumbled backwards, moving off the man, fell and crawled away, drew the pistol by instinct, before ending a few feet away, on his arse, legs sprawled, trousers open and cock still hard. Wet. Spent.

Aimed the pistol at the Russian, hand shaking wildly, breath desperate, heart off-kilter.

Moving into a crouch, Vadim rolled his head in an exaggerated motion. What now, Danny-boy? Scared of your bitch? Seeing the gun sobered him, but that bullet could go anywhere. “Don’t worry. I didn’t expect roses,” he murmured in English.

He stood, pulled up his trousers, fixed the belt. Nice warm, relaxed feeling. But he hated the taste. Vadim rummaged through the other’s bundle. Water. No vodka. Of course not. The other didn’t seem the type to bring moonshine. Well. Plenty more water to wash down the unexpected dinner. He unscrewed the plastic bottle and drank, deeply, for several long moments, then let some water run over his scalp and chest. Tossed the Brit a water bottle as well, skittering aimlessly across the dirty floor, then he continued to check the pack. Ah, something more substantial. Protein bars.

Transfixed yet again like a deer in the fucking headlights, Dan stared. If he’d realised he was, he would probably have pulled the trigger, but he did nothing.

Absolutely nothing, while the Russian rummaged in the bag he'd left in the room. His hand still shook, and so did the forgotten gun.

Ah, this one had a peanut butter flavour. Vadim tore the foil off one of the bars, pushed some between his lips, just slightly, making fun of what had happened, and watched the Brit.

Dan didn't even think. Completely numb and shell-shocked, until he saw the mockery of the bar of food, pushed ostentatiously between those lips. The lips where his cock had been. The cock where his own lips...throat...

Vadim chewed a little, swallowed. "Guess I'm little rusty," he murmured, then crouched again. "Put that gun away."

Dan's eyes narrowed at the Russian's words. He felt exceedingly stupid. A right idiot, Dan, aren't you? Cocksucking poof? How long to the shit-stabbing fag? He placed his gun hand over his now-flaccid cock.

Vadim saw that strange expression haunt the Brit's eyes. He wanted and didn't want, always fear and disgust battling in those features. It might be some fucked-up game for him, but the other took things more seriously. If the man hated this with the same intensity that he lusted, fuck, that had to be a bitch.

"I got to go." Dan suddenly said.

Vadim bit back the response he wanted to give, one about 'not for my sake, I quite enjoyed this.' He pondered the situation, while washing the cut on his lower arm with the water, and rummaging in his pockets for a bandage. He might need stitches, he was only grateful the bone was really close to the skin there, hardly any meat severed. He fumbled around for a bit, then pulled the ends together with teeth and hand.

If he had to pay in blood each and every time they met, and pay like this for coming and having the other come, that had to be worth it. He wasn't bleeding for the sake of two flags and some general secretary's ideas about the southern borders. This was personal.

"Waste of recce and time and effort if you leave now," Vadim said, speaking to the bandage on his arm, and took another bite from the bar. "I have two hours." He glanced up to meet the other's eyes, crouched, as he was, the white bandage a stark contrast to the sweaty reddened skin.

Dan merely closed his eyes, dropping his head forward for a moment, before raising it again, and inhaling a deep breath. Oddly resigned. "Guess so."

He cleared his throat. It was still sore, and the taste was lingering somewhere. Either imagined and in his mind or real, didn't matter. He liked it too much, far too much. No mistake. He was even reluctant to pour down some water, for no other reason than that goddamned taste. Cocksucker. Yeah, shit.

“Give me one of the strawberry bars.” The ones his legendary sweet tooth craved. He held out his hand, palm up, pistol dangling from his thumb, the other hand fumbled with the button on his trousers. Hadn't even taken off his belt. Too bloody needy, too angry, far too consumed by that crazed lust.

Vadim dug into the bag and brought out a handful, found one that said 'strawberry', tossed that between the other's knees and dropped the rest on the pack. Didn't they call homosexuals 'fruits'? His slang was too patchy to be much use now.

Vadim's eyes returned to that gun and the much steadier hand. The man was back to fighting fit. Which meant there could be more conflict. His knife was still stuck in the door. Vadim moved his left hand to his holster, pulled the gun out with his fingers, thumb away, and slid it across the floor. Within reach, but not close to his body. He finished off the bar, his worst hunger dealt with.

Dan was ripping his own bar open. Saw the Russkie's actions. He'd be safe enough to drop the gun. Placed it on the floor as close to himself as the other man's. Somehow, somewhere, he just couldn't be bothered right now. Had to be the mellowing after the orgasm, preferred this as the likeliest explanation. Could always kill the wankstain later. As if.

Vadim regarded the Brit. So many things he wondered. Could wonder now. He wanted to see him naked, like up in the mountains, washing himself, with that mixture of defiance and anger. He had been hardly in any state then to appreciate it fully.

Didn't know how to start a conversation, or what else to do to tell the other he wasn't trying to kill him. That was long over. But where to from here? “Thanks for that thing in mountains.” He felt his face go cold, and shook his head. “Your distraction.”

“What?” Dan raised his head, digging his teeth into the sweet stickiness. The same teeth that had mauled skin and flesh a month ago. “What fucking distraction?”

Vadim could smell the strawberry aroma, nothing like real strawberries, but the Disney version of it. “You kept bandits off my back.” Calm, as if helping the other’s memory. Just for the sake of conversation. He wanted to say other things, but the Brit was too aloof for that.

“Oh that,” Dan shrugged, swallowed the large bite, wished it was even sweeter. “Guess I owed you.”

Vadim stored away those images for a night on the bunk bed, alone. His lips, his hands, the powerful neck. His cock. Vadim smiled. Yes, he had really gotten a good view of that. He smirked against the water bottle, hiding what threatened to become a grin.

Dan took another bite, chewed while his fingers toyed with the gun on the floor. Absentmindedly transfixed by the small round burn wound at the hollow of the Russkie’s throat.

Vadim’s eyes came to rest on the pistol. Owing. Now, this was dangerous ground again. They owed each other so much by now, it was hard to keep track. Rest up, round two.

Maybe he’d be so nice as to give proper head. Show him how to do it. Vadim smirked again. Maybe rub their bodies together until they both came. He liked that thought a lot. And it was easier lying down, but how could he get the other to do that?

“Mind if I lose some camo?”

“Sure.” Mind? Fuck, no. “Go right ahead. Feel at home.” Dan meant to sound snide, but the comment lacked enthusiasm.

Vadim took off belt, shirt, exposing the military watch, kept this on at all times. The other had brought blankets, fair enough. This had to be one of his regular hideouts, there should be several scattered all over the city.

Dan was mechanically biting and chewing and biting again, debating if he should stare at the other man or not. Shit. Why the fuck did he even have to make those decisions? Watched the man lay down the blankets, start to undress.

Couldn’t be any more obvious what he wanted.

Empty foil wrapper in Dan’s hand, slowly crumbling in his fist, turning the foil into a small ball of tension, the more pieces of kit the Russian was losing.

Vadim untied the boots, pulled them off, socks, took more of the bottled water, and headed over into another corner to get some essential washing done, a

few handfuls, but basic hygiene. He hated the dust and sun. And this showed off his body. Could convince the other that skin on skin was an option. Non threatening. A naked man was never threatening. He half-turned away, not to protect anything resembling modesty, but to make it less provocative.

Dan winced. What the fuck now. Should he drool and pant, run over like Pavlov's dog, begging to have a taste of the bone? He felt like an unskilled, unsophisticated idiot. He should have stuck with knife and guns, and stayed the hell away.

He left the gun where it was, threw the wrapper into the bag, scrambled up to stand. Took a couple of steps and a half-hearted attempt to pull at least the tattered parka off. Was lost, hadn't learned the language he needed for blokes, only bints. Had the violent urge to get back to his weapons, at least he knew those.

Vadim could sense the restless hesitation, the debate. The thing that triggered violence, and right now he was unsuitably kitted out for it. Show more weakness, like a bird dragging a wing behind to attract the predator? Only he was by no means, ever, a kind of bird.

He was setting a trap to catch himself a rival, an opponent that wouldn't break, a man who was just as likely to punch him in the face than push a cock down his throat. He had to move like the hunter, how ironic, a suburban kid from Moscow. Russia was a lot of wilderness, but he only knew wild animals from the zoo.

He knew the objective, and, how did the instructors put it? Do everything, anything, to reach the objective. Even be the bitch. It was just a word. A word like homosexual, like degenerate.

He went over to the blankets, and sat down, stretched his legs, no weapon on him, no scrap of fabric. Lay down and rolled onto his side. They had shared warmth like that. It was familiar enough. The closest thing to dragging a wing, he figured.

Dan stood, increasingly awkward. What now? What the fuck now! Blankets. Body. Skin and want.

"I need to leave in hour," Vadim said, the words wanted to be Russian, but he kept them fixed in the other language, even if that meant getting part of the meaning wrong. "Do us favour and come here." Wondered if the words were right,

did say the right things, turned around to watch the other. “I’m off to Bagram for week. Inspection.”

Dan moved. Pressed into action by his ingrained reflex to simply take an order. No, wrong, an invitation. Shrugged the jacket off, walked over. Was easy like this, didn’t need to feel awkward.

Come here and one hour and that naked body on the blanket. Heaven could be a motherfucker and a dingy room in Kabul. “Don’t tell me where you’ll be. Don’t want to know. Can’t be arsed to have to go and kill you if I could do it right here.”

I won’t tell you I’m off to kill a traitorous Afghani scumbag who’s selling our weapons wholesale to the mountain people, thought Vadim and nodded. “No operational information.”

Dan got to his knees, half on the blanket. Hesitated for a moment. “I fucking hate you, Russkie, don’t get me wrong.” Lowered to sit on his heels, own knees opening for comfort. He leaned closer, was getting used to those strange eyes too quickly.

Vadim looked at the other’s crotch, then up to his face again. Hatred. He couldn’t make any sense of his own emotions, apart from lust and danger, those two were clear enough. There was anger, too, but he’d given as good as he’d got, and that seemed alright to his sense of justice.

Dan lowered his voice, speaking with quiet intensity. “I’ll fucking kill you if you ever try to shove your cock up my arse again. Don’t make the mistake to think I don’t mean it. Don’t ever.” Silence, then pulled the shirt over his head and threw it to the floor.

Now, that threat was genuine, and real steel, the real thing. Vadim had fantasized about that, more often than he cared to remember. The way he had felt that man break beneath him. It was still something that made him shudder, in a good way. He couldn’t say he wouldn’t try it again, eventually. The other had learnt that sucking cock could be fun. He might learn that getting fucked could be great.

Vadim raised his hands a bit. “Roger, copy, I hear you.” Watched the play of muscles, shifting. “But rules are different now.” The rape was nothing like an unfortunate accident. And it had started everything, so he couldn’t even regret or apologise. Just roll with it. He couldn’t even say he meant no harm—that was

wrong, he was just as capable of wounding, maiming and raping as before. The curiosity and desire blunted that, but didn't take it away.

Dan could see and hear that his message had gone through loud and clear. He'd been saying and thinking 'I kill you, bastard', too often without pulling through, but that? This time? He'd do it. No doubt at all. No room for negotiation, and he'd get the motherfucker at some stage.

He shifted to sit on his hip, then pulled his knees up from under him, started to unlace his boots, one after the other. Boots, then socks, wiggled his toes once they were free. As much of a habit as hating the Russian. A blunted feeling, mere obligation, nothing compared to the searing-seething sensation, a few months ago in that cave. "And what are the rules?"

"Rule one: what happens between us, remains between us." Barracks rule, the one soldiers followed. They could be like cats in a knife fight, the moment an officer showed up, they were all hugs and kisses. "You don't need that shit, and I sure as hell don't, either. Second: no killing. I don't mind cut or punch, though."

But if I have to die, I'd want you to do it. That thought sobered him, considerably, and Vadim frowned. Fuck. They'd been there, and it was scary, he'd been there and begged for the bullet. He broke eye contact.

I don't want to die. I can't die. "That's it. No other rules."

"No." Dan shook his head, "that won't do. First rule, OK. Second one? No. Out there, I'd kill you. It's my job." He shrugged, made it sound like a walk in the park. Yeah? Why, then, had he stalled a whole freezing night to execute a captive. Shooting cold blooded a bullet into a man's brain was different from killing in combat.

"That is...what I meant." The thought grew larger and larger in Vadim's head, until no other thought had any space to develop. They wouldn't always be so evenly matched. What if his unit was close, and the SAS guy alone? What if fate dealt them bad cards? Out there? He lowered his head, shook it, thought of the moment he'd realized it was the Brit's neck he had twisted his garrotte around. But since then, they had done...this. Met. Got each other off. Fuck. He had started to forget the other was for all intents and purposes an enemy. Maybe because this whole place was an enemy. Having to consider everything as an enemy was a way of life now.

Dan huffed, “I have no illusion you won’t do the same to me, given half the chance. Your job, too.”

Vadim thought he should report him being here. The SAS had no business in Afghanistan. These were internal affairs of the Soviet Union. Brother nation helping brother nation.

Glancing up, Dan’s gaze had darkened. “In here, who knows. You won’t get me without a knife.” Get me? Holy fuck.

Vadim wasn’t sure of the exact meaning. He’d got him even in that moment when he had sucked his cock, and no knife involved.

Dan sat there with his camo trousers still on, but the belt unbuckled. “And now?”

“Now I’ll pull down your trousers.” Vadim opened the buttons, moved closer, almost in the other’s lap, knew it was an invitation, and meant it. Took the trouser legs, left and right, and began to pull them down.

Dan lifted his arse, then moved his legs, passive-actively helping. “Trousers? Alright, I can do that. No need to kill you, just yet.”

The brittle sense of humour that had crept in surprised him. He’d almost forgotten that that’s who he used to be. Crazy Dan, always good for a laugh. A wry grin flew across his face and he stretched his legs. Moved to lie on his back, head pillowed on his arms crossed behind his neck. Stared up at the ceiling. No hidden intention in the movement as he stretched his whole body down to his toes, spent cock nestled in darkness. Should be hairy as a goat by all that was right, but his body was a lot smoother than his face suggested.

Vadim sat up, studying the definition, smooth flesh, powerful in all the right places, six-pack, shoulders stronger than the pecs. No weightlifter. Not a man who balanced his body carefully, adding some here, smoothing some there. Not nearly as obsessed as he was with his. And even stranger to see him grin, see a bit of what the man might be when not on a mission. He realized he was still holding the trousers, and put them to one side, making sure the other could see them and reach them quickly. His own stuff was strewn around the place. Just another sign of his clear and raging death wish.

He stretched out a hand to touch the Brit’s body, placed it between his pecs, felt the breath flow, touched the strength.

Dan raised his brows, casual outward reaction, but inside there was something strange. Alert, confused. That hand was not supposed to sit there. It should be hitting or gripping, not simply lying on his skin. It made him feel uneasy.

Vadim noticed the glance and took the hand back, as casually as he could. Time to shift position, yeah, right. He leant against the wall, legs up, arm on one knee, the arm with the bandage carefully balanced between his knee and right arm.

“OK.” Dan suddenly blurted out, “I know I was shit at that.” That wry grin again. “At being a cocksucking fag.”

“Not something you’re born with, believe me.” Vadim laughed. “Got me far enough to make me lose my cool.”

“Not something I ever meant to do.” Dan shook his head in an economic movement. “Cocksucker. Damn.” After murmuring the words, he discarded the thought, turned his head and looked up. That laugh had smoothed the Russkie’s face into something different. Normal. Shockingly human. “An hour, you said? I’m not ready yet, can’t get it up, not sixteen anymore.”

Talking without hitting was surprisingly easy, but Dan wasn’t sure if he didn’t prefer to punch. “Need a moment.”

Vadim opened a hand in a generous gesture, checked the time on his watch. Simple, economic design. “We try again in half hour, then.” Smirking, how amusing to bring an element of time pressure into this. He could use some rest as well. He rummaged through the other’s bag and started eating another of the bars. Caramel toffee, said the label. Power Crunch. Fill up on some calories he’d lost and would find hard to replace when he came back to the barracks so late.

Dan pulled up one leg, foot planted on the blanket, knee bent. Wondered fleetingly if he shouldn’t feel vulnerable being so open and bared, but strangely didn’t care. “I feel like a fucking idiot. Worse than a virgin bride, but guess I am.” How easy it was to take the piss out of himself. Eyes flickered to the other’s chest, burn wound, then back to the face.

Virgin bride. That man and white frilly lace dresses didn’t go together. The man was still all man. Vadim offered a nod. “Comes with training. Like all good things. You should know that.”

Dan shrugged, as much as his position allowed. “Are you man enough to make me catch up with cocks after sixteen cunt-fucking years?”

Vadim stared at him, fucking irresistible, the offer straightforward, erotic, teasing. As much as a sledgehammer could tease. He snorted laughter. "I guess that would be my internationalist duty." *Proletarians of the world unite*. Something about that was impossibly funny, and his shoulders shook with laughter. Now, that would be a proper sexual revolution, not some long-haired effeminate *hippie* bunch of bourgeois children deciding they wanted the right to fuck whatever moved. As much as he agreed on principle.

"Duty? Funny, I'd pegged you as someone to jump at the challenge." Dan smirked. "Looks I was right. You're predictable, Russkie." And so are you, Dan. So are you.

He dropped a hand, rolled onto his side to face him, scratched his groin absentmindedly. "Been thinking. How the hell did you manage to fuck a woman? That is, unless you lied on that mountain and you haven't got a family after all. Seemed to me you're an uber-fag, not a reformed gay-basher like me."

Uber-fag. Strange, Vadim had never considered himself anything like that. It just wasn't an issue. Vadim noticed how the tension had drained out of the other's body. Neither of them were ready for more action yet. He lay back and waited for his body to recover.

How did you manage to fuck a woman?

The victory had been part of it, of course. Katya had won her silver that day, all the fencers partied long into the night. Szandor, the Hungarian fencer, had dragged Vadim along. Reluctant, because he always felt the fencing specialists looked down on the pentathletes. After that, Szandor used to help him warm up. Built his technique, forced him to fight the whole match, fifteen points, tickled as much fencer out of him as anybody could.

Vadim glanced over but the other seemed to be drifting in and out of sleep. His eyes were half closed, hands limp at his side.

He shut his own eyes and breathed deeply. He and Katya had been trying hard to have an affair. She would kiss and pet him, and the journalists would wait for the silver medallist to come to where he was warming up, or getting ready, one famous shot where she was just handing him his fencing mask, her face serene, commanding, something like 'go, get him, tiger' in the caption, and he, towering above her, but still accepting the command. He had saluted her before the fight against the English captain, had known the man would beat him, but the audience

loved the old-fashioned thing about an attractive man doomed to fail and saluting his sweetheart just before riding out to battle. So to speak.

Another shot: both of them on the piste, blades crossed, no masks, white dress, and a deep glance. Easily the most beautiful love match, and something romantic about the fact they fought each other on the piste. Not unlike a tango or any other erotic challenge.

He had liked that part of it, the journalists, kissing her, spending time with her and they had laughed a lot.

But they should have been brother and sister. That would have made the sex impossible.

She had stopped pushing for it, understood maybe that he didn't really want it. Maybe the fact that he sometimes ended up in the Hungarian's bed had something to do with it.

Still enough to sire a child. He was convinced she had wanted a child anyway and had just been looking for a suitable father, selecting the best stallion she could find.

How ironic it was him, of all people.

'They'll expect us to marry,' she had said. He had just stared at her flat belly which held something small, something he had, somehow, caused, and had felt nothing but stunned amazement at what that meant. Father. When he hardly felt grown up at all. The body that only meant something to him when he was trying to touch it with an electric steel blade, tried to guess where she was going, assessed the posture.

He had looked up into her face, unsure whether it was an accusation. But it wasn't. He couldn't understand her, he had expected fear and revulsion, but she cherished what was there. It would be her and the child. He was only the father. He did like to spend time with her, only just didn't want to have sex.

She had stood and walked over, placing her cool hands on his hot face. "I will protect you," she had said, as if he had offered marriage. No, she had. And she had made the decision for both of them. "I'll be the mask and the steel." Kissed his lips in that chaste kiss. He liked the kissing, liked holding her, and he placed an arm around her waist, pulled her close to rest his head against the place that held something he couldn't understand, but loved. If that meant giving up the sweat and the lust, that sounded like a fair deal.

Only the giving up hadn't lasted for long. The army had brought it all out again. Too many men, too much opportunity to bash somebody's face in and take what he needed.

He reached for another protein bar, checking his watch at the same time. Still too soon. Vadim lay back against the blanket. No rush yet. He scraped the foil clean of the chocolate coating with his teeth, wasting nothing, especially not stuff he couldn't normally get. Made him think about the other type of foil and Katya again.

Pentathlon fencing was only epee, and only to the first hit, while real fencers played for up to fifteen hits. Real fencers called pentathletes' plays 'assembly line fencing', since every pentathlete had to fight any other, so it was all about one hit, next one, to somehow cram all the disciplines into one day, when real fencers considered the match an art form, a test of everything, and not just the first clash.

Vadim didn't feel comfortable among the fencers, he always got the feeling they didn't take him seriously, those strange, very upright, very toned, very elegant people. They walked like kings, with those deadly lunges always a possibility, split seconds that decided everything, sudden bursts of energy, the sounds of the blades, sometimes punctuated by the loud snap when they broke under the impact.

Szandor had waved away snide remarks about Vadim from his team members, and Vadim listened. Next time a fencer told him he wasn't a real fencer, he'd challenge them to swim or ride, or shoot. He should have thought of that himself, but he had been intimidated by their aristocratic airs.

The victory had initiated it, of course. Katya had been glowing, attractive in a strange way, a lioness coming home with the kill. He'd seen her precision, the uncanny way she fought unlike other women fought, aggressive, powerful, with a delivering speed that neutralised his wider reach and outmatched his own easily.

Champagne had been part of it too and cocaine, which they rubbed into their gums, and things went from there. Both sets of hands on his body, he thought he remembered the Hungarian's head in his lap, her lips on his, she smelt good, healthy, strong, he lost his clothes somewhere, remembered he wasn't too sure what to do with her breasts, half a handful, hardly worth mentioning, the powerful upper body, the shoulders fascinated him more, toned and sleek, hair barely reaching her neck, honey blonde and darker blonde beneath.

Thighs strong, she had just mounted him, she liked sex that way, liked to be in charge, and he kept thinking how different it was, different from getting sucked or fucked; she was strong, fierce, had a habit of pausing in mid-motion, and waiting, grinning down at him, like he was only there for her, like she controlled him, which she did, then grind against him that made it good even though it shouldn't, even though he couldn't imagine how he'd got there and how they had lost the Hungarian, maybe she had told him to leave, no idea, and Vadim let her have control, saw her writhe and take her pleasure from him and he was relieved, thought he finally knew, finally understood, could maybe be normal and fit in, women weren't too bad, especially when they could do this.

He had tried hard to love her, convinced himself it would be something he could acquire, if he could understand her body he would desire it. He did try, her on top, like that first night, he guessed she knew, knew because of the Hungarian, and the sex happened when she started it, but he found it increasingly difficult. Her body was just like her fencing style—something he understood, from a technical perspective, knew how it worked, but only meant something to him when he was trying to touch it with an electric steel blade, tried to guess where she was going, assessed the posture. But it didn't trigger anything.

Unlike the Brit's.

Vadim looked back at the man next to him. The man was definitely awake now, staring at the ceiling above them, his hands clasped behind his head. He opened his mouth to say 'she fucked me', but while that was technically true, it wasn't. Much more complicated than that. "Have you ever loved without wanting?"

After the lengthy silence when Dan had been sure the Russkie must have drifted off to sleep, the question was unexpected. Too deep and profound for Dan, almost shocking. His answer came out before he could think.

"No. I have only ever wanted, never loved."

"Lucky bastard."

Vadim berated himself in silence. Too much philosophy, just apply trigger finger to trigger and squeeze, Vadim's instructor had said, making snide remarks about him, calling him names for it, told him to rely on the brain stem, the frontal lobes only slowed everything down. Killing is not rocket science. And not

existentialist thought. Even though there was something highly existentialist about killing.

“Been half an hour yet?” Dan wanted to change the subject.

Vadim checked the time. “Fifteen.” He scrutinized the other man’s body. He wanted to turn him around, push the legs under him and fuck his ass. Naked, just skin on skin, wanted to have the other push back against him, demanding more like a bitch, demanding it harder, deeper, he wanted to bite into his shoulders.

Well, there we go, he sniggered. He was fine now for round two.

He shifted position and stretched out, within touching distance. Regarded his abdomen, the lines only men possessed, stretching from his hips straight to his cock. Nothing straight about it. Old joke. Reached to touch the other man’s cock, eyes on his own hand, squeezing between palm and fingers.

“So that is it? Is that what being queer is about?” Dan’s eyes remained level with the man’s face, even though the Russkie had turned away from his gaze. “Just grab a cock and squeeze it? Not sure if I’ll ever make a proper fag in that case. Seems a bit pathetic.”

Death wish, Dan? While longing for the experience of two men in the sickly yellow of a street light, in a seedy part of London.

Vadim shot him a dark glance. “Just checking whether gun is loaded.” Oh, he liked his answer. Proper fag. Proper, improper. *Uber-fag*. Riled him, to get what exactly? Make him feel like somebody who delivered a service. So much for head, asshole, that means it’s tails.

He wanted the man’s ass, definitely, but that body had to do. For the moment. The other was less sneering when needy. He moved closer, brought cock to cock, took both into his hand. He was hardening fast, hooked a leg around the other’s legs and pulled him even closer to make things easier.

Dan forgot the sneer, the mockery, and most of all the sense of inadequacy. The feeling of that cock against his own made him forget everything else. He barely caught the sound that came out of his throat. Sounded suspiciously like a needy whimper. God, how he fucking wanted that cock.

“That...,” Dan realised he had gasped, “is more like it.” It might have been fifteen minutes, but holy shit, it seemed that cock was all it took. A mind-blowing sensation of absolute equality which made him want to taste that bastard again.

“Like touching yourself,” Vadim murmured. “Only better.” He looked down at his hand, seeing both cocks close together. Pressed and squeezed, going through the motions like he was jerking off, but with added circumference. The other’s cock was a good size, heavy, straight, uncut, thick enough, not a monster, but who wanted that. Roughly his size, maybe a little thicker. He’d rather die than compliment him on his ‘gun’.

Just get him off, Vadim thought, so he comes back, train him to be..., a fag, as he called it. Breath going a little deeper, a little faster, strokes slower and stronger, giving the other something for his money.

Who was the whore now? Good question, but Dan never bothered with an answer. The sensation of cock on cock made him grind and push into the hand and towards the body. Same strength, bodies, muscles, weight, sharp angular planes and smooth skin over hard flesh. His hand dug into the Russian’s flank, forcing himself against the other. Felt like a bitch in heat.

Vadim only half-closed his eyes, knew too much about unarmed combat to ever forget the Brit was more than a handful of violence. He grinned, felt the keen interest, the way the other breathed and pushed, tried to find a rhythm with him, force his own pleasure.

That’s it, boy, fuck yourself against me.

Vadim allowed his breath to grow harsher, normally careful not to make a sound when he did this, to ensure nobody heard a thing. The feeling unlike any other, not enough friction to come, hardly ever, he did this if he was being nice, and usually as a prelude to something more substantial, more satisfying. Not that it wasn’t nice, but it was never enough. Not what he wanted. Gradually shifting his hips, he steered the other while matching the thrusts with his hand, concentrating on strong strokes, but he needed more friction, more resistance. He shifted his weight so he lay on top, trapping their between muscled bodies.

Dan hit his head on the floor when the other’s weight suddenly fell on top his body. He’d never been beneath another man except for combat—violence of a better-known kind. He groaned, lost his capacity for words, eyes wide open, was blind to anything but the sweaty skin so close.

For Vadim it was the strength, the taste of strength, the resistance of a body that remained dangerous, even now. Nothing that broke underneath, just echoed his thrusts, grinding against the smooth hard stomach, feeling muscles tense and

tighten, the skin slick with sweat. Almost the only way to use his strength without hurting, wounding, breaking.

Dan pushed upwards, seeking more friction, more feeling, more heat, and more weight. Wouldn't dream of pushing that muscled bulk off, forgot about death and killing while trapped underneath. Forgot about anything at all, but this bastard's body. Didn't give a shit about fag and soldier, enemy and poof. Lifted his head, dug his teeth once more into the muscles between neck and shoulder, grunting, gasping, desperate to come while hands dug into the other's flesh.

Breathing hard and fast, Vadim thrust hard against him, the bite made him groan, but he kept his head down, within reach of the teeth. Fuck, the man biting him was good, the way he didn't care whether it left marks or whether it hurt. It was sex, stripped of any concern, any fear for the other, just the friction.

Shamelessly grinding and groaning beneath the Russian, Dan let go of the flesh between his teeth and bit back a cry when the end of it came all too soon, yet never soon enough. Convulsing against the body that was manipulating his own, he lost himself in the orgasm.

Vadim felt the wetness, saw the other's face, the way he wanted to call out, but remained silent, face alight with an animal's feelings. Nothing ashamed, nothing guilty. He pondered just for a moment, no more than a heartbeat, to turn the Brit around, helpless as he was now, and fuck him anyway, and grinned at that thought, and then felt he was too close, and pushed harder, the thought of that ass, that man wanting him went through him and he came, hands on the other's shoulders, upper arms, fingers digging into his skin.

He wanted to stay, like this, waiting till he could breathe again. Masked this with licking some sweat off the other's chest, smelled the fresh sweat that would dry too soon.

Dan's heart was hammering, faster this second time, took longer to calm. "So," Dan struggled for breath, eyes half open, staring into the dusk, "that's more like being a fag." He lay still for half a second, before pushing the Russian off, rolling over. Couldn't allow himself to lose himself in this madness. "I got to go."

Vadim felt heavy and tired, but couldn't just lie down when the other got up. Found the rag he wore as a scarf, wiped himself down with it, felt thirsty and dazed.

Dan rummaged in his bergan, found a suitable rag to wipe himself down as well. Felt sticky and sweaty, but strangely not soiled. Decided to worry about the distinct lack of guilt or shock about the way he had been humped by another man and got off on it. Was going to dwell on that miserable attempt at cock sucking later. Cock. Damn. He'd be a fool if he thought he'd stop thinking about that cock anytime soon.

Vadim was watching the Brit put himself back in order, chewed on the words. "I need to see you again." Expected mockery, something about the fag stuff that the other threw at him all the time.

Why, Vadim?

Because he wanted that body again, wanted to feel that rage, that desire, but most of all that body. Nothing he could get from a comrade.

Dan's hands stopped in mid-motion. *Again. Need.* The offer to fall back into this insanity again. Cock. Man. Flesh and blood and muscles and heat.

"I can be at that tea house," Vadim murmured.

Dan nodded. "In seven days." He'd be wanking himself blind before then. "Leave a message there if you can't make it and vice versa."

Vadim exhaled, realized he'd held his breath. This was going well. He nodded. "Seven days." He watched the Brit, didn't feel smug, just relaxed and pleased, most of all with the fact the other wasn't attacking him and there was no need to attack him. For the moment, the tension was gone. It would grow back out on the streets, but this place wasn't part of that any more.

He stepped up to the door, pulled his knife free and slid it into the holster at the back of his trousers.

Dan sat back down and pulled the socks back onto his feet, while looking for his boots. "I'll have another place by then."

It was easier for the Brit to organize a safe house. Made perfect sense. Plenty of work up to then, Vadim could keep himself busy. He wondered what the Brit would write into his report. 'Bribe', probably. Random bribes to get round in Kabul. They might not even mind if that guy paid the occasional whore. They went for around 100 Afghani, not a massive amount of money. Vadim took another of those protein bars and began to chew, eyes on the other man. He could get used to this.

Dan was watching the Russian from the corner of his eyes, would never leave the man out of his vision, wouldn't ever trust the bastard. Tying his boots, he stood back up, throwing the shirt over his hand and grabbing the jacket, the rag loosely wound around his neck. He watched the other for a moment before reaching into his bergan and pulling out a handful of the protein bars. "Here." He dropped them onto the blankets. "Looks like you need them more than I do. Good mother, your Russia, she takes care of her children, eh?"

The comment sharp enough in Vadim's ears to be mocking, but not serious nastiness. Nothing about getting paid for his services. A gesture that was kind without embarrassing either of them, and felt almost natural after the man had fed and washed him, up in the mountains. Few things that could embarrass them at this stage, after the things they'd done.

Dan shrugged, looking around the room to get hold of everything that was his, and closed the pack. He walked to the door, unlocked it and took the padlock out. He'd never return to this place, not now the enemy soldier knew about it. "In seven days." He left without another glance.

Vadim heard the door shut, then looked at the scattered bars. "You have no idea," he murmured in Russian, into the empty room. He'd never admit how the conscripts were blowing all their pay on merely buying food and how even that kept them just this side of starvation. Food shortage, and the same food over and over if there was actually enough. He had privileges as an officer, but athletics grade protein was nothing he could get his hands on even with the rank. Let alone the other things he craved.

* * *

Seven days later, in the waning heat of a late afternoon, Dan was sitting in the tea house, or as the locals called it, the *chaikhana*, sipping a tea so strong and sweet, if it had any more sugar it would have crystallised. Sitting cross-legged on one of the carpets, a plate of baklava in front of him, working his way systematically through honey sweetened pistachio, rosewater and marzipan pastries. He had been sitting in the shade for over an hour, seemingly relaxing while secretly tense. Had chosen a space opposite to the entrance with the wall in his back. Old habits died hard and in this place, and while waiting for an enemy, those habits would keep him alive.

The tea house owner came to refill his glass, and Dan observed the dark brown liquid being poured into the small, gaudily painted glass. Accepted another handful of heavenly baklava, his fingers sticky from the honey when he paid from a wad of notes. Never leaving the entrance unwatched, not even for a second.

Reaching for a pastry, the heat in the pit of his stomach was growing more intense as time passed. Would the bastard be insane enough to come? He should kill the Russian. Get it done and over with.

Licking his fingers, his gaze was drawn to the plants once more that grew around the shadowed entrance.

* * *

Life alternated between frantic activity and complete boredom; Vadim never really knew what awaited him, an exercise, a friendly encounter with Afghan officers, none of which were worth the space they occupied, or time to kill, lots and lots of time to kill. He amused himself with Gavriil, but that amusement was more like a body function, eat, drink, shit, come. He wrote the occasional letter home, received things in return, a book, a report on the children.

He found it hard to read about them in this place, felt vulnerable when Anoushka's horrid handwriting wormed its way into his eyes. Officer, Spetsnaz, and father. Hard to tell which of these words made the whole thing a joke. Every time he had settled on one, it began to shift in his mind. Some officers had photos of their families on their desks, and the rabble showed off girlfriends, but most often sisters; many were so young that they'd never had a girlfriend, as he could tell from their stories of unlikely anatomical details.

He traded shifts for vodka, shrugged when the other officer said something about an 'Afghan sweetheart', yeah, very likely, that, and went to the tea house. Forcing himself to check for other soldiers and anybody following him, had a good walk around that part of Kabul before he went anywhere close to the tea house, then stepped into the gloom, and through it, into the garden area.

He spotted the man spotting him, looked at him for a long moment, then moved towards him in a semi-circle. Most of all he was bored, and irritated, useless in this place. Might have to do with the fact his right wrist hurt after an exercise where he damn near tore his arm off, but while the shoulder and arm

muscles supported his weight, his wrist disliked it more, as if they had both been weakened from that fall, years ago. Or it was a mental thing, as the doctor had said, who couldn't see any damage on the x-ray. He was supposed to be careful. He had taken the firm bandage off—it only supported the wrist a little, but he'd be damned if he showed the other any signs of discomfort.

“Good afternoon.” Vadim paused, wondering why he allowed the other to make the decision whether to drink tea and eat and then leave, or leave right now, then thought, whatever, he doubted the other was interested in conversation.

Dan checked his watch, good sturdy build and a squaddie's favourite, got up, wiped his hand on his camo trousers, nodded. “I got an hour.” He turned and left the plate of sticky sweets discarded, moved towards the side exit that led into an alley, away from the market.

Vadim followed. No conversation. Okay. He walked as casually as possible, like it was perfectly natural for him to be there, led by what could be anything. Reporter, spy. Either of the two, and both would be bad if the KGB caught wind of it.

Dan walked through several streets and turned a couple of corners without ever looking behind. He reached another of those small houses that were barely more than a hut and a room. He was careful this time, had been attacked before, but now the knife was lying comfortably in his palm as he undid the lock. Pushing the door wide open he did not step inside. Waited for the Russkie, even though he didn't expect the bastard to be so careless to bare his back. “I remember the promise,” reassured the other they weren't here for killing, but fuck, he would, if he had to, “no attack.”

My Afghan sweetheart. Vadim looked at the man, his hand near the knife as he passed him, turning his head at the other in passing, close enough to smell him. Good smell. Then stepped inside, exposing his back only for a heartbeat before he brought it against the wall inside, like securing the entrance.

Dan smirked at the Russian's wariness, good to know it was matching his own. Secured the lock and bolted the door, he turned. No nonsense, not this time. He shrugged out of the jacket, unwrapped the rag, dropped both onto a pile on the dusty floor. Unceremonious and uncaring, but a movement of his hand gave proof to how cautious he was. The knife, blade flashing in the gloomy light of the deserted room, stashed securely into yet another pocket.

He stepped closer, pulled the shirt over his head, blinded only for a minuscule moment, threw it onto the existing pile. “As I said, cunt, I’ve only got an hour.”

He suddenly lashed out and pinned the Russian’s shoulder to the wall, the other hand pulling the neck of the uniform tunic open. Connecting teeth and lips with the burn mark on the Russian’s throat.

Vadim was surprised, then the guy’s lips, and shit, this was good, good already. “Hour is plenty.” He moved his head out of the way, the scar was sickening, the reason he was careful about undressing, just didn’t want to expose himself like that. Thought about the knife, lazily, but those...sucking biting kisses went right into his body. He took the other’s hand and brought it to his groin, press it against his cock. “I brought you something.”

“Good.” Dan’s voice husky, ragged breath against sweat-damp skin. His hand didn’t just grope and squeeze, familiarising itself with that cock, it wanted more since he’d found what he wanted. He fumbled with the buttons of the Russkie’s trousers, didn’t bother with the belt this time, freed the cock while his own was being handled, all the while biting-sucking the muscled flesh. He was getting addicted to that neck.

Vadim bit back a groan, hot, sweaty hands, strong, rough, his own hands starting to stroke the other, the enemy, torturer, foreigner, equal, the stuff in his neck making him dizzy, worse than the heat. Leaned his head against the wall, smelled the other’s hair, sweat, heat, hands moving on their own, tensing lightly when the Brit squeezed, an echo almost of the other’s motions, mind blank, tuning into the moment, the desire, raw and pure.

Dan’s strokes matching the other’s. Like his lust, fierceness, the anger that fuelled more lust in return. Believed in the intensity of hatred, transmitted through his teeth and lips, assaulting skin and flesh, tasting sweat and musk.

He would be easy prey for a hunter right now, nothing in his mind but the need and greed to feel a man’s flesh and taste a man’s lust. This man’s. Dan couldn’t get enough of the body he was crushed against, the strength that matched his own, and most of all that cock. Would always want more, and always took it.

The way the other handled Vadim bordered on pain, too much force with just sweat between the rough skin and his cock. When the border to pain was crossed, he could feel something break, something give, and a moment of fear, of

being without defences, and shit, pain should not do this, but Vadim came, clenching his teeth even though he wanted to breathe, gulp air, couldn't get enough air into his lungs, reached out with his other hand, squeezed the other's balls, rolling them and jerking him off, his wrist hurt, but he had to distract the Brit, and make him come.

Afterwards, he was leaning against the wall, breathing hard, feeling sweat run down his neck, which was raw from the bites, pain now became heat and glowing, and there was the lingering fear. He wanted to drink, but couldn't move. Just waited for the other, waited for him to recharge. The Brit was getting more and more...assertive. Bossy, even. He wasn't quite sure whether this was really what he had wanted. Bullshit.

The next time was just like the others. Hands, again, borderline pain, as if the other was trying to punish him, and the fear was back, the fear from the mountains. Somehow he couldn't hate him for it, instead desired him more. You sick motherfucker.

After that, they always met at the tea house, always using a different place to get off, biting and grinding, hands, rubbing, pushing, sweat. It began to feel as natural as cleaning his rifle, and in a way it was, but Vadim noticed the other handled him with more confidence, with fierceness. Nothing like the man who'd asked him to be taught about being a fag.

Vadim could feel his control slipping, every time a little more. The other biting harder, demanding, sometimes mocking. He could see the Brit would just seize and take control, and he couldn't let that happen. He needed to get the upper hand again, needed to push him, unbalance him.

He was cleaning up after one of their encounters. "I'm off to exercise for rest of month. Can make second week of next month. Same day." That would give him a week to heal up after the 'exercise'. Vadim didn't want to meet this guy in anything but a good shape. "Ah, by the way, I think I know your fingers by name now. Maybe we should do something different next time." He glanced up, grinning, ready to block an attack. "Keep me interested, suka."

"If you're getting bored, find yourself someone else, cunt." Dan sneered, buttoning his trousers, "I'm sure one of your conscripts will gladly take it up the shitter." He was unsure what 'suka' meant. 'Bitch', he reckoned, bloody Russian, once a cunt, always a cunt. Dan was more pissed off than he showed.

Vadim laughed. “You don’t think I have couple of those?” He usually only allowed Gavriil to suck him off when he was too lazy to jerk off, to relieve the tension and boredom, if only for a few minutes.

“Do me a favour and get yourself killed during the exercise.” Dan snarled, grabbed his dusty shirt, threw it over the t-shirt. “Save me the trouble.” He was out of the latest run-down room before he would cave the bastard’s face in.

‘More interesting’; fucking arsewipe.

* * *

Cunt or not; one month later, Dan was back at the *chaikhana*. The owner was becoming a useful acquaintance. Never knowing enough to cause trouble. A mutual agreement of ‘hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil’ and a handful of Afghan notes. They understood each other, transactions without words.

That day, Dan was smoking something sweeter than his usual fags; the hashish pure, his mind the opposite. Nerves on edge. *Suka*. Fuck you, Russkie.

Vadim came on time, mind and strength drained. He was exhausted. Night marches, alarms, pure sadistic pleasure to drill them till they dropped, while restricting water and provisions. When the body was weakened, they’d weaken the mind, too. Sleep deprivation.

He wanted to rest up, but he’d miss the appointment. Too curious whether the other would show up or had managed to wean himself off their dangerous little game. He grinned as he saw him, and the grin widened as he smelled what the other was smoking. Another easy game. He’d be in control.

He sat down, and ordered tea, snatching two bites off the platter that stood before the Brit. Pistachios, honey, sugar. He chewed, stuffed another between his lips, quite relaxed, masking the tiredness. “Good stuff, eh?”

Dan’s eyes opened a fraction more, the pot was good, but he’d deliberately chosen a small amount. He smirked, took another drag, kept the smoke deep in his lungs before allowing it to escape. “You look like shit, Russkie.” He offered the joint. “Shame they didn’t finish the job.”

Vadim glanced at the roll. Thousands of warnings from coaches and trainers and nutritionists, keep tight control over what to put in his body. He had experimented, of course, but never smoked. Cocaine, pills, yes. He shook his head,

instead grabbed another handful of the sweets. The Brit was exactly as he remembered, every line, every hair. Had wanted him more than sleep, craved to get that ass again, that strength. “Tree planting can be hard work. Reforestation.”

Trees. Sure, asshole. Dan smirked, threw the joint onto the ground, extinguishing it with the heel of his boot. “Come.”

Dan left a handful of notes and walked out of the teahouse. They both knew why they met, no point in wasting time. Today was the same set-up and a similar house in another part of Kabul.

Vadim checked for eyes and ears that took too much interest, but no such thing. It had been a quiet month in Kabul, as far as he was aware. Adjusted himself as he walked, shit, a month, and he wanted the Brit. Remembered too much and the way the other bit and sucked his neck. Always good for a quick relief of pressure, but it was much worse when the other was actually *there*, there to touch and grind into.

Now that the other had been away for a while, he’d be happy with a handjob. He entered the house.

Dan did the usual, the month hadn’t changed the ritual of waiting for the Russian to step inside, then lock and bolt the door, getting acquainted to the dim light. The shutters always closed.

“Energy bars are over there.” Dan pointed at his bergan and a rolled-out sleeping bag in a corner behind him. “Figured you’d need it.” He fiddled with the lock a bit longer than usual waiting for the Russian to turn his back, counting on the other’s greed to get some of the sickly sweet protein stuff down his neck.

The moment the Russkie turned, the hefty club he’d stored in the corner came crashing against the man’s temple. “That *interesting* enough for you, bastard?”

He watched the body crash to the dried-mud floor. “Time for another fag lesson, I think.” He rushed to his bergan, pulled out ropes and dragged the unconscious body towards the centre of the room. He’d chosen the building specifically for its low beam and the pillars that stood closely together. Sturdy wood, just right for a Russian cunt.

Beret already on the floor, he opened the Russkie’s uniform tunic, pulled the shirt underneath over the man’s head, baring his chest, then bound the wrists together in front.

Moving quickly, he threw the rope over the beam, grunting as he pulled. The bastard weighed a ton. When the unconscious body was finally upright, hanging off his bound wrists, he secured the rope. So far, so good. He hurried to open the polished belt buckle, smirking as his fingers ran over the Soviet star, then pulled the trousers and briefs down, as far as they would go. He needed access for what he wanted.

Dan raced against time, knowing he'd have a boot smashing his face if he didn't secure each ankle to one of the beams before the Russkie came round. He just managed to finish before the man regained consciousness.

He stepped back, pulled his hunting knife out of its sheath and fingered his shirt for the packet of Russian coffin nails. He lit a cigarette, grinned and blew smoke into the Russkie's face while playing with the blade. Standing a mere arm's length away, watching.

“Interesting enough, cunt?”

Vadim's temple was one throbbing mess. Opened eyes, couldn't focus, rolled this way and that, but he smelled something. Fire. Pain. He came the rest of the way with a start, heart beating so hard it made him nauseous, dizzy. Breathing fast, his body kickstarted from off to overdrive, suddenly understanding his situation with the clarity of a scalpel cut.

The Brit would kill him. This way, he could fuck him, easy, and then cut him open. Cut off his cock, stuff it into his throat, then cut his jugular. Breath going even faster. The pain in his head forgotten. Now he felt the burn on his wrists, his weight, body shifted to stand upright, not leaning forward. Smoke. The scar right under his throat.

Vadim felt the sweat, the way it cooled him. Nameless dread, fear, the whole thing came back, the mountains, the torture. The other would start again where he'd stopped. Had broken the rules. Of course the Brit would not follow the rules. He'd been insane to believe for a moment he had the other in a place where he'd be safe, safe to handle. He couldn't bring his legs together, not protect, not stand secure, no leverage, no freedom. He didn't want to show the fear. Didn't. Couldn't. Tried to summon rage to keep the other emotion under control, siccing the other animal on the thing that was his fear. Seeing the knife, his stomach tensed; he had no defence, nothing, against that blade. That very same blade that had almost...

Don't think about that.

Don't.

Vadim tried to breathe, tried to control his face, keep the mask up, his stoic façade. No, the other wouldn't believe him. They knew each other too well now. He could fool a stranger, but not that man. After relaxing briefly, he coiled his strength in his body and threw himself against the restraints with everything he had, fighting, hoping pain and stress would get the dread under control.

Fought for his life, fought against the fear, mindless; bruising, even tearing the skin at his wrists, boots protected the ankles. He didn't believe any of this would give, least of all the other man. Struggled, because he had to, it was the only way to deal with the uncontrollable emotion. Sweating, breathing hard, and finally managed to win. Anger. Pain.

Dan's eyes widened in surprise. He hadn't expected that reaction, then he shrugged. The fucker was a force of nature—or natural disaster, rather. He took a step back, watched, fag in the corner of his mouth, cleaned his nails with the knife. Smirked.

"I'll kill you. I swear I will kill you." Vadim was staring into the dark eyes. Pain brushed over everything, the lust they'd shared, their dirty little secret habit, the fact he had never managed to take revenge, the fact he had offered, and offered again. Gone now. Enemies again. It was a fucking relief.

"Hold your horses, Russkie," Dan took a drag, smoke curling out of his nostrils and from between his lips, "you don't do anything by halves." His smirk grew, head slightly tilted, studying the sweat gleaming body that had fought for its life. Fuck this was good. His head was spinning with an overwhelming sense of power, and not from the dope.

Dan stepped closer, close enough until their chests almost touched, but kept his head out of head-butting harm's way. "You wanted it more interesting." He spoke through the fag, still between his lips, smoke curling between their faces, "is this interesting enough for you?"

Interesting? What the fuck...? Vadim didn't have anything to attack him with, teeth, maybe, if the bastard would get that close. Tear his nose off, his ears, the human face was nothing but a collection of targets, ridiculously placed on the outside of protective bone. He sneered at the smoke, he hated that smell, hated the

bite in his lungs, worse than dust, because dust did not create round obvious scars right under his throat.

Dan's free hand grabbed the unprotected balls, squeezing hard.

The Brit would cut them off. He would. Would get him hard and cut it off. Vadim would have jumped out of his skin if that had been possible. His skin crawled.

If I cut your throat, would you come?

He was fighting for breath. The squeeze. His body thought this was a game, or was it the fear? Fear could do this, could mimic arousal.

The knife. His eyes fixed on the knife. Nothing in the world but the knife.

"Seems it is interesting enough." Dan's smirk grew to nasty proportions, moving his hand from the balls to the cock already showing signs of arousal. He spat the fag to the ground, continued to stare, then bared his teeth in a feral grin before lowering his head and licking across the jaw, down the throat, towards the round scar at the hollow. Tasting sweat, fear, anger and heat.

Dan sucked the flesh, a groan escaping. Too fucking good. Knife blade warming against the other's damp chest, lying still, for now.

Vadim shuddered, hard, felt the tongue like fire, like ice, like ant poison, the knife too close. He could feel the flat of the blade, a flick of the wrist, and it would sever skin. Another flick, muscle. Bastard. Fucking bastard, break him first, make him enjoy getting killed. You fucker. He remembered the mountains, remembered he'd been able to fluster the other, crawl into his mind, touch him in ways that unsettled. Nothing like that now. The other was aware, completely rational. The understanding brought the fear back. That was the original torture, the part with the rag, not allowing him to breathe, making him retch and vomit.

"Remember I asked for lessons on how to be a fag?" Dan murmured against the skin, before teeth and lips once more attacked the scar—his mark. "Time to continue, I think."

Move on to shit-stabbing. Then killing. Vadim shook his head. "Taught you...well...already." The cynicism didn't carry, his voice lacked inflection. "Just...make no mistake, and make sure I bleed out. Like you did Vanya."

Dan laughed with an ugly sound. Came up, face to face, less than an inch apart. "And fucking you, like you raped me?" Lips curling into a grin, it never

touched his eyes. Heady with power, awakening lust. He knew what he wanted, but had to bind the other to allow himself to get it. Fucked-up logic.

Vadim stared at him, not gracing that with an answer. The truth. Nothing but the naked, cruel truth. It was only fair. They'd be even.

"You'll bleed." Dan whispered. "Don't worry, you'll bleed to the last drop."

Vadim closed his eyes, impossible to stare at him now, impossible to have it confirmed. He'd die tonight. He'd die with sore feet, brain sore with lack of sleep, with the taste of the mountains on his lips. Fought hard to control his breath, fear clenching his lungs. Staring again as the other shifted.

Blood. Cum. Life's essence. Dan tilted his head, looked up, while going down to his knees. The knife went with him, but didn't touch. He said nothing, just burrowed his face into the other's crotch, inhaling deeply. Shit, he shouldn't get so fucking high on this scent of musk, man, fresh sweat and dusty heat. "Now, how does this work?"

Vadim couldn't breathe. Nearly forgot how to. Shit. Shit. Worse than the torture before death. More humiliating. What was the plan? He couldn't think clearly.

Dan's tongue trailed along flesh, hand aiding, both moving together. Tasting, licking, rough and demanding. He'd been shit at it the last time, he'd work out how to do it right this time.

Vadim's legs straightened, he stood on his toes, shoulders taking some of his weight, as if to get away from Dan, but his cock was hard, damn troublemaker. Body just flesh that reacted, despite the fear. Because of the fear. Stared down at the other, who focused on his cock. Shit. No way to force him, no way to slap him away, but the sensations still good, even now, even bound and scheduled to die. Clenched his teeth, trying to stay unmoved, or at least silent, trying to gather himself, stay himself, stay in control as much as possible.

Dan pulled back, looked at the cock before him, savouring every moment. "So that's what it's like to be a fag..." Knife in his right hand, cock in his left. Blade or balls—the sharp edge won. Knife slowly moving up the leg, towards the groin. Had been there before, but in a less powerful position.

Dan's head moved back down, this time sucking, imitating what the other man had done and countless big-breasted bimbos before him. Lips firmly around

even firmer flesh, but no friction as intense as the sensation of the steel against sensitive skin. Death and lust.

Vadim gave a surprised, agonized sound, bit it down. The fear of the blade made his cock jump, and the sensation of heat and wetness freaked him. Shouldn't happen, couldn't happen, this was sick, this was wrong. Wanted his hands free, needed his hands free. Tensed every muscle to keep control, to make sure the knife wouldn't slip, and then... the lips around his cock. What a sight. The bastard relished the control, the power that brought. There was no way he himself could be more powerless, tied up, cock between another guy's lips, teeth close, knife, always possible.

Vadim pressed his eyes shut, but that was even worse, left only feeling, while his cock strained, growing harder, or felt like it was. Would the other make him come and at the same time slash the femoral? A shudder gripped his body and didn't let it go again.

Dan had the time, even the confidence. It didn't matter that he wasn't sure how to suck cock. The Russian was in his power. He experimented with sucking and friction, all the while pressing the ever present blade against the balls. Running his tongue along the underside; lavishing time and attention on the uncut head, getting hard himself from the sensation of taste and smooth-ridged hardness. This time sucking down only as much as he wanted, completely in control, no danger of choking. The bastard was his. He took his time. Admired veins, licked pre-cum, experimented as if he owned that cock. His cunt. His enemy.

Vadim managed to breathe, to remain silent, like he did with Gavriil, or Vanya. Couldn't show more weakness than tension, and fast breathing. Couldn't moan, or groan, couldn't, above all, move. The sensations so tantalising. Arousing despite the intention and what they meant. Firmness, heat, tongue, lips. Vadim let his head fall back, concentrated on staying completely silent, could feel the other fumble around, try things, take him deep or focus on the tip, less concentrated on any kind of rhythm, any kind of getting him off.

He felt a sickening lurch when the other tried teeth, tensed so hard he almost lifted himself off the ground, just from the scraping of teeth. He would come if the other cut him. His body wouldn't be able to tell the difference. It had blurred long enough. Release, climax. He shook his head. Don't think about it.

Don't remember Vanya's cut throat, the way his windpipe had looked, the cartilage of the voice box visible in the gaping cut.

He turned his head to the side to bite into his shoulder muscle. Desire turned to anguish, and raged through his body. The fear was part of it, added edge, and that made him bleed just as any knife. He couldn't beg, they'd been through this already. Appealing to any kind of soldier's integrity wouldn't do it this time. He had nothing to offer. The other had him under control, every response of his body, and he couldn't end this, couldn't speed it up, and he didn't want it to end, because then he'd die. If anything, that thought made it better, but caused a darker kind of fear, a fear of himself.

Dan didn't notice any of his victim's fear; sex-partner, tool and toy. He continued to take his time, exploring that one, central part of the other man's body. Fixated and focussed on smell and taste and sensations, until he started to realize which reactions were caused by what and how he could get the Russian to groan or inhale sharply or hiss. Felt the cock twitch when he squeezed the balls in just that certain way and pressed his fingers against the dam close to the anus. He began to get addicted to the sounds the Russkie tried to repress and the tenseness and sweating when he sucked down as far as he could and added just that extra amount of pressure.

Dan pushed down again, almost gagging, but this time in control. Harder, faster, the blade almost forgotten, steel resting against delicate flesh. Fierce; violating himself while using the other man.

Vadim felt the tension build, could feel the other was driving to make him cum now. The pressure was getting bad, his body burning and melting and beginning to get there. Friction, heat. He bit harder into the muscle of his arm, tried to take some control back with the pain. He was getting closer, closer to death. Hips moved forward, but could only go so far; no real strength, no force, more begging than thrusting, every muscle starting to tense, to knot up, thighs, stomach, ass. He could feel his guts tighten, and fought climax like he had never fought anything in his life before. Don't. Don't. He was dripping sweat now, could hardly breathe, knew he needed to breathe, relax but couldn't. Wouldn't warn, couldn't.

Speak. Think. Breathe. Couldn't beg. The fear was just as bad as the need now, a sharp-clawed monster digging for his heart, relentless, eating him.

Stop, he thought. Please fucking stop.

He didn't want to die for this.

Then the other pushed him over the edge, pressure mounted and crashed, intense like lightning, he came so hard he thought he'd collapse. Legs going weak, his shoulders taking the weight as he came, shuddering, a toneless sound choked in his throat.

Dan's throat was suddenly assaulted again, but different this time, voluntary, not held, not forced, and it was he whose fingers were curled around the long-forgotten knife. His mouth was filled with cum, the taste he'd found and wanted, and wanted again. Blade scraping along the thigh while Dan's hand started slipping, holding onto hips and cock, swallowing, keeping the friction up, sucking the other dry.

Shit. He was a goddamned fucking fag and he loved it.

Cock still between his lips, tongue lapping-licking, knife somewhere half-mast along the Russian's thigh.

Vadim shuddered, tensing again, his body so grateful, enjoying it so much despite his brain that was just panic now, anticipation of death. Couldn't think of anything but that. Death, blood, weakness, darkness, cold. Rotting bodies. The sensations were good, fucked-up good. The other's eagerness was nothing but a desire to take revenge, to show him just how weak he was, a prelude to death. It didn't make sense for the other to keep going, but he was beyond arguing, beyond logic and reason.

His teeth released their grip on the muscle—no, it wouldn't hurt tomorrow, because there was no tomorrow. He rested his forehead against the arm. Shivered and shuddered. No strength in his legs, no strength anywhere.

He wanted to beg for his life, felt the fear, the cowardice. Wanted to do anything if it meant he would live. But the other wasn't finished with him. Would he fuck him with that knife this time? Like he had almost done...

"Nyet," he breathed, and suppressed the sound at once.

A sound from above filtered into Dan's thoughts. The word didn't make any sense. Didn't matter. He reluctantly let go of the cock. If cock-sucking-tasting-swallowing was what being a fag was all about, he wanted nothing but to be a fucking fag, with a five-star rating.

He looked up, licked his lips, and remembered the knife. Scuttling backwards, still on his knees, he dropped the blade, and reached for the pistol in its

holster in the small of his back. He'd come prepared for everything. He wasn't going to risk being torn apart by an irate Russian cunt once he'd untied him.

Vadim could sense the other leaving. Sweat beads trickled down his sides, down over his flanks, running down into the camo trousers, which were down to his knees. Waited for a shot, a sharp impact, then nothing. Expected the other to go behind him and put that knife into his body. Seconds passed, and he was still alive. Maybe the other wanted to look into his eyes when he killed him? He didn't raise his head, it was too heavy, neck muscles not supporting the weight.

Still crouched on the mud-pounded floor, Dan drew the pistol. The knife beside him, forgotten and discarded. "If I cut the ropes now, will you attack me?"

Why would he do that—cut the ropes? "Do what you want," Vadim murmured in English. "Nothing I can do about it." Don't fight. It will hurt worse when you fight. Nothing you can do right now. Just don't allow him to gloat. A shudder ran through his body. Proof in point, his cock was going to get him killed.

Dan nodded, but didn't believe a word, nor the fucked-up stance. The Russkie malleable and meek? Bullshit! "OK." The man was trying to trick him into believing he was no threat. He shifted the pistol into his left hand and picked up the knife.

He stared at sweat glistening on pale skin, in parts sun-burnt and almost raw. Muscles, perfectly defined in ways that he would never achieve. Dan, the soldier, runner, para and fighter, never the perfectly balanced sports god. Unable to keep his eyes away from that body, he suddenly grinned. Fuck, that had been a ride to remember. He wanted it again. Would wank every night—and every day if given the chance—to the taste and sound of the Russkie. He went over and started to cut the ropes at the ankles, carefully keeping out of harm's way.

First thing, Vadim brought his legs together, nothing but a reflex. Stand properly, securely, protect himself against a knife that didn't come. Had no idea what to expect now, maybe a beating, maybe a shot, maybe he was being taken prisoner and would be marched to the embassy. The panic still eating at his mind.

Dan cut the ropes securing the man's arms and stepped back quickly.

Vadim's arms came free, and bared his face. He didn't want to look at the other, didn't want to risk it. He reached for the camo trousers and pulled them up, hoping that wouldn't trigger anything. Scorn, violence, or a bullet. When had he been so scared last time? Oh, that's right. Mountains.

“You do remember the rules, aye?”

Rules? Vadim glanced at the other, trying to read that expression. Failed. He had no idea what was going on. Reached up to touch the place at his temple that still hurt. Swollen, but no blood. Well-executed blow. “Want me to kneel for bullet?”

“What?” Dan didn’t get it. “Fucking Russian weirdo.” He kept the pistol trained on the man, certain now that the odd behaviour was just a clever ruse. He grabbed his bergan and rolled up the sleeping bag one-handed, and stuffed it inside the backpack.

The Brit had lied, Vadim thought. He wouldn’t get killed. Not like this, not today. He shuddered. Nausea, stress came crashing down. He staggered back against the far wall, reached for it, supported himself as he crouched, feeling weak. Weak, tired, humiliated and exhausted. The fear embedded so deeply in his mind it wouldn’t leave. He wanted to scream, run, and go home. Wanted to leave this place, any place like this, this country, the army, any place with soldiers.

“No killing.” Dan repeated. The rule. The only one he could remember. Everything else paled in comparison. Didn’t want to kill, just suck and fuck and rub and touch. He heaved the bergan onto his back, and moved towards the door, all the time carefully watching the other man for an attack. Wired, wary. He didn’t trust the bastard for one second.

“Seven days. Remember.” Dan opened the lock of the door.

Vadim shuddered uncontrollably, fists clenched, face stony, but his eyes felt like they might burn. As if he hadn’t blinked, hadn’t closed them for an eternity. He wiped the sweat from his face with his arm. “That...” His voice was not to be trusted, “all you wanted?” Touched his swollen, raw wrists, could feel the touch from those lips linger, just like the blade right to his balls. “You mean it?”

Dan’s eyes narrowed. He didn’t get it. What the fucking hell was going on? “Your own words. *Keep it interesting*. I did, cunt. What else.” Dan sneered, baring his teeth in triumphant arrogance, and opened the door. “Teahouse. Next week.”

Dan slipped out the door and vanished into the labyrinthine streets of Kabul.

Vadim drew a breath that nearly choked him. Couldn’t even think of counterattack, accepted the arrogance, arrogance couldn’t kill him. Scorn, whatever. He’d live. Interesting. Fuck Chinese sayings. Too interesting. Too close to death.

Cut it right there, Vadim. This one was too close. You can't go on like this. Not like this, not with this man, not in this city. You have a duty, a family, a job to do. You can't throw all that away.

He nodded. "Too close." Swallowed. Needed water, should have smoked the weed. Would have helped now, but before... This had almost driven him insane in a sober mind. What would a drugged mind have made of it?

No grenade being lobbed through the door. No booby-trap. He'd live. But had died too often just now. He stared at the ropes, could feel his wrists burn. Another thing he'd have to hide. He didn't care. He'd live. He wouldn't throw this away, wouldn't put himself at risk again. Being Special Forces was bad enough without some sick bastard as a fuck buddy who was the enemy and capable of taking him out. Madness from the start. But he had woken up now. Had sobered. Was back in his mind.

He would focus on winning this war. No more tea houses. No more tying up, no more knives and torture. No more sick release. Too risky.

* * *

Seven days later and Dan sat in exactly the same spot as before. Confident the Russian would turn up, as he'd always done. He drank his over-sweetened tea, smoked weed the owner supplied him at no extra cost, could allow himself the luxury of a semi-stoned mind. His duties were negligible, hadn't received any order yet, just to lie low. He ate platefuls of baklava, and waited.

Waited.

Nothing. Dan frowned. Had the cunt been killed? Too bad. Perhaps duties kept him away. He sat for hours, waiting, wanting, and finally left with a sense of emptiness and frustration.

Maybe next week, or perhaps the Russkie was simply rotting somewhere in a tin case, draped with the Soviet flag.

* * *

"You finally decided to make major, huh?" asked the Major.

Vadim almost dropped the weight onto his chest, but lifted it again and let it rest on the frame of the bench. He sat up, regarded the other Vympel. Tough as leather. The leather of a crocodile, and not the soft belly. Didn't think the other expected him snap to attention, they were both off duty, both working out. The Major had a towel around his neck, wore the striped undershirt, and Vadim could see that the body was only a few years away from sagging, but at the moment, he was like the knotted leather of a whip.

"You seem more focused, Vadim Petrovich."

"I realised life is short."

"We will be sent away soon. Out there, I want you to be awake."

"I am awake, comrade major."

The Major waved that away and stepped closer. "Empty mind. You are thinking too much, Vadim Petrovich."

Thinking about the other man. Seven days now. That's why he worked out, couldn't find rest, couldn't find peace, allowed him only to think of the other when he was in bed, and more often than not, the spike was taken off with vodka. Sometimes he'd jerk off, but most of the time, he was too tired or drunk or both. "I am aware of that, comrade major."

"You'll soon get transferred to the front."

"As much front as it can be in this country. Thank you, comrade major. I was getting cabin fever."

The other would stay in Kabul, most likely. Duty would keep them apart. He'd get used to not meeting the enemy. In uniform, at several hundred yards, it would be impossible to tell the difference. Killing was less agonising than being at each other's mercy. More natural. More acceptable. Saner.

The Major knotted the skipping rope in his hand, and hit Vadim square in the chest with it. It hurt. Vadim stepped back, felt the backs of his legs connect with the bench. "Comrade major?"

"You must never forget where the front is," said the Major. "A man of your intelligence shouldn't doubt even for one heartbeat."

Vadim felt his hackles rise. "I did not doubt, comrade major."

"Or question."

"Or question, comrade major." He kept his lips pressed together, felt found out, bared, and kept his gaze neutral, forced himself to relax.

The Major looked at him for a long time, then nodded. Vadim didn't dare feel relief.

* * *

Another seven days and Dan had made his way back to the teahouse. Warring between hoping and dreading. What if the fucker didn't show up? He should be glad, the insanity would end at last. What if he did and what if he didn't; what if he'd never taste that bastard again, never touched, never punched, never bit and never sucked? Shit.

The owner greeted him like an old friend. Baklava was soon brought, and strong sweetened tea, but Dan refused the hashish that time, had to keep a clear head.

He'd received orders. Not much longer and he would have to vanish, across the border into Pakistan and from there back into the mountains. Going into the landscape of majestic solitude, of skies and rocks, caves and sheep and houses hewn into the rocks. Ten more days and he'd be gone, perhaps forever. Didn't know much of his mission, only what he needed to know. The less he could be forced to tell, the better.

Dan sat and waited. Again. Cursed himself, drank the tea; angry, worried, pissed off and fuming. He ate the sweets. Had he gone too far? Scolded himself for that ridiculous thought. He missed the cunt and that body. Only that body. Not the man.

* * *

Vadim was restless. Today. The *chaikhana*. Lifting weights, he could feel his body change as he kept increasing the weight, did it slower, more intense, groaned and nearly screamed in the weightlifting room, would have much preferred to groan that other way, but his duty was to stay alive.

Tied up. The enemy sucking him off. Fourteen days. Two missed opportunities to blow steam. Images tantalising, the other's body, the smell of sweat, harsh breathing. Tied up like a pig for the slaughter. Fuck you, Vadim.

Don't.

He'd be gone in the next few days. No more opportunities. He didn't have to follow him. He dropped the weight and got up from the bench, burning with exertion. A quick wash, still hardly enough water, hardly enough for drinking.

Leaving the barracks he thought what the fuck was he doing, headed into Kabul, market, tea house.

Dan had been waiting for hours, debating with himself whether he was a stupid fucker or a sad fag, waiting for a 'date' that never arrived. Telling himself he was about to leave, like he had been half an hour ago, an hour ago, two hours ago, three... Leftovers. Unwanted. Waiting, and what a date he'd been waiting for. Fucking enemy, soldier, bastard and Russian cunt. Needed him. Needed him so much his insides churned and his body was tensing in near-pain.

Finally spying the tell-tale silhouette, Dan almost jumped. He pushed the shades back down over his eyes, and sipped his tea, cursing the hand that dared to shake.

Vadim ordered tea, went to the usual place where they met, sat down. Fear.

He'd tell him it had to end. They were enemies again. No way could they keep doing this. Too much fear.

Dan raised his head and stared at the other man, grateful his own eyes were hidden behind darkened glass. He wanted to rip the uniform off the wanker and assault skin and flesh with teeth and hands.

"Wondered if you were dead."

Vadim glanced up, hated the shades but of course that was why the other was wearing them, denying him eye contact. "No. Moving to front in few days." He couldn't lean back, the tendons in his body felt too short for that, he saw the weapons on the other, remembered that man's control and felt the fear surge back. What the fuck had happened to him? The other had let him go. Or rather, let him crawl away, torn open by fear. But the truth was, he had enjoyed this. Would have enjoyed everything, including getting fucked. As long as it wasn't death, he could enjoy anything.

His tea arrived. He waited till the Afghan was gone. Looked briefly at the plate with the sweets, but couldn't eat, not the way his stomach was one white-hot knot. Worse than eating in the scope of a sniper. "Might be few months."

Tell me to fuck off, now, Brit. No, tell him to fuck off, Vadim. He has broken the fucking rules.

But what a blowjob. His face twitched. Indeed.

“Months?” Dan’s brows rose, visible above the shades as he reached for another piece of the sticky pastry. His hand hovered over it, realising he wouldn’t be able to get it down, stomach churning close to being sick. Shit again. “Don’t you Russkies ever get R&R?” He masked his aborted movement to the baklava by taking the tea instead. Too bad the glass was empty—how lucky because his hand was shaking even worse now. He wanted the bastard; needed the fucker. Months. Fuck. Could be a year if they were unlucky with both their missions.

“I’ll be off, too.” Dan couldn’t say anything else, wouldn’t. “No fucking clue when or if I will get back.”

And I need your body so goddamned badly, I’m close to begging, you fucking cunt!

Vadim nodded. They’d both be gone. Much better for their sanity, their lives. A few quick encounters, nothing they couldn’t forget, wouldn’t forget in the hail of bullets. Back to being proper enemies. Those lips around his cock. The way the man had pushed himself to get him off. The way that man had fucked his mind, letting him believe he’d die. You fucking scared me. I can’t deal with the fear. Not like that. Not like you tortured me in the mountains. Can’t forget it, will never forget it. You damn near broke me with that. Without actually beating me up, no blood, just...fucked my mind.

Vadim inhaled. “Likely heading south. We have trouble there.” Nothing the other wouldn’t know. “Behind lines.” He took his tea and sipped it. “Earn some tinsel.”

Dan shrugged, “Tinsel’s cheap, just like tin coffins.” He pushed the shades off his eyes, and let them perch on top of his forehead. Scrutinising the other, but couldn’t read him, he hadn’t learned the codes yet. “Seems our last chance, then.”

Vadim shivered. No. Yes. He wasn’t in control. How could he be in control. How could he do this? How could he even want this? One last time? Why the fuck had he come? To talk? They didn’t talk. They never talked. He looked into the other’s eyes, didn’t see aggression, didn’t see scorn, spite, anger, or worse, ridicule. Nothing.

“I...” The English syllable hung in the air. One last chance to get off. I’m fucking scared of you. “... don’t plan to go home with black tulips.”

“Good thinking, because tin boxes sound like a fucking stupid plan to me.” Dan smirked, but didn’t feel anything inside like the cool exterior he presented. Could he suck the Russkie off this time without the safety of ropes or weapons? “You got time?” I’m so fucking desperate I want to jump you right here and now. “I got another safe house.”

Vadim blinked. That sounded. Not like hatred. Not like the other would bash in his skull and fuck what was left of his pride. Shouldn’t be here, shouldn’t think of those lips. The heat of that mouth. Last time before the mountains. And plan or not, he could still die. He just needed to be careful. Alert. Not trust him, not even for a heartbeat. “No ropes. Almost broke my wrists.”

Dan tilted his head. “Deal. No ropes. No weapons. For both.” He didn’t trust the Russian, not after the last time, the fight, the panic, and that niggling feeling that he had gone too far. But how? After the torture, how could he ever step over that line again?

You trust that promise? Do you? Fuck you, Vadim, you’ll get yourself killed, in a messy way. Nothing clean about what the man will do to you. Vadim hesitated, feeling the fear overpower the need, the need that was in the background, the fear all over it, swarming insects crawling into every thought.

“Come.” Dan got up, threw Afghani notes onto the blanket. Had paid before but paid again, always twice. It helped his dealings with the natives. “Not far.”

He turned, started to walk out of the *chaikhana*, but this time slowly, turning back to see if the other followed. Less cocky and sure, or maybe just too damn frustrated.

Vadim didn’t want to, but the lips. The hands. The strength. All that strength that could destroy him if he chose to. He felt vulnerable. Didn’t want to follow. One last thing. One last time.

He kept his gaze down, felt defeated, knew he was being stupid. Just waited for a movement from the corner of his eyes. Would fight and kill at the slightest hint of danger.

True to Dan’s word, it wasn’t very far this time. Two streets, three corners, and they had reached the same type of building in a similar kind of shitty place. Dan unlocked the bolt and stepped aside, waiting for the Russian to catch up.

Slipped inside, immediately turned back round, wary of an attack. Stayed in full view of the other. Hands up, showing he had no weapon.

“No attack this time. I promised.” Again that head tilt, Dan’s voice growing huskier, memories of two weeks ago. “At least you can’t complain it didn’t get more interesting.”

Vadim moved with his back against the wall, shut the door with his heel, locked it. Breathing. Mockery. “Yeah, bit in mountains...that was interesting, too.” Shit. Cry-baby. Mewling cry-baby. He shook his head, put a grin on, masking how much he had let on. “Good cocksucking, though.” Eyes narrowed, a challenge. “Not bad for second time.”

Dan’s smirk grew, a dangerous edge to it, but far too desperate to allow the aggression to take over. He wanted, needed, had to have this man. One last time. He couldn’t let his own arrogance or pride blow it.

“Are you saying I’m becoming a good fag?” Dan didn’t wait this time, shrugged out of his jacket. It was getting colder in Kabul. “I think I need more practice.” He wasn’t ashamed of his greed. Cocksucker. Cunt. Whateverthefuck.

Vadim wanted to jump back. Remembered the teeth, remembered too clearly how much he had wanted and how much he had feared the other would kill him the moment he came. No knife. Please no knife. His face twitched. Did he want to give him that much power again? No. Yes. Didn’t want to suck him, but then, that would give him control, things would go at his own speed. Yes.

“Undress. All of it. Down.” So he couldn’t hide a weapon. Important. Vadim stripped off tunic, shirt, down to the camo BDUs, boots remained on for the moment. His body was still pumped up from the workout, muscles swollen with blood and strength.

Dan shrugged, pulled the shirt off, bent down to unlace the boots before kicking them off. Didn’t feel right to undress himself, an awkward moment, scolding himself for his bloody idiocy. He continued to undo belt and trousers, pushed them down and stepped out of the faded and worn army issue. Stood in socks and nothing else, having gone commando as usual whenever possible.

“Might be off to eagle’s nest,” Vadim murmured. Twelve months in solitude. Patrols. Watching the road. “More likely, run security for the convoys to south.”

“You fucking Russkies with your fucking insanity. Eagle’s nest. Twelve fucking months and no R&R. No wonder you’re so fucked-up.” Dan sneered, finally getting around to his socks, non-standard issue and a thousand times better than army crap. He stood naked, arms crossed in front of his chest, gaze challenging. “Just don’t run into me. A bullet would ruin our next tête-à-tête.”

Vadim stepped closer, eyes on the round bullet scar on the other’s shoulder. That had ruined nothing. Not that one. That body. No weapons, no guns. He opened his belt, detached the pistol holster, put it on the ground to the side. The knife went there, too. Now he could want this body, could allow feeling needy and wanting to touch.

“I go where ordered.” Vadim shrugged. “Working on next rank.” Making major. That would be nice, actually. Afghanistan was the way up. Nothing like a war zone to keep those ranks and medals coming.

“We’re not that different, then.” Dan shrugged as well, “I do my duty. No more, no less.” As long as it gave him the adrenaline thrill he had been seeking all his life.

Vadim stepped closer, running his hands across the other’s chest, down his abs, one hand went straight for the cock and balls, closing finger and thumb around them, behind the balls, pulling and squeezing.

“I’m out of practice,” Vadim murmured. “Tell me, why did you not kill me? What do you want?” He went down on his knees, ran his tongue over the other’s balls. Sweat. Salty musky taste. Pulled the cock and balls up to lick the underside, brush them with his cheek.

Dan inhaled sharply, “Shit!” hissed between his teeth. Hard to form a thought. Hard, yeah fuck, the irony of the word. “Why the fuck should I have wanted to kill you?” He shuddered, looked down, watched his cock, the head, those lips, the face and heaven and hell, the feeling he got was more intense than any battlefield he’d ever been on. “You wanted a thrill, you got t.”

Thrill, yes. But too much. Had given up. Resigned to death. Broken. Snapped. Begged for his life without being able to. Come apart. Nothing that Vadim should do. Not in his profession.

“I thought it was for the power,” Vadim pulled the foreskin back to completely bare the head, studied it, rolled his neck to relax for what he had in mind. He’d be damned if he couldn’t get the other to lose control. Flicked the tip of

his tongue across the head, the slightest of touches, and checked on the other's reaction. But then, he certainly didn't mind if it got too close to discomfort.

"Fuck," Dan searched for anything to steady himself, while staring down, "Bloody hell, you know what you're doing." Like no one before. No bimbo, ever. No whore.

Vadim kept the grip strong around the balls, increasing pressure with his fingers, closed his lips right after the flaring tip, tongue circling around the small opening, the taste there different, not particularly pleasant, but he knew what it did to a man. Laid off the intensity, took the cock deeper, running his tongue over the underside, taking him slowly, neck and jaw tensing, offering resistance and friction, slowly taking him to the throat. Now, that was a proper skill. Mostly willpower, control of breathing, nothing more. His drill instructors would kill him for what he used his various skills for. He almost laughed.

Dan couldn't find support nor leverage, felt his body first wanting to slump, then tense, stagger, then turn rigid, shudder and tremble, then lose balance.

"Shit...gotta...hold onto..." desperately trying to get closer to a beam or wall without losing those sensations. Fuck, that bastard was better than a whore, addictive unlike anything before and he knew he'd want it again, couldn't exist without it anymore.

Stomach muscles tensing, he cursed his need and the far-too-fast arousal, reacting to the suction, friction, scraping and licking like Pavlov's dog. He would reduce himself to begging if the fucktard stopped right now. "Gotta...come...soon but...balance..." Stammering idiot, nothing but a quivering piece of meat, willingly in the power of an enemy.

Vadim pulled back, chuckled, kept his hand around the other's cock and balls, other hand turned Dan so his back faced the walls and pushed him against it, flat hand against his stomach. He wanted to mock him, wanted to make sure the other knew how helpless he was now. Don't even need ropes and knife for this.

Dust mixed with sweat on Dan's back. His stare fixed on his cock and the other man's head. He wanted to scream, hit, hurt and make the other man feel in return. "Shit...shit..." Mindless, stupid, garbled words and sounds from his throat that he should be ashamed of.

Vadim looked up, licked his lips, eyes narrow. I'll fuck you now. And nothing you can do about it. He sucked the cock through near-closed lips, focused

on the tip again, allowing it to slip free and took it in, in and out, sucking, pressure, tongue then invading the slit, snaking against it, while his hand kept the cock under control. No ramming inside, and very likely no cumming until he allowed it.

Dan hit his fists against the wall behind him, prisoner, owned by his own lust and that goddamned clever tongue. Teeth. Lips. Fucker!

Vadim was laughing inside, the way the other grew desperate was a sight to behold. Of course he knew what he was doing, but he acted as if he did this for himself, when he really was just putting on the show for the other. Changed gear every now and then, two deep motions, taking the cock into his throat, a third time, less deep, two more deep ones, then back to the tip that was leaking precum, cleaned that away, pulled the cock free, just cleaned the tip, went into the opening again as if to take the rest, ignoring the taste. This was mostly a lesson, some odd kind of payback, nothing but control for as long as he could keep it up. And that could take a while, because the other was defenceless.

His free hand began to fuck that cock, wet with saliva and sweat, pumped him a few times, while he kept licking the tip, loved how the other sounded, nearly whimpering, those fists clenched and helpless. No rope necessary. The other had dropped his defences. He'd be dead if he wanted. His choice, his decision. The man was his. His free hand slipped between the other's legs, to touch the dam, press there, slip further, while he took his cock deeper again, as deep as he could—and his wet finger found the hole, and pressed in, slipped the finger in deep, and released Dan's cock and balls. Now cum, bitch.

"Holy fuck!" Dan lost it and yelled. Too many feelings assaulting his body, sensory overload. Sensation of the wrong fucking type and the most right one ever in his life and fuck! Fuck! Fuck! His knees buckling, useless fists hitting his own thighs, the wall, scrabbling-clawing at flesh, his own. Convulsing, shuddering, stammering words with no meaning, completely lost. Came into the enemy's throat, with the enemy's finger up his arse and to the enemy's knowledge that he was completely in the other man's hand. His. My cunt?

Fuck that, he was his bitch.

"Fucking bastard!" Dan couldn't get his body under control, only half-managed words, wanted to kick the other man, punish the Russian, but that finger, the added sensation, was too bloody good, and he just collapsed.

Vadim pulled back, needed to get out of reach. The rage was there, only the fact the other was not nearly coherent enough to fight now, too weak. He wanted vodka to wash the taste away, headed towards the other man's bergan, dug inside without taking his eyes off the enemy, found a bottle, opened it and drank. Whisky. Excellent way to purge that taste. He kept the bottle open, swirled the golden liquid around, then, maybe as a manner of offering peace, stretched out the hand with the bottle, some tension in his body remaining. Ready to jump back.

Dan had sunk to the ground, slowly sliding along the wall until he hit the floor of dried mud and dust. Shit, sweat and dust creating an itching paste on his body, cooling rapidly even though his heartbeat was still hammering.

"Fucking asshole." Not half as much venom behind the words as expected. What damned point was it now to beat the crap out of him? Dan had liked it. Too much. Bastard. He had known exactly what to do, unlike himself. He grabbed the bottle without looking, gulped down a fair amount, wiped his lips. Narrowed his eyes, only then studied the other man, gaze pointedly falling on the still soft cock. "Bloody disinterested for someone with your skills."

Vadim followed the gaze and got the meaning. "True." It did next to nothing for him. He was too aware, too himself, and the main aim was to control the other. It was interesting, in some way, the first time with any man, because there were always challenges, but once he'd mastered them, it was a routine thing. He'd done this for few, and he didn't really need it, didn't really want to. "I guess too much interest gets you into trouble," he mused. "No control. It's something you do."

Dan shook his head, swallowed another mouthful of burning liquor before handing the bottle back. "Bullshit. I like it." Giving too much away, but what did it matter. Either of them would probably be dead in a year, he'd put money on the Russian going first. "Cocksucking." Bared his teeth. "I've become a right little fag, eh?"

Vadim's eyes narrowed. Fag. The word continued to rile him. "I know. Have guy who nearly gets off on it. Does it himself, saves me trouble." He indicated wanking with his right hand. Gavriil. "That guy's fag. Can't wait to get fucked, he'd even put on dress. That type's fag. And you are not. Neither am I. You like it, fine, that means nothing. Doesn't make you girl." Took more of the

whiskey, waited for an attack, but there was no tension in that body. The other was simply sated, and that made fighting near impossible.

Dan shrugged, almost laughed, but the sound stuck in his throat. Pulled his legs up, one arm around his knees, still studying the other man. "I should smash your fucking face in for that finger up my arse." No real conviction behind these words, either. Damned satisfaction, the come-down after a climax could be a killer. He'd become careless.

"Can't be bothered to beat the crap out of you. The mountains will do that for me. If not them, then the Mujahideen and if they don't make it either, then some shit that happens in a bloody place like this." Dan shrugged again, as if he didn't care either way.

Vadim gritted his teeth. And that was exactly why he shouldn't have returned after last time. "You should have left me to the goat-fuckers that time." Challenged the other, challenged that assumption. "You think I'd get caught in place like this? No way. Mountains? I'm trained to deal with mountains. Bandits? Fuck bandits, I'm Spetsnaz." He bared his teeth. "I'll outlive you, bastard."

Dan smirked, "Spetsnaz? Fuck Spetsnaz. I'm SAS and we all know the British Special Air Services are the best." Cap-badge pride, the right of every soldier. He wiped his lips, pointed at the bergan. "Protein bars. Hand me one."

Wordless understanding between them by now, the handful of peanut butter ones were always for the Russian.

Vadim crouched to reach inside, tossing him one of the bars, stuffed his own pockets with them, always watchful. "Just in case we're both alive...will you be back?"

"I'll be wherever they send me, but seems it will be more likely here than anywhere else." Tearing the wrapper off the strawberry flavoured one, Dan bit into the bar as if he hadn't eaten for years. "Six months at the earliest. I'll leave a message in the teahouse."

Vadim wasn't hungry. At least the other's mission was long term. He doubted it would be as long term as his own deployment, but he wouldn't just vanish. No address, no place to reach him, just the tea house, which he might not be able to reach himself, trapped in the mountains with comrades, hunting insurgents, or escorting one of the convoys. One convoy could take weeks, and the Red Army needed to ship in each and every piece of equipment from Soviet

territory right into Kabul, over roads that hardly deserved the name, through passes that swarmed with bandits, constant danger of mines and snipers. But the other option sounded worse. Eagle's nest. He really hoped it was protecting the convoy—or getting flown in when a convoy was under attack. "I'll check for messages. I might be gone for longer. Seems it's some kind of testing ground."

Decided to make major. He had the feeling his superior had something special in mind.

"In that case," Dan swallowed the last piece of sticky sweetness, "I better get one more practice in." Not too sure how he felt about this, not the cock or its sucking, but the time of separation. Six months, twelve. He didn't believe he'd ever see the bastard again. Couldn't understand why he felt numb. Dan simply crawled over, pointed at the other man. "Your cock. Now."

Vadim gave a surprised laugh, stood to lean against the wall. Don't get your hopes up, I'll be back, he thought, but he had no idea what state he'd be in. Very likely the major would wear them down, work them to the bone, knew what they could endure and would push that limit. Very unlikely he'd have any time to miss something, or energy left to think of sex. He'd be lucky if he got enough sleep and water, no way there was vodka or sex in it. "Just don't cry for me, darling," he murmured in Russian.

Dan looked up, on his knees, still managed to smirk and answered in Russian. "You should be so lucky." Then he concentrated on his task.

1982 Chapter 7—Army of One
March 1982, Afghanistan

The rumble of the machine echoed in his bones. Vadim couldn't quite sleep, and he wasn't supposed to, but it was hard after three weeks guarding convoys, and more fake alarms than he could remember—seemed there were no enemies in the mountains, only shadows that moved and rocks that looked to these kids like enemies. Baba Yaga out hunting children, something like that. He was as tired as a long-rotten dog, decomposed, bones already ground to dust. The mountains had the colour of ground-up bones, anyway. Made for joyful driving.

The conscript's name was Platon, like the old Greek, and that was probably why they put him with Vadim. Vadim would sometimes say things hardly anybody understood, especially when he let his guard down a bit and was not itching to kill or brawl. So there were two philosophers on the same truck. Vadim's head nodded forward. He wanted to curl up and sleep, preserve warmth and sanity.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Platon glanced over, his face far too young to be here, the shaved head making him look like a child.

Vadim indicated the road. “Concentrate on that.” He could not remember when he had really found any rest, and didn't have any idea when he could expect rest again. He kept nodding off, thirty seconds, or a minute, while the trucks crawled forward, mine sweepers checking the road bit by bit. One mine meant the whole convoy had to stop, and that amounted to something like seventy trucks. He was not supposed to sleep, he was on duty. Only he hadn't been off duty for three weeks, and was starting to fray. He was perfectly willing to mistake anything for a dushman.

Ironic, really, that the bandits were starting to pick up how to mine the roads. The first attacks had been screaming and shooting and standing perfectly in the open, but somewhere along the way, they had picked up military skills. He had heard they still refused to belly crawl towards their targets, as they were too proud. But they were starting to grow into the whole guerrilla thing. Ambushes. They were getting trained to get better, and one thing had to be said in their favour: They were tough.

Vadim yawned. “Huh?”

“Girlfriend?” Platon reached inside his vest, showed him a photo.

Vadim didn't really look. "Nice."

Platon seemed a little surprised.

Vadim obliged him. "Nice tits."

So much for the bonding experience. Vadim, on principle, never showed photos. He didn't carry them out in the field, as it were, and he wouldn't let anybody comment on Katya's tits. And he didn't want any comrades to stare at the children. War and family didn't belong together. He knew that the story went his wife was really not much to look at, but then somebody else had mentioned the Olympics, and the other soldiers had fallen silent. He jerked awake again, ironically because the truck had stopped moving.

Platon began to sweat, even though the heating was off, saving power. "Oh god, please..."

Vadim glanced at the sweepers, who seemed concerned. Might be a mine, might be a mock-up. It was hard to tell, especially with the sleet and snow outside. The mountains were starting to fuck them big-time. "Five more, and you get a medal."

Twenty trips per medal. It was getting that dangerous.

Platon stared at him. "I don't want a medal..."

Vadim laughed softly. "Then you're in the wrong place." He pushed the door open, and used the truck as cover as he brought up the rifle. The ice rain was starting to battle against the fur *ushanka* and the big woollen coat. Visibility was a joke. He saw absolutely nothing.

More doors opened. Spetsnaz. Covering each other, while the sweepers began their work of starting to excavate. No alternative. Left was solid, vertical rock with boulders, right was a chasm. Vadim was used to landscape suddenly ending in this country, and hanging in mid-air. He briefly closed his eyes, burning from the cold, burning from lack of sleep, burning with concentration.

Fuck you, he thought, checking the rubble for figures. We are too big for you to take on. Or maybe you planted this and didn't think the next target would be so big and now you're holding a *loya jirga* about whether to attack or not.

He signalled, crossed the road and found himself a nice bit of rock that looked like it had eroded from somewhere higher up. Rocks coming his way was the last thing he wanted to think about.

More soldiers took position, hit the ground, crawled. His blood burned. He wasn't tired anymore, just exhausted.

He'd be able to get a feeling for the territory from up there.

Snow, rain and ice tried to crawl into him as he began to climb. After the damned heat of the summer in the lowland, it had to be fucking winter when he got into this place. Just his luck.

Five hundred yards up. Were there movements ahead? Scurrying? Small rocks were dislocated and began to dance down. Vadim paused, he could almost feel eyes concentrating on the trucks, but didn't want to give away his position. He signalled again and advanced a little more. No shots. No movement. The enemy were staying put. Not risking it this time. The convoy was too well-protected.

Platon would get one trip closer to his medal. Vadim waited, heart pounding, cold as fuck, hands on the rifle nearly numb, just enough heat left to be able to tell he was still holding something.

The lights flared once down on the road. Vadim signalled back to the convoy. He knew what he had seen, but there was no point in fighting this battle, not with shit visibility. Not cold and tired like this. There had to be caves here, and they probably used this position for an ambush and might do it again. Good sites were to be cherished. It wasn't too far away from one of the Soviet strongholds, the kind where they sat and waited, barricaded up. Unwilling to venture out, unwilling to leave, keeping losses down.

Every now and then, the dushmans would fire something at them, a grenade, an RPG, and the Soviets would return fire with everything they had, and usually stopped when there was no more shooting from the other side.

Vadim had the feeling that was not what he was there for. He returned to his seat in the truck, cold and wet enough to drip, at least the coat held the worst off, and went back to half-sleeping, half-waking, and nodding off without finding rest.

* * *

Fucking cold. Fucking snow and ice, howling winds and thin air that stopped him breathing. A lead weight across his chest, only allowing frantic, shallow breaths even at the best of times. Much worse if he tried the slightest

physical exertion. Fucking mountains, deadly freezing nights and goddamned fucking Mudjas who kept him in a maze of caves after caves. 'Is good, Daan. Is safe.'

And they'd nod. Fuck them. Fuck his weapons, his frozen hands and the constant almost-frost bite.

Most of all, fuck the Russians! Fucking Soviet cunts in trucks and impossibly big convoys. Fuck their furry hats and sheltering vehicles and fuck even more their mere presence. Bastards. If they'd stayed back home in Mother Russia he wouldn't have to freeze his bollocks off.

The insurgents had been warned the convoy would be one of the largest, but had they listened and stayed in the fucking caves? Had they? Fuck. It was out again and braving the elements. 'Go, Daan. Good, look. Watch our mines. Good, Daan. Taught us. Watch effect.' They could watch their own arses for all it was worth, if it were down to him.

Dan tried to wiggle his fingers, he'd been holding his AKM rifle for too long, the additional rounds on his back were starting to dig into his body. Too freezing cold to be on an observation post for hours like this. He couldn't feel his toes anymore, and was trying to move them when the convoy came into sight.

Holy fucking Christ, he started to count, ending somewhere around seventy. Shit. No way, it would be suicidal to attack, no matter how long the trucks had to stop when the first ones caught wind of the traps. Dan checked to his left and right, praying his 'friends' weren't so bloody stupid to disregard his advice.

He wiped ice off the binoculars, shifted his weight, then started to move slowly, crawling forwards on hands and knees. Stopped when doors opened and soldiers came into view. No one but Spetsnaz to guard the trucks, no one other than...Shit. That man. The tallest of them. Dan checked again, concentrated on movement, stature, body and gestures.

No doubt.

A twinge of unexpected desire hit the pit of his stomach, greed curling deep in his guts. Fuck. How could he have forgotten, that amongst all the strain, frustration and physical hardship, there was one need that grew every time it had been satisfied? A bottomless vessel, the more he filled it, the emptier it got.

He stared, transfixed on the man, aware of a hidden desperation. He had to find a way to follow the Russkie; of course, it made strategic sense. The convoy

would split and make its way in two different directions. One south, another deeper into the mountains and higher into inhospitable terrain, and someone would have to keep track. Dan knew just the place where the trucks were heading to, but what was even more important, he knew which vehicle the Russian cunt sat in.

Dan slunk back once the convoy was out of sight, determined to talk to the Mudjas. Driven by the poisonous need, but no plan yet. Stake-out? Recce? Anything that got him close to the Soviet outpost, ideas would come once he got there.

Fucking suicidal, but at least he wasn't cold anymore.

* * *

Dan went on his own, refused to take anyone else, claimed they didn't have the experience and besides, how would they do their five-daily prayers? He made it close to the garrison overnight, despite the extreme cold. He'd learned from the Mudjas how to survive, wrapped in a thick Afghan coat and native clothing on top and beneath his old army gear.

He survived the bitterly freezing gales of the night, holed up in one of the flea infested caves. Shelter, even though he felt as if thousands of those beasts were crawling on him.

Dan had been on the stake-out, mind-numbingly patient, for several hours before he caught a glimpse of the one man he was looking for. He grinned with bared teeth. He could easily get himself killed for his greed, but he counted on the other man being fucked-up and insane enough to accept the bullet he was going to offer.

Teeth chattering after another two hours, Dan had enough information to satisfy his official mission. He called the recce a day and started his own operation. His body was almost frozen solid, but the rattling snake of unsatisfied lust was still coiling in the depths of his stomach, suffocating him worse than the thin air of the Hindu Kush's high altitude.

Reaching blindly towards his back, Dan fumbled for one of his belt pouches, searching for a reminder of earlier times. A leftover scrap from a bag, the one he'd been wearing back in the days of his reporter disguise. He pulled one glove from his fingers with his teeth, prised the piece of fabric out of the pouch and

grinned, eyeing the soiled and torn Canadian flag he'd haphazardly stitched onto the front. Once bright red and gleaming white, now dirty colour on tattered and frayed ground, but enough contrast to stand out in the snow. Stand out and be noticeable—for someone alert enough to see it.

The Russkie was a sniper, he'd spot the colour that didn't belong.

“Come here, kitty kitty, come to Dan...” he muttered to himself, carefully placing the grubby scrap on an outcrop of rocks, weighed down with stones to keep it from escaping. Just a piece of fabric, blown across the mountains, of significance to no one, except for the one man who Dan would swear had an unrivalled perception. He'd witnessed the other's sniper skills before, after all.

All he had to do now was slink back and find his way to the cave that provided shelter, be economical with his rations, conserve body heat.

And wait.

* * *

Vadim had hated the cold from the first days of survival and winter training, creating a mature mutual hatred he was starting to feel comfortable with.

He was fucking freezing, no surprise there, chest pumping against the piercing cold air, but at least the drifting snow became less dense, and the cloud cover was thick enough to allow vision. Part of him would have enjoyed the mountains, if it hadn't been for the treacherous ground of ice and loose rocks, and the howl of the wind that could sound like human voices. It was even worse when it sounded like non-human voices.

He was walking patrol. There was bandit activity here, but the bitches would stay in their caves and villages. Using the logic of someone entirely too much in love with the concept of Spetsnaz toughness and superiority, that meant it was a good moment to recce. Only a madman would be out in this weather, under these conditions. They fanned out over the mountains, even broke visual contact, every single one of them on their own.

Vadim moved. Could that rock formation harbour caves? He crouched, tired and slightly dizzy, brought the rifle out, took position, and observed the area through the sights.

Blood? No, a motion, small, fluttering. Bird? Signal? The snow seemed to have been disturbed, but long ago. Might have been mountain goats. Or it might be a sign for other dushmans. He climbed higher, did a long, exhaustive circular movement, came from the other side. Those rocks looked fucking suspicious. He fumbled for the flare, kept it close to his body, then advanced.

Yes, caves. The thing looked man-made, nearly square. Cloth. Reached for it, then realised what it was. Fuck. He pulled the hood off his winter gear, pulled the rags away to bare his face, just in case he was standing in a sniper's scope now. Canadian. Yes, right. The man was here.

* * *

Dan had been watching. Waiting. Battling hour after hour with the freezing bloody cold that tried to wear him down. Keeping his position, only moving as much as he needed to stop his body from succumbing to the mountains and their horrors of winter.

There. Movement.

Dan grinned, right before the surge of heat shot into his body, pooling in his guts and groin, taking the grin and breath away, as well as the caution. So close. Could shoot him, watch him die and see the goddamned endless white of the snow upon dull grey of rocks turn into bright-red patterns of life and death and lust and fuck. That wasn't what he wanted.

"Come here, kitty..." He murmured and picked up a small stone, throwing it towards the Russian from his vantage point higher up. Hidden beneath an outcrop of rocks, the cave mouth invisible from below, he watched the stone take momentum and disturb the Russkie's vigilance.

I'm here, cunt. I'm fucking here.

* * *

At the sound of a falling stone jumping down the mountain, Vadim turned, eyes narrow. Hard to say where the small rock had come from. He reached behind him, took the flag and stuffed it into one of the ammo pouches, almost in an

afterthought, then began to climb. His head bared, he was losing heat, he was cold, his ears were numb, but he didn't want to catch a bullet.

Dan grinned, too bloody desperate himself to relish the triumph, watching the Russkie's progress towards the cave. Closer, come closer, and don't you fucking shoot me, bastard.

Vadim climbed higher. Fucking madness to walk into an enemy position. It could only be the Brit. He had to be alone. Please let him be alone. Vadim moved faster, trotted up, then crouched to see who or what was there.

The mouth of a cave. Good position. Hand on a pistol. "Is that you?"

"Goat fuckers don't usually have Canadian flags lying around in the mountains." Dan's voice was coming from behind the outcrop of rocks, the smirk unmistakable. Fuck, he was so bloody desperate he'd run into the garrison to get to that body. "I'll put my safety back on, Russkie, if you do the same."

Vadim raised the hand with the pistol, flicked the safety on and slipped the weapon into its holster, then pushed the rifle back over his shoulder. "Safety's on."

The answer was a metallic click and then a shuffle and rustle. "Same here."

Vadim moved closer to the voice. There, a silhouette. Excellent concealment. He could have walked right over him without seeing him. "What are you doing here? Sightseeing?" Vadim grinned to mask the need raging inside. No chance yet to groom anybody in the garrison for sex. No target he really wanted, but there was not much choice. If he wanted a bitch, he better start training one.

The silhouette moved, forming into a human shape, thickly clothed in layers upon layers, sporting stubble on the little skin that was visible in the rag-covered, grinning face that emerged when Dan stood up.

"I heard it was hunting season in the Hindu Kush for shit-stabbing Russians." Grinned so wide his teeth were showing, the insult not an insult this time, too bloody horny to bother with their usual rituals of enemy engagement.

Dan waved him inside, urging him to step out of the howling wind and biting cold. "I guess you haven't got any fags on you?" The double-meaning escaped him for a moment, but when he caught up, he smirked and set the rifle aside, fairly securely out of reach and in the back of the cave. "Running low on coffin nails." And even lower on sex.

Vadim shook his head. "Don't even keep them as barter." I don't barter. I want anything, I take it. He stepped out of the cold, the lack of wind chill making it almost warm.

"Damn." Dan muttered, but he hadn't really expected to get lucky. He'd used up all his luck by still being alive and together with the Russian. He pulled his gloves and the sheep's wool hat off, unwound the rag underneath and shook his head. Sporting a veritable head of dark locks, his hair growing annoyingly fast and no luxury of a barber in sight. "You got your nice little bed warmly made up in the garrison, haven't you?"

A dry cough. "It's better inside. Barely." Vadim regarded the man that looked nearly like a beefy Afghan, still attractive, despite the wool on his face. "So, you bitches do operate in this area," he said, thoughtfully. "Mountains will be swarming with my people. This is going to be very unpleasant winter." As if any winter could ever be pleasant. "My unit's outside."

Dan shrugged, "Tell me something new." Anything at all, other than cold, danger, survival and blowing up Russkies. Especially this one right here, for a few minutes at least. "Guess you have the choice, in that case, to either try and kill me straight away and thus save yourself the trouble later, or stop the afternoon pleasantries and get your cock out, because I'm fucking desperate." A few months ago he'd have been shocked at the frankness of his words, not any longer. "Your unit can wait for half an hour."

Vadim glanced at the winter outside. Expose himself? He'd seriously freeze his balls off. And other Spetsnaz out in the mountains. That made it...interesting. Oh shit. "Desperate for what?"

Dan rolled his eyes, opened the long coat and dug through the layers beneath, trying to avoid exposing any flesh. "Desperate to get off, cunt. Haven't found a brothel in these fucking mountains yet."

Vadim pulled the gloves off and stuffed them in his pocket, took the rifle off and placed it against the cave wall. Wanted to feel the other, yes, but maybe...maybe the best way to rub against each other and not bare any skin. He stepped closer to bring his hand against the other's groin, rubbing it. "Half hour. Not second more."

"Half an hour." Dan nodded, reached for the man's coat and buttons, working in haste to discover without uncovering the flesh beneath. His own cock

already hard, his hands were freezing within seconds of being exposed to the air, but he'd be damned if he'd let himself be stopped. "Been a long time." Got through the coat to the tunic, shirts, vest and finally the belt, fumbled with the trousers, "could come twice in thirty minutes."

Vadim was surprised how fast the other worked, felt cold fingers on his flesh, his chest, and did the same, fuck the temperatures. A mouth would be hot enough. He pressed in, squashing the other against the cave wall, wedged between sharp rock and his own demanding body. Pushing against whatever resistance he could find, thigh, hip, hand. "Too long," he agreed. "Nearly made me fuck conscript..." Hand warming against the other's flesh, while pressing closer, didn't want to touch him cold, but couldn't stop, either.

"Only thing available to fuck..." Dan's husky voice close to the Russkie's ear, "...are goats or sheep and I'm not that desperate yet." Dark chuckle, then nothing but teeth digging into the muscle of the man's neck. His face burrowed into layers of shirt collar and scarf, tasting skin. He didn't have much room but pushed his groin into the Russian's; hands, cocks, layers of cloth trapped between their bodies. Preserving warmth, creating heat and friction.

"Shit." He gasped out against Vadim's skin when cocks and hands connected, hard flesh and ruthless strength, "won't take...a minute."

Vadim gave a silent groan, broadened his stance to gain more leverage. The bite on his neck always so welcome, even if it bruised; nobody would dare ask him where those marks were from. Most wouldn't care, and he'd deny anything anyway. Bragging and gloating was for conscripts. Took the man's cock, wanted more than that, but it would do. Had to. Madness to go for anything more, and if he had to be caught pants down by his own unit, at least he'd be mostly dressed, never mind the searing cold.

Firm grasp, getting himself off and the other as well, shoulders pressed against the Brit's, could smell the mix of fur, wool, sweat, weeks with only the most basic cleaning. But whatever vermin lived in the other's native clothing, they would find it hard to find any purchase on him. He was shaved and clean, smooth. The other soldiers thought he was especially reckless because he shaved before a mission. They had this superstition about shaving beforehand, about shaking hands, about saying the word "final" in any context, and, of course, about taking photos.

They thought he was insane because he shaved. What a strange thing, this brotherhood of Afghanistan.

Dan was humping and grinding like a mindless animal, pushing against the Russkie's body, teeth sunk into muscle and sucking on flesh. Taste of sweat and body heat. "Fuck... yeah..." His hand brutally stroking the man's cock, giving as much as he was receiving. Desperation of months without anything other than his own hand and his memories, images of this Russian cunt and the taste and feel of his body, the knowledge of power and matching strength. He'd rarely had the chance to jerk off. These goddamned mountains owned his body and mind. When Vadim twisted his hand with an even harder stroke, that was it, enough to make him crash and come, shuddering and pushing against the other man as hard as he could, cursing under his breath, eyes wide open and staring into nothing, teeth lodged in the muscular neck.

As always, ever since the very first time of fucking instead of raping, torturing, shooting or nearly killing, when he came, Dan lost himself completely, but only for a few seconds. Precious moments of utter lack of control. He leant against the Russkie, legs growing weaker.

Breathless, Vadim laughed; he loved how the other lost it, lost it so hard it would even take this confident bastard a while to pull himself back together. "That's...it," good boy, he thought, with an odd familiarity despite the months between sweaty Kabul and teeth chattering mountains. He thrust hard, as if trying to crush the body, which was rigid and raw with orgasm, and came a few moments later, pressing the other's neck into his shoulder, anything to hold onto, whatever he smelt like, whatever they had done.

Vadim wanted to drink and sit down, instead listened to the shudders in the other's body, how he relaxed a little, and knew the touch wasn't welcome much beyond this. He stepped back, enough to keep the heat, pulled the scarf from his neck, wiped them quickly down, closed the coat, and found himself a rock to sit down, breathing, feeling warm and relaxed, for once. He could collapse right here and sleep. Checked his watch instead.

Dan stood upright, pulled up pants, closed trousers, pushed down shirts, vests and rags, and finally fastened the long coat over his parka. Leaning against the wall of the cave, he looked at the other man while rolling one of his last cigarettes one-handedly. "Any chance for another enemy encounter?"

Glancing up, Vadim smirked. “I’m stuck here all winter. Securing that road.” There was really only one road, an artery that needed to be protected. “Establishing some footholds.” The other knew that of course, all he did was confirm it. His very presence could only mean that. “Maybe two weeks, here?”

He couldn’t propose anything else, couldn’t show him the map, too much information. “I’ll be walking lots, you know.” He laughed. “Get my fitness up for summer. Like a training camp.”

Dan shook his head, “Shit, no. Can’t do it. Got to go back.” Wherever the fuck the ‘back’ was, nothing for the Russkie to know. After lighting the fag, he inhaled deeply, revelling in nicotine and hands that were warm; warmed by the other man’s body. Sated, he knew the desperate need would be back with a vengeance too soon. “Remember the cave on the plateau? The water hole.”

Heat, pain, hatred and mercy.

“I’ll be there next month. Three weeks, max four.” Endless miles, on foot and mule through the mountains.

Vadim grinned without humour. “Might be able to volunteer if anything comes up, but I’m stuck here. Can’t just go sightseeing in Afghanistan. I’m officer, not tourist.” Would be nice, though.

Dan huffed, a dry laugh, equally without humour. “Sightseeing is highly overrated, as impressive as the mountains are.” Impressive and deadly. He hated them—loved them. Had become part of them, the Afghan mountains were creeping into his blood and bones. Wanted to just sod his orders, simply stay, at least for a day or two, but even if he had the food with him, he couldn’t. He had his orders, impossible to defect, just for a fuck. Just?

Vadim frowned. His hand went to the pocket with the map, which had this area on it, and the part they were covering. Too much tactical information. Shit. He wanted to pull it out and show and decide on a meeting point. Didn’t think he’d walk into an ambush. The man wanted his body, not his death, not a victory won like that. But it would be treason. That was exactly the kind of information that was never supposed to fall into enemy hands. “I’ll try. You will have to be patient.”

Signs of relief ghosted across Dan’s face. Hope. Good. Perhaps another encounter. Inhaling deeply some more of the smoke, he nodded. “I’ll be there,”

shrugged, added the inevitable, “if I’m alive, of course. I’ll be there in about three weeks, can wait for two.”

“If you’re dead, no point in meeting,” murmured Vadim, then suddenly gave a grin that was not at all dark. “Listen, stir up some trouble in area. Just general area of that cave. Whatever you do, I don’t care. But it might give me excuse to investigate.” Yeah, and it entails wounding and crippling my own comrades. Then again, that was what the other man did. Where he did it, now, that was a different matter.

Dan’s dark brows rose, surprise and amusement. “Not sure if I’d want you as my comrade.” Smirked, but nodded, understanding.

“I’m Special Forces. Other soldiers think we’re scary anyway.” But no, you don’t want to be my comrade, because I might jump you at night and fuck your ass.

“Just make sure you’re not there when I raise hell.” Dan was baring his teeth in a feral grin. With death their constant companion, mocking the skeletal rider came easy. “Unless you’re into getting off with corpses.”

“Not quite there yet.” Vadim laughed. “I like fight. Corpses don’t do that.”

Dan shook his head, remembered—refused to remember, and glanced at his watch instead, gestured with his chin. “Twenty-nine minutes. Time for you to fuck off, back into your cosy little garrison.”

“I might be ten minutes late?” Vadim replied, encountering another set of raised brows.

“Despite my earlier boasting,” Dan stubbed out the fag, “I’m not up for another round. Must be the shit food and the cold, definitely not my age.” He grinned, and had the odd sensation for a moment that he felt at ease with the enemy and their fledgling banter.

Vadim patted down his BDUs, found what he was looking for, opened the pocket and tossed him one of the peanut butter bars. His lunch for the patrol.

“Cheers.” Dan caught the snack, figured it had to be one of his own, and grinned while tearing the wrapper open. “Looks familiar.” Bit off almost half of it, chewing too fast, proof of how hungry he really was.

“What about twenty minutes late?” Vadim grinned and got up, understanding. “I have five more clicks to cover—I don’t want to be in after nightfall.”

“Best get going. I got to stay here overnight. Not suicidal enough to cross the pass in the dark. So you better make sure I don’t get any visitors.” Dan shrugged, “besides, I wouldn’t go down without a fight.”

Vadim glanced around in the cave. What a lovely way to spend the night. How dangerous. “You’re scouting our position,” he murmured. “I wouldn’t attack. We are too ready. Or why are you here? Alone?”

Dan grinned, swallowing, amused by the question. “Why I’m here? Why the fuck do you think I’m here? Or do you believe I often leave scraps of coloured fabric lying around carelessly?”

Vadim checked his pockets, found a bag of nuts, wrapped up like he had just bought them on the market, kept the beef jerky because he was getting hungry, too. Offered his full water bottle, he could always thaw more snow.

Dan took nuts and water, beggars couldn’t be choosers, polishing off the energy bar before taking a few mouthfuls of the water. The peanut butter taste was still vile, but he could feel the calories kicking in, producing warmth throughout his body. He stashed the nuts in the pockets of his parka, beneath the coat, nodded his thanks while handing the bottle back before searching his bergan. “Here.” Found strips of dried and spicy meat, a handful of dates, offering them. “Not too bad, try them together.” Reminiscent of his words, back in another cave, and in the midst of summer heat.

Vadim paused, remembering himself beaten up and mentally broken, and the sweetness and spiciness. Probably too spicy for his taste, but he took some, careful not to take much. He could get more, the other...couldn’t. He hissed as the pepper or chilli kicked in, felt his mouth go dry, then water. The dates soothed it a little, and added a fruity, slightly grainy layer. It was a change from the usual chow, which was the main point to be grateful about.

“I recognised you,” Dan was chewing on some meat and dates, too, “followed you, found you, met you,” shrugged, “that’s why I’m here.”

The unknown dread up in the mountains. The faceless movements. Dan. Shit. Good he hadn’t shot wildly into the snow. And that meant the other was here for him. How fucking wrong, yet why did it affect him? The other wanted a hand job, wanted to get off, that was the main thing. Vadim, of all people, should know to what lengths men went for sex. “Yeah. That’s why I’ll be at other cave.”

“Aye,” Dan nodded, “That’s why you and I will be at the cave next month.” He turned his head, following the other’s movements, as Vadim slung the rifle back over his shoulder, still eating, but careful not to use up all of his stash.

“Safe crossing. I better get going.”

“You too, Russkie. Or as the Mudjas say ‘Allahu akhbar’, God is Great, and may he be with you.” Dan chuckled darkly, “not that I believe in any of that shit, but don’t let yourself get caught by them.”

Vadim made a rude gesture. “Fuck you, too.” He grinned, gave a mock salute, put the hat back on and left.

Dan was still laughing when the other was out of sight, surprising himself once again at the ease he felt. Almost comfortable, something insanely sane about the banter and if he weren’t so freezing cold, forced to survive a night with temperatures plummeting well into the minus double-figures, he’d spend some energy thinking about it.

As he was unable to start a fire with the garrison so close and patrols in the mountains, he set up as best he could in the furthest corner. Thawed snow in his canteen, kept nuts and food close, and curled up. Burrowed into his coat with a blanket wrapped around him, used whatever he had for insulation, his AKM clutched in his hands.

Sleeping despite the freezing cold. Dreaming of heat and sweat, muscles and strength, and the salty taste of the Russian’s skin.

1982 Chapter 8—High Altitude

April 1982, Afghanistan

Spring, birds chirping, trees blooming, baby rabbits hopping across fresh green lawns, daintily sniffing at daffodils.

Yeah, right. Dan was sneering at the mental image he'd been amusing himself with for the last two hours while cleaning his guns for the umpteenth time.

Spring. Bloody spring in this goddamned shithole and snow was still covering most of the mountains. Granted, the plateau was fairly clear from the white crap that was pissing him off to heaven and hell after almost six months of trudging through this shit, but the nights were still freezing. The cold was ten times worse than the heat had been last time he'd been in that cave.

Spring. April. Nineteen-bloody-eighty-bloody-two, and it felt like eons ago since he'd carved a word into bleeding flesh, sealing his fate by setting the path that would lead him back to this place, waiting. Day after day, approaching the tenth. He'd be waiting until he couldn't hold off his orders any longer, bound by his duties as much as the other man.

Day after day. Shooting small animals, skinning, roasting, eating. Shitting in a faraway corner, pissing the water back out that came cold and fresh from the well that still sported the Russian's blood in his imagination. There, the construction that held the bucket; the beam he'd tied the man to. Dan was watching, waiting, cleaning his weapons and exercising, but most of all observing the mountains. Alone with his thoughts, content with himself.

Sleeping, dreaming, never of anything other than sweat and heat, touch and need.

Watching. Waiting. Wanting.

* * *

The weather was mild enough to sleep outside, and Vadim didn't mind anymore, didn't mind the country, or the stress and didn't mind mountain warfare. He did mind the deaths. Remembered Platon, good for a dozen fucks, perverse the fact that the kid had been so young and so scared, the contrast of their bodies

nearly the best thing about it; bony, slender, a sleek creature with good bones, good features. Had been trip number 30, one-and-a-half medals, for courage, in what the Soviet Army called a 'road war,' fighting for streets and passage, and mobility.

Rifle shot to the throat, Platon had bled out before any medic could reach him.

The driver had been gloomy during winter, so gloomy that Vadim had bitchslapped him, several times, told him to get his act together, but Platon had said he'd die. Had been right. Hadn't shaved before his trips, no hand shaking, no photos, and still dead. Black tulips.

Vadim couldn't linger, didn't want to. He and Platon had been 'friends', the kid sometimes rested on his shoulder, looking like a father-son thing. Vadim doubted anybody knew their physical ease with each other had been earned at night. Platon had got into his mind, a little, maybe because the first time he had been so scared, begged him not to hurt him, offered anything not to be hurt. Vadim had been too calm and rational, he actually didn't do it as he originally intended, thought of the Brit and their meetings in Kabul, and thought, fuck. He had taught Platon how he liked to be touched, did the whole thing, jerking each other off, but Platon didn't get into cocksucking. Too nervous. Vadim had fucked his thighs for weeks and jerked him off before he actually fucked him, and he'd been 'careful', and got the other to relax and enjoy it. Never quite like Gavriil, who was still stationed somewhere in Kabul, but actually the very first conscript with some guts despite his age. Guts enough to treat him just like another soldier, no fear of the invincible, indestructible Spetsnaz. Kids and fools know no fear.

Vadim had written the letter home, what a hero Platon had been, how much his comrades respected him, heart and soul of his unit, and had wanted to scream in rage, go off into the mountains and kill everything that moved, pile bodies up just to feel better. He was oddly, darkly, relieved he hadn't raped the kid, not like he could have. Okay, he hadn't left him much of an option, but that was better than it could have been.

He sent the letter off and kept his own council. Platon's friends thought he was one of them, but he didn't take any bullshit from them about consolation. He wasn't that young anymore, and never been that innocent. He'd been the father-figure of one conscript who had been fascinated with the Special Forces. End of story.

He'd pulled strings to get to the cave, to check out dushman movements, alone, because hiding one man was easier. He'd been careful, thought things through. Platon, and the gloomy, hopeless thing they'd had. Platon who'd said he felt safe with him, Vadim who had joked that he could kill him in a heartbeat. Or rather, not joked.

Guided by the latest intelligence, Vadim went with a convoy, then began the long march, slept when he could, always defenceless the moment his mind slipped away.

Once, in the middle of the night, there was a blinding pain in his head, then a deeper kind of darkness.

The next time he woke up, it was to kicks and punches, his hands twisted, and curses in Pashto, or some other language. He still could only order tea. He had a rag over his head, his nose and eyes felt swollen. The bag was wet. They were trying to scare him, scare him by restricting his oxygen. He breathed, calm, forced his mind to acknowledge he'd been taken in his sleep, in the middle of nowhere.

They hit him, hit him often, rifle butts, it felt like, mostly against his back and shoulders, his chest. He did as expected, cringed like a worm that was being stomped upon—no faking, he meant it.

They didn't speak Russian, or English, but they must have worked out he was an officer, or the pain in the night would have been a bullet. They'd take him somewhere where they could cut the knowledge out of him. He had no idea how many they were, he heard definitely more than two voices. Didn't give a fuck, plotted, worked on his escape when they tired of hitting him. Calculating, assessing his chances, while he did what they forced him to do, and that was march.

Vadim roughly calculated the direction in which they took him as north, judging from the way they bowed to Mecca five times a day. He could peek through the rag when he pulled the cloth with his lips to a patch that was thinned out, saw shadows. That was enough.

North. Closer to Kabul again, not south, toward Pakistan. They probably meant to bring him to the Panjir. Which was amazingly bad news. He didn't want to come face to face with the warlords there.

He planned to make a run for it, but the bastards were careful and thorough, and his hopes sank. They kept him short on water and food, probably didn't have

much themselves, and underestimated the amount of water that a body like his needed. They were creatures of leather, these mountain people.

Eventually, they rested during midday, and Vadim collapsed onto his knees, breathing hard, dizzy, throat parched. There, ‘salaams,’ greetings. Another voice. They seemed at ease. Had met up with another group? Probably yes.

Vadim focused on breathing, listening. If he listened carefully he might recognize place names, names of people. But then. The voice. Pashto.

A deceptively soft voice, with a melody he recognized. Dan? What the fuck? His head snapped up, he tried again to work on the rope around his wrists. They let him drink like an animal, the rope never came off.

The voice continued, talking slower than the locals, but fluently. Then silence, shuffling, the rustle of papers, and several voices together, debating. It had to be his captors, then, who spoke with determination. “No.” In Pashto.

* * *

Smooth-talking, the rifle slung carelessly across Dan’s back, cajoling, trying to bribe with words and explanations, showing the letter that gave him authority, and arguing the prisoner should be his. He should take the Russian soldier to the warlord, but they refused. No.

Theirs. Not his. Wrong warlord, wrong place, wrong religion and wrong race. Dan remained silent, shielding his eyes with hair and dark brows while glancing at the barely conscious figure on its knees. The Russkie. *His* Russkie. His cunt.

Vadim could have been hewn from stone, didn’t move a muscle as he heard the voice, knew for a fact it was him. The voices sounded agitated, these weren’t Dan’s insurgents, Afghanistan and its fucking factions, one warlord hating the other, one race the other, ethnic groups as incompatible as predators and prey.

“I understand.” Dan finally answered. In Pashto again, nodding and seemingly acquiescent. “The Soviet officer is yours. Take him to your warlord. He is your responsibility. I will be on my way.” A shuffle of boots on the bare rocks and Dan turned to leave. “Dasvidaniya.”

Goodbye? It hit Vadim like a grenade, everything he’d gathered, thoughts, willpower, strength, suddenly burst into splinters.

He fought, got up, got two strides in, then heard them shout and again the rifles butts, until he couldn't move but squirm on the ground, choking on his tears. Hoped to fuck the SAS guy would move up higher into the mountains, take aim and shoot him from there.

He had no voice, no breath, no strength to shout that after him, instead focused on curling up against the vicious blows. They did what he would have done to a prisoner. All's fair in war. He had been taken. Nothing he could do about it now. Maybe there was an opportunity later. Vadim waited, waited for the one blow to the head that would be a big calibre slug going right through it.

Fuck Afghanistan.

* * *

Dan walked away, barely able to control the tension. Fuck. Fucking Russkie, but fuck those goat-herders even more. Trust the Russian cunt to act like a brainless idiot, attacking the Mudjas with a hood on his head.

The plan had been forming in his mind while checking location, opponents and chances during their conversation. He'd tried with words, but in the end, fire and steel would do it again.

He couldn't have shot them, not then and there. Not three at the same time. Besides, his ammo and rifle were rare in the mountains. Too dangerous to be tracked and found out, Dan, the foreigner, the Westerner and infidel, the man who came to help and who turned out to be a traitor? No fucking way. All he could have done—was what he did. To have his presence acknowledged by uttering the Russian greeting, and to listen and watch the beating.

Hours passed; Dan remained carefully hidden behind an outcrop of rocks where he had stashed his bergan long before the three insurgents had arrived, taking their captured prize to the water. He'd noticed them from miles away, those damned natives would never learn to be stealth fighters. Now watching, waiting again, still for the same man, but this time the stakes had been upped and a whole new deck of cards had been handed to the very few players. Hearts or spades; he'd take the cocks instead.

Dusk fell, and Dan was ready to go, watching the group around the fire. The prisoner—still with his head covered—slumped, more dead than alive. It

would get fucking cold soon, was well below freezing, but he counted on the Russian and his physical strength. He'd make it, he'd done it before.

Finally, one of the Mudjas stood up, left the fire, rolled up in his coat and a blanket, close to the Russian. They camped towards the edge of the cave, for some reason avoiding the darkness at the back.

Damn. Dan frowned. None of the other two started to move, the bastards continued to sit and talk. He noticed the Russkie's head fall forwards and his body slump, and Dan knew he couldn't wait any longer. Bad sign. He was betting on dehydration and weakness, maybe shock due to extensive bruising. A few more hours and the Russian would be useless for what he needed him for.

Dan climbed out of his hiding place between the rocks, and started to make his way in, tortuously slow belly-crawling towards the cave, took the long way round from the back, until finally, after what seemed an eternity, came close enough to touch the Russkie. He was hidden in the shadows, shielded by the other's body and the cold, moonless night. Darkness. His friend.

"Silence." In Russian, whispered into Vadim's ear the moment his hand clasped over the hood, judging where the mouth should be.

* * *

Vadim jerked awake again. He had started to dream something, couldn't bear waiting anymore, had been sweating and nervous about the fucking bullet that never came, now felt something touch his face, restricting his breath. Could feel himself shudder, slowly shifted his weight, moved his hands, yes, reached out with his fingers, almost numb as they were, tried to touch, tried to understand whether it was Dan and whether he'd come to kill or free him. He nodded.

Dan felt the nod, those fingers moved, sensed the tension in a body he was getting to know as well as his own. "Wait. Don't move." Breathed into the other's ear.

Vadim touched Dan's thigh, needed to calm himself, needed that touch, full stop. Wait. What if, whatever Dan planned, went wrong? What if he started to hope he'd be free and then it wouldn't happen. Fuck.

Dan's hand slid slowly off the hood, froze at a shuffle and a sound right beside him where one of the Mudjas was asleep. Remained absolutely still until he

was sure the man had settled back to sleep. Heard the other two talking over near the fire. Good. His hand crept to his back and touched the sheath that housed his knife. He'd only have one go at it, and it had to be silent.

Moving again, barely visible increments in the darkness, until the shape of the sleeping man became clearer. There. Head, neck, shoulders. Throat. It was quick. Swift movement, flash of the blade and the razor-sharp assault knife cut through tendons, trachea and part of the spinal chord, almost severing the vertebrae. Death. Silent, except for a faint gurgle, and swift. No agony, just death. Nameless. Shapeless. Meaningless.

The two others were still talking. Dan waited. Watched, back to the old game of patience, cleaned the blade on the Mudja's coat before silently sliding back, once more to the Russian. Cutting through the knot that tied the hood to the other's head. "Do you function?" Toneless whisper directly into the ear.

Vadim nodded, could smell the blood over his own smell of fear and pain. "Positive," he breathed, raised his hands a little to present the rope, wrists pushed apart. His ribs were alright, he was only hurting, not seriously wounded. He hoped. No, he'd have noticed that.

The hood slid over Vadim's face, was silently discarded, the knife severed the rope between his wrists, while Vadim's eyes got used to the starlight again, the reflection of fire. The darkness was gone, he could see. His left eye twitched, it was pretty badly swollen, but his sight was decent.

A steadying hand appeared between the Russian's shoulder blades, applying a firm pressure. "See the Mudjas?"

Vadim nodded, rubbing his wrists, spread his fingers, checked whether all tendons were good, stretched his legs, too, slowly shifted into a crouch. He was hurting, but his body geared up for the kill.

Dan moved, everything agonisingly slow, silent, got the second knife out, pushing it into the other's hand. "Blade's shorter." Figured it was all the Russkie needed to know. "I take the right. You the left."

Vadim nodded, assumed the dushmans would be blinded by the fire, would much prefer his pistol, his rifle, or a garrotte, take one prisoner and torture the life out of him. His lips moved into a feral snarl, the hatred pushed pain and exhaustion to the side, grew and surged. He shifted his weight, began to move in a circle, to flank and strike and kill.

Dan moved into the opposite direction—silent progress; silent attack. His second kill was as swift as the first. Painless, except for the moment of terror in his victim, when the blade entered the body, sliced and severed, taking the man from life to death. He was pushing the dying body to the ground, when a sudden frenzy of motion and sound caught his attention.

Vadim appeared right out of the darkness. Up to the last heartbeat, he didn't know whether he'd only wound or kill, but he was in a bad state, mentally most of all, and there was nothing he wanted to know, so he just made the bastard grin and gurgle, and hacked the knife into the body, down through the shoulder, again, and again, kicking him, hitting him. The knife went in and in, blood splattering into his face, on his chest. The rage tore free. He wanted to reduce that body to nothing. Minced meat. He screamed with rage and anger and pain, all the fear came out, the pressure, Platon. Kept the knife but went to his knees again, exhausted, pain throbbing in his face and chest and shoulders.

Dan stood, motionless. He didn't have a fucking clue what was going on in that madman's mind. He cleaned the knife before he pushed it back into its sheath. "He's dead. You can stop now." He shook his head, looked at the mutilated, still twitching corpse in disbelief. "Talk about overkill. You Russians are fucking weirdoes."

Vadim stared at the ground. Thought for a second he'd break down, but he just breathed through the parched, raw throat. Wanted to scream more, wanted to cut the bastard open and see his guts gather dust on the ground. Breathed. He slowly extended a hand towards sanity, pulled himself out of this state that wasn't healthy, wasn't sane, looked up to the other, not quite comprehending, moved a couple yards to get to his pack, his gear that the dushmans had brought along.

He found his canteen and poured the water down his throat, swallowed, felt he could never drink enough to not be thirsty, but gave his stomach a few moments to deal with the water. "Hate those bitches..."

"I can tell." Dan replied, wiped his hands, hardly any blood on them. He'd been professional, cold, felt somewhat disturbed at the other man's reaction. His breath curling in front of his face, he bent down, rifling through one of the corpses' clothes and bags. "We need to get rid of them. Enemy warlord, all that crap. Make it believable." Most of the stuff was useless tat. Prayer beads, Arabic writing, Koran. He didn't want any of that. "And get washed up."

“Can help you carry. Ravine? Or bury them.” Hard work to bury here, with just stones. But yes, Vadim didn’t want to attract buzzards. He drank more, poured water into his hand to wash his face, noticed the cuts burned, the bruises that hurt when he touched them.

Not a pretty sight. He stood, swaying on his feet, wiped the knife and tugged it into the empty sheath in the small of his back.

“That was my knife.” Dan raised his brows while rifling through the last of the corpses. He threw anything incriminating into the fire.

Vadim grinned. “Past tense.” Always good for a grammatical joke.

Dan shrugged. “Ravine. There’s one close by.” He shook his head at the Russkie’s unsteadiness. “Forget it.” The fire gave enough light for a few steps, he’d get the bodies out of sight, to be disposed of in the morning. “Get the gore off you, I’ll do the rest. It’s fucking cold and I could do with some body heat.”

Vadim staggered over to the water hole, pulled water up, then undressed to wash. He was getting sick of his own stench; uniform, everything dirty, grimy, bloody, just being alive had meant crawling through dirt and getting dirtier by the minute. He hated the stubble in his face, his hair was too long, too, he wanted to get shaved and clean. He began to wash away blood and sweat, and kept washing. He would have loved a bath, sauna, or an extended swim because nothing else made him feel so clean.

Dan trotted off with the first body across his shoulders to drop it behind a rock formation with smaller boulders nearby. It would have to do. Now he had to wash the blood off the plateau before the sun brought out the stench.

After washing his uniform, Vadim spread it out over rocks, hoping to catch some warmth the next day, then wrapped himself in one of the wool blankets that were smelly and scratchy, and watched Dan carry the corpses while he sat near the fire, soaking up warmth and trying to wind down.

Dan threw buckets of water across the rock until he was satisfied it was clean enough until dawn when he could take a proper look. He stripped out of parka, tunic and shirt, and started to wash himself. Blood on his clothes, mainly from the butchered one.

“Thought you’d shoot me.”

Dan turned his head, shivering in the freezing cold. "I had to let you know it was me. Had to use Russian. Couldn't use anything else without raising suspicion."

"Yeah, makes sense." Vadim clung to the canteen, drank more water, could feel his body soak it up.

Unlacing his boots, Dan stepped out of them, the socks, then finally the trousers. Freezing his arse off, teeth chattering. Cold water and steaming breath, a bloody uncomfortable combination, but he had to wash whatever he could.

"Been waiting ten days." He was cleaning his cock, shrunk into itself in the cold, the usual attention on the foreskin, his back to the Russian.

Vadim glanced at the ass in the light of the fire, saw the dark arms, bowed neck, and he smiled, lips swollen, dry, cracked, but he smiled.

"Colour me surprised when you came with company." Dan turned round and smirked, drying himself with his shirt.

"Not sure company's the word," Vadim murmured and forced himself to not look towards the bodies. He touched his face. "Not exactly great fans of my masculine beauty, those three."

"You'll look even worse in the morning."

"Thanks." Vadim shook his head, looked up when the other came close, crouched down and studied him in the fire, the embers prepared to last the night. Found it hard to answer that gaze. The Brit had risked his life, saved it, most likely, again, and Vadim felt a shudder course through his body. Somehow, the other always ended up with the upper hand in these mountains.

"Makes a change. It's not my fault." Dan prodded the Russian to shift and let him under the blankets. It was cold. He was freezing. If he didn't get warm he could be dead by the morning. Necessity.

Vadim let the other have the space he'd been heating up, naked himself. Wanted to touch him, wasn't sure what he wanted, wasn't sure it was sex, not quite sure he could be horny after this, too tired, no, shaken, wanted to lie there and stare at the sky. He lay on his back, stretched his legs out, raised his hands to look at the wrists. They'd look less raw in a few days, feel less tender. "No, not your fault," he murmured, belatedly. "For once, eh?"

"Aye, for once." Dan let out a sound of pure pleasure when he felt the heat seep into his skin. Stretched out, then turned onto his side. Comfortable, the ground

padded with some insulation the Mudjas had left. Dark eyes studying pale skin as he rested his head on his elbow. “Didn’t mean for this to happen.” Dan paused, felt this odd sensation of...guilt. “Had no idea they were in this area. Too many fucking tribes and warlords.”

Vadim dropped his hands behind his back, elbows shielding his face while he fought the twitch in his face. He should be able to deal with it, had been strong all the time. The last hours, though, while he had waited for the bullet, they had got to him. Nodded, inhaled deeply, then opened the elbows and rested the back of his head on his crossed arms. “My fault. Not paranoid enough.” Too tired. Too defeated.

Dan reached out, his hand rested on the other’s abs, under the blankets. Felt heat creep from the skin, feeding it back again. “How long did they have you? You look like you’ve had a fair few beatings at least.”

Vadim looked down at his body, tensed the muscle to keep that weight there, nice and snug. “Two days. Like weekend with in-laws, eh?” He tried a smile. “Bad food, and they hate you.”

Nodding, Dan’s eyes narrowed, he could imagine what it had been like. “I don’t take kindly to those who try to take away from me what is mine.”

Quietly, surprising himself, then falling silent, moving even closer until skin was pressed against skin, sharing every ray of heat.

Vadim turned his head, gave a smile, wanted to put an arm around the other, like he’d done with Platon, winced at the thought, but then, it was about warmth, right?

“I’d take your mind off it,” Dan murmured, “if you think I’d be successful. Feel all the shit was kind of my fault, even though you followed your cock, like I predicted. But fuck, so do I. Every time.”

Vadim didn’t want to think about it, his face pulsed and hurt, and he reached out to the canteen and drank more, needed to get more water down to make up for what he’d lost. “All’s fair in war, eh?” He turned, facing the other, pulled one arm from under his head and pushed it under Dan’s head, hand to the back of his head, pulling him closer, close enough for a kiss, wanted to rest against the other’s chest and thought how fucking stupid, no way could he get one of those from the Brit, he wasn’t a child anymore. He didn’t need this.

Resistance in Dan's body, sudden tension and surprise at the closeness. Forced himself to relax slightly, nestled-cradled in the other's arms. Strange. Wrong.

Confusing.

Vadim released him, cursed himself for trying to get that close. "Ah, fuck. Take my mind off it. Fuck me. Whatever. Get me tired."

"Fuck you?" Dan shifted, looked straight at the Russian, trying to figure out if he'd lost his marbles or had just been simply fucking crazy all along. "Does that mean you meant that, a month ago?"

"Yeah, that's...what I meant." Vadim swallowed, closed his eyes, felt embarrassed. He had offered again. Seemed he had to finally accept the fact that he wanted the other to fuck him.

Dan frowned. "How can you want that. That...thing."

"Because it feels good," Vadim murmured. "I...like it. I'd have to tell you how to do it, and we'd need something like...oil, but I like getting fucked." His jaw muscles tensed. "Not often. Not by...you know. In army. Can't allow that."

Dan remained silent. Brows furrowing, thinking. Hard and long, trying to figure it out. Those Mudjas already forgotten. Corpses. Starting to rot. No space nor time nor feelings for those who were gone. No thoughts for the dead, rarely for the living.

"If you like it, and I guess you don't mean the way you did it to me, then why do you rape men? Plural," Dan snorted, "Don't think I was nor am the only one." He frowned, tried to get his head around the concept. "I don't get it. You doing it for the power? If not, for what else?"

Vadim inhaled deeply. "I...don't take no for answer," he murmured. "I want them, and I know I can't have them that way, so I force them. I don't want...anything long, just get rid of pressure. It's not always like that, it's risk every time, but..." Platon. He had been getting somewhere else with that one. Platon had been resigned to the fact, had acquiesced, even understood, just somehow got his head around it.

"And getting fucked? Power again, but in reverse?"

"Somebody fucking me...I don't know. It just feels good. Drives me insane. It's...different. Gets me deeper than other way. You know. Gets...under my skin." Of course deeper. What a shit way to describe it.

Dan's hand moved along the abs, slid lower. "I understand power, need, not taking no for an answer, but I don't get it the other way round." He paused, "I'd fucking kill you if you tried to fuck me." His fingers tensing on the other's groin.

Vadim smirked, took the hand and held it there, for a long moment, looked into the other's eyes. "Did you ever fuck a woman's ass? I know men who do that. Heard it's not that different. I...wouldn't know."

Dan nodded, hovering between a grin and a frown. "Fucking bitches were hard to convince, wouldn't give up their precious holes. Was rarely worth the effort." Especially that last one, stupid giggling bimbo in her pink thong.

Vadim moved closer, murmuring into the other's ear. "I heard guys are tighter, though, much tighter than women can offer. And I'd be lot more willing, too." The prospect aroused him, getting the other to do it. "You don't have to go gentle, or stop. All I'm asking is your hand around my cock, so I can cum."

Dan tensed, every muscle telling the story in his mind, drawn to the prospect of willingness, anger, power, unleashed strength of a body that could take it. "You...bitch." Murmured, breathless, addicted before the poison had been injected. "I don't understand why the fuck you want it, but I don't fucking care."

His body had decided before he'd made a conscious decision. Wanted this. No holds barred. Bastard. "Your arse, my cock. Makes a change."

Vadim inhaled again, but yes, he wanted that, wanted the other to try and fuck him, hard, preferably, a fast, intense fuck that would take his mind off dying. "Yes. I'll be tight. Didn't have guy like that for what, five years? Already that long." He released the other's hand, allowed it to roam free, his hands on the Brit's pecs, running down to the stomach, dead set on sex now, mostly as an alternative to something he couldn't have, and what did it matter anyway?

Hands ran down to the groin, then moved on the ground to get his lips around the other's cock. Only to get him interested enough to perform.

Dan's detached bemusement at the movement south soon turned into straightforward want. "Shit." Where he'd been interested before, now he was demanding. "Don't you need some...stuff? You're a cunt, but..." couldn't continue, too much friction and heat, "...but you don't drip."

Vadim pulled back. "Yeah. Oil would be good. You got any? Those bandits took my kit, need to check what I have. Gun oil would do." He paused, feeling his hackles rise.

“Gun oil...” Dan lifted his head, looked down at the shape beneath the blankets, saw the face that looked like a butchered mess. Smirked, an unpleasant expression. Gun oil. Remembered. The smell, the feel and the disbelief. “Guess it’s been tried and tested.” Reached for his bergan, right beside his head, rummaged in one of the outer pockets and produced the bottle. “You want to get fucked?” His cock jumped against the Russkie’s battered face. “You apply that stuff yourself since you’ve got experience.”

Vadim’s brow darkened, but yes, at least it would be enough oil that way. He opened the bottle, poured the stuff into his hand, much like he had done back then, could feel his heart pulse, hard, against his ribs. Shit. Did he really...yes. Reaching behind himself, he rubbed the stuff between his cheeks, pushed a finger into the ring, didn’t look at the other as he did that, slicking himself up like a whore, whatever, used more oil, pushed more in, made sure it was enough.

The smell. Dan’s nostrils flared. Memory. Two years ago. Kabul. Heat. Night. Pain and terror, disbelief. And above all the pungent smell of gun oil. He watched every movement and something inside of him was growing restless, awakening. Something that made him snarl and bare his teeth when the other poured more oil into his palm and reached for Dan’s cock, oiling him nice and slow, tip to balls. He had never fucked a man. Never been sober when fucking a woman’s arse, and rarely been less than pissed when he’d been ramming his cock into a willing cunt.

Never as willing as *this* cunt. He felt tension strumming through his body, each muscle ready, electrified, wanting to attack. Slaughter and kill; on the battle field, and...

Gun oil.

Vadim rolled onto his side, presenting his back. While he wanted it, he was also suddenly nervous, after all, what the fuck, how could he trust him that much; yeah, he’d saved his life, not taken it several times, thought he should be safe, better than any soldier of his side.

“No.” Dan shoved against the other’s back. “No fucking way. I’ve never fucked any cunt’s arse other than on all fours. I won’t fuck yours either.”

Vadim glanced over his shoulder. Just lift that leg and do it. He inhaled, slowly, breathed the anger away. The other wanted him like he’d do his bitches, bent over like an animal. Too close for a moment to saying ‘forget it’. He rolled

onto his hands and knees, body tense because he was helpless now, needed all limbs to support his weight, flanks open, cock easily attacked, and his muscles coiled. Cold. “Relax,” he murmured, meaning more the other than himself, but it was appropriate, too much so.

Hiding his surprise when the Russkie acquiesced, Dan got onto his own knees, threw the blankets haphazardly over their bodies, preserving some of the heat, never mind how much he’d produce. Sneered at the sight of the kneeling Russian. Arse, spread. Body, covered in bruises. Hole, slick with gun oil, like a cunt. A real cunt. This fucking bastard of a raping fucking Russian cunt. Dan growled in the back of his throat, kneeling behind him, taking hold of a flank, the other stroking his own cock. “Relax, aye. Like you should have told me to, you bastard.”

Gun oil. Flesh. And a muzzle against his head.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t want this, bitch.” No preliminaries, for neither. Dan treated the man like a pussy, guided, found, pushed relentlessly, half-breached the muscle, sneered, “Don’t ever cry rape, cunt!” Used all his body strength, seized the other’s hips with both hands, bit down on his tongue and rammed his cock viciously into that arse. No mercy. Bastard. Groaned and started to fuck like a motherfucking piston.

Vadim’s body tensed, unexpected, completely unexpected, should have known, fuck, the force hurt less than the words. He was strong enough to take it, a massive invading thing, like a fist to the guts, his body rushed into stress, fear, unexpected, coiling like he was getting beaten up again. Hadn’t meant this, had wanted something else, and still, the invasion worked. Worked in sickening ways, hit him where he hadn’t expected it, wondered if that was what had made Platon accept it, a deep, sickening pleasure that had no place here and still existed. He’d wanted this, asked for it, and the other only took him up on it, but this wasn’t lust, not passion, this was something entirely dark. And still.

Vadim groaned, suppressed the sounds after that, just breathed, forced himself to accept the humiliation, needed all his strength to move back, greet the thing he should run away from, should try to escape, but in some way it was what his body wanted now. Something inside, something that tried so hard to break him could make him forget. Pushed back, face twisted, as if he was in pain, and he was, in several ways, and still. Touched him right there, the force told him it was alright,

he could agree to this, a force he couldn't muster now by himself and merely had to take and endure.

Dan fucked with all his strength. At first hatred, revenge, with every thrust forcing his cock into the other's body. Invading, punishing each time his hips crushed against that arse. Muscles against muscles, body against body, and man against man.

But he didn't come. Couldn't. Not in the middle of anger, neither in taking his revenge, brutalising the body at his mercy. The body that could still turn the table and rape him again; that could kill him as much as he could kill in return.

Dan groaned again, sounds torn from his chest; eyes fixed on the body that fought without seeming to fight. Matching strength with strength and taking the impossible force despite being so beaten-up.

Anger and thrusts slowing, hands taking over, roaming. Closer, ever closer to release with every time he drove forward, pulled back out of tightness and oil-slicked heat, only to bury himself even deeper into this damned willing body that refused to give in, that just took, accepted, but still with that same strength. Impressed despite himself, in return his hands impressing, subconsciously avoiding bruises, clutching flesh, kneading muscle.

Vadim closed his eyes as he felt the shift, that... impossible shift that happened with Dan, like the moment of truth when it had all been the other way round. He understood, suddenly, physically, understood, and he would have fought the touches, but they were good now, now that the other touched him, really did, on purpose, took his cock that was straining despite the pain, despite the force and because of it.

Dan was finding his own rhythm. Hand and strokes and arse and cock and body. Cruelty turned into aggression; revenge into lust. Fucked him, took him, wanted him. "My..." so close, fucking close to coming, "my cunt."

Vadim fell into the rhythm, fluid, body became one, wasn't his anymore, was the other's, his mind fell into a place where everything was calm, serene, and quiet, like under the surface of an ocean. He wanted to reach behind and knew he couldn't shift his weight that much, instead tensed his ass, moved into the hand, completely taking what was offered, given. No better knowledge, no humiliation, he existed in the right time, place, and circumstances. Everything felt more right than it had been for ages, something like fifteen years. Or about two.

For Dan, nothing was swift nor negligent this time. Unlike the hand jobs, the biting, the quick and angry encounters. Anger, too, but a physical one, discarding the mental resentment. Thrusts in sync, riding the new-found rhythm, hard and relentless, inherently smooth. Cock, hand, bodies, all one, all rushing towards release, until the sensation of tightness became overwhelming. The last few thrusts were erratic, even harder, desperate. Crashed over the edge, suddenly, brutally, letting out sounds that bore no meaning. Dan was shuddering, gripped by a body and by release.

Vadim pushed up until the last moment, couldn't quite come, Dan came and Vadim loved that, loved the despair in it, the way the other lost it, but he himself couldn't quite get there, not physically, so shifted his weight, splayed the fingers of his left hand wider, felt his shoulder groan as he reached for his cock and pumped it, hard and fast, just as brutal as Dan had done. Came without a second thought, groaning, head lowered, neck tense, whole body taut, the wet sticky hand returning to its place to support his weight, but he couldn't hold it, just dropped to the ground, panting hard, slick with sweat.

Dan was too dazed to notice much, just the sounds and the scent of cum overpowering even the gun oil. Cock far from softening yet, but slipping out when the body under him collapsed. Didn't think, just seized blankets, threw them over sweat, sperm, oil and heat, and let himself fall down beside the other, rolling onto his back. Breathing. Heartbeat racing and aftershocks still shaking his body.

Vadim was on his stomach, hands just near his body, shoulders couldn't take any more twisting, any more abuse. Body burning, like embers, to ashes, burning out, cooling, like the sweat on his body. His ass hurt in a strange way, good at any rate, but nobody had done it like that... more care, more respect, tenderness, this was not what people did to him, but what he did, and he could feel a strange thing, like being vulnerable, exposed, much worse than a stretched throat under a knife. Deeper.

Dan closed his eyes, wasn't thinking. Existing. Sated. Breathing, just breathing, more than merely physically content. Hand sought out the other's body, rested somewhere on sweat and oil slicked skin. Said nothing for a long while, eyes closed.

Vadim didn't know what to make of the touch apart from remaining there, close to sleep, but not falling into it. Something inside was racing, and thinking,

realizing things. He liked the pain. He did like it. He wanted this, had wanted it, from start to finish. He pressed his eyes shut. Damn you.

Dan started to move at last, braved his way out of the heat beneath the blankets, hissing at the sudden shock of cold. Walked to the bucket, the rag that the other had used, washed himself before tending to the fire, and taking the freshly wrung rag and the bucket back to where the Russian was lying.

“Here.” Set them down beside the other, crawled once more under the blankets. Felt odd. Almost protective. Possessive, as if he had to take care, now, as if by naming the nameless he had made it his. His cunt. His Russian.

His...if only the fuck he knew what.

“Yeah, thanks.” Vadim sat up, one sticky mess, cleaned up, the sweat first, felt his body deal with the shock Dan had dealt it, muscles coiling, testing if he was alright. He was. Washed himself, shifted away from the wet spot that cooled now, moved closer, relaxed now and still... something inside him gnawing on the problem. “Worked for me,” he said, hardly more than breathing.

“I guessed that.” Dan answered, lying on his side, facing the other. Not a hint of the earlier nastiness in his voice. “Not sure if I get it, but I guess it doesn’t matter.” One-sided shrug, reaching again to the bergan, pulling his headscarf out, draping it over the wet spot. “You were right, though.”

Vadim acknowledged the scarf and settled, lying on his back, feeling his body hot and relaxing, stretched out, arms behind his head again. “Right? About me being tight?” He looked to the side, irony in his eyes.

“Aye,” Dan nodded, shuffled closer. Preserving body heat. “That, and the other thing. Your body. It can take more. Fucking amazing.” Pulled his face into a grin while reaching behind his back to search for one of the energy bars. Found peanut butter and strawberry, dropped the first in front of the Russian’s face, started on the latter. “Can’t break you. Didn’t know a fuck could be so mind-blowing.”

“Break me?” Vadim gave a dry laugh, while his skin crawled. You can’t break me because I enjoy it. Breaking would mean pain, more pain than I can take, but this was all good, too good, getting off on the brutal force and what would have reduced most people to tears.

“Aye.” Dan was chewing in the back of Vadim’s neck, grinning. “Breaking, as in girly bimbo china doll and I got to be careful. With you I don’t. You can take it.”

“I’m Spetsnaz. Of course I can. I like it rough.” Understatement of the year. Vadim took the bar, glad he could do something with his hands. “Quite different, eh?” Just shut up, Vadim, and think. Don’t let him know too much. Know more than he already did? Hardly possible.

“Different to girls. Better.” Dan bit off another piece, savoured the sticky sweetness. “Even though I wanted to hurt you at first. Really hurt you.” Swallowed, shrugged, “that changed.”

Vadim drew a shuddering breath. I know, he thought. If you’d had a knife, you’d have cut me open just to see your cock come out the other side. He closed his eyes briefly. “I guess...you understand something about me now.” How much I want to hurt, and break, and what I felt for you when I made you my victim.

Dan’s chewing stopped all of a sudden, even forgot to swallow. “Bull’s eye.” Quietly, no inflexion. That one had gone straight in and to the core. He finally swallowed that last bite, remaining silent for a long time, so close to the other’s body they almost touched. Pathetic that token space between them. “I don’t know if you want to get fucked as ‘payment’ for what you’ve done, but whatever it is, I don’t want it.”

“Not payment. Not...making...not changing it. I want it because it feels good.” Vadim answered. Because I can lose myself and don’t have to fight. Shivered with the touch, a good way, intense again, but not sexual. They’d had that. Something close, but not the same thing.

Dan crossed the minute distance, said nothing. Body touching body and skin to skin. Voice barely more than a murmur, his intensity needed no volume. “Don’t fuck me again.”

“I’d kill to have you, still same, I’d lie if I made any promises,” murmured Vadim.

Dan nodded, forehead lightly hitting the back of the other’s head in the movement. “OK. The rules are clear. You’d kill for my arse, I’d kill you for my arse. I can live with that.” Too sated to get riled up about anything. His hand coming up to rest on the other’s hip. Had done it before, almost two years ago. Almost as close as he had been when inside that body—or closer?

Vadim chose not to mention how good it could feel and that things could be quite different, if he chose to make them different. “Rules...rules are good.” He laid back, turned on his side and felt the other closer than strictly necessary for preserving heat. It worked fine. Naked bodies. Wool.

Dan yawned. Tired now, exhausted and physically content. “Will check your bruises tomorrow.”

“I’ll be stiff, but nothing serious,” murmured Vadim. “Bones are fine. We did check that.” He gave a toneless laugh. He wanted to reach out and touch, felt good now, better, body realizing it was over, and there was no more danger, no more things to defend against.

That man was like a tropical thunderstorm, he thought. The very heart of thunderstorms, not the rumble and flash, but a proper, all-encompassing, world-will-end thunderstorm. Even better when it had ended.

Another yawn, and Dan burrowed even closer, without thinking. A body, heat. Touching. He fell asleep in an instant. Rifle close by, knife beside his head, chest pressed against the other’s scarred back and his hand resting on Vadim’s hip.

* * *

It was dawn when Dan woke up. Refreshed and rested after a dreamless sleep close to unconsciousness. No thoughts of the lives they had taken, only memories of a body he’d possessed. He grinned, stretched slowly, revelling in the shared heat, which made a bloody difference from the previous ten nights. Reluctant to rouse the other man, he crept out of the blankets, tugged them back down around the sleeping man and slipped into his clothes.

It was freezing, but he’d got used to the climate. The mountains had become a friend, a dangerous one, but no longer an enemy.

Stoking the fire, he refilled the battered tin pot he used for cooking, prepared it to boil with a handful of tea leaves and a large chunk of honey comb he’d got from one of the villages’ markets.

Dan was careful, convinced they were alone but checking the grounds before tending to the blood encrusted corpses that were begging for flies once the spring sun spread some warmth. Sure, the other had offered to help, but he preferred to deal with it himself. The battered Russkie needed his sleep. Why had

he freaked and stabbed the Mudjas like a madman? Whatever. Dan figured it was because all of those Russians were crazy bastards. He carried one lifeless body after the other, disposing all three in a deep ravine close by, while thinking of the night before. Couldn't get his head around the idea of wanting to get fucked, become the bitch of another man and willingly turn oneself into a dripping cunt, but hey, he didn't argue. He wanted that body again.

Damn.

Returning to the cave, Dan checked the sleeping bundle beneath the blankets, shrugged with a grin and took a good long piss before going on shovel recce—without a shovel. Wouldn't do any good digging a shitting hole into the rocks.

He found a comfy spot out of sight that kept the smell and flies away. Once back at the camp, he stripped down to his trousers and boots, thoroughly cleaned his hands, washed his face and chest and figured he'd do the rest later when it got warmer. Shrugged back into the parka, didn't bother with a shirt, and checked the water. Good, the tea was merrily boiling away.

He poured the honey-sweetened brew into his one and only tin cup, before he moved towards the blanket bundle, crouched down, grinning with teeth bared.

“Oi, sleeping beauty. Wake up.” Waving the tea in front of the other's nose.

* * *

Wet hot smell, steam. Ground hard under his elbow, ribs, hip, knee. Sunlight. Late. Vadim came round, felt like he had to shake off a blanket of lead, emerged. First glance went to the wrist, no watch, the Volkov had been taken. Later than five. First time in ages that he overslept.

He hadn't dreamt and was grateful for that; it would have been about being beaten up or about the gaping, black hole in Platon's neck. Vadim looked at the mug, then the wrist, the grinning face. Right. Sat up and scratched his neck, hair too long there, could feel his body protest, inside, and shoulders, and thought, fuck, that's what I did to take the dreams away. He nodded and took the mug, blew on it. “Sleeping who?”

“Beauty.” Dan smirked, sat down on the ground on a corner of the blanket, legs crossed. “Seems you overdid the make-up somewhat, princess. Especially the

blue-black and green eye shadow. Oh, you should also do something about that swelling. Isn't a good look on anyone."

Vadim glanced up. "That makes me Princess Aurora and you would be Prince Desire." Tchaikovsky. Ballet. The Sleeping Beauty. He'd rather die than admit he had liked ballet in a time when his father had tried to drum culture into him. Taking the Bolshoi with him on Afghanistan tour was just not an option. One of the things that were better left at home. He'd always wondered about that story though. Absolutely stunning girl, asleep, not awake, and all the guy did was kiss her when he could have it all?

Dan let the man drink before holding his hand out to have a sip himself. Precious, the sweetened tea, he had meant to keep the honeycomb for a special occasion. Yeah, seemed this was one. They weren't trying to kill each other on their 'first morning'.

Vadim brought his hand up and touched his face. If he looked as bad as that felt, he'd look pretty bad even in a week. His skin always did the whole colour set, black, blue, purple, several shades of red. "Could use bag of ice, just bit late for that."

"I can still get you some." Dan gestured with his chin towards the rocks. "Might not do much, but better than nothing. You'll need a damn good story to explain your pretty looks." He took a few sips of the tea and handed it back.

"Close combat, got a rifle sandwich, but I killed them. Spetsnaz are just that good." Vadim snorted.

Dan glanced towards the back of the cave. "I got rid of the Mudjas. Everything worth anything is stored over there."

Vadim had some more tea before standing, walked over to his packs, found the spare pair of uniform trousers, a pair of socks, and his boots. He got halfway dressed, then walked up to the dushman's stuff. Any ID would be interesting. He dug into their kit; plenty of beef jerky, dried fruits, rolls of Afghani, one of which he pocketed and tossed the other on the ground.

"Expenses," Vadim murmured, found a bag of raw opium, weighed that in his hand for a moment. "Baksheesh." He tossed that on the ground as well.

Dan's eyes grew narrower with every item that came out of the packs. He had a fair idea what they'd contain, but fuck, he'd been careless. Should have

checked them first. Idiot, Dan, bloody idiot! Ruled by your cock just as much as the other man was.

Vadim dug deeper, touched paper that felt like...a map. Notes on it, an old Soviet map, probably prospecting map, they were still using these, based on last century's maps. "Shit." A bundle of letters, looked like correspondence for warlords and tribal leaders. Jackpot. He glanced up to check where the Brit was.

Dan stood and walked over. "No fucking way."

Vadim put the map down, breathed. Stayed relaxed, because that was the only way he had a chance to surprise the other. I'd hate to kick some sense into you, he thought, and that thought shouldn't be here. This was still work, and if he could return with a prize like that, he'd come home as a victor. Could jump him now, could attack him, wrestle. And then? He stood, took one step back to get into neutral distance. "I need those." Should fight for them, he could win.

Dan shook his head. "You want to get me killed?" Eyes narrowed, immediate change from grinning, relaxed bloke to steel-sharp Special Forces soldier. "You take that back, and what are the chances the next time I deal with my Mudjas, turn a corner, only to stand in front of a whole troop of bloody Russians?" Shit. Shit! He should have checked the packs. His own fault. Fucking idiot. Body tensing, readying for the fight, set to win. "I want to survive, dickhead. You take that stuff, chances are I'm dead."

Vadim felt strange to see the other bristle with determination. Valid point. Both. "Could check what's in them," he ventured, slowly, offering a treaty. One problem: He still didn't know enough of the language. The other could trick him. Probably would trick him. One thing to fuck, another to be stupid. He stepped away, offering the pack, sat down on a nearby rock. "Had my dose of smashed face for week. Lucky you."

Dan nodded, the tension remained, but disaster was avoided—for now. Taking the pack he started to read the missives, frowned more with each of them, shook his head. Getting to the map, he checked over the remarks, comments, pointers and names. Tilted his head, thinking, folded the map back up at last, turning towards the other. "Take the map. It has information, but nothing that would get me killed." Perhaps others, but hell, he didn't give a fuck, wasn't their keeper.

“The correspondence is off-limits. Knock me out, take the letters and have them translated and next time you want a fuck you’ll have to use a piece of my rotting flesh as a hole, or fuck yourself on a smashed-up bone instead of my cock.” He walked over, dropped the map in the other’s hands, holding the letters and notes in the other. “Understood?”

Vadim took the map. Military intelligence would love this. Then glanced at the other hand. Instinct fighting instinct, would love to get his hands around the throat of the sniper that had shot Platon. “Burn the shit,” he breathed, speaking Russian. Because I can’t promise I won’t try to take them. This way, I’m not even tempted. This way I can’t think I should have.

“What else do you think I had intended.” Dan turned instead, threw the first letter onto the fire, the others swiftly following. He still watched the Russkie’s movements from the corner of his eyes.

Vadim folded the map and slipped it into his pocket, then stood, glanced up at the mountain, and began to climb in the search for snow. Three hundred yards, a nice morning exercise. It was cold up there, and his chest was pounding, hurting in the thin air.

Dan stood, wrapped in his parka, hands in the pockets of his camo trousers. “What the fuck do you think you are doing?” Shaking his head, watching the half-naked Russian in the snow. “Butt-fuck crazy Russkie!”

Vadim took two hands of snow, a thin layer of dust covered the white here so close to the rocks, scraped the dirt off, placed his face into the cold. He was freezing, but it eased the pounding. Cold water ran down his wrists, and he allowed the cold to bite and then to subside, cooled his face, then washed his chest with snow, cooled the bruises, then started with his face again. Wouldn’t make much of a difference, the injuries were too old already, but never mind. Should have cooled the worst with a knife blade.

Dan was sitting on one of the packs, close to the fire, drinking tea and preparing food. He looked up when Vadim reappeared. “Eat.” He didn’t specify what, just pointed to the dried fruit, nuts, beef jerky and the bubbling tea.

Vadim was starting to feel warm, but still wrapped a blanket around his shoulders. “Yes, comrade.” He gave a dry huff, took handfuls of the stuff and began to eat.

“Which Pashtun tribe are you working with?” Vadim looked up, surprised at himself for actually asking the question. But then, how much could he prove when he returned? As long as it wasn’t about tactics and locations—and they already knew a fair deal about the tactics.

Dan shook his head. “I don’t want to talk about my orders with you. The less you know the better, alright?” Taking a handful of nuts, he offered some while chewing.

“They hate everybody. Russian, Soviet, British. If you don’t do Allahu akhbar and aren’t blood-related, they’ll cut your throat,” said Vadim.

“Whoever I work with isn’t too bad.” Dan shrugged, conveniently forgetting the dozen or so of times when he’d thought he wouldn’t make it out of a warlord’s territory alive. Sometimes brandishing letters and names and having local knowledge didn’t work. “They let me be and vice versa. Simple rules, if one of their women saw any of my naked flesh while washing, I’d probably not manage to get the soap off before I’d find myself cut into strips.” He grinned wryly. “Strange world, but it’s theirs, not mine. Got to accept that while I’m here.” He finished off the tea, before he suddenly started to laugh. “I sound like a fucking politician. Truth is, I personally don’t give a shit about those goat-fuckers and their fucking beliefs, but I do follow my orders.”

“Then it’s orders that are wrong. You Europeans try to make this hard for us. Europe and America. Just look at any map. Europe and Asia. Connected, right? There’s nothing between Slavs and Europeans, just...open plain. Made it easy for tanks, but also keeps mind open.”

“Bullshit.” Dan shook his head. “You make it as hard for us as we make it for you. You and your ultimate neglect of human life.” He shrugged. “Seems I don’t even give a shit about that either.”

“That’s not what I mean,” said Vadim. “American continent. Oceans east and west of it. They live in their own world. Not connected. Very far away.”

Dan threw a handful of nuts down his neck, chewing. “Americans are fucking arsewipes. Friendly fire and nothing else, but that’s me, a British squaddie talking. We’re not quite cheek to cheek, despite what you think.”

“My point is, they can’t understand Asia. Last time they tried, was Vietnam.”

Dan was stoking the fire. “They don’t, we don’t either. I don’t even understand you. Out of curiosity, do you understand me?”

“You speak my language. That’s start.” Vadim reached for the dried fruit and rolled a piece of apple between first finger and thumb. “And I speak your language. I had culture classes. Information is limited, but I’ve seen movies. Read books, for authentic language, to keep my skills. You must know about Soviets. You can’t learn a language without understanding. Concepts behind words and thoughts.”

Dan shrugged. “I did.” Chewed with delight on a piece of dried fruit. “And do. Learn languages without learning what’s behind them. It’s just what I do.” Shrugging again, he stuffed a couple more fruits between his lips. “Does it matter?” Speaking with a full mouth.

Vadim regarded him for a minute, let another pass. They did these things without understanding them? It was like playing chess without understanding the mind of the opponent, playing it without soul, purely mechanical. The game didn’t matter to them. It was about winning. This man hadn’t been trained to do this, it was an accident, him knowing Russian. “Guess it doesn’t matter,” he acknowledged. “Many ways to go to Rome, yes? How did you *pick up* Russian? It’s difficult.” Vadim stood and moved closer to the fire, a cold in him that was difficult to get rid of, his sore and swollen flesh demanding rest, above all else.

“Well, aye, it’s not quite like that.” Dan swallowed another round of fruit, then went for the dried meat, stewing away on the fire. “Not with Russian anyway, though it’s pretty much as I said.”

Vadim looked up, quizzically.

Dan realised he was talking in riddles and suppressed a smirk, trying again, wiping his lips before looking at the other. “I have this knack. I hear languages and if I hear them long enough and get a few pointers they kind of make sense to me. That’s why I understand and speak Pashto and Dari. Comes easy, it’s like fucking.” He smirked, “not something I ever had to learn.”

No, the strength and the force was all there, thought Vadim, and felt a shiver course through his body. How odd. Comparing a language to something the body did, not the mind. I picked up Russian, I fucked a Russian – that was what it translated to. He rubbed his arms over the blanket, tried for some friction to get the blood going, but it felt sluggish and dark and slow in his body. Exhausted. Healing.

Deciding that the meat was just fine, Dan fished a piece out and began to chew, thoughtful for a while, but still watching the Russkie. He could see how cold the other man was. “Russian was a bit different. I went for books, tapes, the lot. They told me I’d get more interesting missions if I became fluent.” He shrugged, “so I did.”

“I learnt English for Montreal. Chinese at officer’s academy. Tajik in my last posting. Some German at officer’s academy, but I don’t use it, so it’s leaving.” When Dan finished off the meat and offered him his share, Vadim didn’t feel hungry, knew he needed to eat, and found it hard to bring himself to do it. He shouldn’t talk that much. He was behaving like a faggot, really, the kind of effeminate that spilt the beans after sex. Still enemies. He found it hard to believe himself, slipped too easily into trust. “I will eat later,” he murmured. “Tea would be good now.”

Dan wiped his lips again, nodded and pointed to the pot. “Tea’s been boiling for a while. Got another piece of honeycomb, should be sweet and strong.” He tilted his head, studying the other man with increased intensity for a moment, then moved off his pack to crouch beside the fire. “You look like shit.” He poured the tin mug full of the sweetened tea and handed it over. “Death warmed over, except, that you don’t seem to be particularly warm.” Baring his teeth momentarily into a semblance of a grin.

Vadim cradled the mug, soaked up the heat. The mockery sounded like banter. Nothing aggressive about it. He grinned back, eyes narrowing a touch, but he just couldn’t help thinking how that same easy going guy had fucked him. That intensity.

Dan stood up. “I’d suggest another fuck to warm you up but (A) I’m beat and (B) you don’t seem to be up for it.”

Vadim swallowed, wondered if he was up for it, in theory, in practice, to pile more pain on top of this last one, more on top of the beating. “I’m not much of challenge right now.” Didn’t like the thought, at all. Offering was one thing, the inability to defend himself something different. If he was the bitch, that meant the other called the shots. When, where, how. He couldn’t accept that. Even though he wanted the sex. “Maybe tomorrow. We can rest. Share...heat. Just that. Heat.”

Dan spotted another mug tied to the outside of Vadim’s pack and bent down to get it. “What,” he smirked, “snuggling? Like poofs, girlies and faggots

do?” One thing to fuck a man, another to want to hold him, touch his body, share heat, feel skin. Want. Fuck, no.

That’s it, thought Vadim, realizing it with the closest thing to horror. He wanted touch. Wouldn’t get it. Wouldn’t ask for it, and it wouldn’t just happen. Why? He knew, of course, being demoralized, hurting all over, face, body, ass; the only touch he’d get was that man pounding against him. “Didn’t say that.”

“I thought we were about fucking, mate, not cuddling.”

And I thought we were about survival. Vadim snorted. “We have shared heat before. Nothing new.”

Dan shrugged. “That was different.” He was back at the fire and pouring himself a tea. Couldn’t help but notice how cold the other was.

Vadim drank the hot tea, body tense and pulled together to preserve heat. But he was cold from the inside—everything that wasn’t a throbbing mess was cold. “How much time do you have? I’m on patrol, officially.”

“I have as much time as I want.” Not quite, but it felt like it. “Your patrol, how much time is that?” Dan went back to his bergan, sat down once more and sipped the strong, hot liquid, glancing over. That man was shivering, even trembling with cold. Body heat, aye, he could do that. Just not like faggots did.

“A few weeks. Map will help explain what I did. As long as I make up good story for each day, I am safe, but I need to cover distance, will be expected to be at...somewhere, eventually.” Remember to keep things vague, Vadim. “Will have to march faster.” Yeah, beaten up and fucked like you are, Vadim thought. Couldn’t get warm. Think warm thoughts, how funny. He just hoped he hadn’t caught something, an illness, a fever, hoped it was just the body’s response to the bruises. He’d kill to be able to sweat it out in a sauna.

Dan sneered, “In your state? You’d make a great Olympian, as fucked up as you are.” Steadily working on his tea, he welcomed the caffeine buzz and the honey was exactly what he needed. Sugar-rush, he’d never get enough of that.

Vadim drank more tea, then settled on the ground, almost curled around the fire. He didn’t care. Couldn’t care. It was getting warmer, he was starting to sweat, but there was still cold, too much of it. Sleep it out, he thought.

Dan shook his head after a few minutes, finished his tea and stood up unceremoniously. “Faggoty or not, you look like shit and you’re going to kill yourself in the mountains if you don’t get back in shape. Who would I fuck with,

then?” Nodding towards the cave and the pile of blankets. “Want to get warm? Come on, then.”

Vadim forced his body up, took the blanket, gathered his bergan, more dragging than carrying it, but that was where knife and gun were, and followed.

Dan never looked back, but stopped near the entrance, waiting for him to get settled. Dazed, Vadim wondered about the closeness, the proximity, and whether the other would fuck him for it. Not much he could do about it, not in his state, but he couldn't allow it, not when the Brit was in control.

He lay down, laboriously, face turned towards the open space, bergan under his head, blanket around his shoulders, legs pulled up. *Who would I fuck with, then.* Who indeed.

Dan was still standing, still watching, and still debating a few things that he figured he shouldn't want nor like and sure as fuck not actually do. But this was about survival, and what if the Russkie died? Not easy to find another fuck in this place. The Afghan mountains weren't really a teeming market of willing male flesh. “Right, then.” He dragged his own bergan close, set it behind the other's head. As good a pillow as any. Getting down onto his knees, he pulled the second blanket close and wrapped it around himself before shuffling behind the Russian, figuring it wouldn't do any good if he stayed too far away.

He ended up so close, his entire front was pressed against Vadim's back, the blankets tightly around them. “What the fuck am I going to do with my arms, now?” Dan muttered, awkward, there wasn't any way he could rest his arm except on the other man. Shit, that looked and felt to all intents and purposes like cuddling after all. “Whatever.” He muttered again and dropped his hand on Vadim's flank.

Vadim's eyelids, too heavy, opened when the hand came to rest there. His arm was under his head, the other crossed in front of his chest, minimizing surface. The other body felt warm, and was too close, too much like sex. Too much like forcing him to turn onto his stomach, spread his legs and fuck him again. No. He'd said he was too tired for it.

The cold slowly subsided, his aching muscles relaxing, and the dizziness and throbbing remained, but it worked already. Body against body. Platon. Not dangerous. Katya. Not about sex. He forced himself to breathe slowly, deeply, counting his breaths. “Not...volunteering for any watch,” he murmured, feeling relaxed enough to begin drifting off to sleep. His body demanded the rest. He had

enough sense to reach and find his knife in the open bergan, and pull it close to his chest. Just in case. Just for anybody surprising him in his sleep.

Dan sniggered, shook his head in the confines of that odd embrace. “No, I can see you’re too fucked, and it’s definitely not the good kind.” Shuffling even closer, eyes fixed on the back of the neck. Murmuring into the other’s ear, lips tickled by short shaved hair, “And as for that knife, if I really wanted to kill you, you’d be dead before you could even wield it.” A rumbled chuckle.

Vadim was awake again. Breath against his ear did that. Staring straight ahead. The body. The heat. Liked it too much. Couldn’t even think the word sleep now. Too intense. “You believe that, but I have good chance to kill you, too, before I’m dead.” As long as there’s no gun involved. Hand to hand, knife to knife. A moment of intense claustrophobia. Trapped. Dan was about to say something, an aborted sound from his throat, when Vadim half-turned to face him. “Don’t believe just because you fucked me means I’m losing my pride. Not happening. I’m Spetsnaz, never forget I can kill you.” Hoped he sounded calm, neutral.

“Huh? What the fuck are you on about, Russkie. You having a chip on your shoulder a mile wide?”

Vadim swallowed the words, something about not taking insults, then realized, yes, he was tense about it, pride wounded, and he was irrational in that state. At least he was warmer now. Still, he kept misreading banter for aggression. “If you think so.”

Dan frowned, the other man’s face so close, the sharply cut features were blurred. “Just shut the fuck up and get some sleep. You’d be fucking useless in your state against me. You want to start being a cry-baby about the fucking? Doesn’t suit you.” He patted the hip, exhaled exasperatedly, “Get some sleep, Spetsnaz. SAS is taking the watch.”

Now, much, much better. Not ‘Russian cunt’, not ‘faggot’, or ‘bitch’, or ‘suka’. Spetsnaz. It was a glaring contrast to what they were doing, but it was acknowledging the other’s regimental pride. *SAS is taking the watch*. No violence. No unpleasant surprises. Two soldiers, nothing more. “Good night, comrade.” He turned around again, settled back on his arm and inhaled deeply, counting his breaths until he could fall asleep.

* * *

Dan couldn't pinpoint when he'd fallen into a snooze, but it must have happened sometime between morning and noon, because the heat woke him. That, and discomfort of having lain in the same position for too long. Sun, heat, and a body pressed against him.

Opening his eyes, he stared at the back of the other's neck, about an inch before his face. Burnt skin, tanned deeper than the pale-skinned Russkie was meant to be; shaved hair, straw-coloured, sun-bleached stubble growing up the back of the head. Dan blinked, shifted slightly, brought his face even closer. That scent. Damn, he wanted to bury his nose into the scent of sun, heat, skin and man. Tasting the sweat and biting the flesh.

He did nothing. Just blinked again. One thing to fuck a man—another to kiss his neck.

Vadim had slept like the dead, had dived deep, deep into leaden water and wouldn't have minded not waking up. But he still woke up, felt sore, but alive, awake, and felt the other's breath. He reached lazily down to scratch his stomach, glanced back at Dan, wondered if there was more sex in it for him, fuck his pride, it was an opportunity. He moved back against the body, bridging a gap that wouldn't have allowed a fist to fit between them, back against chest, ass against groin, legs against legs. Maximising heat. Get the most out of the time they had.

“That would work better if I weren't dressed.” Dan delivered dryly in a low, raspy voice. Still wondering when he had slipped from taking watch to taking 40 winks. His hand moved. Slow, lazy, creating a snake-like pattern up and across the other's chest.

“Which reminds me.” Vadim smirked at that, his own hands moving to his trousers, opening them for the other, pulling them down over his hips, baring his body down to his thighs.

Dan's eyes grew wide, and still he did nothing. The Russkie hadn't just pulled his combats down, had he? Wasn't right now wiggling his naked arse against his groin? Dan's hand flattened on the other's chest, resting between the pecs.

Vadim reached behind him, slid the flat hand against Dan's groin, tracing the bulge inside the BDUs. Yes. There was definitely another round in it for him.

Damn. Dan inhaled, forgot to exhale again. The crazy bastard was doing exactly what Dan thought he was doing. He remembered to breathe, but his rumbling voice had a strange new tone to it. "I take it you want to get fucked."

Yes. No. Why not simply do it, why talk? Why make him aware that he was offering, offering like a bitch in the barracks. No. Never that. Vadim's hand tightened on Dan's cock, and he glanced over his shoulder into those dark eyes. "I can see how you made Special Forces. You're a quick thinker."

"Ha ha, very funny." Dan grumbled.

Vadim grinned, needed to stay playful, taunting; banter was not aggression. He stretched his neck, and gave a smile, at the same time squeezing the other's cock, his balls.

Dan froze. Whatthefuck? That smile, that wasn't planned nor programmed and sure as hell didn't belong into their little insane arrangement. "Not sure what you want..." he murmured, slowly deciphering what the hell that smile meant, and ending up with cryptic messages. No sneering, no smirking, no threats and no anger. Just a smile. Holy fuck. "But whatever that is, I can assure you..." he twisted his hips further into the hand, voice no more than a murmur, "it's exactly the right way to get it."

Vadim laughed and felt the other's body obey his touch. He turned around, to have a second hand, and pulled the belt open, opened the buttons to free the other's cock, growing fully hard under more squeezing. Wrapping his hand around it, he looked into the other's eyes, touch firm, tight, his own body ready, wounded and beaten up, but ready. "I wouldn't mind repetition," he murmured. Couldn't, wouldn't say 'fuck me', that was Gavriil, even though he could feel the tension inside, wanted cock, wanted the other pounding into him. One taste of it, and he was hooked all over again.

Dan breathed in, slowly out, then suddenly, "Where the fuck's the gun oil."

Vadim reached for his bergan, found the gun kit, fiddled with it one-handed, found the bottle, opened it with teeth and hand, poured some oil into his palm and opened his legs, pushed two oiled fingers inside, then glanced at Dan, curious what he'd see, and what he saw was breathlessness and eyes that had grown even darker. A face, betraying with shallow breaths and parted lips that Vadim's actions reached deeper, touched lust, and released want.

Vadim pulled his fingers out, took more oil, slower now, more deliberate, and again pushed the fingers inside, but slower, almost sensuous, felt a stab of lust, and smiled, running that slicked hand over his own cock, making it jump.

Dan was undone. Lips moving, no sense nor sound. Hard, harder and wanting, more. He had never seen anything so arousing. No pussy, no gyrating hips, no bouncing tits; nothing and no one before had got into his mind and cock so intensely.

“Fucking hell.” Dan murmured, voice shaking, hand trembling, cock jumping against his belly. “Want to watch.” Hand moved, covered the other man’s, both hands on Vadim’s cock. “Want to watch you fuck yourself.” Pleading, begging, more, fuck, more of this, this...this mad thing. Man. This something that turned him on like nothing before. Soldier. Spetsnaz. Special Forces. Killer. Sniper. Enemy. And shameless whore.

Vadim suddenly couldn’t breathe. Being taken up on the tease. He’d done this, sometimes, pretended it was one of his few lovers. Masseur. Hungarian fencer. Increased his own need when a normal jerking-off couldn’t take off the spike. But he needed to be safe to do this.

“Please.”

He *was* safe to do this, Vadim realized, and it was another shock. It wasn’t safe, nothing about this man was safe. Hand on his cock. The need in those dark eyes. He had his hooks firmly in this man, finally in his mind, reduced him to begging. Almost better than having him beg for his cock—but not quite.

He moved slower, focused on the pleasure more than the oil, how his body reacted, the tensing of muscles, breath going harder, but still toneless.

No sounds from Dan either. Nothing but accelerated breathing, harsher, louder, and the blood in his ears, as deafening as the echo of a shot in a cave. He took his hand away from the other’s cock, minimising the touch to maximise the effect on his other senses. Smell; gun oil. Sight; the Russian’s flushed skin, moving hand, oil-slicked fingers. Vanishing inside the body, creating reaction, and action. Sound; silence.

Vadim’s half-closed eyes were reading the desire on Dan’s features, which made him grin, and increase the speed, fingers rubbing the place that made his cock jump and his balls go heavy, the feeling going up to his throat, making his heart pound. Silent. Couldn’t allow sounds. Wanted the pounding, body against

body, wanted the strength. Wouldn't ask for it, swallowed dryly, face twitching with what he felt, lips open, body moving against the pleasure, an instinct more than trying for a good show. Not like Gavriil. He was in control.

Dan's eyes moved from hand to face, fell onto the heavy balls, glistening cock. Darkly flushed, hard. Hard. Fucking loved that hardness. The sight. The taste. Eyes moved back up to the face that expressed more than the other might think.

"Throat or cock." Three words. Dan's hand on his own cock, stroking. Would come sucking; or come fucking.

Both, thought Vadim, feeling coherence slipping away as he watched the other touch himself, kicked off the camo trousers to get rid of the last bit of uniform, now the only thing that was still Red Army was the watch around his wrist. "Cock. No hand. Can't...come without." Hoping the other would suck him off and finish it, after giving him a good pounding. He pulled his fingers free, body shivering in the cold and shuddering with need, and was about to turn to get on hands and knees.

"No." Dan moved quickly, his free hand coming to still the movement. "Stay." For what? Not clear, just felt, not knowing. That face, watching every twitch, hear the breath, see the sweat and how the pale blue eyes darkened, it was fucking erotic. No, hot. Horny. Lust. Erotic was for pussies.

Not sure what to expect, Vadim paused, but remained on his back, knees open, legs bent, idly stroking himself, one elbow supporting his weight, his slicked-up hand pulled the foreskin to cover the tip, as he watched Dan get to his knees, placing one hand flat on his chest, pushing backwards, and Vadim relaxed on the ground, stretching out.

Dan had never fucked a girl's arse other than from behind. But that face. Had to watch that face.

Ah, knees up, thought Vadim. The way Vanya liked guys, on their backs. Had liked. Gavriil liked that position, and that was the reason why he had rarely ended up in it. "That works. Strain on lower back, but should manage."

"I know, asshole." Dan's breathless voice was raspy, dark. He flashed a grin, let go of his cock, took the other man's legs, pushed them upwards. "You'll just have to manage."

"I guess," murmured Vadim with a half-grin.

That body. Laid out, massive, beaten and bruised, but still impressive. Muscled and sharply angled. Like his own—yet different. Smooth. Dan knelt, stared, the Russkie’s body open, vulnerable, but never defenceless. Sharp intake of breath, then moved between the open legs, that arse was oil slicked, didn’t need any for his cock, and guided himself. Wanted to ram, punish, force, brutal, but shook his head. Fuck, no. Held back, right there, in breach of the muscle, stalled, minute push forward, sliding, breaching.

Vadim’s hands formed fists—slow. Slow. Control. Slipping. No way to move against that, too much weight held him there, his own, and Dan’s. The heat invading, crawling in, heat and size.

Feeling the Russian’s body shudder, Dan raised his head back up to meet the other’s eyes, wide and gleaming with need. Smirked. “Thank fuck you’re no girl.”

The observation intrigued Vadim, and speaking meant he could mask the groan. “Why’s that?”

Dan bared his teeth in a feral grin, said nothing, pushed forward hard, entered the body, tight, heat, groaning out expletives.

Knees pushed up towards his chest, Vadim could do nothing but take the force, no burning, no pain, instead, unclouded, unmixed lust, pure and simple, no fear, no guilt. In control. He wanted this, kept wanting this, and the other just delivered, lust, desire, need, and Vadim’s lips opened, the groan did escape, felt too good.

Heat and tightness, fucking that body again. Dan felt lust and aggression, not hatred. Needed too much, wanted. Greed. Body. Man. Hand gripping the Russkie’s shoulder, fingers digging into bone and muscle, the other finding leverage on the ground. Knees protesting on hard stone, but the pain just added that kick. Stared at Vadim’s face, eyes, facial expression, mouth, always drawn back to those lips. Parted, panting.

Fucking wild, hard, with vicious lust. Dan groaned, sweat running from his neck and chest, dripping onto the other’s body. Fuck. Fuck this was it, harder, faster, more and more, clenching his teeth or he’d let out sounds of too much motherfucking need.

Close. Not close enough. Vadim neared the edge, caught up in the sensations, strength, more, just as he liked it, more brutal than any of his lovers.

They had been gentle, because he was young, and inexperienced, or they had not been not strong enough to test his body like this. How ironic to find it with the enemy. Finally he closed his eyes, let go, control, thoughts, whatever, felt the force wash through him and into him, felt the other come, hard, and couldn't join him there, on the brink, where he'd wanted to be, now needed to get further.

Dan was panting, dizzy, short-changed of oxygen and shuddering with lingering sensations. This fucker was addictive. That body, not any body. Male. Goddamned male and more beyond. Brutal, violent, killer, soldier, enemy, and the best cunt he'd ever had. His mind blown to pieces by the paradox. Strength and passiveness; power and taking it up the arse. He couldn't get his mind around it. To have possessed that man. That bastard.

Vadim felt Dan's sweaty body against his legs, his shoulder, hands, force, cock, still inside, panting, weakened, not in control, his, his in so many ways right now, then Vadim began to push him off with his legs. "I'd... appreciate... some help."

"What?" Licking sweat off his upper lip, Dan raised his head. Took a second to get clued on, then slipped free from the tight heat, softening, and feeling pathetically bereft. Like an addict, on cold turkey immediately after the last shot.

Still on his knees, Dan shuffled backwards, twisted, lowered his head, stared at the cock and could feel the greed for the taste in the back of his throat. Loved that cock. Cocks. "Cocksucker." Murmured, smirked, then pushed his head down and as much of the full length down into his throat as he could. As ruthless in sucking that cock as he had been in fucking that arse.

Vadim grinned at the other's self-deprecation. If he got a kick out of it to think that of himself. Fine. It only took him that—the sight of how his cock vanished between the other's lips, the expression of willingness and concentration, heat and tightness, and he came, like a switch had been flicked, that fast, sensation splitting him from groin to brain, shooting down the other's throat, willing, welcoming, wanting this.

Dan's reflex was to swallow, too deep down his throat, he'd hardly been prepared. Almost choked, but got it this time. Swallowed, quickly, a couple of times, then moved up, licking along the shaft, lingering to lap the cock dry. He lifted his head, smirking and watched the Russkie pant, spaced out. "As I said, cocksucker." Grinning smugly before reaching for his nearby bergan, had a pre-

rolled fag stashed somewhere. Didn't bother to pull his camo trousers back up, should give himself a wash in a moment.

Eventually, Vadim could breathe again. With that, thought returned. Amazing. Great sex. He rested back, regarded the Brit, sated and heavy as the anaconda. "What did you mean? About girl?" Lazy curiosity.

Dan found the cigarette, lighting it, sitting with knees close to his body, trousers tangled on knee height. "Girls want the big show, the lies." Taking a drag, he grinned, exhaling smoke with his next words. "That, and they're too fucking fragile, but I told you that yesterday."

Vadim rested back on his arms, stretched out, warm, relaxed enough to fall asleep. "Yeah. I can't try and put ring on your finger just because we had fun." He glanced up, about to continue that train of thought, joke about women starting to cling and clutch after a night, but the joke died in his throat. Firstly, Katya had done nothing like that, and secondly, he didn't want to pursue that thought.

Dan sneered. "And you can't get pregnant. That's a bloody good bonus." Smoking his fag, focussed. He didn't have much tobacco left, hated to be hung out and dry. "Besides, that ring shit? I swore when I joined up never to marry. Damned bloodsucking bitches. Shag a guy, whine long enough till he's stupid enough to marry her, then whinge and bicker and bitch until fucking off, having fucked themselves through the entire camp, from senior ranks down to juniors, and finally take him to the cleaners." Baring his teeth again, mixture of smirk and sneer with added frown. "I fucking hate those bitches."

Vadim smirked. "That must have been tough. Hating them, and still chasing skirts."

Dan rolled his eyes, muttered something about having no idea how bloody annoying it was.

Vadim yawned, reached for the blanket and pulled it up to cover himself. Too sluggish to think about cleaning up or anything. He'd do that after he'd rested. "My wife...is very different. She made decision, she protects me. I'm officer, I need to appear normal."

Dan's brows rose. "You sound like a wuss to me."

Vadim assumed a 'wuss' was a weakling. Couldn't know, and wouldn't ask. "You have noteworthy talent to cut short conversations before they happen."

Shrugging, Dan looked down at his bare feet, starting to feel the cold but ignoring it. Realised while watching the cigarette burn to a stub that even for his standards he'd been an arse. "OK, different tack. How the fuck have you been getting away with being a fag anyway? I'd be chucked out, dishonourable discharge, if they'd know I'm shagging a man."

"Being homosexualist is illegal. I'm breaking law. I'd end up in prison, and definitely in my rank. Not high enough to weasel through, not low enough to not make example of me." Never mind the Vympel machismo, or the fact Vadim was technically military intelligence. "I've fooled them. I fooled their assessments and I married. Two children. Beautiful wife."

Stubbing the cigarette out on the rock beside him, Dan looked at the other questioningly. "Then tell me, how the hell do you get away with fucking in the barracks?"

"They can't speak about it. They don't want to be known as guys who took it up the ass. It would mean the others would do same. Do you know what 'grandfathers' are? Their word is law. In addition to that, I'm officer, they can't touch me." Vanya, who had learnt the rules quickly, and enjoyed it, Platon, whom he had protected. Gavriil, whom he had kept out of the worst. And struggling bodies pressed into the mattress. Dozens of those.

Dan's eyes were darkening with every word, brows drawing together, body tensing. "I know grandfathers. I studied your goddamned glorious Red Army. You're my fucking enemy, already forgotten?"

Actually, I had. Vadim inhaled deeply. Only that the truth was more complicated. But how to explain?

Dan stood up abruptly; when the trousers fell down to his ankles, he stepped out of them. He turned round, presenting his back while walking to the fire. He swallowed his words. Anger. Disgust. "Bastard," he muttered under his breath while busying himself with water and rag. Washing the bastard off himself; the rapist whose arse he'd just had. "What a fucking farce."

Vadim thought he should lie. Should profess guilt. One victim that had become more than a struggling body in the night. He ruined it every time, Vadim thought, watching the other, anger in every motion. You're Spetsnaz. What's a little violence there? I can't change the system. I need a way to get off without ending in prison. He wouldn't tell him about Platon. It was still too close. Gavriil

didn't matter. With Vanya, too, it had been different. Vadim tried to push it away and sleep, but it didn't work. The other's resentment itched.

Dan finished, shivered, being damp in the cave was too bloody cold. Cold, magic word. What was he going to do, sleep with the enemy, cuddle up with a raping bastard or freeze his balls off? He shook his head, looked for the food instead. Didn't glance over to where the Russian lay in silence. "I got beef jerky and dried fruits. You should eat. Still look like shit."

Vadim sighed, slipped into his boots, got up, kept the blanket about himself, and came to the fire. "I guess I should eat," he echoed, sat down on a flat stone and stared into the flames, then poured some tea into the other's mug and sipped.

Dan stood, naked, bare feet freezing on the rocks and pondering if he should give up being a hard man and just get himself some clothes, when Vadim spoke.

"One conscript. He prefers men. Was my driver for few months. Kept him out of trouble." Vadim kept his eyes on the dark surface of the tea.

Dan stopped in mid-motion while dishing out food, and glanced over. "What about him." Flat.

"No need for violence. No other grandfather for that one. He was lucky. Safer option for me, too." Vadim looked up. Hope for—what? Absolution? Understanding?

"So, he was your whore. Aye?" Dan started to move again, finished putting food on a tin platter, shoved it right under Vadim's nose. He was freezing, obviously so, but he'd be buggered if he was going to do anything about it right now. "And exactly how does that makes your glorious Soviet Union 'glorious'?"

Vadim took the plate, looked at Dan's chest, then higher. Wanted to offer the blanket, or a place on the stone. "State has nothing to do with it." He offered the steaming mug after another sip.

"No?" Swapping plate with mug, Dan cradled the hot vessel after taking a sip. "It's the state that makes the laws." Frowning, glancing around. One blanket, and that one blanket was draped over the other. Fuck. Still standing. "I don't know the full extent of the law in Britain, just that fucking with a man gets me discharged. Shagging an enemy? Holy fuck, I'd end up court-martialled."

“I’d end up with bullet to my neck. Resisting arrest. Job hazard.” Shit. Giving too much away. The secret service would clean house, after the interrogation, of course.

Dan froze, thinking. Took a large gulp of the tea, letting the steamy bitterness replace a different acid inside.

Vadim set the plate down, then stood, pulled the blanket off and placed it around Dan’s shoulders, who was looking at him with ill-disguised surprise.

“Guess we’re both fucked. Better make it worthwhile, then?”

“Aye.” Dan nodded. “Guess I’m the lucky one between us.” He took one corner of the blanket with his free hand, lifted it and gestured with his chin to the other. “One blanket. Cold cave. Two men. Both doomed. Best share the warmth.”

Vadim smiled. “Yeah, let’s do poof thing.” He gave a laugh and Dan let out a snort, but Vadim turned serious when he picked up his food. “You know, it doesn’t mean we’re doomed. They won’t get me alive. And you’re safe unless you do something that they can prove.”

Dan walked back towards the make-shift bed with a packet of nuts, the refilled mug of tea, and sat down, wrapped in the blanket, leaving one half free.

Vadim moved back to the cave as well, set the plate down and waited for the other to lift the blanket.

“Go on then, poof. No point in freezing our arses off.” Dan flashed a smirk, “I rather like that arse of yours. Especially with something in it.”

“Yeah. Shit-stabbing isn’t so bad, huh?” Vadim grinned and sat down, leaning against his bergan, covered his legs and abs with the blanket and put the plate onto his knees. Chewing, he murmured, “I’ll be sore as fuck for a couple days.”

“From the beating or the fucking?” Dan picked up some fruit, pushing them between his teeth, mixed with the jerky. The heat from the other body was welcome. “In the case of the latter I suggest we make it worthwhile.”

Vadim swallowed a bite. “I’d almost forgotten beating.” He waved it off. “Ah. More worthwhile? I already thought you performed nicely.”

Dan swallowed and grinned, washing the food down with some tea. “Well, I guess I got the jackpot. I get to fuck arse and suck cock. What else could a man want?” He let out a short stab of laughter before getting more of the food down his neck.

Vadim grinned. No need to set the other on edge with indicating that getting fucked was just as nice. “What else indeed.” He manoeuvred a bit of dried peel from between his teeth. “I’ll always remember this war for strange Brit I met. Limey. Tommy. You’re strange man, Dan. You know that?”

“Me?” Dan huffed, swirled the tea in the glass. “I’m not strange. I’m so fucking normal I make the Kremlin seem like a space ship.”

“Little grey men? Damn. That’s what they are. Aliens.”

Dan couldn’t help it, he laughed. Not the manic one, but a full-out belly laughter, almost spilling the rest of the tea. “Didn’t know you could do humour, Russkie.”

Vadim laughed, too. From sex to anger to laughter. That man made his head spin. “You haven’t seen Brezhnev. Or Andropov. Or other old men.”

Dan handed the mug over, fished some more fruit from the rapidly emptying plate. “Thinking about it, I guess Mrs Thatcher is a fucking alien as well, and the whole British government to boot.”

“Can’t say I follow your news much, but I take your word for it. Her hairstyle is clearly designed to withstand falling A-bomb blast.”

That was enough, Dan burst into laughter, laughing so hard he choked on some of the food he’d just shoved into his gob. Coughing, spluttering, doubled over and still laughing, like a far too grown-up kid who’d just read the stupidest joke on a Penguin chocolate bar.

“Oh fuck.” Barely able to bring out the words, coughing, “The more their hair’s like a helmet, the more upper class they are.”

“Good to know, in case I travel there. People that are dangerous are ones with kilo of hairspray.”

Doubling over with another coughing fit, Dan’s eyes were watering. Vadim slapped him between the shoulder blades. “And your Brezhnev looks like a carp.” Dan was opening and closing his mouth, breathing like a fish.

“His Eyebrowness?” Vadim held up a finger. “There’s joke I heard. Goes like this: “Glorious Soviet leaders Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev are travelling by train. Suddenly, train grinds to halt. Stalin is first to try solve problem. He orders that engine driver be shot for sabotage and he deports co-driver to Siberia. Train doesn’t move. Then it’s Khrushchev’s attempt. He brings co-driver back from Siberia and tells him, “You’ve been away for long time, but try to remember

which controls do what.” Engine driver can’t and train doesn’t move. Then, third, Brezhnev tries. He orders that all blinds be drawn across windows and that passengers start rocking back and forth in their seats—so train feels like moving.” Which was a pretty accurate snap shot of the current political situation, come to think of it.

Dan snorted, wiping his eyes, the laughter was turning into a grin. “If you continue like this, you’ll have to provide some vodka to keep me from choking.”

“Sorry, no vodka. I was travelling light. Next time, yes?”

Dan moved closer, unthinking, seeking body warmth. “While we’re at it, a personal question.” Out of the blue and delivered with a bared-tooth grin. “Do all Russkies have no body hair?”

Vadim paused, then grinned. “Only ones that don’t like it and can get enough razor blades to keep smooth. From my swimming days. And it’s more hygienic.”

“Fuck, no, you’d never get me to do that.” Dan was running a hand over his sparsely haired chest, then down along his thigh. Dark hair, not a bear, but definitely hairy. “I’m a bloke, blokes are supposed to be hairy.”

Vadim snorted. He really preferred it that way, even the hair on his head was only a concession to the military style, but the sides of his scalp and his neck were shaved, definitely the face. More hygienic, certainly that.

Dan finished off the last bit of beef, chewing while glancing sideways. “Not saying it doesn’t feel good, though.” Said too much, rolled his eyes, hid the discomfort behind a boisterous smirk. “You’re as smooth as pussy, but with a cock and muscles. Suits me well.”

“As pussy?” Vadim laughed. “You haven’t seen aunt Olga.” There was no aunt Olga, of course. “But then, she doesn’t qualify as pussy anyway. Maybe forty years ago.”

“Better than pussy and definitely better than your aunt Olga.” Dan wagged his brows, felt a strange sense of ease, wondered if he shouldn’t be wanting to bash the fucker’s head in. Enemy and all that. Russkie. Bad man. Killer. Shit like that.

“You’re insulting my aunt Olga?” asked Vadim, mock-serious.

Dan shrugged. “Skin, I mean. Girls have soft, smooth skin. They do that powdering and perfume shit, can’t stand that, but their skin feels good.”

Vadim smirked. Ah, hard training, hours and hours of swimming, sauna, oiling the body, resting in warm towels, sweating, washing again. They had treated him the best and he had looked the best in Montreal. Anoushka's skin. Porcelain complexion, pores so small they were invisible. He shouldn't think of his daughter, not in the mountains, not in a war.

Dan started to stretch, closed his eyes and prodded the Russkie's ribs to make him lie down. A soldier could never get enough sleep when he had the chance. "Yours is better."

Strange thing to compliment him on, but Vadim was oddly touched by...by that...affection? He laid back, head resting against the bergan, thoughtful.

One of them should keep watch. But then, it was really, highly unlikely they would be found, asleep. What if? What if the Mudjas showed up? Vadim checked his pistol and kept it between their bergans that served as pillows.

"Wake me when it's time to fuck you again." Dan grinned, closed his eyes. Strangely relaxed. It could all be different in a few hours. They were still mortal enemies and he didn't trust the Russkie from blanket to cave mouth. But now it was time to rest, and what better way than to rest in safety and warmth. If they were to kill each other, they'd could always wait till morning.

Vadim wanted to run fingers through the tousled mess of hair, to feel what the forehead felt like, and formed a fist instead. No. Too risky. Right after sex, maybe right before sex, but not now. It would bleed the relaxation out of this man faster than a bullet wound.

He spied the round scar on Dan's shoulder, the scar that belonged to the gun that was just a breath away. He leaned against the bergan, close enough to the other to be warm, awake enough to guard, to look out at the stars, the impossible deep dark blue of the Afghan sky. Maybe another day. Maybe two, even three. He needed to take what he could. He had nothing to squander.

1983 Chapter 9—Mercy

March 1983, Kabul

It was one of the Tajik Spetsnaz, who found him, and called out in Tajik: “Turkey.”

Vadim signalled the man to his left and began to run toward the Tajik’s position, who emerged from one of the houses. Saturday afternoon, fire fight. This time not an exercise. He passed the Tajik, and came face to face with yet another mercenary.

The body was squirming with pain, breathing ragged, Vadim checked him for weapons first, took the pistol; the rifle—an AK, judging by the magazines—was already gone. Took the hand grenades and tossed them away.

The man was lying on his back, legs open, one arm clutching his chest, wet with blood. He wore a ragtag collection of gear—the camo pattern was part American, part British, the pistol Swiss or German. Of course he wouldn’t wear anything like regular kit. His face was covered with a rag typical of Special Forces everywhere. His had a white and dark grey pattern.

Vadim pulled his own rag down, like he’d honour an opponent with the wire mesh mask, before he pulled the other’s down. Hands shaking. Dan? But Dan never wore military gear. Dan blended in.

Blood bubbled from the other’s lips, too red in a bluish pale face. The man was European, short, ash blonde hair, crusted with dust and sweat, greenish-brown eyes. Dust and dirt exaggerated the lines in his face.

Chest wound. Vadim reached for the arm and forced it away. A mess of blood. Impossible to say, but it looked bad. Even without the panicking, choking breaths. He took the fabric of the tunic with both hands and ripped it open, then, amidst all the blood, saw at least five holes in the man’s heaving chest alone.

“He’s dying,” he said in Tajik.

The other Spetsnaz nodded. “Take him to the comrade Major?”

The Major would want them to at least try and get this man out alive. None of the cross-trained personnel would do. Vadim called Dima over, and the medic immediately began treatment in an effort to stabilize him.

There was no kindness involved. If they could take this man prisoner and interrogate him, he would be the best source of information they could hope for. Vadim didn't believe this Westerner was some soldier of fortune. This area was too interesting for too many forces. After all, Dan was here.

The other Spetsnaz scoured the village, checking for more rebels, dead or alive, but this was the only survivor they could find, and even his survival was debatable.

Vadim helped Dima, listened to the man's assessment of the situation. The medic kept speaking to himself, his voice low and monotonous, to stay focused and keep the unit informed.

The turkey tried to make eye contact, fixed on Dima, hands clutching at the ground, just reflexes, motions of fear, not of any reasoning. Fingers found the cloth of Dima's trousers near his knee, but the medic kept speaking in a murmur, and Vadim wondered whether he should take that hand and press it.

Fear of death; the man wasn't worried about being taken prisoner. He was in too much pain to worry about consequences, he probably only wanted to live. Console the enemy. How? Vadim's instinct told him to shoot him in the head and end the suffering and those horrible breaths.

The turkey tried to speak, gargling noises from his throat and motions from lips and tongue, but no words anybody could understand. He might be begging for his mother. A different instinct wanted to make Vadim speak the words: don't worry. All will be well.

Death was only nothingness. Absence of anything, memory, self, but most of all, pain. He stared at the man and followed Dima's orders, and wanted it to end.

Eventually, the body stopped moving, and Dima glanced up. "That's it. I lost him."

Vadim wondered why Dima didn't try to get the other's heart going again, but then, this wasn't Moscow. Keeping him going for ten minutes or half an hour, fine, but not the hours it would take them to get back with the helicopter. And even then...very unlikely. Dima seemed to wait for an order, but Vadim shook his head. "Was worth a try."

Dima began to clean up, detached the stuff he'd been pouring into him, washed his hands, then stepped outside to smoke.

Vadim glanced at the dead man, his pale features, European face. Another man sent half the world just to die. The killing shots had come from a window, neat holes, one right next to the other, too many of them for a human body. “This is not your fucking war,” hissed Vadim, and pushed the man’s shoulder. “Fuck you.” He stood, anger rising.

His gaze fell on the boots, saw metal blink. He crouched and saw what the laces held in place. British dog tags, no rank, nothing but a name. And what looked like a phone number. He untied the laces, pulled the tag loose, and placed it in one of his pockets, then searched the corpse. More metal tags. Clearly, this man had wanted to make sure his various bits would be found and could be traced—too much experience with mine fields or RPGs.

And that meant one of the tags missing wouldn’t make a difference to the Major.

* * *

Back at the beginning of the year, when winter was still so fucking cold, Dan’s cock would have frozen off if he’d dared stick it out of the many layers of clothing. Dan had been to the tea house one last time, before leaving for the mountains. He’d talked to the owner, left some dollars and a verbal message, never committing anything to paper. Paranoia helped his survival.

He’d be back in Kabul in the spring, around March, possibly April. The weeks in the mountains had been hard, but he was used to cold, heat, danger, hunger and destitution. It was his job, and the payback was worth it.

Not just the money, an acceptable salary with several different bonuses, but the mountains. Forever the majestic vastness, and at the end of it all, if he returned, the hope to meet an enemy whom he’d never see again if he weren’t doing this fucked-up suicidal job in Afghanistan. An enemy who was occupying more time in his mind than hunger, thirst, or the damned itching of fleas and nits. Every night. Every day. Every hour when he wasn’t fighting or surviving.

* * *

Vadim asked the *chaikhana* owner whether he'd heard anything from the other foreigner, but there was nothing but a headshake, and something like "Allah be willing."

Allah had nothing to do with it. From what Vadim knew, the radical Muslims stoned homosexuals. He bribed the owner to not tell anybody about his own message, or him being here, then proceeded to have his tea. After being holed up for too long in too many patrols with too many clashes and bullets whizzing past his ear—Kabul was a rare haven of civility.

Vadim ate nuts with his tea, and ordered naan and mutton. Chewy, but protein, and his body didn't mind the grease and the vast amounts of chillies that could have masked any ingredient.

The tea house owner gave him a patchy grin, and encouraged him to eat. They were both laughing when he downed the hot tea and his eyes almost ran with the spiciness of the food. "Good, eh, good?" he asked in pulverized Russian.

When had Vadim turned into local entertainment? He hadn't bribed the man that much. He nodded, pulled his lips back from the heat, and chewed, hungry for anything that wasn't army rations.

Vadim wasn't aware of the man who was watching him, that dark-eyed gaze not intent enough to make him uncomfortable. Just a man, close, sitting in the shadows, a rag wound around part of his face, and his grin hidden.

Three months, it had been a while, but the Russkie never seemed to change. They'd been lucky in autumn, meeting almost every week or fortnight, and he'd grown accustomed to his presence. And to the sex, always that. Lust was a powerful incentive. But the winter had been long and far too hard. He was tired and exhausted. Only thirty-four and the extreme conditions were taking their toll on his body already.

Downing the last of his tea, Dan pulled the long native coat to one side, fished in his pockets and left a handful of bills on the table. He stood up in a fluid motion, moving the rag away from his face simultaneously. Shaking his head until the too-long hair sprang free, he took a couple of steps towards Vadim's table, and grinned, the rag only partially obscuring his features.

Vadim glanced up. There was no mistaking him. He'd know that body in almost all guises, all states, in any place and at any time. He gave a grin. "Fancy

some meat?” He asked, with a wink, and offered the place opposite, licking the fat and spices from two of his fingers.

Dan laughed, damn, it had been a long time and he’d spent it in far too much hardship and in the wrong company. Sitting down, he pulled the rest of the fabric off his face. “Been a while since I had some decent meat.” Raised his brows in a suggestive manner, and grinned. “I see you’ve gone native.”

Indicating the leftovers of the naan.

“Native? Since when does meat speak Pashto?” Vadim gave a roguish grin. “That old goat or whatever it was, mutton, is just food. And I like naan. Half continent eats naan. Nothing Afghan about it.” He motioned to the tea house owner, ordering “more of this,” in Pashto. “Good you’re in one piece.” In English.

“Aye,” Dan grinned and nodded, “I got only one new scar, and as usual, just about made it out in one piece.” Changed into Russian, fluently, “Fucking cold out there, but what would you know about that, you and your cosy little garrison life.” He slouched on his cushion, long legs stretched out.

“Yeah, fat and lazy old me,” commented Vadim. “Got your message yesterday. No time to warn our little friend here.” Indicated with his chin over to the tea house owner, who was busying himself, but lifting his head to smile brightly at Dan.

“Good to see you seem intact as well.” Dan leaned forward with a mock frown, “or did they make you a eunuch in the meantime?”

“All still there.” Vadim looked up as one of the waiters appeared with an even bigger portion of meat and naan for Dan. Seemed they liked Dan better than him. Who could begrudge them that. They probably made more money out of him.

Dan thanked the young lad in Pashto, received the usual smiles and nods, waved at the owner, before turning his attention to the meat. He loved spicy food.

“Come on.” Vadim urged, “You’ll need strength.”

“For what?” Dan took a piece of meat with his right hand, dunking meat and bread into the spicy sauce. Food couldn’t be hot enough, it brought life and heat back into his bones. “Any plans for needing my strength *later*?”

“If you’re interested in expending that strength?” Relaxed banter, while Vadim dug for the metal tag. Show it now, or later? At least it was still there. “I have something to show you.”

“Hm?” Dan had his mouth full. Eyes watering, but hell, this was proper food, not the shit he’d eaten over the last three months. His goat-herders did their best, but the insurgents were distinctly lacking in catering qualities. He’d lost weight, as he always did when out there for any length of time. “Unless you got yourself some weird-ass tattoo, there’s nothing I don’t know on our body.”

“No. Something more serious.” Vadim dug out the tag and put it on the table, near the big bowl—that way, none of the Afghans could see it.

Dan stopped chewing, stared at the tag before placing his hand over it. “Fuck.” Forgot to swallow, lifted his fingers, read the name again. Said nothing, just let his fingers rest on the metal. Swallowed at last, took a deep breath. John. Old mate from yonks ago. Fuck.

Vadim watched him, and had a sinking feeling in his stomach that this had just ruined the chance for sex. Next time, he should wait with bad news. He chided himself for that thought. Dan had lost somebody he’d known, and all he could think about was sex.

“Did you...?” Dan asked. Not that it mattered, and yet it did.

“No. It happened on my left flank. He took cover in building, got sprayed with bullets. One of scouts found him. Medic tried to stabilize him, but he had seven bullets in his body. Died under Dima’s hands. Hopeless. Heart just stopped. Didn’t die as prisoner. Just died. Was fairly quick.” And he was scared and hurting and stared at us as if we could help him. Soviets trying to patch the holes so they could take him prisoner. How fucking grim.

Dan picked up the tag and closed his fist around it while lifting his head to look at the other man. He didn’t doubt Vadim’s story for a second. Why should he lie? Even if he had killed John, that was life, and death, their jobs, and this fucking war. It could have been him, but it wasn’t. He was alive, and that felt damned good. “I’ll see that his ex-wife and his kid get the info.”

Confirmation. Wife. Children. Vadim’s jaw muscles worked, chewing on that information like on a bar of steel.

It was their job. Death was their constant companion. Dan slipped the tag securely into the buttoned pocket of his shirt. “Thanks.” He meant it.

“He went fast,” Vadim repeated, uselessly. “We assume he was just mercenary. We won’t be able to confirm his identity.” Shaking his head, he

glanced at his hands, put the last bit of naan down. “Well. He had about ten tags on him, so this went missing on way to base. We buried him.”

Dan nodded again, hand hovering over his plate. Couldn’t quite recover his appetite. “That could have been me. Same job.” Implicit-explicitly exposing his trust. Knew he shouldn’t tell the Russkie, but somehow felt the need to let him know that Sergeant John Archer, nicknamed ‘Stubbs’, had been more than a mercenary.

“That was what I thought.” His hand had been shaking when unmasking the enemy. Dan. Too close for comfort.

“I’ll tell my contacts to let his family know he got a decent burial.” Tilting his head, Dan took in a deep breath. “Where? Just in case this war is ever over. Relatives want to know and see strange things sometimes. Much better not to have too many and keep it in the family. No one to miss you, then.” He grimaced, meant himself, but in too many ways also the other man. His opposite.

Vadim nodded. “Have map?”

“Aye, but not with me. It’s in my bergan, back in a room I got.” Dan lifted his head and looked straight at the Russkie. Room. Three months. Need.

Vadim glanced up. Knew what it meant. He was glad but still felt strange. Maybe this time, it would be his turn to take Dan’s mind off dying.

“John’s dead. I’m alive.” Dan picked up the naan, grease and spices running over his fingers when he bit into the meat and bread, chewing, eyes fixed on Vadim. “Come?”

“Aye.” Vadim grinned, realized he had quoted Dan, and gave a laugh. “Finish that food, I have three, ah, four hours.”

Dan flashed a grin, chewed faster. “I better hurry, eh?” True to his word, he finished the naan and meat in record time, licking his fingers before downing the strong, sweet tea. It was strange, he felt more alive than before he’d heard about Stubbs’ death. As if the dog tag in his pocket reminded him that he had made it. Not unblemished, but alive, and that was all that counted.

“The room’s in the Western district.” Dan stood up, waited for the bills to be settled. Vadim paid the rest, put in some extra money, wouldn’t hurt to keep these folks on his side—never had.

Dan just turned and expected him to follow. Winding the rag around his head once more, he blended into the crowd, just another native, with nameless dark

eyes and nameless dark face and hair. He stopped in front of a building that was somewhat different to most others. A sign above the door, declaring rooms for rent.

Dan grinned beneath the rag, nodded quickly to the ‘Soviet soldier’ who was following him, before slipping through the door. He took his time going up the rickety stairs. Up and up he went, level after level, until he got to the upper landing. Dirty floor, shabby door, but it had a lock. Producing the key and fiddling for a moment, he swung the door wide open.

Inside, Dan unwound the rag from his head once more. “Welcome to the Hilton.” Making a sweeping gesture before dropping the rag and opening his coat while grinning. It was a room. A real room, albeit grubby, cheap and nasty, but fuck, it had a chair. A window. A sink which might even have running water. But most importantly, a bed. A large double bed with a real mattress, real pillows, real bedding. Fairly dirty, but what the fuck did it matter.

Vadim glanced around. “Hilton indeed.” Ah, follow some guy to his hotel room. The small thought amused him. “For once, you won’t press me into some stones that I can feel for days.” He took the beret off and tossed it on the chair. “Does water work?”

“Did this morning.” Dan grinned, shrugged the coat off and let it drop onto the floor. His shirt and belt followed quickly. “I trust the owner. As far as I’d trust anyone here, that includes the tea house owner.” And you, Russkie, but you I trust in other ways, and yet never in some.

“Hope you have knife to his balls,” murmured Vadim with humour. Wouldn’t it be ironic if the guy sold his head to the Mudjas wholesale, and they’d come and pick him up when he was in bed with Dan?

“Let’s just say the owner of this place here has some things to hide that don’t fit well into the Shar’iah.” Dan smirked and made a lewd gesture, rubbing his crotch. “Males and females, whatever you like, but I told him I won’t require those services. I have my own cunt.”

“Brothel?” Vadim glanced around again. “Well, that means nobody worries about who comes and who goes. As long as we’re not nailing their women. Or their sons.” Vadim opened the belt, the tunic, slipped out of it, shirt, undershirt. Smooth and shaved, the only thing left on his upper body was his watch.

He sat down on the bed to untie his boots, working quickly to get the kit off, socks, too, then placed his hands on the buttons of his trousers, glancing at Dan who was just about to step out of his boots. “Anything you want?”

Dan glanced up, still bent down, head roughly on crotch level. “That depends on how quickly you want to finish. As I said. Been a while. I want the whole hog. All four hours.”

Vadim hooked his fingers into Dan’s belt loops, pulling him close enough to press his face into Dan’s groin. “Whole hog sounds good.” Breathing against the other’s groin, lips opening to trace the line of cock through the fabric.

“Hmmm...” Dan hummed, as if pondering the right course of action while his breathing pattern was already shifting towards the erratic. Undressed, both of them, except for their trousers. Running his hands over the other’s neck, down the back. “Has anyone told you lately that you feel like a girl?” He grinned, moved his hips, pressing his groin into Vadim’s face. His cock reacted in seconds flat. “The skin, that is. Can’t say I met many birds with your kind of muscles.”

Being called a *girl* was oddly better than being called *cunt*, and Vadim almost laughed at the thought. Pride of the Soviet army, indeed. “See, not all Russians are hairy bears.”

“No, I figured that, but I bet in a moment you’ll tell me that I’m one.”

“Bear with you is wrong,” said Vadim. “What is your national animal? Bulldog?” Vadim opened Dan’s trousers, rubbed his face against the other’s cock, heard him take in a sharp breath. “Ah, but that would mean you’re not homosexual,” murmured Vadim. “If you think of girls...” Teasing. “Do you?”

“Are you fucking insane?” Dan’s hands came to rest on the other’s shoulders, steadying himself. “But there were some things about them that I liked. Smooth skin for one.” Moving his hips slowly, Dan’s eyes half-closed, simply enjoying the feel of the other man’s face against his cock.

“Yes, I guess they usually smell better.” Vadim kissed the inner thigh, felt a tendon there tense as Dan shifted his weight.

“And by the way...” Dan’s voice had turned husky, “it’s ‘homosexual’, not ‘homosexualist’, but I prefer ‘gay’.”

“Gay means joyful.” Vadim looked up. “Neither of us is that. Joyful. I prefer homosexual. Homo means same. That is something we are.”

Dan stilled, looked into those pale eyes, the colour still amazed him. “But I am. Joyful. Sometimes.”

“Not enough. Precious little joy in war.”

Dan shook his head. “When you cum, what do you feel? Tension? Release? Ecstasy? I feel a glimpse of what could be called joy, as well.”

Vadim nuzzled the cock, hands running down Dan’s flanks, a slow, lazy caress, until he hooked his fingers into the trousers and pulled them down. “Not sure which English word is good for that...peace? I am myself, and nobody, just feeling. I don’t care.” He moved closer again, kissing the hard, smooth plane over Dan’s groin, almost reluctant to start, then chided himself and opened his lips to take in Dan’s cock. It didn’t matter. They were both alive, both here, and they had a little time.

“No.” Dan stopped Vadim with a hand on his head. Feeling the short hair beneath his calloused palm. “I’d come within seconds.” Wry grin, a flick of his hand against the top of Vadim’s head. “I want to make the most of that skin of yours. Seems a luxury after the long winter.”

Surprised, Vadim glanced up and licked his lips quickly in a rare moment of...something. Didn’t have a word for it, could hardly understand it. Self-conscious didn’t quite hit it. “Okay. What will it be?” He grinned; he was about to fuck in a brothel, and that seemed to rub off on him.

“Just lie down.” Dan pointed at the bed. “I feel like savouring this. Got so fucking cold this winter, sometimes all I could do was think of the heat of your body, of being inside you, to keep myself from just falling asleep and freezing to fucking death.”

Inside me. Vadim shuddered, moved onto the bed and laid down, flat on his back, one arm under his neck, chest tensing lightly. Showing off the lines there. He’d had some time for weights and push-ups and the usual exercise and he gained the satisfying response of an impressed Dan.

One brow raised while examining the man’s body, Dan’s grin turned self-conscious for a moment, before ploughing on. Wondering at first if he sounded like a bloody poof, but then discarding that thought immediately. “Consider yourself the dish and I’m the temperature gauge.”

“Is that thing you put up goose’s ass?” Vadim enquired, suddenly laughing again.

“Later.” Dan smirked, did a side-jump onto the bed so that it shook and squeaked, threatening to break down. The mattress continued to wobble on worn-through rickety springs like the Titanic tittering around its iceberg, when Dan scrambled onto his knees, straddling the other man.

“If you’re really good, I’ll see what’ll get up this goose’s arse.” Planting his hands right and left of Vadim’s shoulders, Dan lowered his head, smirking. “But before that, let’s test how smooth you *really* are.”

The Brit just didn’t make any sense. But Vadim liked him strangely open like this.

Enough of the preliminaries. Dan felt he’d been talking more than a chat show host intent on wooing his guests, he decided to woo a nipple instead. Pale brown, small, almost negligible on the expanse of pale, smooth skin stretched taut across a pectoral muscle. Teeth, lips and tongue, working their way around and across, flicking, teasing and testing, until he chuckled and moved to the other. Bites, licks. Never quite kisses across and upon the Russian’s body.

Vadim softly cursed, chest tensing, hands reaching for the other who...made him squirm. Every touch on his nipples was directly connected to his groin, and he was breathing hard and groaning before he remembered that he usually tried to make no sound. Loved it, even if it made him desperate. “You...bastard...”

Dan lifted his head a mere fraction. “I resemble that remark.” His lips curved into a grin, before turning his attention back onto the hardened nipples, swollen and damp from his attention. Surprised at the reaction, hadn’t expected a man to get much out of this. Like him, who figured it was nice, but nothing special, yet his bimbo-birds had writhed around and squealed while he’d been working on their tits.

Tits. Pecs. The latter was infinitely better.

Making his way downward, teeth, tongue, lips, touches hard then soft, but never ever quite a kiss, instead tasting skin and licking, biting, suckling. Moving down the body, sensation of rope-like abs beneath the silken-smooth skin. Laving the groin, hairless, spotless, smooth, damn, smoother than any of his girls had ever been, and that cock. His prize.

Vadim opened his legs, cock almost flat on his stomach, hard, twitching when Dan moved closer, tension building up, then breathing again when Dan moved away, cursing softly in Russian. How to force more, now? Short of

grabbing him and flinging him onto the mattress, and it felt too damn *nice* to do that.

Dan was moving back up, along ribs and onto pecs once more, playing with sensitive flesh, before travelling towards one shoulder, and then the other.

Teeth-lips making their progress across the neck, sucking the spot of his cigarette burn, which made Vadim groan loudly, before his tongue dipped along bones and muscles.

Dan was taking his time to map the terrain of the Russkie's body, saw hands digging into the mattress, before one found its way up to the head of the bed, arm tensing as if Vadim were trying to pull himself up.

Vadim knew he didn't look very dignified, but he didn't want it to stop, and was more than ready for anything that would happen, had been ready ages ago.

Dan lifted his head once more, almost on eye level. His own body touching all the way along the other. Groin connected to groin, cock meeting cock, chests acquainting.

"What do you want?" Mumbled. He was goddamned horny by now, but a fuck just didn't seem quite enough.

Vadim groaned, lips open, breathing, needing, struggling to regain a little control, but couldn't care; somehow, he just didn't. "Anything," he said, in Russian. "Whatever..." Moving his hips up to get friction, stupid mattress was too soft, really, forcing a hand between their bodies, wrapping his hand around Dan's cock. "Move." He just wanted to feel the other's strength, wanted to have all that skin on skin, feel the weight, even fucking hold him.

Friction, heat and strength. Dan pushed down onto that body that was stealing his senses and robbing his mind of anything but the imprint of muscles, skin, and hardened flesh. Moved, forcing his hips down, cock against cock, his own held by a relentless grip. Needed his hands to support himself, but ground and pounded, pushed and slid, moved his body so viciously, he was fucking the other's cock with his own, hand or not. This would take longer, wanted it to last, last forever, if only it could.

Vadim felt the bed move beneath, the headboard tapping the wall with each of Dan's movements, pressure building. He released the head of the bed and dug his fingers into Dan's back, slippery with sweat, pulsing with muscle and strength, and he thought alive, we're just alive, fuck everything else. Getting close, muscles

coiling to build up the pressure, could feel sweat, smell it, feel it tickle down his temple. Dan on top. A perfect sight, especially his shoulders and collar bones, working, shifting, holding the weight and moving it, just need, no control, chest glistening.

Vadim came, with Dan following close behind, moment of weight, tension, crushing strength, held in check by resisting strength.

Dan collapsed. Strength depleted. Tension, control everything. He let himself fall down onto the other man's body, sweat-slicked and wet with cum between them, skin on skin. He was breathing hard, heart pounding, face nestled in the crook of his neck.

Vadim relaxed, and wiped his face with his arm, then tried to look at Dan's face. Silent.

The silence stretched, felt like forever. Sweat cooling on Dan's skin, his heartbeat slowing back down and thudding slowly, lazily, utterly relaxed. Dan finally murmured, "D'you think the Hilton has room service?"

Vadim gave a dry laugh. Brothel with room service? Do the gentlemen wish to clean up? Maybe strawberries and whipped cream? Would this champagne do? "Maybe one day," he murmured.

That would be the day when the country was rebuilt and the same system of wash-my-hand-I-wash-yours was installed here, with party members jockeying for boons like time in luxury hotels, or what passed as such. He'd seen Montreal. He knew just how far the Soviet Union lagged behind. But if and when Afghanistan became like that, there'd be no room for Dan. For a start, Dan's side would have been defeated, and he'd have been pulled out.

Moving his head, Dan grinned lazily and stretched like a cat in the sun. His whole body moved slowly, undulating on top of the other before relaxing once more. "One day, aye. Once you are out of this shit. It's not going to last forever, this communism malarkey. It can't. It simply doesn't work." He chuckled lightly, eyes closing. Should really move off that body, but hell, he was spent.

"Term's 'socialism'," corrected Vadim. "Communism is idea, socialism is way there." He looked at Dan. "You think there'll be world war three? Nuclear fire? All gone, Shakespeare, and Pushkin, both gone? And we fight like cavemen, with stones?"

Dan huffed, pushed himself up on his elbow, ready to roll off, because really, he shouldn't be lying on the Russkie and anyway, what a goddamned faggoty thing to do and...he still couldn't be arsed right now. "No." he looked down at Vadim's face and flashed a lopsided grin. "I don't believe there'll be a World War Three. Certainly not between you lot and us. We're not stupid. I don't think you are, either. But..." he trailed off, shifted his weight before finally rolling off and ending on his side, head propped up on an elbow. "We'll just keep practising for all eventualities. Always prepared, as they say."

Vadim thought about it. "You need to understand...we are armed to teeth to protect people. You on island, you are safe. Russia has been invaded again and again. Americans don't know what this feels like—maybe Indians, that lived there to see invasion and slaughter happen."

Dan huffed at the concept of Britain being safe.

"System's not ideal, but..." Vadim's jaw muscles tensed for a long moment. "I dread what comes after. There is talk of reform. It's not Stalin. We might yet...put it on right course."

"How the fuck are you going to turn things round, change a whole country? You're too big." Dan let his arm fall down on his hip. "Look at us, Britain and Northern Ireland, what a fucking mess we've made of it. I had mates blown to pieces over there."

Chewing his lower lip, Dan grimaced. "That whole Mudja shit here in this bloody shithole, it all reminds me too much of other stuff. It's the same, everywhere, and when it comes down to it, your vast nation will fail, too."

Vadim accepted that it looked unlikely they'd win, unless they waited it out. And Dan was among the people who took that leisurely planned time away. The last plan for Afghanistan he'd seen estimated it would take ten years. Thirty. Forever. Just to make a point, one point: We are not weak. We won't let brother socialists fall. There was nothing to gain from here. No wealth. No industry. No rich soil. Nothing intellectual. Afghanistan wasn't Eastern Germany, not even Poland.

"Ah, but we have long memories. Your people are old, too. Lots of history. All we need is time, and things will change. It's my duty to keep watch so they can make journey safe. Even if it's my children's grandchildren. The steppe is wide,

Dan. Teaches you patience. Just like those mountains.” He smiled. “And I like competition.”

Dan laughed, a short, abortive sound. “Can’t claim I understood what you said, but I agree with two things: the steppe is wide—even though I’ve never been there, and the mountains, fuck, yes, the mountains are a thing in themselves. They eat you up, swallow you whole, digest and churn you around until their loneliness spits you back out again. You think that nothing else matters. Just them, and that tiny handful of life that’s your own. Nothing, no one, barely remembered, except perhaps for a moment of recognition in a goddamned teahouse.” He shut up, suddenly, had said too much.

Vadim flashed a smile. “You’re my favourite enemy, too. Messy Brit.” He reached over to the pile of clothes, half-turning, angled for the rag to wipe his abs and stomach clean.

“Well.” Dan shut up before he said any more. Blinked once, twice, wondered how he’d gained that kind of answer. *Favourite enemy*. He swallowed and deflected his confusion. “Give me the rag. I’m sticky. As far as I can make out we got another two to three hours, aye?”

Vadim dropped the rag between them. Not that there was much space, but he didn’t want to clutch the other’s hand and make him promise he’d come out of the mountains alive. Then, suddenly, the irony of it all hit him. John. The dead man. Vanya. Ivan was Russian for John. Same name. “Yeah.” He checked the Volkov, which Dan had reclaimed from the bandits before chucking the bodies down the ravine. “Two and half.”

“Two and a half what?”

“Not days, not weeks.” Vadim grinned. “But not minutes, either.”

“Oh.” Dan groaned, feeling like a right idiot. “I’ll get my own back for that.” He stretched, threw the rag behind him. “You up to another round in a while?”

Vadim stretched out, took the headboard with both hands, and tensed his muscles as he rattled against it. The bed failed to collapse. “Looks like it.” He was thirsty, but too sluggish to move, and he liked lying there, not many cares in the world, and no responsibilities right now.

“Good.” Dan flashed a grin, teeth, lips, grimace and all. “I’ll even slip a dollar or two down your crack.”

“Careful.” Vadim raised a couple fingers in warning, but grinned. “Guess you pay by night, not by hour?”

“Hourly.” Glancing at his bergan, Dan sat up. “I got water, energy bars, even some food, before you need to get back to your duties, Russkie.”

“Duties, like...?”

“I still haven’t tested the temperature of that goose of mine, and I’ve been jerking off so often to the memory of fucking your arse, it’s time to refresh it.”

Oh. Duties. Taking it up the arse. If only all his duties were that enjoyable, he wouldn’t even think about the war anymore, just take it in his stride. Vadim watched Dan stand, grab the bergan, and throw it onto the bed between them.

“Help yourself.”

Favourite enemy indeed.

1983 Chapter 10—Down and Out

July 1983, Kabul

Market. That fucking M again. Kabul in summer, all heat and dust, an inferno of flies hanging like large teetering grapes on cut-open carcasses in the meat corner; a hellhole of voices, shrill and fast, movements of faded colours and dirt. Stink of sweat, animals, and half-rotten produce, the last island of activity and life in a dilapidated city enveloped in clouds of dust. Stalls with nuts, spices, promising atonal symphonies of smell; beads, carved stones, lapis lazuli and turned wooden bowls. Pottery and tin vessels, fabrics, wool, spun and raw, dyes and flashes of brighter colours. Above all of this, the incessant noise and never-ending movement. Men, women in burkhas, and even more men. Rags around their heads, garments flowing, some with their faces almost fully covered, others with hats and long beards beneath, but all swathed from head to toe and their dusty feet in sandals. One as indistinguishable as the other to an uncaring eye.

All the same, except for one.

Dan was moving through the market. Incessantly. One with the sound and the smell, the ebb and tide of the human ocean. Looking. Waiting. Searching.

* * *

Vadim had hitched a ride with a patrol, just wearing standard issue plus the ranks, which might lead to a problem here. He jumped out of the car and regarded the onslaught that was the market. He should be safe, nothing he couldn't handle, but he was weary. Paranoia was an art form here, and he squeezed through the hustle and mass of bodies, looked at some wares...blue, bubbly glass that made him think of the sky, lapis necklaces, and massive silver rings with semiprecious stones that had gone out of fashion five hundred years ago.

He stopped at a place that served tea, nothing more than a dusty carpet under an improvised roof, and watched the passers-by. They weren't an unattractive people, the Afghans, with all their ethnic groups: Tajiks, of course, he spoke their language after his last posting, and recognized their features; Hazara, who looked like Mongols. The tall, bony, haughty-looking Pashtuns, who thought

they were the true Afghans and everybody else was just a vaguely annoying guest who had overstayed their welcome.

Dan was moving along the stalls, into the centre of the market then weaving back out again. He had managed to leave a note with the tea house owner, but it had been cryptic, and already over a month ago. A month in which a lot of shit had happened. So much had gone wrong, he didn't even want to think about it anymore. Down and out, he felt like the most hapless, clueless green-faced Nig the army had ever seen.

He was still wavering between being so fucked-off he was ready to slaughter half a dozen Afghans with his bare hands, and pissing himself with laughter at his misfortune.

Turning another corner, so damned hungry by now he was pondering stealing food in daylight, when he finally spotted his prey. No, his hope. What?

Bastard. Prey. Whatever. The man he hadn't seen for over two months and who he needed to see more than anyone or anything else.

Walking casually closer, he was the tallest man in a throng of others. Same clothes, long flowing rags with just about nothing underneath, tattered sandals and rags wound around his head. Leaving nothing free but a small section of deeply tanned skin around his eyes and the eyes themselves.

Vadim handed the tea glass back, pondered getting another one, but he didn't want to stay in one place for too long. The Pashtuns could always decide it was worth the risk to earn the bounty on another Russian's head.

He moved again, paused to get some hot, spicy meat things wrapped in a naan, and ate the steaming meat while he walked, on all accounts not intimidated by being outnumbered about ten thousand to one. He paused again to look at some stone lion figures that seemed to be Chinese, weighed them in his free hand. The merchant told him it was 'smoked jade'. Whatever that was, it wasn't plastic.

Vadim pondered, then set them down. Nowhere to put them, nothing he could do with them, cheap or not, bargain, even...the merchant kept shouting lower prices and annoyed Vadim. When he abruptly turned, he saw somebody—a pair of eyes, shoulders...tall, massively broad for a country that seemed to know no muscles, only sinews.

Dan stood still for a heartbeat, in less than safe distance, aware there were others who might not like to see his face. Nor body. Nor still un-cut-out eyes, and

least of all the fact he was still breathing. Instinctively about to dodge away when spotted, his eyes got drawn to the empty naan bread, some of the grease from the meat still clinging to it. Fuck. He hadn't had a decent bite for days. Not counting the half-rotten scraps he had found the night before. He had to keep a low profile for at least another week; so low in fact, he was close to licking the sand off the goddamned streets. But that bread. Food. Fuck, so hungry, gnawing pain in his empty stomach was slicing like a knife, twisting a few times for good measure.

He forced himself to step aside, blended into the next dim opening between two stalls, hoping the Russkie wasn't going to chuck the bread away before he could get his attention.

Vadim's nostrils flared. Possible. Impossible. The other ducked into an alley, and he turned fully around to follow, plucking some meat from his teeth with a fingernail, squeezed himself through a squabbling bunch of women, and came face to turban with the other. "You." He murmured, the food forgotten. Thirst, and hunger of a different kind. "Shadowing me?"

"You want that bread?" No reply, just greed, pointing at the emptied naan in the other's hand.

"Uhm." Vadim glanced at the bread. "Do you want it?" Offering it, still puzzled. "The meat's mostly gone, though."

"Holy fuck, yes!" Dan tore the naan from the Russkie's hand, half crouched, ducked his head and turned away, unwrapped the rag from the lower part of his face, and stuffed the bread in less than three bites into his mouth. Not turning back to face the other before replacing the rag, his face was completely covered again, except for the eyes. Chewing, greedy and starved, those dark eyes intensely focussed on Vadim.

Vadim watched, exasperated, at the display of hunger. He knew that from survival exercises, which were a bitch, especially in winter. "Stay here," he murmured.

Dan nodded, still chewing while looking around, ensuring that no one was close. Vadim turned back into the market, got another of those naans, with meat, and dried fruit and nuts by the bag. He stuffed the latter into his pockets and returned to Dan, whose dark eyes grew wide at the sight of hot food.

"Fallen on hard time, eh?"

“You have no idea.” Dan nodded, glancing around. No matter how hungry he was, he couldn’t take any risks. “Can’t eat it here. There’s a darker alley a bit further on.” Eyes on the naan, but hell, better wait and live than eat now and end up in the gutter. “I have nowhere else to go.”

Vadim raised an eyebrow, quizzically, but indicated for Dan to lead out of the bustle and hustle and the donkeys. It was relatively calm there, and much easier to keep an eye out. Safe enough for Dan to unravel his rag, enough to free his mouth. Vadim offered the naan to him, and leaned against the wall. “What happened? Your rebel band got killed? Blood feud?”

Snatching the naan from Vadim’s hand, Dan took a large bite before he spoke. Chewing and talking with a full mouth, he couldn’t help it. “You could say that.” Forcing himself to chew some more before swallowing, knew if he were too greedy he’d just get sick. “The last bit. Got myself caught in the middle of some shit even I don’t understand.” He flashed a reckless grin. “Lost everything.” Another bite, moved the hot meat around in his mouth. “No weapons, no money, no place to stay. Not eaten for days and my contacts won’t turn up for at least another week.” Chewing, fuck, this was good. “You’re looking at a man, piss-poorer than even your raw conscripts.” Despite it all, Dan grinned, almost laughed, even. Starving, yes, but this shit was too fucked-up to get him down. “Haven’t just got Russkies out for my hide, got some zealous goat-fuckers as well.”

Vadim couldn’t help but chuckle. The despair was comical, and Dan’s way to deal with it felt almost Russian in its odd humour.

Dan was waving the naan about with a smirk. “Get your gloating in now, Russkie, it’ll have to do for a while.”

“I think you need bath and new clothes. You smell pretty bad.”

“Aye, I know.” One more bite left and the naan was gone. Hunger sated for now, Dan hadn’t felt so good for a while. “I’m a flea-fest and nit-haven, but fuck all I can do.” He replaced the rag as soon as he had finished eating, even though nobody was near. “Bloody lucky to be alive, but my contacts won’t like it when I have to tell them I got no equipment left. I wonder if living off rubbish in streets and rat-infested Afghan alleys gets me promoted.”

Vadim laughed. “You could tell them you did that. Come.” He had an idea, and the other would follow, but Dan protested. “I’d like to point out that: (A) I

wouldn't be grinning if I found you in my position," no, he'd be pissing himself with laughter instead, "and (B) where the fuck are you taking me?"

"Don't make such a ruckus." Vadim headed towards one of the hamams, a small place he sometimes visited, rarely, though, because it was too dangerous to form a habit. Strangely enough, the Major had brought him here, him and another captain who was on the way up. Vadim just about managed not to stare at either man, nor to seem too eager not to take the offer of women. It was meant as a friendly gesture, but Vadim told him he'd caught some unpleasant shit last time and was let off the hook. But he did cherish the place.

Dan was looking around himself, wary, but strangely trusting his Russkie. His best chance to trust the enemy and do that lap dog thing for a while, at least with the Russian he knew where he stood.

Vadim knocked on the door, exchanged a few words with the young boy, and they were let in. Dan was astonished, but damn glad. "You think there's anyone here to shave my head?" He hated his hair completely cropped, but hell, he was so infested with critters he needed to get rid of everything. "And while you're at it, any chance for some rags that aren't crawling with lice? No point in the bath otherwise, aye?"

"That stuff needs to get burnt." Vadim fumbled for money, handed the kid some and told him to buy a new set of clothes, native-style, and bring razors. "Get undressed. The water should be ready. Maybe not be completely clean, but should do." He ushered him into the next room, which was already hot and steaming. "You lost weight."

Dan glanced around, ending up grinning at the Russian's care-taking. The whole situation was too absurd. "Hey, you haven't even seen me naked, yet. How the fuck do you know if I lost weight?"

He unwound the rag, his hair wild, worse than two months ago, when they had last managed to meet. Long, dark, matted, and most obviously not been washed for too damned long. Getting out of the rest of his clothes quicker than he'd ever done before, finally delivering a kick to the bundle of infested rags. Hands on hips, he turned towards the other, a haughty expression on his face. Grimy, but smirking, and yes, starved. "Say hello to my personal zoo."

"No great exhibits, nothing truly exotic, sorry." Vadim nodded towards the next door. "Water. Soap. The kid should return with razors soon."

“Bloody slave driver.” Dan muttered, glancing over his shoulder. “You better watch your back, next time we meet I won’t be so down and out and I’ll have your arse quicker than you can utter ‘poof’.”

“Move it, princess.” Vadim smirked. Nothing against that, but not now. Not. Right. Now. Damn. Too long. What, two months? Ten weeks? He opened the door and Dan walked through, flashing a grin while walking.

“And you’re still a fucking bastard enemy soldier to me.”

Vadim remained dressed for the moment. He didn’t trust his body right now, and didn’t want to be fucking with the Brit when the child returned. It wouldn’t do. He liked this place.

Dan saw the steaming water, the heat got into his pores before he’d even lowered himself into the small pool. Taking the soap with a groan of relief. “I hate having my hair shaved.” And face it, McFadyen, it won’t just be your head that needs to have its hair lopped off. Not with that infestation of creepy crawlies above and beyond your nuts, performing a native dance as high as your eyebrows.

Vadim sat down on the stone bench, and folded his hands. “Oh, I’ll get to see rest of your face? Isn’t easy to tell whether you’re gorilla or man right now.”

“Thank you, arsehole. I hate having a damned beard, but at least it looks more native and less ‘let’s go spill blood of Daan’.” Dan flicked out his middle finger in a rude gesture.

Vadim laughed. “Not converted to Islam, yet, huh? You’d be their ‘brother’ then. Would be smart move. Of course, Allah hates homosexuals. And you’d have to wear beard forever.”

“No bloody way, and they can keep their stones to themselves.” Settling down into the water, soap foaming, hands roaming, Dan let himself soak up the heat. Fuck, it was good. Hellfire and damnation, he had to be thankful to his Russian cunt for all of this. Could be worse, though. Could be someone he didn’t trust. Trust?

“Soak. That dirt is clearly measured in geological layers...”

“Aye, comrade, whatever you say, comrade, since you pay, comrade.” Dan took the piss, then did exactly what he’d been told. Soaking. Cleaning, and scrubbing himself. This was good. Better than good. Orgiastic. Would be even better with some more food.

Vadim idly reached into his pocket to pull out the bag of nuts, poured some into his hand and was eating them, one by one, enjoying the sight of the man who, in turn, clearly enjoyed himself. And started to look more human.

The kid arrived with a stack of clothes and a razor while Dan was lathering himself down for the third time. Vadim took the items off him and told him to leave them alone. He bolted the door and sat down again.

Dan dunked himself under water, washing the last soap out of his matted hair and ears. The pool had turned into murky dishwater with minuscule critters floating amongst the grimy soap bubbles. “Hey!” He turned his head round, saw Vadim eating, and pointed at the nuts. “Bastard.” He pulled himself out of the dirty water.

“Hey, what?” asked Vadim, oh, but appreciating the view, naked, dripping wet body. The desire was getting pretty close to unpleasant. “You want some?” He grinned, suggestively. “I mean: Do you want...some?”

“Eh?” Dan was reaching for the nuts, but the other was snatching them away from his hand. “What the fuck’s that, aye? My services for a nut?” Did his best not to grin, pawed at the packet again.

Vadim held the packet, but allowed Dan to latch on to it. “For clothes, food, wash, and maybe some cash. Depending on your...performance.” He smirked, which changed to a downright dirty grin. “Would love to feed you some more meat.”

“Well.” Dan seemed to ponder while grabbing a handful of nuts. “That sounds like a hardship.” Yes. Really. Terribly. “Downright abusive, if you ask me.” Shocking. Disgusting. Sucking that bastard’s cock? His life seemed to be going from bad to worse. “So, you want me to whore my cocksucking skills out to you for a few peanuts?”

“Yes. And I’ll toss in some dried mangoes and apples, too.”

Dan looked appalled, grimaced, stuffing himself with the nuts. Silent while chewing, until suddenly. “Deal.” He flashed a grin. This was better than being on the run, stripped down to nothing. Bugger them. Bloody goat-fuckers. This was a hell of a lot better. Alive. Not too long ago when he had been sure he’d drawn his last breath.

“You feed me, clothe me, bathe me, help me survive—and you got me.”
Didn’t add, not yet, the most important sentence: ‘But if you try to buy my arse I’ll kill you with my bare hands.’

“Deal.” Vadim surrendered the packet to a ravenous Dan who was wolfing the entire contents down in thirty seconds. Vadim felt an odd kind of humour creep up inside. Paying the enemy for sex? It was really just about keeping face, but he’d love this. It shifted the balance. He’d get sucked off, maybe allow the other to fuck him, but first, his needs. He swallowed dryly, fought hard, then lost, to place his hands on the wet flesh, tracing the lines of shoulders, arms...fuck. He moved away again, away from a smugly grinning Dan, and fetched the razor. “Get human.”

“You don’t want any nits, fleas and lice jumping from my beard onto your cock, eh?” Dan smirked, glanced around, looking for some drinking water. They usually had a jug somewhere. He’d got so used to most of the diarrhoea bugs, he was pretty much immune. “Head, beard, and...,” he sighed and shrugged, “the rest’s itching pretty badly, too, but you’re not going to get that knife close to my balls. I’ll do that myself.”

Vadim checked the razor. Metal handle, and a pack of razor blades. It said ‘Schick’, whatever that meant, wherever that came from, must have been out of production for about fifty years. “I’ve shaved you before...”

Dan grinned with raised brows, “My face, Russkie. Just my face. Remember?”

“For starters.” Vadim took the beret off, then opened the cuffs and rolled the sleeves up. “Come. Razor’s sharp, you won’t feel thing.”

“What, at my throat? When you slit it?” Still, Dan sat down on the stone bench after spotting the water jug, and taking a swig out of it. “What first?” He shrugged, “guess whatever. Just do it. Those bloody critters are driving me mad.”

The blade was easily sharp enough, and Vadim had got the soap while Dan was still protesting. Soaped him up, then placed his hand on the man’s shoulder, beginning to shave in slow, regular, calm strokes, every now and then wiping the blade on one of the rags. “I’d have been driven insane,” he murmured, assessing the work after a couple strokes, and, satisfied, he continued. “Well, despite your state, you’re clearly spirited enough to be entertainment this afternoon.”

Rolling his eyes, Dan let out a groan. “Entertainment. That’s what a man is reduced to who’s lost his clothes in front of a rag-tag bunch of fucking goat herders.”

He tilted his head, “Cheers, mate. Why don’t you stab the next knife into the other side of my back and twist it a bit more.”

Vadim chuckled while finishing up the chin, and the throat, just enjoying the sight of the fresh, bared skin, the lines he had memorized and didn’t tire of. “I’ll consider it,” he said, somewhat belatedly. “But I’ll leave clean corpse. So your people can actually identify you.”

“Thanks, asshole.” Dan hid the grin by lowering his head. “Go on, then. It’ll grow again, just get rid of the mane.” He was going to look like some fucking skinhead without his hair, or like a Soviet conscript.

Vadim began to trim the long hair with his knife—no way the razor could do this—and touched Dan’s head and hair at his complete leisure. He liked the hair. Strange, to enjoy this so much. He began to shave the head...oddly erotic, again. He’d never seen Dan like that, naked in a new way.

Dan was tense. Knife. Russian. His head. Vadim. Blade scraping along his skin. Trust was a fickle lady. “I’ll look like a freak,” he muttered, distracting himself. “Might be your preferred look, but not mine. Not even a damned beret to cover my head.” No beret, no insignia. Not a scrap of ID. He didn’t exist anymore, at least not in Kabul. If he succumbed to the Afghan mountains and the dangers it nurtured, its nature, and its human beasts—every kind and colour, he’d vanish from the face of the earth without anyone knowing. “Nothing to hold onto my head anymore. Looks like I’ll be sucking your cock for food, but entirely my way.”

Vadim paused. “No. Food is free. I’ll give you money so you can buy food.”

Dan’s head hidden, lowered, Vadim couldn’t see his facial expression. Surprise. Astonishment, his Russkie was more decent to him than he’d expected. He’d hoped for a scrap to eat, but this treatment was more of a royal one. “You’re treating me like I used to treat my pussies.” Dan smirked, lifting his head.

“You shaved their heads? You weird man.” Vadim chuckled while Dan muttered one of his choice obscenities.

Vadim was running a hand over Dan’s shaved head as he finished. Odd. He had liked the long hair, even though Dan looked much cleaner now. Shame nothing

could be done about the hair. “Maybe I’ll pay you to fuck me later...maybe.” He smirked into the other’s face. “Doesn’t suit you. Not at all. You look ten years younger.”

“Oh fuck, no more roughie-toughie squaddie? Is it choirboy, now?”

Running his own hand over his head, Dan shuddered visibly and frowned.

Vadim grinned. “No, not boy. But...different.”

“Awful. Don’t want to see it.” Dan decided to get on with it. “Hand me the razor. Got to get rid of more hair.”

Vadim changed the razor blades, then handed the thing over. “I mean, I could do that.” Yeah, handle his balls and cock and ass. Not a bad thought, was what his body had to say to it.

“Bollocks.” Dan flashed a grin. Crap joke, but what to expect from a man with a head like a snooker ball. “I’m not going to have you slash away at my crown jewels with a sharp blade.” Taking the razor, he stood with his legs apart, starting to work away at his pubes. Awkward. Chewing his lower lip while peering down. Wondered if he shouldn’t just shut up and let the other get on with it.

“I’ll find some vermin poison for you...don’t have it on me, but I can bring it tomorrow.” Vadim leaned back, watching; the strangely young face, not rough, with a suggestion of what a young Dan had looked like. What he was enjoying about this was Dan’s obvious discomfort, and the way he handled himself. Have him smooth? Now, that seemed like a great idea. Worked for him, on several levels. “I can do it. If you don’t mind me shaving your ass, too.”

“What?” Dan stopped mid-motion. “Are you completely fucking bonkers? Shave my arse? Why the fuck would you want to do that? You’re not going to fuck me, understood? I rather starve in the streets.” He frowned, simultaneously doing small circular motions with the razor. Dark curly hairs at his feet and the uncomfortable realisation that he’d probably just chop off his own balls in an attempt to shave them. Thrice damned.

“Because lice and other things live even there.” Vadim grinned. “Wherever there’s hair. There’s reason I prefer to go smooth.” He shrugged, allowing the other to come to his own conclusions, and Dan muttered in due time, “damn.”

He knew when he was beaten.

“Apart from that...why should I force you?” Vadim continued. Because I still want you any way I can get you. Shit. He wanted to fuck him, but not like the first time. He wanted the other to want it, enjoy it, understand the lust.

“I’d kill you if you tried to force me.” Sudden seriousness entered Dan’s words and voice, and Vadim nodded understanding. He’d understood it the first time Dan had said it, ages ago.

Dan held out the razor. “Alright.” That itch was worse than having the Russkie fiddle about with that sharp blade near his cock, balls and arse.

Vadim stepped closer and took the razor. Still wearing his clothes—that should give Dan a little reassurance. Only a bit, didn’t mean it couldn’t happen, of course, but maybe it calmed him.

“How do you want me?” Dan winced. Bad choice of words.

Vadim grinned. “Lie down on bench. On your back. I’ll get some water and the soap.” He headed to the tub while Dan reluctantly lay down. Knees up, arms at his side, strangely awkward. Vadim brought everything, then opened Dan’s legs, despite the initial resistance, and pushed one knee up. Shit. This would be hard. Dark, bronzed skin, cock, balls, dark hair. Lots of good stuff right there. “Now, concentrate,” he murmured, more to himself.

“Yeah, you better, fuckhead.” Dan growled, wondering if he was somehow behaving like a virgin on her wedding night. “Guess that’s what it feels like for birds at the gynaecologist.” Grumbling, but holding very, very still. Muttering after a moment, “One nick and I kick your balls in retaliation.”

Vadim glanced up, hand with soap reaching towards Dan’s balls, then gave a short laugh. “What if I lick blood away? Still kick?” He asked, sounding as innocent as he possibly could, but he had no illusions about the range of his acting ability.

“Aye,” Dan muttered, glaring from his rather passive position. The tension in his body was unmistakable.

Rubbing the soap over the skin, starting with the insides of Dan’s legs, the space between thigh and balls, and on the other side, more soap, and down from the abs. Vadim ran the blade through the water and began to shave the left thigh, carefully...but he liked how still Dan was, and how focused. “If you don’t move, I’ll give you good reward.”

Dan cleared his throat. Unable to see much of the other man. He could lift his head but didn't dare move too much. "What reward?" Strange, that blade. Like courting an enemy.

"Something somebody did to me once. Wait and see." Vadim took Dan's cock and pulled it to the side to give a precise shave, liked the feeling in his hand.

There would be time for that, too.

"That's...an ominous promise." Dan's breath stopped for a moment.

Vadim pulled it to the other side, and kept working. "You won't regret it. That much I promise." Now the balls. Tender, wrinkled skin, balls inside moving. He worked like he would shave himself, every now and then cleaning the blade.

Dan turned into a statue, bronzed, smooth, dark skinned, silent and utterly immobile. Even forgot to breathe.

Vadim took a towel, wet it and wiped Dan's front with it. "Now comes fun part. Turn around, hands and knees, one foot on ground." Changing the blade again. He wouldn't risk nicks or cuts there.

"No." Dan shook his head, ignoring the mild arousal.

Soaping his hands up, Vadim glanced at Dan. "Basic hygiene, Dan. Sex is later." His own body enjoying the closeness and sight, but he was dressed, and figured the other might not know...might be too flustered to notice.

"No." Dan was looking at Vadim, intently. "No fucking way am I going to get on my hands and knees."

Vadim put the blade down. "I won't fuck you. Not tonight. I wouldn't mind, but it's about cleaning you up. And that means that hair needs to go as well."

"Of course you won't fuck me. Remember? I'll kill you if you try to fuck me."

"Listen. It's not different from physical examinations in army. Only I won't stick anything into you and ask you to cough. Take knife if you don't believe me."

Still undecided, Dan was lying tense, unmoving, just studying the other's face. Nothing, until a sudden, muttered "fuck!" and he sprang into action. Moved off the slab, turned over, did exactly what Vadim had asked him to do. Right knee on the stone, left foot on the ground. On all fours, kind of. He was angry with himself, more tense than before. How the hell could something that had happened so long ago affect him so much? Fuck that. This was nothing. He lowered his upper body, head towards the slab, lifting his arse. Spread. Vulnerable.

Vadim hadn't anticipated how arousing that sight was. His cock stirred, twitched, and he wanted nothing more than to break that promise. "Shit," he murmured. Vermin. Shaving. The task. His soaped-up hands went between Dan's legs, dam, again inner thighs, then moved his fingers into the crack to soap up the hair there. Tight hole. Tight and hot. Just remembering it made his breath go heavier. "Will be over in minute," he murmured, trying to calm the other as he put the blade to skin and began to shave. Carefully, fingers preparing the way for the blade, moving flesh away and smoothing it.

Dan said nothing. Did nothing. Just listened, to fingers, blades, voice and breath alike. Didn't like it, no fucking way. Too tense, no way could he let go and trust. "Hurry up."

Vadim nodded, to himself, damn, he was hard, he wanted nothing more than to have him now, shit, tried to force himself to think of something else, then did, that delicious sinful thing the Hungarian had done. Szandor. Oh yes, that man had shown him a few tricks when he'd thought two men were just about fucking.

"Done yet?" Dan muttered impatiently, but Vadim just took a handful of the water and rinsed the smooth skin, washed some hairs off, more water. Placed the razor down as he brought his face forward, thumb moving one cheek further out.

"What the...?" Dan protested.

Taste of soap, of water. Vadim ran his tongue into the crack, nothing bad about that, then moved to the hole, which tightened. Of course.

He moved back enough to speak. "Relax. Just showing you something."

Craning his neck, Dan's body in fight or flight response. "What the fuck are you doing, Russkie." One false movement, false word, and he'd be out of the door. "You want to lick my arse?" Disbelief.

Tongue. Cock. No competition.

Vadim grinned. "Guess I just did." He moved in again, to play with that tensing muscle, amused and aroused, which was actually not a bad combination, by the other's disbelief. Pressed lightly against the muscle, circling it, all good and clean, soapy, but there was sweat, too, and the taste of Dan's body. His hand went to his own cock. He couldn't come into his uniform. Later.

Patience.

Dan didn't breathe, held the tension.

Tongue flicked in, no resistance if it was wet enough, and out, to circle. In again, gently fucking that hole. Szandor had used this to get him ready for fucking, and Vadim would have done anything after that, including let the Hungarian have him any way he wanted. Mind-blowing sensation, with the small sounds the other fencer had made, wet, obscene sounds.

Dan still wasn't breathing, not until he suddenly gasped, breaking some of the tension. Why the fuck did he even allow this? What was it all about? What...damn. Something happened in his body. Some weird-assed sense of acceptance.

"You're fucking my arse with your tongue." Voice dry, low, somewhat brittle. Congratulations, Dan. The power of perception. Body something other than tense now; intense. And fuck that, he shuddered; grew hard. So much for control.

Don't stop.

Vadim paused, briefly, right hand resting on Dan's ass, steadying himself. He wanted to bite, kiss, suck, closed his eyes, wanted, wanted badly, relaxed his jaw muscle, then returned to it.

Dan, who couldn't quite suppress a strange sound. Forced, strangled, cursing elusive control.

Licking again, tongue finding its way inside, and, almost in an afterthought, Vadim took the other's cock with his left, not surprised it turned Dan on, he knew what effect it had on his body. Hand stroking him in time with the motions of his tongue, steadily pumping him.

Dan gasped. "Fuck, no." Control gone, no illusions. "No." Didn't move. Couldn't. Shit, that was...didn't know. Remembered that finger up his arse, and how he'd wanted to kill that bastard for the intrusion but this...Shit.

"No." Liar. Yes. More. He pushed backwards, towards that mouth, forcing that tongue. "No!" desperate. More, fucking Russian cunt, give me more.

Vadim paused, to breathe more than anything, to keep in control, maybe, he really only wanted to open his trousers and fuck him right here on the spot, right now. He should be wet enough to allow that. Hand still on Dan's cock.

"You...alright?" Fuck. And when had he ever cared? They could beg him to stop, he never budged, never did.

"Aye..." Dan's breathing erratic, too far down the path of lust. No options. "Don't." No. Fuck, yes. No. Fuck! "Don't stop." Truth was a bitch without tits.

“Wouldn’t want to get killed for this, you know.”

“Won’t.” Dan pushed his hips back, into the face, hands gripping the stone slab with white knuckles. “Will if you stop.”

Vadim flashed a grin, ah, exactly as intended, exactly what he wanted, well, some of it, at least. He closed his eyes and went back to work on Dan’s ass, fucking him with his tongue, going slow and intense, tongue flicking in and out, or just licking. The taste of soap was gone now, it was Dan’s sweat, which he liked, and the scent of lust. He could just imagine what Szandor had thought, having just peeled him out of the white jacket, pushed the white breeches down to go down on his ass, and Vadim’s self-consciousness at the sweat and the fact he worried about being clean—obscene to enjoy this, even more obscene to beg for cock, one’s own trapped in the breeches, untouched, on purpose. He made it easier for Dan.

One more thought, unbidden, for Dan. He shouldn’t enjoy this. Shouldn’t allow that tongue to fuck his arse, and then he cursed himself. Discarded all thoughts, just pushed back again and lowered his upper body until his face was pressed against the cool stone. Like a wanton whore, arse open, presenting himself; like the Russkie had done. Body begging.

That hand on his cock provided the last edge. Strokes intense, demanding, he was ready to give it up, give in, just touch. Body. Steam. Heat and water and the never-known sensation of smoothly shaved skin and that tongue...Every second insanely intense, too much feeling. Too much and too different to topple over that easily. Minutes felt like hours, body moving in sync with hand and tongue, nothing but a puppet, forgetting himself. No thoughts. Just sensations. Completely gone, handed over. Prisoner. Slave. Whatthefuckever. Groans, whimpers, arms shaking, hands losing their strength, knee buckling. Body sliding further and further down, chest touching stone. Eternity. Timeless. Lust stayed on a plateau of painful intensity until then suddenly. No forewarning, body bucking, mind the centre of a lightning storm. Flashes across his brain, and Dan cried out when he came.

Vadim was impossibly hard, briefly wondered about what picture they provided, Russian Special Forces captain in combat gear, needing so much, breathless, and a smooth, oh no, more than naked enemy—foreigner, shaved head like a POW in the films. Somewhere in a nameless hamam guarded by nameless people, hidden away.

He steadied Dan, who seemed ready to collapse, leaned against him to keep him on the bench. Wouldn't do to have him fall down now.

And Dan simply let himself give in like a boneless weight, slid onto the stone, lying in the other man's arms for a moment. What a fucking inappropriate place to be, if only he gave a damn. Didn't. Couldn't. Just lay and breathed, eyes closed. He wouldn't even feel nor see his death coming.

Vadim tore himself from Dan's body, knew the man wouldn't be able to resist if he fucked him now, no way Dan had enough strength to do much more than bitch at him, but he believed him. Dan would kill him if he did that. He'd try, at least. And he couldn't get that other thing. Holding him. Too much on edge, needing too much. More contact would break his control.

Restraint. Vadim stood, all blood, all reason, all strength gathered in the middle of his body, and he gave a dry huff. He reached into a thigh pocket for a flask of vodka he kept around to wash out cuts or nicks, and to wash the dust from between his teeth, and emptied it. Taste. Not as bad as cum, but a reminder of what he'd done, and what he wanted, of the other, and he needed distance now. "You should rest."

He turned to face Dan again, whose head turned, body remained relaxed.

Tiger. Kitten. Defenceless. Didn't think. Didn't want to. Overrated. "You're hard." Dan's eyes open at last, looking directly at Vadim's crotch. "I'll suck you."

Vadim's cock twitched yes, but damn, he needed distance, knew too well what he'd do if that control was taken away. That throat wasn't enough. "Give me moment." He stood there, closed the flask and stowed it away, then reached with a hand into the basin to wash his face and neck, ran a towel over his skin. Wrong to want so much. Dan never allowed him to grow tired of him. It was the situation. War made life more intense, yes, and they met so rarely.

Suck me. Eye for an eye. Lust for lust. It only seemed fair. Vadim covered the distance, ran a hand over Dan's smooth scalp. Fuck. Nothing to hold him by, he looked like a different man. That was the key. Different man. Vadim opened his combat trousers, just enough to free his cock. No time to get undressed. Too dangerous.

"Straddle me." Dan ordered. The bench had the right width, right height. "Like I did." With a knife on a throat and the intention to humiliate. Different, now.

Cocksucker. Loved cock. Didn't care. He turned over onto his back, looking up at the other, knees slightly bent. His whole body different, sensitised. Smooth, perfect. Except for the imperfections—some scars, no hair. "Give me your cock."

Vadim swallowed dryly, then did, straddled the other's chest, kept the weight on his legs, and leaned in, moved down that body to reach his lips. *Give me your cock*. Shit, like a request, almost polite. His face twitched. At least, it wouldn't be easy to turn him around and fuck him raw, now. Good. Another anchor for his sanity. He was pretty damned close anyway. He brought his cock forward and down, one hand directing it.

He was pulled further down within an instant. Dan's hands at Vadim's hips, urging and pulling closer, deeper. Parting his lips, tongue meeting resistance, hardness, smooth and heated. Concentrating was an easy task, he was relaxed and mellow, calm, and his throat opened. Dan gave the Russkie's hips a harder push, forced that cock all the way down his throat. Shit, that reminded him. Of a time where he'd had no choice but to choke and gag and swallow, but now, he was in control.

It was good. Deeper. Almost painful, but hell, he was too sated to care. Fucking his arse with a tongue, fucking his throat with a cock. And still in control. Some semblance.

Vadim groaned at the tight heat, at being urged and needed, taken like that. He suppressed a curse, moved, needed to fuck, needed to have it, right now. Thrusting hard into the other's throat, who took the strain, the force, eyes closed, just sensation, almost gratitude, might be using too much strength but just couldn't stop, then, with another choked sound, came, feeling the throat around his cock frantically swallow in reflex. He needed both hands to steady himself, pulled back the next instant, wanted to collapse, but there was no room but on the other man.

Dan gasped for breath, coughing, but grinning, moved a hand to wipe his lips, wet with a trail of cum as the other pulled out. Clearing his throat, he said nothing, head fallen back on the slab, relaxed, but hands digging into Vadim's uniform-clad arse. Muscles. Power.

Vadim didn't have the strength to get away, so just lay down on the other, possessive hands on his ass. Dan didn't complain, lay still, his body covered.

One naked, one in uniform.

Vadim wanted to rest his head against the other's, or his shoulder, and just dipped down to lick Dan's chest, couldn't and wouldn't kiss it, scraped his teeth against the other's pec. Glancing up, saw his cum on the Brit's face. Shit. Licking it away would be too much like kissing. "You're messy eater," he said.

Dan's brows raised, lifting his head from the stone to glance quizzically at the other. "Guess I was just too hungry." Smirked, teeth and all, before trying to reach the spot of cum with the tip of his tongue. Contorting his face in the process, reluctant to let go of the Russkie's arse. His.

He suddenly huffed with dry laughter, out of the blue. "We're not enemies right now." One skin, another camo. "Haven't even got my hair. Let alone any semblance of uniform."

Vadim grinned. That humour told him it would be alright. He moved in to lick the cum off, didn't even like the taste of his own, whatever, wasn't much, but loved the feel of the other's stubble on his lips. The moment a razor stopped touching that skin, it grew stubbly.

"Hey, take that tongue out of my face, it's been in my arse!" Dan's lips morphed into a toothy grin, that tongue a quite indescribable sensation on his face. Almost...tender. A slow-gentle rasp, the opposite of a punch.

"Guess you're too deep undercover, huh?" Vadim grinned.

"Don't think I can get any *more* undercover. I'm covered by a Soviet officer."

Dan smirked, letting his head fall back onto the slab, looked up at the ceiling. The other's weight was considerable, his own body muscular enough to tolerate the man on top. Odd. Sensing his reluctance to move, that weight was strangely reassuring.

Vadim gave a short laugh. "Next time I bring whole Christmas tree, service ribbons and all, so you can enjoy it more."

Dan laughed, his whole body shaking. "The lametta would dig into me."

Damn, Vadim thought. This was the perfect place to be. "Can't have you get cold, eh?"

"Cold? Despite my bare head, highly unlikely. It's July." Dan smirked, one hand moving up towards the small of the other's back. Resting there. The other hand still digging into the Russkie's arse. "Even though that cum under my back is getting cold and sticky."

“Yeah. And there’s that.” Vadim was reluctant to leave, those hands on his body were firm, solid, but he did, getting up from one of the best places in the world to rest. Narrowly beaten by the sun-drenched beach at Sochi. “Guess you need another wash.”

“But not in the same water.” Dan gestured over to where dirt, hair and vermin were floating. Moving his limbs, stretching, he was still sated and remained on the bench.

Vadim put the uniform back in order, body still tingling. Rest up, have a vodka or two, and lots of home cooked food. “Listen. I have some money on me, not much, can’t have it stolen, but should be enough for meal and room. I have some...foreign money. That should keep your head above water.”

Dan remained quiet. Lay on his side, propped up on his elbow, head in hand. Thoughts waging a war, should he accept it, could he. Had to. Had hoped he’d get help, a bite to eat, no denial. Had counted on the Russkie, but hadn’t expected this. This...taking care. Shit. Seemed he was supposed to stay alive.

At last, Dan nodded. “I’ll pay you back. I’ll be on R&R shortly.” Payback with goods, not money. More valuable and useful. Tit for tat.

Only when Vadim flashed a smile did he realize he’d been nervous the other might not accept. “Good. It’s not my money, anyway. Loot.” Turkeys usually had well-stuffed money belts. He wanted to go back, on top of the man, but had no reason to. “How long will you be gone?” Months, again. Weeks and months and wondering whether last time had indeed been that: last time.

“R&R? No more than three weeks this time. Including travel.” Dan ran a hand down his hip, letting it fall towards his groin. Unfamiliar. Smooth, strange. Overly sensitive. The itch when it grew back would be hell.

Vadim checked his watch to avoid looking at the other man. “I’ll meet you tomorrow, same time, where I had my tea.” Dan nodded while Vadim dug into his thigh pocket, and found the hard roll of dollars. Fifty dollars. They actually had value in Kabul. He pulled it out and placed it on the corner of the slab.

“Are you insane?” Dan stared at the money, sat up at last. “I know Kabul like I used to know the Scottish Highlands. I don’t need more than twenty bucks and it’ll last a while. I just need a safe hole, some grub, nothing fancy. Keep some of your turkey stuffing, you might need it.” He remembered another turkey, not so

long ago, and the Russian's decency. Enemies or not, they'd long passed into no man's land.

The Bit was probably right about the money. It was just that Vadim preferred to have him on the safe side. Vadim opened the roll, peeled thirty off and put them back in his pocket. Left the rest. He would have left thirty, but didn't want to start a discussion on it. Too mellow.

Vadim straightened to look at Dan. "And poison, of course. Anything else?" He hoped his face betrayed he regretted to leave. Hoped he would be asked to stay. What for? Couldn't touch him, but wanted, wanted to undress, give him a massage, again, take his time with the other's body. Just spend the night.

Dan shook his head, a hand on the twenty dollars in his lap. "No. Nothing else. You don't particularly live in luxury, either."

Vadim shrugged. "I get by. What do I actually need?" Beyond feeding the family? Precious little. "Doesn't matter." What matters is that I get out of here alive, and you, too, he thought, but the last part of that thought no longer surprised him. Been through too much already.

"I guess they're wondering where you've vanished to already, aye?"

Vadim inhaled deeply. "It's one of the guy's birthday today. There will be party. Vodka. I better go. Few reasons to pass on party." And he'd better find a present on the market on the way back.

"Vodka." Dan suddenly grinned. "Reminds me to go back to your question if I need anything else. Can you get me some vodka? Any cheap shit will do. Haven't had booze for ages. Bloody goat-fuckers doing their Allah shit won't allow any drinks."

"Plenty of moonshine in barracks. I'll just do inspection tomorrow, when everybody's still hurting." Vadim grinned.

Dan stood up, lifted a hand in an indicated wave after dropping the dollars on the pile of new clothes. "Guess I get myself cleaned up again and then head off. Will be at the same place tomorrow. Have a good party, Russkie." He added, with a raised brow and a flash of teeth, "and don't do anything I wouldn't do when you're pissed. Not many unsuspecting 'reporters' on the streets of Kabul anymore." A jab, but strangely enough not a vicious one. An almost negligent piss-take. Odd, that. The things a man's tongue in one's arse could do. "I wouldn't trust anyone with a press ID these days."

“Guess I have all press coverage I can handle.” Vadim wondered just how many of Dan’s sort prowled the city these days. “Just keep me happy, suka, and I won’t stray from path, yes?”

“What did you just call me?” Dan tilted his head.

Vadim paused. “You owe me few of those. You’re one who calls me ‘cunt’, Dan.”

“Touché.” Dan shrugged, grinned, relaxed. “In that case I owe you more than just a few, but I guess we’re even.” One rape. One torture. Accounts settled.

Vadim raised his eyebrows. “Would you prefer ‘darling’?”

Dan smirked, gave a rude gesture with one hand, the other middle finger stuck down his throat, making gagging noises.

Vadim laughed, plucked the beret from under his epaulettes and put it on, checking that it had the correct angle. “Very convincing.”

“Fuck off and get pissed.” Dan waved the man away with a dry huff.

Calling after Vadim, “and don’t forget, you’re *my* cunt.”

Vadim turned to wink. “We’ll see about that tomorrow.”

1983 Chapter 11—Up Close and Personal
October 1983, Afghanistan

There was nothing accidental about this. No happenstance encounter, no bumping into convoy, patrol, or whatever-the-fuck the Russkies were doing in October in these mountains. Not a scrap of convenient ‘by chance’, nor a smidgen of lie he could tell himself. No fibs, no nothing.

The only goddamned reason why Dan was hiding in this godforsaken part of the mountains, was the Russian. *His* Russian.

Holed up too close to levelled villages that had once been inhabited by goats, black-draped women and tea-cosied men, and far too near to a Soviet outpost, he had no other business in this place. He hadn’t had his hands on his Russkie for too many weeks.

Hiding. Waiting. Watching. Listening and patiently cowering behind rocks. He’d seen the patrols before; knew Vadim was part of that unit, and he’d be buggered if he was going to leave his post before he’d had his fill—and the other’s.

Damn. Dan was cursing himself and painfully aware of the irony of it all, how he had accused the other of being a stupid fuck who was ruled by his cock, now proving for the umpteenth time he wasn’t any better.

It would be getting cold in a few hours once night was falling, but he’d come with a packed bergan. The mountains—his mother and father and saviour and friend and unforgivable foe—and his most precious possession at all, a tub of Vaseline. Sod gun oil, he’d be doing the luxury thing. First a hotel room, now a proper lubricant. He was turning into a romantic.

Dan brushed hair out of his forehead, still short from the shaving four months ago, and was about to rifle through his bergan, when he suddenly heard noises. He peered carefully over the top of the outcrop of rocks, and was hit by the full force sucker punch of desire.

Vadim’s voice; Vadim’s body.

His Russkie was here.

* * *

Crude jokes and a relatively uneventful patrol, which didn't mean anything, only that there had been no all-out battles for a couple of days. Largely, Vadim thought, because they didn't take any fixed route across the mountains.

Dima sat down to peel his boots off, while another comrade got a fire going for tea, and there was the usual banter about girlfriends and families. Vadim gazed over the mountains, the landscape of grey and light brown, the sun-bleached bones of the earth.

Dima groaned as he massaged his feet, which looked swollen even at this distance. Vadim stepped closer and put a hand on the medic's shoulder.

"Should be back in two days."

Dima gave Vadim his typical exasperated, somewhat irritated glance. Dima had issues with being the medic. But he had studied medicine before joining, craving adventure and most of all to get out of that town somewhere in the Urals where he came from, only to end up studying emergency medical procedure and, of course, walking patrol in the Afghan mountains. Dima was proof in point that, if a cosmic intelligence existed, its sense of humour was sarcastic at best.

Dima was as tough as everybody, even though he tended to be more careful about his physical limitations, and took cuts and bruises more seriously than any of them, constantly reminding them that negligence wouldn't do. He also made sure that things were as hygienic as possible, and entertained them, at times, with stories about typhoid and leprosy. Which he likely did out of spite, knowing him.

Water was getting boiled, Alyosha lay flat on his back and seemed ready to sleep, hat pulled into his eyes to shield them from the sun, while all Sershka cared for was whether the tea would taste more like sweat or tea, as the leaves were damp.

Vadim tapped Alyosha in the side with his boot, rousing him. "Thanks for volunteering for the guard, comrade," he said. "I'm off to take a piss."

Alyosha muttered something obscene, but got up, pushing the hat back over his head, and reaching for the rifle.

Vadim was amazed he actually felt the need to piss. These mountains sucked a man dry just from the sweat, and his kidneys hurt for lack of water.

* * *

Dan's hand was moving silently while the rest of his body remained frozen to the spot. No sound except for the faintest rustle as he slipped the tub of Vaseline into his hand, arm moving minutely while watching the Soviet patrol. Unscrewed the top, dug deep into the grease with his left. Still no sound.

There, movement. Vadim was standing, then seemed to be walking in his direction. Fuck, yes! For once the gods were smiling at him, or perhaps the mountains had a gift for their lover, presenting his Russkie on a plate. Silver cutlery, crystal glasses, and all.

Dan was snaking sideways, stayed hidden, intent on the sounds the other man made. Reckoned Vadim was walking round the corner, out of the patrol's view. He'd bet he was about to take a piss or shit, hoped he'd catch him with BDUs conveniently around his knees.

Vadim found a good place, just out of sight, heard Alyosha and Sershka exchange pleasantries, and smiled to himself. All Spetsnaz, all professionals, one of the best units he'd ever worked with. Great soldiering, all the way, and discipline, too, which they only allowed to relax a little when they were reasonably safe.

Dan was moving as fast and yet as stealthily as he could, greased left hand by his side. One mistake, one sound, and he'd be caught. Killed by his cock, and he'd deserve that death.

Vadim opened his fly and pulled out his cock to piss, thought of nothing much but the lessening of pressure on his bladder and that he'd grown used to the mountains. On patrol, they saw sights nobody did, dramatic gorges, the way light reflected off a deep valley, an unexpected speck of green in this desert of rocks, or how the sky tore open after rain.

Dan saw the other's back, broad, known, as familiar as the scars that were hidden beneath the uniform. One more step. One yard to cross between rocks, and he'd reached his target. Adrenaline pumping, heart racing, and fuck, he was hard. He'd been too long, too lonely, and right now the danger was an aphrodisiac beyond his wildest expectations.

Dan took the step, used more speed and strength than he needed, crashed his body into the other man's, pushed Vadim into the rocks, impact muffled by flesh and blood. The full length of his body against the Russkie's, Dan's right flew to the other's face, covered his mouth before he could let out a sound. One sound,

just one measly sound that reached the idle chatter of the rest of the patrol, and he'd be dead, greeting Vanya in hell.

The sudden terror made Vadim dizzy, too fucking surprised to fight the onslaught, taken by surprise like a fucking goat-herder, and his hand went to the knife on instinct.

“No sound.” Dan breathed into the other’s ear, “I’ve been waiting for you,” grinding his cock into that arse, feeling the Russian struggle. “I’m here to fuck you, Vadim.”

What? It was Dan. Vadim’s hand released the hilt of the blade, instead tried to turn around. Patrol leader. Officer. Fuck. The others were what? Ten, fifteen yards away? He shook his head, but could feel Dan’s hands already on his BDUs, pulling them down, holding him there with the weight of his body. The crazy bastard wouldn’t listen. He’d do it. The holed-up lust gathered inside, the fucking need for a cock up his ass, for the other’s raw power, weeks and months and fucking months. No way, impossible. Just impossible.

“No sound.” Dan repeated, no more than a breath against the ear. Used his right hand to open his own trousers, then pulled out his cock with his left, lubricating himself. All the while pinning Vadim’s body against the rocks with his own. “Silence, or I’m fucking dead.”

Dan’s left hand dropped between Vadim’s arse cheeks, pushed slick fingers into the hole, breaching the muscle. Nothing took more than a few seconds.

Inside. Was that...cock, or? Vadim felt his heart stop, just stop, a sharp pain in his chest, what a way to die, bent over a rock, opened up, something up his ass and an enemy going to fuck him within earshot of his own men. In. Broad. Day. Light. He shook his head, just that, couldn’t plead, and the other wouldn’t listen.

He couldn’t even fathom what the other Spetsnaz would do to Dan, after weeks in the mountains, running like the wolf pack. And him, the ranking officer, been taken and fucked. The kind of thing that broke careers and people. Only way to deal with this would be putting a bullet in his own head.

Dan’s right hand went up to cover Vadim’s mouth, fingers gripping hard. Left guided his own cock, knew the arse as well as his own, probably better, twisted hips, pushed, slid and forced, thrust harder to breach the muscle with his cock this time. Groaned, bit into the fabric of Vadim’s uniform, had to keep himself from making a sound.

Vadim's heart began to beat again, painful now, raced, raced with fear and need, a measure of pain, because he didn't want this, didn't want to take that risk, not at these odds, no way, but the cock hit him just right, and he knew it, knew what would come, and the pleasure came and doubled because it was as brutal as it was. Because Dan just took, knowing he wanted. And he did.

Reckless, fast, they had no more than a few minutes, if that. Dan pulled out, snapped his hips forward, rammed his cock up that arse. Desperate. So motherfucking reckless with need, he could cry or scream with the sensations. But no sounds, just fabric against fabric as his body moved, harsh, vicious, fucking his Russian; his cunt.

Left hand dropped to Vadim's cock, stroked as frantic and relentless as he drove his cock into that body.

Vadim moved back, couldn't help it, cock hard and ready and pulsing, unable to deny his own lust now, the pain just perfect, just as he needed this, blowing his mind with the fear and danger and how perfect it was. Clenched hard down, feeling Dan's hand on his mouth, fuck, yes, the closest thing to rape, his life and career and everything on the line, but yes. Just yes. He came within what felt like only heartbeats, into that hand, against the rocks, hardly breathing so he couldn't make a sound, dizzy with lack of oxygen.

Dan followed a fraction of a second later, his cock gripped in the other's convulsions, sensed the cum splatter against the rock, his hand wet, sticky. Bit hard into the uniform, caught some skin and flesh as well, his whole body shuddered as he came, wanted to scream, the sensation blew his mind, taking his senses and wringing them out over an acid bath, leaving him empty, shaking with tremors of aftershocks, as his cock remained hard and deep within the other man's body.

But he had to move. Leave. Vanish from sight and sound. He took the liberty to stay for another couple of seconds. "Until next time." He breathed into Vadim's ear, hardly able to speak. "Guess I'm the one who's ruled by his cock."

Chuckling tonelessly, he pulled out, reluctant and wanting to groan with the loss. Hands sticky, greased, he was a mess, but fuck, a sated mess.

Vadim turned, quickly, felt the cum run down his legs, face burning, breath catching in his throat because he wasn't even sure he should pant. Heard, from too close, the other Spetsnaz debate whether the tea tasted like shit or not, whether it

was still within limits, and pulled the rag free to wipe himself down, ass raw, but he needed to hide the evidence. “Suka,” he mouthed.

Dan smirked as an answer, pulled up briefs, closed his trousers, sticky or not, no time. Every second the others could turn round the corner.

“Vadya?” called Dima.

Vadim’s face twitched. “Here.”

Dan blew a mock-kiss at Vadim. Turned and vanished behind the next outcrop of rocks. Vadim shook his head, but couldn’t suppress a grin. Nice and truly fucked. Shit.

“Fell into a hole?”

Vadim pulled his trousers up. “No, just waiting for you, darling.”

Roaring laughter, and Alyosha’s and Sershka’s heads appeared, just as Vadim closed the belt.

Dan was watching, hardly breathing. So close, he could smell the Russkies, mixing with the scent of lust, cum and sweat, but they’d probably think Vadim had just had a dump.

“The things rations do to my guts,” said Vadim darkly, and returned to camp, it was one of the facts of soldiering life that rations—or lack of water, or a virus—upset digestion. It would explain why he walked stiffly.

They poured him tea, and he decreed it undrinkable, then had a bite to eat, and rested, body remembering Dan, too well, too often, the slickness between his cheeks, oil or whatever he’d used. The raw feeling stayed with him that day as he walked and sat down, and how fucking twisted, but that dirty little secret made him smile.

March 1984, London

“And what is this?”

“Toothpaste. Surely, Soviet toothpaste is not dangerous goods?”

Vadim heard something like “Commie smartarse” from one of the customs officers. His passport was still being checked. It didn’t have many pages, and not a

lot of stamps. And it wasn't War and Peace. Still, it seemed to provide plenty of entertainment.

They'd pulled him out of the queue and escorted him into one of the rooms where they did the searches. Five men in the room, all armed and in uniform. Vadim was told to sit down, and did, aware of the old trick of establishing hierarchy. What was missing now was a bright lamp shining into his face.

So, this is democracy. Terrific thing to have.

The man who dug into his pack wore gloves. He unpacked everything, even shook the book he'd bought in transit. Travel guide to Greater London und Kent, as well as an A to Z for London. He had scribbled in the margins, underlined things that were world-renowned. British Museum. National Gallery. National Portrait Gallery. He'd be lucky if he'd make it that far. And no way would he be able to explain those entry fees on his expenses. Culture was not exactly a thing his superiors cherished. And the sums were fantastic; at least as per the exchange rate in roubles.

Next item.

"Toothbrush." Vadim forced himself to remain as stoic as during basic training. "Soap. I didn't bring razors."

"Why not?" The door had opened and another man had entered. "If I may ask, Mr Krasnorada?" He held Vadim's passport. Ah. Now, that was a professional.

Vadim was pretty sure where his suitcase was at the moment, and what they were doing with it. He was no beginner. There was absolutely nothing they'd find, and plenty of places where they could plant something. Cold War games, just different weapons.

The official wore a neat dark suit, as serious as cancer. Beautiful shirt though, excellent fit. One thing the Soviet secret services could learn from their Western European colleagues. "Why no razors?"

"They were sold out."

The man leaned back with the easy arrogance that having a strong currency brought. "You must feel very unwelcome?"

"Must I?" asked Vadim.

The man paused and smiled, then thanked his colleagues for the "excellent work" and sent them out. There was still a camera, pointing from the corner of the ceiling directly into Vadim's face.

“I am sorry, I am tired. I might not understand what you are trying to say.”

“What is your business in the United Kingdom?”

“I’m invited by regional fencing coach.” Vadim pointed at the backpack.

Not that that reason hadn’t already been given a dozen times. It wasn’t the greatest alibi and would have been much better if he’d had won a medal. If he’d actually been a fencer, and not just a pentathlete. “Mr Robbins. We met at Montreal, in Canada.”

“You are a sportsman, yes? Major Krasnorada?”

Vadim nodded.

“And you look very tanned.”

Bastard. Vadim’s jaw muscles tensed. “I have just returned from Afghanistan.” The word didn’t belong here in this small, dreary room somewhere in the bowels of Heathrow. This man’s boss probably used the same toilet in the same building where the man who had briefed Dan pissed. ‘Go out there, to that wild and barren place, and give hell to the Russkies.’

The man sat down opposite, crossed his arms and leaned back, regarding Vadim evenly. “Active duty?”

Vadim shook his head. “I’m getting a little old for that. But I don’t think I can tell you more about my duties, with all due respect.”

The man’s brown eyes caught interest now; maybe he allowed him to see that. It was hard to say with intelligence types. The same kind of nondescript faces, the same wits and smooth talk. “Your English is excellent.”

“Thank you. It’s much better than my German.” He had the stamps to the German Democratic Republic in his passport. Nothing new. Speaking Dan’s language in Dan’s own country, Dan’s own brand of intelligence officers in front of him. How strange.

“Well, I hope you enjoy your stay. You will give a presentation?”

“It is important we learn to understand each other,” said Vadim, and, for once, meant it. Important to enter a dialogue of brothers. People of the world...talk. Talk and understand, and that would make war difficult and the nuclear holocaust impossible. That was, at least, the hope. Party doctrine. Peace movement; much of it financed from the shadows. Render the enemy’s youth unwilling to fight. Amusingly enough, Dan had done more to that end than he could let on, but it

made him a more convincing pacifist right now. “I can only hope to do my part in this.”

“You seem to be an intelligent man, Major.” The spook gave him an altogether charming smile that looked genuine and honest. “Please, if you enjoy this country, I’d look forward to meeting you again.” He reached into the front pocket of his suit and placed a card next to Vadim’s hand on the table. “Just give me a ring. I am sure I can make time for you.”

Vadim blinked. And this would be...an attempt to turn him. They knew he was military, he spoke English, he had expressed hope of helping to end the Cold War. The pointers were all in place. He had sounded like he wanted to be turned, and they had obliged. How very forthcoming.

Did he? Vadim stood, the man stood as well, stepped closer and offered him a hand. “I’d be delighted,” said the man, and gave another sincere smile. It was all about leading people, making them trust you, spooks always used those dirty tricks. And what if they did background checks on him? What if they compared notes? What if there was a leak, higher up, and Vadim’s name was known? Even worse, what if Dan had used his name, in a report back home?

“Oh, I could give you your passport. Silly me,” said the man and handed Vadim the document.

Could. Now he was making it obvious. Passport, the right to travel. Freedom, or, what these people called freedom. And wouldn’t it be nice if he was indeed nothing but an ageing ex-athlete, meeting other ageing ex-athletes for a cup of tea and a laugh about how serious they had taken medals eight years ago?

“I will think about it,” said Vadim, took the piece of paper from the table, which only had a number on it, then began to pack his bag again. Toothpaste, soap, toothbrush, map and A to Z. He didn’t need more for the mission.

* * *

He read the A to Z on the train, cross-checked it with the travel guide. Looking, to all intents and purposes, the Soviet visitor scared to get lost. Maps were powerful things, information the weapon.

He carried the suitcase through Victoria Station, an intriguing construction like a plaza with a roof added. No real plan to it, no structure; it looked like the

Brits just improvised, managing the chaos that was their capital. They needed a train station, so they haphazardly made all the trains stop in one place, and stuck a roof on top. There was their main terminal.

Vadim found a woman who looked official, and had her explain to him where to drop off his luggage. In the row of grey lockers, he opened the suitcase, hands running over the seams of the leather. He was one hundred percent sure he was bugged, probably twice. But he'd be damned if he could find the devices.

Now, the main task was to vanish in the crowd as soon as possible. He locked in the suitcase, everything important on his body and in a light day pack that he had bought where he'd bought the map. Heading into the underground, he changed trains at random, then emerged after about an hour of being politely ignored, which seemed to be a very British thing—they didn't even step out of his way when he was moving, as if completely spatially unaware. A blindness that would mean death in any war zone.

Vadim heaved a sigh of relief when he came back to the surface. Suddenly, everybody seemed very young; no suits, no grey skirts, no clutched handbags. Instead, young people with spiky hair, torn jeans, greasy and creased—in an attempt to be as ugly and unkempt as possible. He stood there, watching the youths stream past. It seemed loud and chaotic, but then he defroze, and followed the crowd.

Dusk was approaching, and he assumed he'd have maybe four hours to find a place to crash—and kit himself out. The airports, customs, and travel had settled heavily on his bones, and the time difference was having an impact. He wasn't quite sure whether he should be hungry or tired, or both, only knew that, compared to a patrol, this was all a walk in the park.

Gaudy stalls. Now he knew where the youths bought their clothes. An eye-searing collection of neon colours, even collars with silvery metal spikes made from cheap leather, and, that amused Vadim somehow, belts made to look like ammo. He followed, senses besieged by impressions the further he walked that road, almost elbow to shoulder with the crowd. He smelled weed every now and then, saw the usual implements for it, sold freely as if they were decorations.

He was offered to buy drugs, but smiled and shook his head, saying "I don't understand" in Tajik, assuming, of all the different languages he'd heard, that this one might be new. He was let off the hook, playing ignorant, and thought, if he'd

fancy a career as a drug dealer, he'd just track, follow and kill those kids and take their stash. They didn't seem particularly vicious, and there was money on the street in this city.

But how ironic, after burning the poppy fields in the valleys, to see it sold freely in the streets. Purity, of course, was another issue.

Vadim saw a shop that seemed promising—rows upon rows of second-hand clothes—and headed in. Behind a counter that displayed all manners of silver rings and arcaner items that Vadim couldn't quite place, was a dark-clad youth, hair so black it had to be dyed, and done up in silent, rock-solid explosion of hair. The youth was busy and unaware kissing and stroking something that looked like her twin sister. Tight black PVC shirts and long skirts that were slit up to bony hips, displaying black fishnet stockings and high boots—so pointy it made Vadim's toes ache in sympathy. And lace gloves. The other wore a black hat settled on that nest of hair, at an angle that made Soviet parade uniforms appear practical and logical.

Vadim raised an eyebrow at the muffled sounds, but decided as long as he ignored them, he would be ignored in turn.

Going through the shirts, he found a few that looked like they could fit, he'd have to change to know, but he figured he'd fit in better if he went with jeans and nondescript T-shirts. He ran his fingers over leather trousers right next to the second-hand stuff. By far too expensive, even though he liked the feel.

He headed towards the counter, where the two pale dark-haired creatures were still kissing. He waited, as patient as in any Soviet shop, and eventually, they pulled apart. Both wore the same amount of make up, red and black lipstick, eye shadow in red and black as well, eyebrows made to look like bats' wings.

The one with the skirt might have had the longer fingernails. They could have been Martians, and yet, they both looked fragile and vulnerable, and Vadim didn't find them ridiculous.

“Is there way to try them?” asked Vadim.

“Put them on?” suggested the one who didn't wear a skirt. Male? Or just a husky voice.

Vadim paused, went over his sentence again. “I mean, do you have place where I can try these on?”

A hand laden with silver rings and long fingernails waved towards a curtain. Nothing more, just a curtain that would hardly cover him. Vadim decided he didn't

mind much, even if normal people would, and the two creatures would most likely be too busy reapplying their lipstick.

“Thank you,” he muttered and headed behind the curtain—about one step behind the corner. He found a cluttered stool and put the pile of clothes there, placed the day pack between his feet, keeping constant contact, and stripped out of the jacket and shirt. Then tried the T-shirts, cloth soft from being washed too often, which he liked, despite the somewhat musky smell—being stored with too many clothes in one place, and mothballs to protect them.

Not too bad. It would air out. He had no luck with the shirts—too tight in the shoulder, or downright baggy, but the T-shirts fit nicely enough. He’d just have to wear a jacket or coat at this time of year.

The jeans were alright, gave like second hand clothes did, and Vadim stuffed his old clothes into a bag. He emerged back from behind the curtain, seeing both youth slack-jawed.

Oh, the scars on his back. Vadim gave a smile. “I’ll take these.” The mirror near the door showed he’d fit in if he did something with his hair and shoes. That shouldn’t be too much of a problem. He reached for his wallet, too aware of the hole that the clothes ripped into his budget, but it was absolutely mandatory to blend in, even in a place as diverse and strange as this. It was bad enough that his accent gave him away, but with a little luck, it would be harder to place now.

The one with the skirt leaned the elbows on the counter and regarded him with all the blasé attitude of a maybe twenty-year old who’d seen everything. Definitely in terms of fashion. “You a tourist?” And the voice was female. For a strange moment, he’d thought they were both girls, then boys, but apparently, their gender followed the normal tradition.

Vadim smiled. “More like visitor. Nice city, though.”

“s alright,” said the one behind the counter, shoving his clothes over, long, bony, silver ringed fingers splayed on them, not yet letting go.

Was he being checked out by two kids each half his weight and bulk? Vadim glanced out onto the darkening street. If anything, it was getting more crowded. He wondered what Dan thought of this, and whether Dan had ever been in one of these shops, and what he thought of boys that wore eye shadow. And were old enough to have served in the army and been killed.

“You probably know your way around,” said Vadim, “I can find shoes further down?”

“Try Camden Lock market,” said the boy.

“And something to eat?”

They nodded and assured him there was plenty of food in that area, too. Not that they seemed to eat much by the way they looked. “Thanks.” They were nice enough. He could just as well risk the rest, especially as there was one further need he wanted to attend to. What was the word Dan had used? “Are there gay establishments?”

Neither batted an eyelash. “Soho. Full of that.” They gave him directions as well and told him there was something for every taste. Gyms, saunas, and nightclubs. The first two sounded just great. This freedom thing made some things easier. He’d be gone soon, he risked nothing, nobody would see or remember him. Just fine. No risk to the mission. He gave them another smile. “Thanks.”

Further down the road he found shops hawking military kit, and that was where he found some proper shoes, second hand as well. He wanted nothing to stand out, definitely not bulled boots; and then spied a bookshop that had a special display with the year’s date. Vadim wondered what was so special about it, entered, and browsed some of the books. In pounds, this was still too expensive, by far, but it made him smirk that all the Russians were there.

Tolstoy, Gogol, Pushkin. Might be interesting to read them in English and see how they changed. But he needed to travel light.

He plucked one of the books from near the window and read the beginning.

‘It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort to escape the vile wind, slipped quickly through the glass doors of Victory Mansions, though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust from entering along with him. The hallway smelt of boiled cabbage and old rag mats. At one end of it a coloured poster, too large for indoor display, had been tacked to the wall. It depicted simply an enormous face, more than a metre wide: the face of a man of about forty-five, with a heavy black moustache and ruggedly handsome features. Winston made for the stairs. It was no use trying the lift. Even at the best of times it was seldom working, and at present the electric current was cut off during daylight hours. It was part of the economy drive in preparation for Hate Week. The flat was seven flights up, and

Winston, who was thirty-nine and had a varicose ulcer above his right ankle, went slowly, resting several times on the way. On each landing, opposite the lift-shaft, the poster with the enormous face gazed from the wall. It was one of those pictures which are so contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption beneath it ran.'

"It's really against totalitarianism," said the man behind the counter.

Forbidden. Vadim felt it burn his fingers, opened it again further into the book, knew the moment he spoke, the man would be able to tell what and who he was.

'The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power.'

He glanced up, didn't understand, yet understood too well. Part of his mind coiled back. He shouldn't be doing this, and he should feel guilt, or more of a pause, but he had entered a place where the usual laws did not apply, the usual chains didn't bind. And if anything, having an anti-Soviet book in his pocket would clear him of being a secret service assassin. Just part of the disguise. Nothing more. He would probably not have the time to read it, anyway.

He paid for the book, then walked back to the underground station, where he took a train, and changed to get to Oxford Circus.

It was dark by now, tourists, party-goers, loud, crowded, he walked, dodged people running straight at him. Little Compton Road, there, he was there, saw a nondescript door painted with a rainbow flag. That was the place. He saw men kissing while walking down the road—like a parallel world, where this was neither a crime, nor something to be ashamed of.

How odd, how intoxicating. No force, no danger. He began to see the point about freedom.

"You want to go in there?" asked somebody.

Vadim turned, suddenly faced with a man wearing leather. Lots of it, in fact. Shining, gleaming, smooth black leather. He looked like he had just stepped off a motorcycle, but nothing like that anywhere near. Excellent body, meaty, broad shoulders, powerful. "Yes," he said, strangely breathless. Man in leather. Okay. That was...clearly something to remember.

"You sure?" The man stepped closer, bastard trick, Vadim smelled the leather, heard it creak. Chest nearly as broad as his. The man was in prime shape,

late thirties, crows' feet around the eyes, but he couldn't guess their colour behind the shades. Shades in darkness. How strange.

“Why not?”

The man shrugged. “Just loose arseholes in there. Old sluts hoping to score tonight.”

Vadim gave a quick smile, and the other smiled back, and he knew he liked the man on some level. Humour despite the appearance. “It's sauna, yes?”

“Really just a place to check out the flesh that's on offer,” said the other. “You should find a fan club within ten seconds flat. I'd say you look too classy for that.”

Vadim took half a step away from the door. “Why is that?”

“Are you fishing for compliments?” The man pulled the sunglasses off, and his eyes were brown, a shade lighter than Dan's. Vadim could feel his blood heat up. He didn't want a sauna, didn't want to see what that place was like.

Instead, the other man became a distinct possibility. Their eyes met, and the other's lips curved into a smile. “I guess you are.” He stepped closer, again, now within distance of a punch, and his voice turned into a low murmur. “You could go in there and have them fawn over you. Or you could come with me.”

“What are you offering?”

The other grinned. “Pretty sure I have what you need.” That sentence did it. As straightforward, teasing, and knowledgeable as could be. Unashamedly erotic. A man that didn't hide, that needed no convincing, and knew what he was doing.

Vadim stepped away from the door, and the other nodded, as if congratulating him on a good choice, but he didn't say it. “What were you looking for in there?”

The other gave a smirk. “Somebody like you. A new face. Happens every now and then.”

“Fresh meat?”

The other paused. “You wouldn't be the first tourist to put himself on the market here. It's a holiday of sorts.”

You can say that again, thought Vadim, and found himself walking beside the guy. He said his name was Darren, and dealt in real estate, which sounded for a moment like innuendo, but then Vadim understood he bought and sold houses, or properties, as he called them, and that it was really all quite boring. Only that it

was also pretty profitable, judging from the flat. Vadim had expected a hotel room, but Darren said something about a surprise, and Vadim was intrigued. It would beat having to spend money on a hotel room, that was, of course, if the other allowed him to stay until the next morning. He had no idea how these things went—definitely not as casual as it was right now. Even with Sasha, things had been more complicated—lies wrapped in subterfuge, covered with pretences. Following a stranger into his flat for sex made him feel oddly self-conscious. As if the man called Darren now called the shots.

First, he was offered a drink, and took it, amber liquid in a tumbler, without ice. The other was close, but not jumping his bones, or expecting him to jump his, still casual and relaxed. Without the sunglasses, and in the light, Darren had a good face, strong hands, excellent, chiselled shoulders. He lost the jacket somewhere, showing off his pecs, clearly a man who worked out hard and maintained even more painstakingly.

Vadim returned the favour, and put his jacket over one of the chairs in the kitchen.

Darren gave him a grin and placed both hands on Vadim's chest, warmth spreading, a calming touch, establishing contact. "Anything you absolutely don't do?"

That seemed ominous, like there was some kind of procedural manual for reference, and the only one without a copy was Vadim. What he absolutely didn't do. Genocide, rape, torture. He shook his head. What could this man do that Afghanistan hadn't?

Darren peered into his eyes, hands slowly moving outward, as if measuring Vadim's chest, then down, fingers tracing the lines of the pecs there, meeting just over his sternum. "You have no idea what I'm talking about," Darren said. "You're just playing by instinct."

Vadim gave a short laugh. "Just assume it's different where I come from."

"I gather that," murmured Darren, and Vadim could see that the man considered whether he was worth the trouble or whether he should put him out the door and thank him for his time. "Where are you from?"

"Soviet Union."

"Holy shit. I thought you looked Scandinavian."

It was probably the wrong moment to tell him that the Rus were descended from Vikings. Vadim emptied the glass, the heat spread in his stomach and made him worry less. Hadn't managed to eat, and was running low, fourteen hours with nothing but the sandwich on the plane. "No. Russian." He gave an ironic smirk. "Sorry."

Darren shook his head, discarding that notion. At least the Cold War stayed outside, that man was just interested in his body, which was fine. "You want to shower first?"

First. Sex was on, then. Vadim nodded.

"Through that door. Towels to the right. Take your time. I'm upstairs in the bedroom."

Vadim nodded his thanks, and made his way to the shower. Gleaming, clean tiles, chrome, a continuous, strong rain of hot water. For the first time in two days, Vadim felt comfortable, odd, given the situation. He found a razor and shaved, relished being clean and smooth, and thought of the other's body. Had no idea what to expect, would be nice to fuck an ass again, after all the times he'd been fucked, but couldn't allow that, and wouldn't. Quickly towelled himself down, took another towel and tied it around his waist, felt warm and relaxed and looking forward to getting off.

The corridor light was dimmed, one door almost closed, but there was light on the other side, and he heard faint groaning.

Vadim glanced into the room, and the scene inside didn't make sense at first. A man lying on the bed, wearing some kind of leather trousers that were cut in a way as to bare his ass and groin, which would have looked ridiculous if the black, gleaming leather hadn't been tight in the other places, if he hadn't been shaved smooth, if his hands hadn't been bound to his ankles, legs kept wide apart by metal bars, and if he hadn't been blindfolded and gagged. The body, displayed like that, was to die for. Much like Darren, who stood near the other's head, stroking it with all the pride of an owner.

"Come on in," said Darren, and the bound man jerked in the restraints. Maybe shame, maybe surprise.

Vadim gave a questioning glance, but despite the setup, he assumed if the other was really in pain, he'd know. As he walked around him, he saw the bound man was hard, some kind of metal rings and leather keeping his cock and balls

confined. Smooth, powerful ass. Lubed. It looked like it had been breached before, and Vadim saw what looked like a plastic cock near the man's knee.

“Let me introduce you to Mark.”

The other shuddered, and made strange noises, maybe begging. Darren opened his fly and pulled out his cock, then removed the gag only to push the other's head onto it, who began to suck so eagerly and hungrily that Vadim's breath caught. Darren moved almost lazily, despite the other's need, and motioned Vadim over.

Darren's finger hooked into the towel and pulled it open, and it fell to the floor, while Vadim watched the other's cock vanish between the lips, the blindfold somehow making this better, lips wet and inviting, and moaning noises, flaring nostrils, helpless and needing, and reluctant when Darren pulled free, fully hard and grinning.

Vadim took the cue this time, took the other's head and guided him to his own cock. Shit. Just as eager, and he groaned. It was safe to make a noise now, have a complete stranger suck him, while the man's lover watched, stroking himself.

“From Russia, with love,” said Darren, and Vadim felt Darren's hands on his back, that wet cock brushing his flank, and felt trapped, lured, especially as Darren began kissing his neck and shoulders, and it felt good, all of this. The feeling of being a stranger bled away, and he was a body among bodies, no strange accent that made him stand out, just blending in with men that were exactly like him.

Darren's hands moved to his pecs, and twisted his nipples, sending white hot jolts of arousal through Vadim. Shit. Rolled between strong fingers. His hips moved on their own, and Darren whispered in his ear, something about him being so goddamned sexy in his innocence. One hand moved down over his back, to his ass, which made Vadim tense, but shit, this was good, and getting better. The hand moved between his cheeks, circled his ass, rough fingertips just touching him there, while the other's lips and mouth kept him rooted to the spot. Teeth dug into his neck, and again breathing close to his ear. “Do you want to fuck him?”

Vadim nodded, pulled away almost powerless with need, kept on the brink now for too long, with the sneaking suspicion this Mark was tasked to do exactly that, keep him there, but fuck, he didn't actually care, cared more about the ass. He

moved between the other's legs, could see Darren make Mark suck his fingers, murmuring something about wanting him to tell them just how much he appreciated a big Russian cock, and that he would remain ungagged for his performance so far. The easy arrogance and callousness was incredibly sexy, Darren fully in control, seemed to know even what the other thought.

"Wait a minute," said Darren as Vadim was about to enter. "Tell me what you want, bitch."

"Cock, sir." The 'sir' sent stabs of lust straight through Vadim's body. Oh fuck. What was going on?

Darren motioned for him to remain still, a wicked grin on his lips. "That doesn't convince me."

"I want cock, sir, please, let me have cock."

"Any cock?" Oh, that grin could become more evil yet.

"... yes, sir." Voice small, strangled, the man's mind reeling with humiliation.

"There...he's yours." And that wasn't just a metaphor, Darren meant in, there was a layer to it that Vadim found hard to grasp, and didn't actually care about, instead entered the other's ass with all the pent-up need and aggression that he had stored in his body. This made the other very nearly cry out, a choked sound deep from the throat, clenching, but he was nicely slicked up and ripe.

Vadim pounded that ass, unleashing his strength, encouraged by the sounds the other made, and Darren right behind him, toying with his nipples, cock remaining hard against him, but he had the strange feeling Darren didn't feel any rush, just seemed to enjoy the show.

Vadim was sweating, pulled his lips back from his teeth and tried to get himself over the edge and reached for Mark's cock when Darren's hand suddenly closed around his wrist.

"He's not allowed to cum."

Vadim nodded, not really understanding, but somehow did, the fact that one man could control another like that nearly mind-blowing. Oh fuck. Innocent?

He was a bloody beginner, nothing else.

That powerful hand moved to his front, circled his cock and balls right at the root and the pressure made Vadim groan. "Slow down. Fast out, slow in. Make the bitch feel what you've got to give."

Vadim obeyed, Darren's hand taking control now as well, fuck, fuck, but he wouldn't 'sir' him.

"Slow," murmured Darren, and Vadim slowly regained his control, actually felt the other man shift, meet his thrusts, now, needy, not caring, muttering, begging for cock, to be allowed to cum, please sir.

A profound lesson. Slow gave control, control gave power.

Darren pulled back, breathed into Vadim's ear again. "Now, make him hurt."

The order was irresistible. Vadim went back to full force, more force, because all that had been dammed up, and came with a curse, tunnel vision when he came, vision turning dark for a long moment.

Mark was whimpering when Vadim staggered off the bed, leaning against the wall. Darren hadn't just fucked his mind. Had he?

The other moved into his position, and began to fuck Mark leisurely, expertly, a sight truly to behold, Mark too far gone to say anything, just moaning and please please all over, and Vadim watched with flushed face. They fit so perfectly together, polished muscles, clearly a deep understanding that gave the violence and humiliation a thick extra layer—Darren fucked Mark slow and unforgiving, then, when Vadim could hardly bear watching anymore, pulled free from that well-used ass, and made the other suck his cock, a sight that was appalling and still good.

Vadim hadn't thought a man could have that much control, watching Mark swallow everything, unable to breathe.

Only then did Darren touch Mark's straining cock, and it took hardly a thought until Mark came, crying out as he did. Darren removed the metal things that had kept his lover in that position, and Mark curled up, gasping, on the verge of tears.

Now Darren was different. He held the other, stroking the broad back, while Vadim watched, something like...no, not envy, he felt the peace between the two, knew this was as sane to them as the rushed handjob pressed against a wall in a nameless place in Kabul had been between Dan and him.

Better get dressed and leave them, he thought, he felt suddenly like an intruder. A guest, yes, but that was over now. Vadim bent down to gather the towel.

Darren glanced up when he moved. "You should look at him, Mark." The other turned and looked up as well, too tired and shaken to do more than give a strange kind of smile.

"There. He was running around London, with no place to go to."

You nailed it on the head, thought Vadim. Damn. Was he really that obvious?

"Name's Vadim," he offered, deciding to stick to the truth. Go with the 'endearing athlete'. Lay on the accent a touch thicker.

"Hi Vadim," said Mark, relaxing against Darren's chest, and studying his shoulders, everything, with sleepy appreciation. "Can't have you...run around London with no place to go. Can we?"

Darren grinned. "I'll make sure he's comfortable." He stood, while Mark just lay on the bed, not enough strength left to do anything, and Darren gave a grin.

"It's a bit small for three." They headed downstairs, where Darren converted a couch into a passable bed in a few minutes. He'd clearly done this before. "We'll sort you out a good proper English breakfast tomorrow. If you need anything else, ask, unless it's in the fridge." Darren gave him a wink that said exactly what that 'asking' could be for.

"Yes. Thanks. I mean...thanks."

"That was a bit hardcore for you, wasn't it?"

"Mostly...unexpected."

Darren grinned. "Don't be nervous. I'm a bastard in bed, but outside, I'm a fairly relaxed guy. Kitchen's over there, you know the bathroom, and where the towels are."

"Doesn't...he hate you for that?"

Darren stood in the doorway, and studied him with a quizzical look. "Why should he?"

"All that...power."

"Whose power?"

"Yours."

"Mine?" Darren turned and came back. "Who, do you think, was in control, between us? Why, do you think, did I not fuck you?"

"You wanted me to...fuck...Mark."

"And? That wouldn't have kept me from it."

Vadim shook his head. “No idea.”

“Because you didn’t want that. You wouldn’t have resisted, I guess, but you weren’t ready. You didn’t trust me. Would have given you nothing.”

Giving? How could that be about giving? “I don’t understand.”

“You were in control. Mark was. Simple.” Darren grinned. “I’ll show you. Unless you run away and decide this freaks you out.”

Vadim sat down on the couch. “Few things do.” Wrong thing to say. “Well. I have an open mind.”

Darren grinned. “Good night.” And left, the stairs creaking softly as he padded up to the bedroom.

Vadim lay back on the couch, glanced around, and waited till he heard the door upstairs close.

How could Mark be in control, tied up, blindfolded and gagged? Made no sense. Restless, he went to the kitchen, checked the fridge, found cheese and milk and bread, had two apples with that, and thought about it, then headed back to his pack and planned for the next day.

* * *

Seeing Mark in a suit somehow diminished him. Killer body, good looking on all counts. The man gave a wave as he rushed out the door. Darren was still in the shower.

Vadim sat in the kitchen, marvelled at the chrome and glass and wood surfaces, gleaming and technological. Clean. Expensive. He felt outclassed, and the thought surprised him. He had got deeply into a different mind, had done the acting bit right under the shower just half an hour ago. He was the endearing athlete out for blowing off some steam. These people were rich, and decadent, capitalist pigs. And generous, and welcoming, and strangely the same as him. In a twisted, unbelievable way, he was more fundamentally like them than...much that was going on in the Soviet Union. This was the life he wanted, and the thought made him tense his jaw muscles, as if trying to bite through iron bars. No chance, no chance, ever, to have anything like this. He could as well have come from a different galaxy or from below the sea.

These men were not concerned about living together—while he kept up that life and liberty saving guise of a woman and children.

All he had, all he would ever have. Unless he turned traitor.

He started to see the dangers of this world—if for completely different reasons than any of his superiors had anticipated. It was the freedom to fuck a man without having to hide it. A wide, spacious place and not having to beg for scraps from the Party. Self-denial, shame, and the hope that it might get better, one day, if he only sacrificed enough.

‘The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power.’

Yeah, no shit.

“Your face is darker than the prospects of the miners,” said Darren, padding into the kitchen in a dark black robe, hair wet and glistening. Vadim stared at a drop of water running from somewhere behind Darren’s ear over the taut muscle to the throat.

“Sorry?”

“Miner strike. Don’t you read the papers?”

“Press is...different in Moscow.”

Darren paused. “Shit. I keep forgetting. Sorry.”

Vadim turned away slightly, wondered if that was condescending, and knew he’d break the man if it was. A hand on his neck. Powerful. Soothing. Darren had no idea how close that call was.

“You’re incredibly tense.”

“I have good reasons.”

“I’d love to fuck you, but I told you, I won’t do it unless you want me to. Seems that’s one of the things you don’t do.”

Vadim inhaled sharply. How to explain he felt like a hungry dog staring at a butcher’s window? A butcher that actually had something to sell, not a Soviet place.

“Strange. I can’t figure out whether you’re a top or a bottom. Seems to change.”

“Top or bottom?”

“Mark’s a bottom. I’m a top. In bed.”

“I like being in control.”

“I’m not sure you actually do,” said Darren. “I get the feeling you’re trying to lose yourself. Prime slave material.”

Vadim turned to stare at him. They said there were books being printed—and read, and reviewed—that stated that Russians had, what they called a ‘slave mentality’. Just a different kind of saying they were inferior by nature. Those writers thought they belonged to a Master race of a different kind. “No. I’m not.”

Darren’s hand moved to a place under his throat. That scar. The burn scar. Oh fuck. “You look like a man who’s been in a place where things turned bad.”

Dan. Vadim tried to pull away, felt strangely reluctant to just break the man’s jaw for what he said, but Darren’s hands remained on his body, intense, and good, and comforting.

“This. And the scars on your back.”

Darren stood close enough that Vadim could smell the shower gel. He’d used the same stuff last night. Darren smelled clean, of water and heat. Something about water...

Vadim shook his head. “Yes, hard to explain those...”

“Well, looks like torture to me.” As blunt as a sledgehammer. Vadim’s breath caught; one thing to have the political officer or the medical officer say this, and a completely different matter from a man who tied up his partner so a complete stranger could fuck him. “You must have been tied up—nobody could get the lines so clearly if you had been in any position to struggle much.”

Vadim remembered to breathe, then stopped again when Darren began kissing his neck. Darren was getting aroused, Vadim felt it through the robe, pressing into him. He didn’t know what to feel, apart from being frozen in place and unable to breathe. “That...turns you on?”

“Yes.” Darren’s hand moved down to his cock and squeezed it, hard, just right, and Vadim gasped. Oh fuck. The other was going for it, in the brightly lit kitchen, not in the bedroom.

“How...does it work? How can...Mark be in control?”

“He sets the limits. I know what’s going on inside him; we’ve been doing this for a while.” Darren’s squeeze skirted pain, but never quite made it there, just an intense feeling, close to lust, but not quite. “And you are in control. All it takes is a ‘no’.”

“Am I?”

“Yeah. Only that you don’t want to be in control. Whatever somebody did to you here...” Scraping teeth over the first letter of that word. The letter p. “That’s fine, too. I can give you control.”

“What...the fuck are you talking...ah...about.” Darren’s hands were on his ass, kneading it, powerful, strong grip, unashamed of groping, and there was a weird rhythm to it that went to Vadim’s groin. He was being tested, probed for a reaction, and not just of the body.

Darren pushed him forward, against one of the polished wood work surfaces, and Vadim only just managed to steady himself, hands on the wood. Bent over like this and fucked? He was in no way like Mark. Not a slave. And the rest didn’t make any sense. Top, bottom, middle, vertical, whatever.

A shrill ring made Darren curse softly, and then chuckle. “Phone. Typical.” He pulled back and headed into the living room, leaving Vadim confused and relieved and irritated—irritated that he’d allowed Darren to go that far.

He inhaled and exhaled a few times, deeply, gathered the A to Z and the map he’d used for planning and took it to the living room where his day pack was.

Darren sat there, cross legged, talking about some property and how they should talk to the seller, and yes, he’d do that right away. Vadim took the pack and his jacket, but leaned in the door frame, waiting, as Darren lifted an eyebrow, mouthing something silently.

Vadim studied the man, was ready to go, but didn’t. Waited until Darren ended the conversation. He remained sitting there when the receiver was down. “You’re leaving?”

“I have to meet somebody.”

Darren pursed his lips thoughtfully. “You’re welcome to come back after that.”

“I might.” Vadim forced a smirk. “If you stop asking questions. I don’t want you to know more about me than you already do. You’re cutting too close to bone. That’s not way to build trust. I am not very trusting man.”

“Fair enough. If you return around seven, Mark will be here, too.”

Which might be better. They could have some fun with Mark, which would definitely be less awkward than Darren trying to get into his pants. And the talk of slaves and control.

Vadim nodded and headed out. He had people to kill.

* * *

The house in north London looked no different from the others in the same road. Vadim checked the distance to the next fire station. He wouldn't even have to block the road. It was a cul-de-sac, and the street was long and narrow, with lots of cars parked in the street. He doubted the fire engine could get to the house quickly.

Vadim staked it out, patiently, sat down with a Styrofoam cup of tea and a sandwich, not too far away, and studied the house. Two floors. Big windows, single glazing. Cables—electricity, telephone...on the outside of the house and easily severed with a moderately sharp knife. As vulnerable as a T-64, with its fuel lines on the outside. A death trap.

He'd have preferred poison. That was secret service style. A killing by poison sent a message, a message of cunning, of acting like the cobra, quick and decisive and cold-blooded. But he had no poison. He didn't even have a knife or gun.

Didn't matter. That door did not look very serious. Wood. It would splinter if properly kicked near the lock. Vadim had done that dozens of times. In training, in exercises, in real combat. Drilled to storm houses and assume control.

Control.

He finished the tea. Would a bottom—or a slave—be able to take control? To force his will on an enemy? To compete? Storm a house on his own and take out a family? Answer: No. His job didn't allow that. He wouldn't be able to do this if he was anything like what Darren had said. *Prime slave material*. Fuck you.

He watched the neighbourhood for a while. Nobody seemed to take much notice.

This, then, was Dan's country. Nobody here sounded like him, though. He was from further up north. Mountains, they said. He'd seen a photo of the castle in Edinburgh in the travel guide and thought it looked like a fairy tale place. And wasn't it ironic that Dan's origins were far more proletarian than his own?

Farmers.

Dan.

He was about to kill Dan's countryman. Worse. He was about to kill a man who had a lot in common with himself.

Ah, who are you kidding, Vadim? Since when are you a dissident nuclear scientist, working on their nuclear arsenal? He wondered why Doctor Wiezcinski had left the motherland. They had told him it was for the money. But from what he saw, the man didn't seem too keen on sticking out, not too keen on palaces...what he lived in seemed pretty much standard for this country: A narrow-fronted house made from brick. That was not a reason to betray a country.

Russia did not forget, though. He'd come calling to deliver a blow to a programme that the secret service wanted to see stopped. It seemed to be a critical stage. People were tense. There was fear.

Vadim shook his head. Just a year ago, or maybe two, he'd not even have thought about it. Killing was something he did. He was well-suited for the mission. He had a reason to be in the United Kingdom. Again, he was a smoke screen for something less endearing than a second-class athlete stumbling through a presentation in accented English.

How could killing a member of the intelligentsia benefit the Russian people? How could destroying a family serve a purpose beyond merely killing? For Russia? Was that man involved in a weapons programme? No way to check that. And even if he was. The stockpiles were huge—there were already enough bombs to destroy every place on earth that held a settlement. What was it that the doctor worked on? Something deadlier than deadly? A colder kind of nuclear winter? A rocket that could circle the globe twice instead of once? What was the point?

The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power.

But then, this country had sent men like Dan—and his dead comrade, the turkey, John, to fight the Soviets. And kill people like Vanya and Platon. This country was the enemy. And yet wasn't. Things were no longer clear-cut. People were free to read dangerous books. People were free. Full stop.

Maybe that had been what the doctor had been chafing against.

Treason. Treason became a mental habit.

Please, if you enjoy this country, I'd look forward to meeting you again. Just give me a ring. I am sure I can make time for you.

* * *

“We can talk here,” said the man who had introduced himself as Richard. The place was so expensive Vadim felt underdressed, again, like a foreigner, like a man in cheap clothes with company and surroundings above his station. What was it about this country that made him so damned self-conscious?

Vadim sat down. Faint music in the background, overstuffed dark leather chairs. It was some kind of club, understated, but exclusive. It smelt of Cuban cigars and aged whiskey.

“How are you finding London so far?” asked Richard.

“It’s quite something,” said Vadim.

Richard gave a very civilized chuckle. “Would you like something to drink?”

The place was as much the lion’s den as the tea house was Dan’s. “No, thank you.” He wanted to get to the heart of the matter, but it felt rude if he charged him head first. “You said few interesting things at airport.”

Richard studied him, and Vadim took the same liberty. There was grey in the blond, and his hair started retreating over his skull, but high cheekbones, sunken cheeks and a weak, soft chin. Much like an accountant, or a minor functionary with almost no reason to exist beyond being a functionary. The wide, clever eyes, however, betrayed the intellect.

“Which of the things I said caught your interest, Major?”

“The thing about active service. Why should you be interested in the service record of an Afghan veteran?”

“To be blunt, Major, we don’t even know what the Soviets want in that forsaken place. The best we can come up with is that you are propping up a puppet regime—but that is more the modus operandi than the reason.”

Vadim smirked. “I can’t help you with answer.”

“Personally, I assume you are playing chess. Your national sport, if I am correctly informed. Do you play chess, Major?”

“I am not very patient man. I seize opportunities too fast. Sometimes, that means I risk trap.”

“In order not to tax your patience, I have my suspicions who and what you are. As, doubtlessly, you have in turn.”

“Correct.”

“And while I’m not at liberty to confirm or deny, there is something we can do for each other.”

Vadim nodded, slowly, his gaze still meeting the other’s. What he liked about the man was that he looked him in the eye. “What would that entail?”

“Information. That’s the currency we are dealing in.” Richard leaned slightly forward. “It would mean you’d gather information for us, Major. Crucial and not so crucial information. We might have men in place who check that information. Sometimes, we might ask you to verify something.”

“Afghanistan is not hotbed of intrigue.”

“We are maybe more patient than you. You may not be in a good location at the moment, but that doesn’t mean you will not be more fortunate at a later point in time.”

Treason. Traitor. They’d be willing to bank on his career.

“What do you offer?”

“A considerable amount of money in a Swiss bank account, as much protection as we can give you from a distance without drawing attention, and comfortable retirement with your family in ten years. It depends on how things are progressing.”

Ten more years in the USSR. Ten years being a spy, a traitor. Of course. This kind of offer didn’t come without a price. His life would go on as normal—only now he’d have to worry about KGB daggers on top of all the things going on in Afghanistan. But he wanted to leave now. Wanted to stay here now. He’d be old in ten years.

Starving dog outside the butcher’s.

Considerable amounts of money.

How much is your pride worth, Krasnorada? How much is your integrity worth? Weak-spined faggot about to betray his country for cock, simple as that.

Vadim swallowed and lowered his gaze. Freedom. Freedom to do what he wanted. And Dan? What was he thinking? Did he actually think he and Dan could live like that, like Darren and Mark? Impossible. Unheard of. Buy this with his integrity? His self-worth?

It had been a bad idea from the start.

“You look tired, Major.” Richard gave him another smile, compassionate. “I wouldn’t make a decision like that lightly. I’ll understand if you need to think about it.”

“It’s...Afghanistan.” Vadim’s jaw muscles tensed. “The Cold War is not very cold up there. Burns skin off soul.” He inhaled, and stood. He wouldn’t confide further. That was as far as he could go.

Richard stood as well. “We all want this to stop. Thanks for your time.” He offered his hand, and Vadim shook it, finding no words to speak, felt too ashamed after his brush with actual treason.

“You have my number.”

Yes, he did. Memorised. A way out. The coward’s way.

* * *

No vodka, nothing to prepare him for it.

One moment, he was getting ready. The moment after that, he shouldered through the back door, at night. The wife and daughter had left sometime in the early afternoon, Vadim assumed they would be gone for a while. He had had no time to do the legwork, had no idea where the girl was going. Only that, when she returned, her father would be dead, as ordered by grey, bloodless men in the Kremlin.

Vadim headed past the laundry in the back patio, through the kitchen, thought he smelt something like onion, discarded that thought. It was just information, not a family eating together, like his family did, but without him.

He knew they had no dog. He opened the gas of the cooker, heard the faint hiss, then moved up the stairs.

The doctor was likely still sleeping, or fumbling around for his glasses. There was no movement in the house. Yes. One door was open—a dark bedroom, one was closed, and another. Vadim knew from the outside that the one down the corridor was the bathroom. The window was opaque. The other door then was the one to the master bedroom.

He placed his hand on the wood, tested carefully whether it was only leaning or properly closed. Properly closed. He turned the handle, stayed out of the

door frame, the ‘vertical coffin,’ and pushed the door open. Nothing. The man was still sleeping.

Vadim was amazed anybody could sleep so deeply, carefree, like nothing evil existed in the world. Civilian. He checked the Volkov. Forty seconds. He stepped into the room. The yellow streetlight seeped through the blinds, enough to see by, see a sleeping body in the bed. The stale air smelt of people.

Vadim stood near the bed, hands opening and closing, staring at the dark shape in the bed, hoped the other would pull a gun, a knife, force him to kill in self-defense. No such mercy. There was no justification for it. None. Vadim took the other pillow—the one the wife slept on, no doubt, folded it, then pressed it down on the man’s face, grabbing the hands with the other, pressing them against the man’s chest, leaned on him to block the wild movements. Keeping him down with strength and his pure weight, he hoped he’d die fast, pressed in harder, his own face twisted with disgust and other feelings, none of which made any sense.

He waited for a long, long while, then checked his watch. Ten minutes.

He checked the pulse and breath, then, when nothing moved, relaxed.

Highly unlikely the man would survive the fire if there was still life in him.

He opened the blinds for more light, then began to rummage through papers. There was a leather pouch with folders. More folders. He couldn’t confirm anything this quickly, so just carried off what he could, headed down through the kitchen, quickly, because of the gas, and, once safely in the garden, lit the line of fuel he had prepared to run into the house from the garden.

He was several blocks away when the fire burnt so high that it cast reflections against the city night sky.

* * *

When Vadim emerged from Oxford Street station, he stepped into the street and felt the people on the street wash past him, none touching him, they kept their distance, and it made Vadim feel like a leper. Of course, his height, his strength, may have affected them but at the same time he had the nagging feeling the cattle knew he was a killer, and kept safe in the herd, each jostling for the place in the middle. He was not one of them, and would never be. He could never get undercover enough to make them—or even him—believe.

Watching the target's house all day, and then the kill had drained him, bleached all emotion away. He was tired and couldn't bring himself to feel anything beyond a faint ache for Dan's company. Pride of lions. Dan wouldn't shy away. And yet, this whole thing was something he would never tell, never share. He could admit to anything he had personal responsibility for—the rape, and enjoying that—but not this ordered assassination. Dan would understand killing, he wouldn't understand that the secret service took killing home, straight into his capital.

He headed back to Darren's and Mark's place; he didn't want to be alone. Or maybe he just wanted the illusion of belonging. He had killed a man today. It had been easy. Being just body, just flesh, was the lure that brought him in. And it was a good way to vanish off the radar this night.

He rang, and somebody opened. Vadim trotted up the stairs, saw it was Mark who had opened the door, and the man gave him a smile, and motioned him in. In the background, the TV was on. News. Vadim hoped it wasn't about the fire.

"Hi, we were getting worried," said Mark and smiled again. "You still have your bag here. There's some food in the fridge, just leftovers. Interested?"

"Food would be good." Always hungry like a conscript. Always take the opportunity to eat, a moment of calm. "Can I have a shower?" He could smell the fuel.

"Sure. I'll heat the stuff up. Take your time." Mark headed into the kitchen, and began to do something there. Plate, cutlery, a pan, the faint hiss of the gas stove.

Vadim showered, felt the tiredness bleed from him, the numbness stayed. For once, he was glad he didn't feel guilt. The man had committed treason, yes, and he'd left the family alive. It could have been much, much worse. When they came to terminate him, they would kill everybody they could get their hands on. Unless Katya still had clout and contacts. She might be able to free herself. But the risk was too high, the gamble impossible.

Vadim wore the robe of one of the guys when he left the bath, and sat down on the couch, where Mark had already put together his bed. A plate with rice and vegetables and sausage bits sat there, steaming. Mark sat opposite, providing company.

“Where’s Darren,” asked Vadim between forks of food. Damn, this was nice. Spicy, but not too hot. The vegetable was peppers, several colours, and onions, sweet, garlic, also sweet and tender.

“Still working out. He should be back soon.” Mark watched him, obviously pleased he enjoyed the food. Was he the one that cooked? How did that work, anyway? The bottom did the cooking and cleaning? What happened when there was no woman?

“Ah. How long...have you lived like this?”

“Darren and me?” Mark frowned. “Ah, about, what, five years. You know, we sometimes have guests to make things more interesting. Unless we go out together.”

“I see.” Five years. Four for him and Dan. If the mountains were a life, if war was that. If their encounters were more than just an unhealthy habit of two enemies. Were they?

“Do you have a partner?” asked Mark.

“It doesn’t work like that in Russia,” said Vadim. “Like this?” The fork indicated the flat. “Impossible. I’d end up in prison.”

“Oh. Well, we’re lucky.” Mark looked almost guilty. “Do you have to hide, then?”

“I’m married.” Vadim reminded himself that normal people showed photos, and it would make him less suspicious. Not that Mark would suspect an axe murderer still holding a dripping weapon. He reached into his pack and produced the photo, showing it.

“She’s...beautiful. And the kids?”

“Hers.” Vadim felt that answered the question. Mark could probably see that Nikolai was too dark to be their child. Maybe a throwback to dark grandparents.

“That must be...hard. I mean, pretending. I moved to London so I don’t have to hide, you know? The small place where I’m from doesn’t really have that many gay bars.” Mark grinned.

“I’m envious.” He was. Damn, he was. Not so much about the sex, even though that would be great, being able to fuck a man without having to fear disgrace or worse. Just perfectly normal stuff that Darren and Mark probably took

for granted by now. Living like this, comfortable, with no fear in a big city that has its share of freaks, deviants, and perverts—so many that they looked normal.

“Well, you’re always welcome,” said Mark, not smoothly enough to hide the moment of embarrassment. He knew how lucky they were.

The sound of keys in the door. Mark stood to greet Darren, while Vadim finished the food, and looked up when he heard Darren say “Look whom we have here” from the door. He gave a nod and put the fork down.

Darren was flushed, muscles pumped up after the exercise, and Vadim could almost see him steam. He’d worked hard, clearly, and was beaming with the post-workout high. “And I thought we wouldn’t see the Russkie again. Good I was wrong.” He gave Mark a grin, who grinned back. “I’m going to take a shower. Anybody want to come along?” Mark volunteered, but Darren told him off, promising something “more intense” later, which sounded ominous.

Russkie. Vadim shook his head. He wasn’t really in the mood for sex, he knew too well what was on Darren’s list to do, and he didn’t want to end up getting fucked just because he didn’t have the energy left to say no. He wanted and needed rest. Getting old, clearly. No much of a hitman left in him.

“I don’t understand that,” Vadim murmured.

“What?”

“The top and bottom thing.” Never mind the slave thing. That was even worse.

“Uhm. It’s really simple. Fucking or getting fucked...there’s usually one you prefer. Unless you don’t, then you’re a switch.”

Dan. Dan and geometrical terms didn’t mix. And how did handjobs fit into it, or blowjobs, or all the other things they did? It just didn’t work. Getting fucked like that day on the patrol—as welcome as it had been, he hadn’t strictly agreed to it. Those words didn’t fit anywhere. “Strange. I never thought of it that way.”

“Well, if it works for you, there’s no reason to change anything. Or whatever.” Mark grinned. “We’re all different.”

Darren came back, leaned in the doorway, and regarded Mark, then glanced at Vadim, sizing them both up with a speculative expression. Vadim shook his head. “Not up for it,” he murmured. “Sorry.” The last thing he wanted was sex. Strange, really, he’d normally jump at the opportunity, and he wondered for a

moment if he'd have declined an offer from Dan. Likely. Just not in the right mind for it.

Darren gave a nod. "No problem. Don't worry." He nodded to Mark, that nod alone was an order, and Mark got up. "You got everything?"

"Yes. Thanks."

Both of them went upstairs, and Vadim stretched out on the couch. He could still feel the dying man struggle under his fingers. Nothing exhilarating about it. No real test, no challenge. No fucking enemy. Just the pathetic squirming of a pathetic civilian who had never realised what killed him. Just a human being.

He stared at the wall opposite. He was trapped as securely as if the secret service had the wire of a garrotte digging into his flesh. Couldn't go where he wanted, couldn't stay, all he could do was follow orders, whatever they were, even if they were as demeaning as this. There was a difference between murder and killing. Or was there? Since when? He'd killed traitors before—but they were Afghans, and not in Dan's country. Not sleeping in their beds. Not like this.

He closed his eyes, could still see what the house had looked like, inside. His mind had a way of keeping these images in case he ever needed them again.

In his mind, the house was not yet a ruin; all the books, oh the precious free books, shelves and shelves of paper that burnt so fast that the whole place became even more of a death trap.

With a groan, Vadim opened his eyes, turned his head to stare at the blind eye of the TV screen. Considered exercise, isometrics in the absence of proper weights, push-ups until he dropped and couldn't get up anymore. Maybe plunder the bar and see what a bottle of vodka—or whisky, or gin, or whatever—did to those gloomy thoughts. Few things alcohol couldn't make better, apart from the aim, as one of his instructors used to say, himself firmly married to the bottle.

Just. The fact he'd rubbed this man's life out. His house. His books. Everything he'd ever thought or written. Vadim sat up, rubbed his face, considered another shower.

No. Company. That what was he was here for. Just that. He stood, paused for a moment, but thought that those two men would hardly mind. And if he ended up in their bed again—and whatever happened then—would at least keep the ghost away.

He climbed the stairs, and heard panting, deep, visceral groans. Not yet finished. Vadim had hoped they would be. Well, their house, their sex life. He turned the corner, and again, the door was open. But the sight...Vadim found it difficult to make sense of it. Mark was on his back, arms held his knees up, and he was spread, his flushed face twisted in what could only be lust and even more pain...or whatever...no, not pain, not quite, ecstasy?

Caused by Darren, of course, who just rammed his arm...deeper. Into. Mark. Vadim frowned, didn't get that part. Darren's whole hand and wrist just vanished inside his partner, who looked...spaced out. Vadim couldn't even begin to grasp what that had to do to him in terms of pain, but maybe they'd crossed that line. Fuck. He watched Darren go deeper, the way the man's shoulder tensed, and Vadim had a good idea of how much strength lay behind that motion. Mark gave a strange sound, his eyes opened, and there was clarity in them, as clear and intent as the eyes of a madman. "Love you," he said, voice small and pressed.

Vadim pulled back. *Love you.* He stepped back into the dark corridor. *Love you.*

"And I love you," said Darren.

Vadim headed downstairs. As twisted as it was what those men had, he really didn't want to disturb them. Not now. Not...with what they were doing. Honest love. It made it worse, if anything, but he managed to get tired with isometrics. It took an hour, but after that, he was sweaty and tired, all muscles burning from the tension.

He awoke from a touch. His hand went for a weapon, but there wasn't any, and then somebody took his wrist. "Hey. Calm down. It's me."

Vadim's eyes fixed on a dark shadow that sounded like Darren.

Darren. London. "What...do you want?"

Darren released his wrist, and sat down on the couch. "Came down to drink something. You alright?"

"I was asleep."

"Dreaming."

Vadim sat up, pulling his legs up. "Was I loud?"

"No, just tossing and turning."

"Ah. Good."

"You had a shit day, huh?" Darren raised a hand, and it held a glass of milk.

There was only light from the TV standby light in the room, but Vadim's eyes grew used to the darkness. He could see more and more. "I'm leaving tomorrow."

"Yeah, I figured. Hope you had a good time, despite...today."

Vadim tensed. "What do you mean?"

"You were tense this morning. You vanish all day, and come back like that? You got enough armour on for a tank, Vadim. Not showing weakness, huh, even when it hurts?"

Vadim shook his head. "No idea what you're..." But there it was, the exact denial that Darren accused him of. "Okay, I had shit day. Happy now?"

"It's none of my business, but no, I'm not happy with that. Not that I can change it, I guess. I could be completely wrong, but I think you have a lover in the area, maybe some uptight Englishman, and it's a secret thing, or you wouldn't suffer so bloody much."

Suffer? Darren had an astonishing talent to pick up on details, and, thank fuck, to draw the wrong conclusions. Or, rather, the right conclusions in the wrong order. "It...just doesn't work. It can't work, and it won't work, and...nothing I can do can get me out of that."

"Ah, now we're talking." Darren bent down to put the glass down, then shifted on the couch to face him. "You're seriously in love, you know that? It's a great feeling, unless it hurts like a bitch."

Vadim gave a short laugh. "Aye. Yes, it does."

Darren grinned wide, and reached for Vadim's neck, pulling him close and against his shoulder, gentle, but powerful, and Vadim allowed it and found himself in a strange hug, with Darren leaning back. Not threatening. Darren wasn't going to try and fuck him.

"What's this?"

"I think you need a hug, Russkie. You just look so bloody miserable even I can't bear that."

Russkie again. Vadim inhaled, felt the warmth and the power, the man's secure grip, his breath and calm, and let go of his tension. This felt good. Just damned good, being held and...stroked, the broad hand going down over his back, avoiding the scars, as if not to remind him of them, not now. The man treated him

like a son. No desire, no greed, just an odd tenderness that Vadim found vaguely unsettling, but not in a bad way.

“So, he’s a Scotsman?”

“What?”

“You said ‘aye’. That’s the kind of thing people pick up from the Scots.”

Vadim laughed, and found his eyes suddenly watering. Shit, he was beginning to cry against that man’s chest. “You MI5 or what?”

“I sell houses, Vadim, the most expensive thing most people will get in a lifetime. If I can’t read people, I’m fucked. And if you need to cry some, that’s alright, too. Just get it off your chest, okay? I won’t tell anyone.”

Vadim swallowed hard, and nodded, fighting the tears. He was exhausted, that was the reason. It wasn’t the fact that Darren had penetrated the ‘tank armour’, wasn’t the fact he wished he could just stay and be free without being haunted by the death of his family, or that he wasn’t even sure how to find Dan when he came back home. A fantasy. A fairy tale. It wouldn’t happen.

But what surprised him most was that this man didn’t tell him to get his act together and suck it up. “I...saw what you did with...Mark.”

“The fisting?”

What an oddly adequate name for it. “Yes.”

“And you wonder about it?”

“Yes. Why...I mean, that...must hurt.”

Darren ran his fingers through Vadim’s short hair, rested his head against the couch, too. “Not quite. Not just that. It’s probably quite extreme for you, but it can sort Mark’s head out. You know, when he’s stressed. Or numb. He gets bad in winter, sometimes. Normal sex doesn’t cut it there. So I do it after a shit day at the office, when he’s out there and nothing else can reach him.”

The way Mark had looked at him. Complete clarity. The feeling had to be so extreme that it overrode everything.

“But most importantly, you can only do this if you are not only in control of him, but yourself. A man who’s out of control can be restrained, but you need to do this without the comfort of the rope. If you can’t, you’re not able to do this. And you’ll never understand what it actually means.”

“But the power...”

“You think it’s about power? That’s like saying living is about driving a car.” Darren shook his head. “To me, what we did is more intimate, more intense than normal sex. It’s about control, not power. Take...your scars as an example. Whoever did that, was about power, but they did have control. Restraint. You were in their power and control, completely. Is that why you can’t let go? I’d be screwed up if somebody had done that to me.”

Vadim shuddered. The torture. Dan. Dan. Knife. Dan. “I need to...to survive.”

Darren’s hold was still there, stable, strong. “Yet you got out of it alive. How? How did you survive that, Vadim?”

“I...yielded.”

“There you go. Sometimes, there are no other options. Mark fights me—hell, I want him to—but when he yields, that’s when power changes to control, to restraint, and that is what I call love.”

Restraint. Love. Control. Not killing. Vadim closed his eyes, fought what it meant. That was wrong. Right. He’d lost all rules, all points of orientation. Love and control. Torture and Dan. Fucking rape. The moment of breaking. Oh damn, he knew what Darren was talking about. The moment when Dan had broken, broken because of him, because of what he did. That intense rush. Power. Restraint. How would it feel without the urge to destroy. Would that be...? What?

Darren moved as if he wanted to get up, but Vadim didn’t move, so Darren shifted more and lay down, Vadim on his shoulder, holding him. “It’s okay, I’ll stay here for a bit.”

He did. And Vadim fell asleep again, held and stroked and oddly safe, for once, despite his sins and doubts.

1984 Chapter 12—Insiders

August 1984, Afghanistan

It had gone so fucking wrong. Dan screamed when the bullet impacted into his thigh, stumbled backwards, fell, and knew it was over. Wrong, goddamned wrong, losing everything; goat-fuckers, duty, sanity and his life. Pain, bullets, blood and screams, and those motherfucking Mudjas dying like flies all around him.

Fucking Russians, they'd done it this time. He'd underestimated the Glorious Soviet Army. Cock-sure. Cock...nothing. No more. Reduced to trying to crawl out of the worst of this hellfire. Shot at from left, right, centre. Only a few more minutes and they'd be under fire from behind as well. Really fucked. Truly buggered, right up the arse this time; bullets, RPG, staccato of AKs and any old GMP.

Gripping the flesh wound in his thigh, Dan slung the rifle onto his back, pistol in one hand, dragging himself forward on hands and knees, desperate to get to the outcrop of rock he'd recced earlier. Blind to the dying, deaf to their screams, his own pain bridled with clenched teeth and that never-ending greed to live.

Crawling like a dog, eating dirt, using the dead and dying as shields, he had to get away, or they'd figure out that the man beneath the native rags was nothing like the Afghans. Turkey. Merc. Dead as a dodo after interrogation and torture, unless he got lucky and kicked the bucket beforehand. But fuck, he wasn't ready to die yet.

Damned Russkies. Damn them all and their ambush, and thrice damned his rag-tag of insurgents, unable to hold the village.

Dan managed to crawl two, three feet; the rocks came closer, hope was just about in reach, when he heard more than felt a bullet, too close, impacting on the rock, a sound that made him throw himself down to the ground, belly first. Swallowing dust, dirt, and blood, then pain. Felled like a bull, shot with a dart gun, ready for slaughter.

Blood. Pain.

Over.

* * *

“We’re finished here, comrade Major.”

“Very well, comrade Captain. Congratulations.”

The man gave him a crisp salute. People started pulling out. A massing of effort, men, and gear. This was as much an example as they could do. Part of a huge offensive designed to drive the enemy back, and underground, and generally out of the way.

There was a mass grave, the bodies had begun to bloat and posed a health risk this close to the outpost. There was that smell in the air, sour blood and oily smoke.

Vadim walked into the settlement, what was left of it, with soldiers standing guard. Intelligence had been successful with this one. They assumed they’d hit a lieutenant of one of the warlords...no names, just bets being hedged. He was only here to confirm.

And he did. He began to turn stones, metaphorically and literally, trying to find a scrap of information which faction exactly had been bombed and shot into the Stone Age, which of the many foes was no more...and found a bergan that didn’t belong here. He knew the smell, the frayed, bleached fabric. Thought, Dan, then thought mass grave, then thought Dan would not survive in the mountains.

He knelt there, hands shaking, thought of their last encounter, force and need as always, and thought again of the mass grave. Thought of the turkey that had been Dan’s comrade, and dread crept up and turned his throat to lead.

What if, this time, it was actually what he feared?

He stood, composed himself, hid the bergan back in the same spot, and left to radio the Colonel. He was convinced the insurgent leader had left for the mountains, might be wounded, requested permission to hunt.

After a show of reluctance—he was too valuable, but the target was valuable, too—permission was granted. Vadim got his kit from the Hind helicopter, and watched the men leaving, wrapping up, knew what they were thinking. The crazy Spetsnaz was out to get himself killed. But that was exactly how the crazy Spetsnaz had made Major, that was what the grandfathers said, and, eventually, Vadim was left alone, with the stench of bodies and the settlement, aware that

vengeance was in the air. If the Mudjas had any forces left in the area, they'd come crashing down on him. He should be out of there as soon as possible.

* * *

Pain. Heat. Stench and weight. Impossible to move. Restricted. Bound and Held. Panic.

Dan woke, unable to see, impossible to move. Couldn't fathom where he was, what had happened. Dizzy, thirsty, head spinning from the bullet impact, face a sticky mess, eyes glued shut with blood.

Bodies. Felt hands, arms, legs and torsos. Fabric, rags, felt and wool, smell. Blood. Stink. Flies. Too much weight and heat. Panic rose like bile in his throat. Alive, but amongst the dead. Pried his eyes open, tried to move, froze when he heard voices. Pain shot through his leg, almost screamed.

Stared at by a face, bloated, ripe-swollen skin stretching grey-black over distorted features. Mouth wide open, eyes bulging, dimmed like brackwater.

Dead. Everywhere. Decay and horror. Unable to move; unable to die.

Welcome to hell, McFadyen, the face seemed to smirk. We got you at last.

Hours that felt like days. Weeks. Dead and alive. Rotting corpses, exploding flesh. Fermented shit, curdled blood and bile. The heat drew in flies in the millions. Bodies oozing, fluids drenching, horror.

Death. Please, dead.

Let me die.

Don't talk to me. Faces, bodies, rotting and torn. Limbs, flesh, skin.

Don't touch me. Leave me.

Dead.

Please.

* * *

Vadim searched the settlement again. No Dan. No more bodies. Checked the surrounding area. No. He stood above the pile of corpses, blue and black, the stench like nothing else in the world. Unforgiving heat. He had no idea what he'd do if Dan was in there, but there was only one way to confirm his death.

Vadim downed half a bottle of vodka, trying to psych himself up for the deed, then climbed down into the mass grave. “Fucking hell,” he muttered, one of Dan’s expressions.

He reached down to shift the first body, the stench was so bad it made him retch, every fibre in his body telling him to get away from this, from death. Some of the bodies were half-burned, skin had turned to ashes, torn open in the heat to reveal raw and half-cooked flesh underneath. Piss and shit, and the stench of death. Vadim’s stomach churned restlessly, until he climbed out again, dizzy with exhaustion, and relieved himself of the vodka and the bile, wound the rag around his head again, climbed back in and continued the search.

He checked their faces, whatever their bodies looked like, even if they were only in pieces, even when they had been shot through the face, had been ripped apart and were missing half the face or jaw. He needed to find Dan.

Near the middle, there was a tall, bulky body, and Vadim closed his eyes. No. Please, no. He climbed over to him, treading into flesh and blood and guts and knelt down beside that body, lying on his front, wearing one of those rags, but blood-soaked, dried blood, native clothes. He reached for the shoulder to turn him over, and did, and at least the face was only covered in gore and not mutilated. He didn’t care any longer about whatever warlord, whatever Mujahideen he was tasked to find, just grabbed that body and placed it over his shoulders, a heavy load, stumbled forward, tied rope to Dan and pulled him out of the hole.

That was when the body twitched.

* * *

Dead. Mercy, at last. Gone. That face didn’t speak to him anymore. No more accusations of why and what and how come he hadn’t died, the only one, while all others were rotting.

Dead.

At last. Free, no longer restricted. His accusers had left. No more weight on his body. Floated. Taken. Guilt and questions. Why hadn’t he died? How dare he survive? No longer. It was over. Thankful. No more eyes staring at him. No longer hands that were pulling, dragging. Not anymore tied to legs and limbs, arms and heads that were moving around him in ever decreasing circles. New pain, jolting,

hard. A collision with something unforgiving. Dan groaned. Unaware. Dead. Free. Only the final questions to answer. Would there be heaven or hell, and a god he'd never believed in.

* * *

Vadim checked Dan for wounds. Alive? Or dying? A wound in the leg looked painful, but not life threatening. The one at his head was worse, though. He carried him off into one of the less demolished houses, found water, stripped him, cleaned up the blood and other mess. Working silently, he hoped there were no Mudjas close, no way could he carry Dan in this state. Maybe after nightfall.

He dribbled a little water between the other's lips, just elated he was alive, but wary because he was in a bad state. The Brit didn't react much to words, to being touched; even light slaps to the cheeks triggered nothing more than a blink, or a flutter of eyelashes.

* * *

Something touched Dan's lips and dribbled into his mouth. No! Dan shrieked, eyes tore wide open, seeing nothing. Fighting. Arms flailing. No, not this, no! He didn't want a reprieve from death. No more of this, no more stench and drying blood, no more shit and guts running into his mouth. Fighting, screaming, pressing his lips together, whole body convulsing. No more, no more. No tendrils of putrid body-puss snaking its way into his mind and taking his sanity. Eating away with clouded eyes and open-mouthed grins, lips torn away from teeth, black-swollen tongue stretched out at him, trying to kiss. To taste. To take.

He was theirs.

No!

Vadim pulled back, too surprised to restrain Dan. Fuck. That looked like shock. Or worse. Madness. They didn't move like that in shock, did they? He left him in peace, hoped the other would calm, and he did, probably from exhaustion more than any real peace.

They still needed to get out of here, couldn't risk the whole night. No way.

Vadim began to scout, found a cave up in the mountain side, which might have served this village well at some point in time, but it had no traces of having been used recently.

He trekked up there twice, once with his gear and Dan's kit, then with Dan's naked body wrapped in a blanket slung across his shoulders. He started a shielded fire in the cave, then trekked down one final time to bring as much water as he could, because he didn't want to risk being seen. Not even in a forsaken valley like this.

Dan was shaking. Eyes closed. Unaware of being moved, yet aware of the motion.

'Let me die'. Mouthed. No voice, no sound.

Trembling all over, he refused to open his eyes. No more skull-stares and rotten greetings from the ones who'd died around him.

"Let me die." Whispered. "Sorry." Repeated. "So sorry." Lips moving again and again. So sorry, so sorry, so sorry, forgive me, don't stare at me, don't talk to me, don't touch me, don't feed me. Not your putrefied flesh in my mouth, nor your rotting stench in my nostrils.

"Die..." Begging.

Vadim stared at him, shook his head and returned to the cave mouth. Dan had lost it, lost it completely. He knew nothing about how to deal with this, didn't even know exactly what it was, dreaded to know.

But he couldn't just put a gun to the other's temple and pull the trigger. Too much they'd done, and too much he still wanted to do. The man meant too much. But he needed a solution to the problem, and he was sure stroking his forehead and telling him all would be good wouldn't do.

He rolled Dan over on a blanket and insulation, covered him with another blanket, looked into the face and felt a forlorn pain that was unbearable after the hope. What to do? He rested next to him, hoping for a miracle, then let his hands run over that smooth, powerful back, trying to take a little of the tension out, nervous that would trigger another of those reactions. He dug in the pack for Vaseline, and began to massage, kneading the muscles, trying to make the other aware, aware of himself, and aware he was alive. And that that wasn't the worst place to be.

Dan shuddered. Touched. Moved again. Couldn't understand how his body could feel the imprint of hands, why the stench was replaced with another smell. Were they pulling at him? Trying to get him to join them in the mass grave, trapped between bodies upon bodies. But he could move. Arms twitched. Lost.

Dan whimpered.

Vadim worked like the masseur had worked, starting on the lower back, moving up, tackling the tension that wouldn't subside, went carefully ahead, trying to get the muscles to relax, murmuring under his breath much like Dima did when working on a dying man, and shook his head, discarding that thought at once. Dan was alright. He needed rest. That was all.

Dan felt those hands, touching, not pulling. Couldn't understand. Wanted to scream, let out a pained moan instead. Where, what and why wouldn't they let him die? Tried to open his eyes, shadows and shades, movements, something above him. Someone? He cried out, tried to sit upright, fought against the hands once more. A demon. Out to get him, a tall, broad-shouldered beast. He was about to scream, unseeing eyes wide open, when the red firelight shifted, fell onto hair.

Blond. Memories. Eyes, pale. Remembered.

"Who are you." Dan whispered, slumped, then focussed. That man. No demon. A glimmer of recognition in his eyes before he fell back onto the blankets.

"Vadim," said Vadim, meeting the wide-eyed gaze, hands still on the shuddering body. "It's me. You're...alive." Worked down over the buttocks, felt the tension under his fingers, wanted nothing but to dig into that body, claws, teeth, tongue, take the terror away. Maybe...

I do it after a shit day at the office, when he's out there and nothing else can reach him.

Shit day at the office indeed. Amidst this insanity, that made perfect sense. Dan lay prone. Shuddering, trembling as if cold was wrecking his body.

"Vadim." Who are you—who am I? Alive, dead?

Body moving towards the hand, seeking protection from the shadows. Nameless terror, but he'd be safe under the wings of the broad-shouldered demon. Remembered the hair. That name. Recognition of something deep, profound, reaching to a level where conscious thoughts didn't matter. "Protect me." Big words—small voice.

Vadim's hand scooped more Vaseline out of the tub, warmed it between his fingers, rubbed it between Dan's ass cheeks, one hand splayed between the other's shoulder blades, to calm, and soothe, and keep him down, just in case he began lashing out again. "Trust me," he said, and meant it, and hoped he would. "I'm here."

"They want me." Dan whispered, tried to scoot closer but the hand between his shoulder blades kept him down. Stilled. Easier to stay in this place, beneath the demon's wings, and the strangely familiar touch. "They're waiting for me. They kept talking to me with their rotting faces. Want me." Dan trailed off, wrecked by a shudder.

"They'll have to fight me for you." Vadim didn't believe in hell, damnation, or gods. Only knew Muslims thought they went straight to Allah, whatever happened. Nothing could keep them away from their god. Dan—was a different matter. He needed something, and Vadim remembered Mark's moment of complete awareness, of trust, of longing, deeper and more powerful than anything else he had thought possible. He pushed away his own lust, he didn't want to take advantage; all he wanted to do was bring Dan back into his own body.

The ring, resistance, but yielding, warm, living flesh. Vadim knelt between Dan's legs, kept them open with his own, pushing a finger into the body, easing it in, the other hand on his lower back. The man, sprawled, held nothing but strength, even now, strength that was confused and had no focus, off-kilter, no conscious will that held him together.

Suddenly something in Dan forced him to focus. Something his body felt. Somewhere. A centre, sensations, inside of him, but tiny. Insignificant, yet there. He tried to focus, feel, but his mind fluttered away again. Murmured sounds and words with no meaning. Brought back for another second to that something inside, this point in his body that made more sense than anything else.

Dan stilled for a moment, seemed to gather his thoughts, before his mind was lost again.

Vadim leaned in to check whether Dan's breathing had changed, he thought he'd heard something, then proceeded, pulling the finger out. Dan was nicely slicked up now, and he entered him with two fingers, thumb rubbing against the ring, feeling it relax, while he listened into the other's body for any sign of panic,

murmuring softly in Russian, about trust and about being there, then joined a third finger to the two inside.

Dan felt that focus again. More now. Back again and moving, centring. Never leaving him alone. He started to pool all of his thoughts towards that one point. Nothing else mattered. Just the protection from the shadows and that focus. Inside his body. Safe.

He shivered, minute movement of his hips as if getting closer to that thing inside of him. Dan murmured nonsense, about shadows, death, life and guilt. About killing and murder, duties and genocide. About corpses and bodies, lust and living.

Finally, the body responded. Vadim ran his free hand down Dan's flanks, down the powerful back, leaning in to make contact with his body, not restricting, not crushing, more a touch of body against body as his fingers stayed exactly there, firm, but gentle, not forcing, waiting for Dan to yield, movements minute as he joined a fourth finger, amazed at the flesh that allowed this. He'd seen it, no doubt it was possible, but Mark certainly had a lot more practice. He listened to the body speak, the shift of breathing, the shudder running through that strong back, the flowing and subsiding, tensing of the legs, bare toes stretched as if Dan was trying to push something away.

Dan felt alive only in that single point that made sense. His mind curled around that focus, unable to notice anything but the sensation inside him. Stretching, asking. His demon demanded. What? That pressure point kept increasing in intensity. Commanded him to focus. Live?

Dan's breath evened out. No more shallow desperation; no more air being pulled into burning lungs that remained filled with the putrid stench of rotting corpses. His breathing instead like a dragging of wings. Birds. Slow and steady, circling above the mountains, focussed on nothing but their prey. Like his body. Centred on the intrusion, the demand to live and to accept—to yield.

He moaned continuously. Didn't realise it was his own body, crying out quietly as it opened up. Accepted.

Vadim reached for the Vaseline, pulled back a little, added more of the grease, fingers close together to make this easy on Dan, but could feel him respond, slowly return, maybe. It sure would override anything else. *Shit day at the office*, rotting bodies. Fear of dying. Even a death wish. He felt his shoulder tense from

the control, from the work to keep the pressure up, slowly moving his hand back and in again. Not fucking, not truly, he wasn't quite sure there was a word for it, just a different way of touching, even if his body thought it was about sex. How could he not desire Dan, open like he was now, and how could he, in that fucked-up state that he was in?

You can only do this if you are not only in control of him, but yourself. A man who's out of control can be restrained, but you need to do this without the comfort of the rope. If you can't, you're not able to do this. And you'll never understand what it actually means. You think it's about power? That's like saying living is about driving a car.

Dan was lost, yet caught. Didn't have to think, not required to act. Wasn't needed, just allowed to feel. To be, not do. Felt nothing but that something inside himself, more and more, growing with intensity and slow-tender yet relentless demand. Further, more, opening wider, his body grew accustomed to the intrusion until that intense focus became part of him. The part that wanted to be alive, that refused to listen to dead eyes and bleeding mouths.

He had no idea what he was doing. His body merely reacted. Moaning, whimpering, sounds he'd never allowed himself. Small cries, needy groans he'd have berated himself for. Didn't matter. Nothing did, just that powerful sensation. Body and mind focused, hips moved on their own accord, backwards, further, moving and shifting, legs opening further, as far as they could, until he was on his knees, face on the ground. Following the demand inside his body.

Dan's sounds were driving Vadim insane. He would have liked nothing more than drive himself into that shuddering, sweating, gleaming body that seemed so hot to the touch now, claim him completely, and pulled his lips from his teeth. Control just as fierce as need. He kept thinking of the intricate dance between Mark and Darren, the less Darren actually took for himself, the more Mark gave, begged, the more Mark was his—and wasn't that a mystery that needed exploring? He forced his fingers apart, sweat trickling from his forehead with denial and concentration, he put the fifth finger between them, and moved in again, the row of knuckles the main problem, and how to do it but just try and go ahead. It took forever, and part of him hoped he wouldn't have to go that far, didn't have to go to the limit, because his hard-on was already torture.

Dan sobbed, let go of everything. Abandoned. Thoughts, pain, fear and madness. Pushing backwards in a slow continuous movement. Elegant, the way his body moved on its own, taking in that hand, accepting the fingers and moving steadily in the flow.

Crying and sweating, trembling, he moaned and whimpered, lost in base desire and deepest need, no notion of what he should or could do, just a body that was nothing but centred sensations; a body that reacted at last. Pulled away from death and decay, Dan's cock giving proof of life, almost flat against the stomach, foreskin retreating and dark purple head glistening with precum with every further breach of that hand through yielding muscle.

Vadim muttered tender insults, curses, his hand engulfed in that powerful heat, muscles closed his hand to form a fist, and he moved to kiss Dan's back, lick the sweat from it, while offering resistance; the smallest motions inside, against Dan in ways that surprised and amazed him, opening and closing that fist against the resistance.

Dan pressed his head against the ground, arms wide as if spread-eagled, crucified by that fist inside his body and the unbearable intensity, yet he was craving more. Muscles in his body tensing-relaxing, one second steel hardened ropes, the other as loose as the tears flooding down his face. Unaware of any of his physical reaction, just one large surface of skin and feeling.

Dan's own fists unconsciously opened and clenched, as far stretched out from his body as possible, while his back arched to push his arse higher. Breathing fast now, yet deep, drawing air into his lungs. Alive, and he cried out for more. Senseless, pushing backwards, driving himself onto the fist that owned him. Took him, possessed him and allowed him to live in return.

Vadim noticed the raging need and reached around Dan's body, his own need killing him now, seeing Dan like this, yes, just like Mark. Dan, who was so fierce about it, about his body, about the rape. Nothing like it, now, and not the cheap whore thing that Gavriil had done. He took the heavy cock and pumped it, slow, intense, hand also slicked up with the Vaseline, small movements inside, leisure strokes on the cock, himself groaning with need, but unable to do anything about it but rub himself against the tensed leg, like a dog, whatever.

Dan came within seconds and crashed like never before in his life. His voice echoed across the mountains, swallowed by the rocks and the cold of the

night as he screamed, losing himself. Thrashing, his whole body shuddering, flailing. Choking on tears and sounds, too much sensation. Intensity scalding, drilling into his core and bursting out with insane explosions of energy, pain, and life. Alive. So fucking alive that very moment, he had no name, no past, no future, and all he was, was a body, cumming, and nearly killing itself with its might.

Dan collapsed. Out of his mind, but in his body. Trembling uncontrollably.

Vadim pulled free when Dan lost it, another thing he'd learnt that strange night in London. Slowly, but firmly, his own need didn't matter. He didn't manage to get there. It didn't matter, not right now. He wiped his hands on a rag, moved Dan away from the wet patch, shifted his weight for him because Dan didn't have enough control or focus now, judged by the way his body went slack, but in a good way.

He covered Dan with a blanket to keep the heat inside, then stood and walked off towards the mouth of the cave, checking if they had attracted any attention. It must have taken hours; dawn was already approaching. He finished himself off, thinking of Dan, naked, in this cave, fully his, and yielding, begging, asking for more, begging for his cock; willing his hand to be Dan's throat, lips, forced himself to feel the heated breath against his groin, then, more violent, breaching that body, doing with his cock what his hand had done, ah, deeper, stronger, more powerful, and Dan pushing back, moaning and groaning and cumming. Vadim bit a curse down when he did, again wiped his hands and put the uniform in order.

Then he returned to share warmth, and nothing more.

* * *

Sleep. Darkness. No dreams, no voices, no dead and torn limbs holding him down. Dan's sleep was unconsciousness. Mercy.

Warmth. He wasn't sure if the darkness was inside him, behind or before his eyes, but he felt warmth and a touch, a close presence. Felt sore, too, a strange pain, but all he remembered was this focus, this something that had turned his body and mind into utter abandon, but what this 'something' was, he didn't know.

Half-awake, Dan scrambled more than moved with any purpose, turned and rolled over onto the other side, curled up in a foetal position and burrowing into the heat. Closer. As close as he could.

Vadim felt Dan's breath against his chest, shifted his legs to allow him to lie close, and pushed a fold of the blanket back to make sure Dan was fully covered. Dan. Always him. Always, and again and again. This time, the Brit hadn't even been there for his desire, was just a comrade, on a deeper, more fundamental level than Dima, Serushka, or Alyosha. Stronger than Platon, even though he sometimes missed the courageous little conscript. Platon, had he lived, would now be home in Russia, with his girlfriend, if she had still wanted him back. He ran his fingers through Dan's hair, carefully, checking that wound that had shocked him the first time he'd looked at it. The swelling was profound, the skin broken and discoloured. Something had hit him there with force.

Dan twitched, his head jerking, moaned at a pain that was somewhere other than inside his body. He craned his neck, so close to the other's body, the heat was everywhere. "Don't let them take me."

Vadim gave a smile. "They're all dead, Dan. You're alive." And thank whatever force for that. Blind chance. Destiny. The odd pattern of physics, too complex to calculate, but still a pattern which, sometimes, made things look intentional.

Dan wasn't awake, wasn't quite *there* yet. Moved his head again to nuzzle his face into the other's chest. His head hurt, while turning his hands that had been curled into fists. Palms out and against the other. Connection.

"I need to check on your leg."

Dan just grunted something.

Vadim had cleaned and bandaged the wound yesterday, but feared that last night's exertions might have been not exactly what that leg needed. He felt oddly guilty, but at least he'd fulfilled the objective. Dan was no longer fighting and screaming his head off.

He made sure Dan didn't lose too much heat, and gave that wound a check-up, while Dan lay perfectly still, curled up and into himself. It looked like a flesh wound, the bullet had passed through, without doing any damage to bones. It would hurt plenty, but not incapacitate. Vadim bandaged it all up again, with dressings that he'd salvaged from a turkey and given to Dima, and Dima had

shared his stock with him, muttering something about it being too damn inconvenient if he died of gangrene. Dima was alright.

Dan's eyes remained closed, just breathing. Pain started to hurt like a motherfucker, head trying to explode from within, hammering against his skull, and his leg was on fire. He concentrated on another pain, that ache deep inside him, the soreness that was unfamiliar yet kept reminding him of his sanity and saviour.

Vadim dug into his thigh pocket and found the antibiotics, also from a turkey. Thank you, bitches, thought Vadim and offered the pills to Dan, reaching behind himself for the canteen. "Take these."

Dan opened his eyes, looked uncomprehending at the other's hand. Dark, dark eyes, big, deep, just staring. Trying to get his head around what he'd been asked to do. White things. Pills. Tablets. Take.

Take. Swallow.

Suddenly made sense. "Blowjob?"

Vadim frowned. "Not...right now. Antibiotics. Gangrene's a bitch, and that..." mass grave, "place I found you wasn't exactly clean. Come on." He opened the lips with his fingers, gentle, manoeuvred the pills onto the tongue, and offered the canteen, placing it against Dan's lips and Dan swallowed.

Lips Vadim had seen so often getting him off, lips that could just as easily sneer. Lips he'd kissed exactly once, and that mainly to muffle a scream and because no other touch would do. And what could Dan do to fend him off? Nothing. He leaned in to touch Dan's lips with his, felt the touch like a tingle, knew he should be pulling back, but pressed in closer, licked those lips, could taste the water on them and the dust and the misery and thought how very fucking fitting, the touch warm, no teeth now, no sneering. Shit. He wanted him, wanted him badly even in this state.

Dan responded immediately. Lips seeking, hands palming at the other's chest, wanting that touch, warmth, this softness. Something deep and tender, connecting straight through his centre, with the remaining sensations inside himself.

Vadim pulled away. "I...need to scout the area. I should be back shortly." Just a few hours. Allow the other to rest.

"No!" Dan's voice was low, but his hands scrabbling for the other. Bereft, alone. "Don't leave me."

Vadim covered Dan's hands with his and pressed them against his chest. "I won't leave. I'm here. Sleep, Dan. Rest." A bold-faced lie, he really needed to do some scouting, couldn't have anybody walk in on them.

Vadim wedged the open canteen between the bergans, checked his daypack and took the rifle, checked again on Dan, who had drifted off to sleep before he could realise Vadim was leaving.

* * *

Vadim went back to the settlement; the mass grave was clearly marked with a cloud of buzzing flies, and, most of all, the stench. He covered his face and did recce, thinking of Dan who waited up there in that mountain.

His patience was rewarded when he found a body that had crawled away—tried to flee despite the wounds. The man was panting, soaked in blood, fingers curled into claws.

Vadim turned him around, checked the face. To him, they all looked the same, beards, hawk noses, bony features, he was pretty sure he recognized the other's teeth from the photo. The man was delirious with pain and exhaustion. He'd been responsible for killing Soviet prisoners of war, had organized and plotted, and fought, and was now just dying flesh in the sun. Vadim had no time to take prisoners, didn't want to burden himself with yet another, and was pretty sure he was dying anyway.

"Make your peace with Allah," he muttered and pulled the pistol. He didn't relish this the way he would have, the country, the years of war had sapped his enthusiasm for it. He didn't even hate the man anymore. All he really wanted to do was go back to Dan and make sure he was alright and would survive.

He pressed the muzzle under the man's jaw, making sure it was aligned to send the bullet straight up into the skull, squeezed the trigger, then holstered the gun. He stood, checked whether the shot had drawn any attention, but nothing.

It was far away enough from the cave. They were safe. Stolen time.

* * *

When Vadim returned, Dan had moved to the other side again, less pressure on the leg, and was curled up within the blankets, the canteen empty. Without waking, he had drunk the water, on instinct, then fallen back to sleep. Deep, regular breathing, unruly hair sticking out of the blankets and into his face. Not even twitching, nothing, just breathing.

Vadim washed himself; then joined Dan on the blanket, moving his arms around the other, head to his shoulder, cradling the back of it, one leg over his to pull him closer. He'd long lost any idea what this man was to him, only knew he had no words for it, no concept; lover didn't quite fit it, even if it was technically true, comrade...wrong allegiance. And they weren't friends. He knew at least that much. "Rest up," he muttered in Russian, and, mostly to keep himself awake, talked. Talked about Moscow, about the neighbours there, then remembered a story he had liked. The Firebird. He couldn't tell a good story to save his life, but he had read that story to Anoushka back home.

Dan was listening to the sound of that voice long before he realised he was waking. Awareness returned to his body, and with it came pain. His head was pounding and his leg was in agony. But there was warmth, and closeness, arms that should feel restrictive but instead felt right. There. Around him and on him, close to him, and he lay still. Listening to the voice and tales of folklore and stories, while trying to make sense of the sensations in his body.

He remembered blood, death and decay, horror. A shot, his leg, then something against his head. Pain, injuries. After that? Nothing. Shadowy figures and movements, then tears and terror, but something there to protect and focus, keeping the horror away.

Soreness. A sensation inside his body he'd never felt before. Stretched. Entered. Taken and used and oh-so-filled and centred and one with something...he just didn't know what.

Finally awake, Dan was trying to make sense of it all, checking his body and mind, seemed he had lost many hours. "My arse hurts." Astonished at the sound of his own voice, the croaked words of a stranger.

Vadim placed a kiss on that forehead, much like he would kiss Anoushka. "Yes." How to explain what he'd done? Better not. "Needed to...ah." No delicate way of putting it. "Uhm. Give you focus." He winced. That sounded bad.

“Focus.” Dan cleared his parched throat. Dreaded the need to move his head, pounding away with a jackhammer inside. “Don’t understand.” Thoughts already fluttering forward. Too much effort to hold onto anything.

He opened his eyes. It took him a moment to cut through the blurry picture, before he made out pale eyes, sharp-featured face, shaved blond hair. Dan smiled. Childlike. For just this moment. “What happened?” Why are you here, why do I hurt, how did I survive, and what are those hours that I have lost?

“You were under the boot of the Soviet Army when it came down,” said Vadim. Easier to speak Russian now. “It nearly crushed you. I was tasked to find a rebel leader, and found you amidst...the ruins.” Vadim reached to the side and offered the canteen again. “You were in shock. I think it was shock, you were far gone. I waited for you to return.” Vadim’s jaw muscles tightened. “Something hit you in the head, another shot in the leg. You were dehydrated, but nothing serious.”

“I remember death.” Dan shuddered, reached for the refilled canteen, drank in deep gulps. Finished and wiped his lips on the Russkie’s uniform. Every movement hurt his head. “Couldn’t move.” Handing the canteen back, Dan suddenly tensed. “I was buried alive.” Shook his head, fuck the pain that caused. “No, don’t want to remember.”

Vadim ran his fingers down Dan’s face, careful to not touch the wound. “Just the usual stuff. Just war, Dan.” Maybe I’ll tell you one day, but not now. It made me throw up, and you were in there, what? A day? Two? “You are safe, for the moment. I need to leave in two days, three if I stretch it.” And I will, of course. Stretch my luck again, to make sure you’re alright. Worse than friendship. Could hurt.

Dan smiled again, eyes closed. It was much easier to simply listen to the voice, feel the touch, and refuse to remember. He could feel the lead descending onto his limbs, taking his mind back down into sleep. “Got food?” Too tired to eat, yet his body was hungry.

“Plenty,” murmured Vadim and felt the insane impulse to make Dan eat Russian food, as if he could just invite him after a cold winter day into the apartment and feed him with a stew that had been boiling away for hours, and keep pouring him tea, and show him food that he probably didn’t know. Nothing like the rations that he had and despised, or the nuts and dried fruits that kept him going in

the mountains. No, a long, relaxed dinner with friends, vodka, and courses upon courses.

“I’m delusional,” he muttered. “What’s going on in your stupid head, Vadim?” Wanting that was wrong, wrong trying to share these things, or even feeling the impulse to. Not in the middle of a war.

But Dan was asleep already, his face smoothing and his breath evening out. Just a man, not an enemy. Wounded, tired and hurting, sheltered by another.

Vadim left his side only to piss, or prepare tea, or check the surroundings for any sign of Mujahideen activity, but he didn’t venture far from the cave. At the moment, they were both living off his rations—and the food in Dan’s bergan. Vadim made sure Dan had all the rest he needed, taking a strange pleasure from Dan lying close and needing his help, his care, and even his protection. It was like repaying him, and it was also like owning him on some level. Which was not the nicest thought, but it was this sense of belonging that Vadim cherished.

When he woke, Dan had no idea what time of day or night it was or how long he’d slept. Didn’t have a clue where he was, nor what had happened, and why the fuck he was hurting. For a moment, he couldn’t even fathom out why he was warm on one side, and why there was something heavy across his body. Moving, sluggishly, until his leg protested and he hissed.

Vadim opened his eyes when something pulled the blanket off his shoulder. He looked at Dan in the near-darkness. “You alright?”

“Hungry.” That was easy. Identifying the major feeling in his body. “Thirsty?” Number two was a bit more complicated, and he had a hard time trying to figure out the rest. “Head hurts.” Like a motherfucker, but at least less than before. “Leg...” remembered that one, made sense, and he shifted again, stilled, moved his head, ever so slowly.

Vadim gave a low chuckle and reached for the canteen, opened it and held it to Dan’s lips, digging for dried fruit when Dan had taken a few mouthfuls of water. Slipped small pieces between Dan’s lips, allowing him plenty of time to chew and swallow, and offered water afterwards. “The leg looks alright. You’ll enjoy that for a while longer.”

Taking his time to swallow and chew, then drink some water, Dan was starting to feel more human, not caring that being hand-fed wasn’t quite what Special Forces guys did. The liquid and fruit sugar seemed to help with his head.

He groaned as he tried to stretch, very carefully, at least he had his limbs under control. Some sort of progress.

“Aching.” Dan tried to prop himself up on his elbow. Feeling every bone in his body from lying down too long, he frowned. “Remember stuff I don’t want to remember.” He wiped his lips with the back of his hand, equally slowly, then looked questioningly into Vadim’s face. “Remember bits of something else. Vague. Hazy. Something inside me? Some kind of focus?”

“Yes. Something inside you. But it’s not what you might think.” Shit, that sounded wrong, and maybe guilty, too, only it was the pure, unadulterated truth. “Some kind of massage. Needed to...ah, get you to relax. It worked.”

Dan blinked slowly, rubbing his hand over his face. Occasionally struggling to keep his gaze focussed, but at least he was starting to believe he wasn’t going insane. “Massage inside?” His flummoxed, almost childlike expression was comical.

“Well...yes.” Shit, like Vadim had taken advantage of a seriously disturbed man.

“Don’t understand.” Dan was rubbing his nose, “You said it worked. Will I feel better if you did it again? Still fuzzy. Head’s weird. I was out, aye?”

“Out and gone. Looked like shock to me. Dima would know, he’s the medic.”

Dan said nothing for a while.

Do it again. Oh yes. Why not? The memory of Dan’s sounds and movements tensed Vadim’s stomach. Different from that other memory of yielding. Lusting after Dan, any way he could have him, even if it meant this, and not the other thing. He shuddered at the thought. “First time I did that. No idea. No experience. I was...just trying out something I’ve seen once.”

“Where did you see that massage?” Dan yawned, stretching again, every movement slow, deliberate.

There was really no answer to it. Some things Dan was not supposed to know. Like travelling to London to kill people. “Uhm. Some guy’s place. Did it on...his partner.”

“You been to other soldiers’ places who massaged each other?” Dan’s dark eyes grew wide, something wasn’t right, but he couldn’t put his finger onto it.

“Not quite.”

“And why does my arse still ache? Not bad, just weird. Strange massage.” He smiled a trusting smile. Dan McFadyen, SAS, was right now Dan. Just Dan, no more.

“Not strictly something a masseur would do.” No, yours never got that far inside. Just a couple fingers. “Normal masseurs, I mean.” Hoped Dan would just stop asking.

“So what kind of not-normal masseur was that, then?” Dan was shuffling even closer, while Vadim won time. “But if it’s good, and I think it was good, you think you can do it again?”

“I...yes, I could, but I think a traditional massage might be better at this stage.”

“Why? What’s wrong with the special one? Or does that ache come from you sticking stuff up my arse?”

Shit. He’d been honest about worse things. Vadim inhaled deeply, felt his body tense, expecting a punch. “Yes. But not what you think.”

Dan’s easy simpleton smile froze. That...was something very bad. Yes? Yes. Had to be. Remembered...nothing right now, just a vague recollection of something very bad and very dark and very painful, but it seemed too far away and disconnected, he felt as if that Bad Thing had happened to someone else.

“What do I think?” He frowned, lost.

“I didn’t...fuck you.” But I want to, always wanted to, and right now fucking want to. “Might feel like I did, but I didn’t.” He apologised for something he’d never done, feeling guilty even for apologizing, for trying to not think about it. Dan had sworn to kill him if he ever did. He remembered well.

“I remember...,” Dan’s dark brows drew together with concentration, “...fucking you.” Memory like bright sparks flashing across the surface of his hurting brain. “Good memory.” He smiled again, guileless, slowly images were coming together, one after the other.

Vadim just barely breathed. Oh yes. Very good memory. It increased the tension in his body up a couple notches. Shit. He wanted Dan. Wanted that body, wanted to feel him squirm with need.

“You fucking me, that’s a bad thing?” Again this intense concentration. “I don’t remember. Just something forbidden. Long ago.” Dan paused, “Is fucking me not a good thing? Unlike me fucking you?”

“It’s a very good thing,” said Vadim, voice strained. “Something...I liked a lot.” Hand reaching out to run over Dan’s back, tracing the spine beneath the flesh, rested in the hollow above the ass. “I’d kill to have you.”

Dan moved with the hand, like a slow-coiling snake, until he froze again, some memory triggered that he couldn’t quite fathom. “Kill...” Thinking. Memory came back with each hour, mind getting clearer, but too many puzzle pieces still missing.

“Kill who?”

“Figure of speech. I’d do anything to have you.” Vadim inched closer, making more contact, lips touching Dan’s delta muscle.

“Anything?” Dan moved his head enough to rub his face against the other man’s. Asking for something Vadim knew he couldn’t have, and still wanting it. On the off chance that a beaten-up, shell-shocked and wounded man wouldn’t resist. Fuck you, Vadim, you’re an utter bastard.

“You done it before? Is just that I can’t remember right now.” Eyes dark, Dan’s gaze was innocent. “You fucked me before?”

Vadim winced. “I did.” Now, what? Admitting to something that was forgotten for a couple blissful hours? Ruining the chance for a repetition with the word ‘rape’? “You...didn’t like it.” Understatement of the war, in a war full of understatements. Growing trees. Rape is just bad sex, is it, Vadim? Violence just impatience? “I hurt you.” I wanted to kill you. He shook his head and pulled back, body protesting the distance. “You should rest.”

“Okay.” Dan frowned again, but he couldn’t remember. Nothing except those long-ago shadows, something dark and awful and deeply terrifying. Yet it didn’t make any sense. The feeling of being close to that man, of being taken care of by the Russian, and that disturbing, truly unpleasant memory of yore, those didn’t go together.

“Not tired, though.” No, but Dan could feel himself drifting off when the blankets were tugged around him and the fruit and water were kicking into his system. The warmth of the other’s body and that all encompassing sensation of belonging. It was good. It was right. He was alive and would be taken care of.

He fell asleep before he could protest, his brain resting, healing.

* * *

When Dan woke, he was alone. He couldn't feel the heat anymore that had been enveloping his sleep and guarding his mind. He felt different when surfacing. The hazy cloud that had kept his memories at bay had dissipated, and there were flashes of images that made his mind reel and his body jerk. Breathing, concentrating on drawing air into his lungs and expelling the warmed breath through his nose, he started to check his body. Functional.

Sore. Leg hurting, head in drilling, pounding pain. Arse...

Oh.

He couldn't quite remember, just fuzzy sensations, things that had kept him sane in the midst of insanity, and the feeling of being held, tethered, kept from falling into the chasm of madness. Death, horror, and the invasion of his body.

Dan opened his eyes before moving, peering across the cave.

Vadim sat near the fire, idly toying with pieces of wood, pushing them into the centre, taking one of the sticks and lifting it in front of his face, gazing into the glow, fascinated by the way fire moved and softly hissed, how the wood made the faintest sounds. He glanced over at Dan, back at the stick for a second; then dropped it into the flames. "Tea?"

Dan tried to answer, but his voice wouldn't let him. Croaked out a sound, cleared his throat. "Aye." Sitting up, he almost fell over with dizziness. "How long have I been here?" Holding his head while closing his eyes against the nausea and the pounding ache. Got a lot better when he didn't move.

"About thirty hours." Vadim poured tea, stirred it, and came over, sitting down next to Dan and placing a hand on his chest.

"Shit." Thirty hours. A lot more than he had imagined. He had no real recollection of what had happened, just increasingly clear ideas of what had taken place ever since those dead eyes.... No. He felt the hand on his chest, stopped moving for a while, until the pounding in his head subsided to a dull ache.

"Go easy. You're banged up pretty good." Vadim waited, patiently, as the mug in his hand steamed, then pushed an arm under Dan's shoulders and lifted his upper body enough to push the bergan underneath for support. "Plenty of food and water. No enemies."

"Cheers." Lifting his eyes but not his head, Dan's gaze was a lot deeper and more serious than it had ever been. Just studying the other man for a while. Silent,

before taking the tea and warming his hands. Vadim returned that gaze, clear light blue eyes darker as they were turned away from the fire.

“I’m getting my memories back.” Stating a dry fact while watching, Dan took a first sip of the tea. The stuff tasted like manna from heaven, not that he had a fucking clue what manna would taste like.

Vadim glanced to the side, the only indication that he felt guilty. The rape was back. What he had done was back, everything was back, and there would be questions. Of course there would. “That’s good.”

“I was pretty much out, huh?”

“Shock does that. Can make soldiers completely deaf and blind. Vegetables.” Vadim shook his head. “Guess you should go on R&R for a while. See if something’s broken. Get healed up.” But the thought of Dan going back home was painful. What if there was something broken inside? Dan could just as well have turned into a raving lunatic. The human mind was pretty resilient, but sometimes it could be very fragile—with no reason why some people broke and some didn’t.

Taking another sip, Dan felt like laughing for no reason. The taste of tea brought to his mind the way every goddamned Brit seemed to cling to that fucking proverbial bloody national beverage. Nothing a fucking sip of fucking tea couldn’t cure.

“You didn’t fuck me.”

Vadim shook his head. “I didn’t.” I wanted, but I didn’t. It would have been raping a corpse. Or a child. Not that far down yet.

Dan nodded slowly, not to get that damned pounding going in his battered head again. “You could have. That’s what you wanted.”

Vadim glanced up; then looked to the side again. “Guess I learnt my lesson.” Shit. What lesson? Had he been trained like a dog, threatened and beaten often enough? Scared often enough? *Fuck me and I’ll kill you*. An end to their twisted game, an end to everything that was sane in an insane place, or the other way round, insane in a sane place. He wanted the man too much to have it end like that. It wasn’t worth the price anymore.

Again Dan’s deliberate nod, even though he wasn’t quite sure if he actually understood what Vadim had said. Didn’t matter; he might understand the Russkie

one day, or perhaps he already did, just taking his time to move from subconscious to conscious.

“Thanks.” Simple as that, sipping his tea. “That’s fucking decent.”

Vadim nodded, then, at the strangeness of it, flashed a smile. “You’re welcome. Just...don’t do this too often. Might get second thought.” Or third, or fourth.

“Yeah...” drawing out the vowel, Dan placed the mug onto his lap, cradling it in his hand while just studying, watching. “And that other thing?”

“What other thing?”

“My arse is still sore.” Dan felt his fingertips, each touching its opposite, heated on the mug.

Back to the interrogation chamber. “Should pass. Just rest.” Vadim tried to make it sound normal, because explaining it would not be good. I just fucked you with my hand. No big deal. As long as it wasn’t my cock...no.

Dan ignored Vadim’s reply, ploughed on instead. “I remember you kept me from going insane. Somehow.” He lifted the mug, the last sip was lukewarm. “Shellshock. All that crap.” Watching, always just looking. “It was good.” Mug dropped back in his lap, empty now. “What did you do?” Permission.

Vadim inhaled. No delicate way of putting it. Darren had called it something, but the word didn’t actually fit here, didn’t actually work. Sounded too much like punching, like violence, when it really wasn’t. “Massage. I...used my hand.” Small pause, just a beat. “All of it.”

“Holy fuck.” Dan inhaled sharply, hadn’t forgotten his threat. *I’ll fucking kill you if you ever try to shove your cock up my arse again. Don’t make the mistake to think I don’t mean it. Don’t ever.*

“No wonder my arse is sore.” Felt a strange hilarity, bubbling right up from his core. He’d had a fist up his arse. *That* fist. And that fist wasn’t a delicate little flowery girl’s one. “A cock seems to be dinky compared to that.” Looked pointedly at Vadim’s hand, twisting the empty mug slowly in his lap.

Vadim looked at his hand, too, shook his head. He had no idea what ‘dinky’ meant, but he could guess. Something small and pleasant. When it really wasn’t. “It...took a while.” As if that was an excuse. Or an explanation.

“Aye. Can imagine.” Dan’s voice as dry as his words. “Should probably kick your arse for that, but whatever I do remember, was good. Strange. Freaked,

really. Fucked-up good.” Placing the mug beside himself, he dared to move slowly. Pleased to find his head complying with the careful movements.

Not that you’re in any state to kick my ass, right now, thought Vadim, but kept silent. Wouldn’t do to rile him.

“Where the fuck did you get the idea from?”

“Saw it done...somebody did it to somebody else. Said it was one way to focus, to stretch time...I saw what it did to the other guy.”

“Wonder what it’s like when not being totally fucked-up and spaced out.” Dan had forgotten he’d asked before. “I guess I’d have to be pissed as a newt instead.”

“I could...do it again. And bring vodka.” And jerk off before I do, because I have no idea what I will do to you when you’re not half dead, half insane.

“Good idea. When hell freezes over.” Dan didn’t grin.

Back to normal. Back to struggling with the other even if there was nothing left to lose, nothing left to win. Vadim forced a laugh, like it had been a joke, and stood, headed towards the fire, where the rations had warmed up. Also dried out, but he didn’t mind. As long as Dan stopped asking questions. As long as things were under control. “I guess you’re hungry.”

“Aye, guess so.” Dan didn’t actually know if he was hungry or not, couldn’t read the signs from his body. “What’s my leg like, by the way? Feels like raw meat.”

“Got shot through, but most of muscle seems intact. Flesh wound. Hardly more than grazing. Might be ticket home.” Vadim returned with the food and put it on the ground between them.

“Maybe.” Dan shrugged, “home’s overrated.” Leaning forward, his head was starting to get used to the idea of belonging to a body that was supposed to function. “Where’s home anyway.” He reached for the hot food. “Home’s the mountains.” He began to chew, still watching.

“Living like mountain lion. Fierce loner.” Vadim shook his head. “I miss sauna, and proper food, and family. I miss books, and Metro, can do without walking twenty or thirty clicks in day, in this territory. Can do without getting shot at.” Truth be told, somewhere he’d begun to lose the zest for war. It was now just a task, and one he could do, but he was no longer craving it. Maybe he was getting old.

Helping himself, Dan continued to eat, only now realising how hungry he had been. “Books?” Stuffing himself with another handful, chewing quickly. “You read books?”

“You don’t?” It had never occurred to Vadim that that was even worth asking. Of course he read books. He liked theatre and ballet, too, but if Dan thought reading strange, there was no point explaining *Swan Lake* or the *Nutcracker Suite*. A love that could not be and that killed the lovers. Self-destruction. Tchaikovsky had known things about love, some deep and profound and horrible truth about mortality.

“No.” Dan was thirsty, glancing around for the canteen. “Used to read mags, broadsheets, crap like that. No time for books, no patience. What good would they do? They don’t tell you how to survive.”

“No, they don’t do that. They are reason, not tool.” Vadim smirked. “They hold more truth than Pravda. Politburo can’t lie in Pushkin. Pushkin was there before we became Soviets. It means...if we have past, we have future.” As close to political treason as he could come without showing too much.

“Truth? Reason to live? Bullshit. Food is a reason to live, a juicy steak with oil dripping chips; booze is a reason to live, getting pissed on beer and whisky with mates; sex is a reason to live. In fact, it’s the best and biggest one.” Finding the canteen behind him, Dan closed his eyes for a moment, felt dizzy and nauseous after moving his head. “What good has the truth done you, eh?” Uncapping, he took a swig of water, feeling better with every gulp.

“At least I know that there are many truths. It’s about learning to think different thoughts. Know things that you never felt. You could know what being rich feels like, or being in love, without ever getting real feeling.” Vadim shrugged. “Like guilt.” Raskolnikov. Guilt leading to insanity, and, later, Siberia. “And it tells us who we are. What we are fighting for. I don’t mean orders. I mean people.”

“But that’s bollocks, that feeling and knowing thing. How can you *know* if you haven’t experienced it? I think your books are fakes. They tell you something you *believe* you know what it feels like, but you’re lying to yourself. You don’t. You just fell prey to a big old scam.”

But what’s the difference between a lie that is believed and the truth? Vadim shook his head. Paradox of his existence. Sometimes he thought it would be easier if he could believe the official story. Doublethink.

Taking another swig of the water, Dan leaned his head back against the cave wall, pulling the blanket closer around his naked body. “And what do you fight for? Why are you here?”

“The Russian people,” said Vadim. “My family. People I hold dear.” He smiled. “Trying to make this career. Climb ladder. Watch out for what’s mine.”

Career. Dan couldn’t understand that one either. Mind not fully sharp yet, but he knew that he’d never felt he had to climb anything. No career, just doing what he did. Perhaps he just liked killing and evading getting killed. Great sum of how a man had spent his life. “So, that’s why you’re here?” Lifting his hand, he made a slow-sweeping gesture around the cave. “Looking after your own enemy?” His lips quirked up into a strange half-smile.

Vadim smirked. “Well, in absence of my unit or properly cultured Russian, guess you’ll have to do.”

“Fuck you, too, Russkie.” Dan grinned tiredly. “In that case, help me up. I’d like to go for a piss without keeling over or throwing up.”

Vadim moved behind Dan and put his arms under the other’s, steadying and pulling him up, causing Dan to hiss, then took his arm and placed it around his shoulders, helping him walk by taking the weight off the side with his bad leg. He couldn’t help but stare at Dan’s nakedness. He’d washed him, and massaged him, had been that close, and he still always noticed.

“Ah shit.” Dan grumped, then kept his teeth clenched while walking towards the mouth of the cave. Remained silent until he reached a spot just outside. “Feels like I haven’t moved for a week.” The dizziness could have been worse, though, and he got his bearings once he stood still. Looking down at his body he eyed his cock for a moment. Pondering, couldn’t remember what he was supposed to do with it. Expecting the other to stay and steady him, Dan was swaying for a moment. “What did I mean to do again?” He frowned, kept staring at his cock, flaccid between the darkness of hair.

“You meant to piss.” Vadim hoped it was only a concussion, not something major. He hoped the skull was alright, some people walked and talked with hidden gruesome injuries, then fell over, dead.

“Fuck, yes.” Dan frowned, felt the urge to shake his head, trying to clear the cobwebs, but the constant dull ache reminded him to stay still. “Seems my memory’s shot to pieces.” He took his cock, tried to relax, willing the piss to flow.

“Can remember yesterday and before. Kind of. Can’t quite remember before you found me.” Letting out a sigh of relief when the urine started to trickle and then shot out in a mighty stream. Hadn’t realised how full his bladder had been. “Shit, that’s good.”

Vadim swallowed. The way Dan’s voice changed with that simple pleasure. If he could only have him under him, saying exactly that. Yeah, lusting after a man who was pissing and rested half his weight on his shoulder. “Concussion.” Vadim tried to pull his mind off the fact Dan was naked and in no state to fight. “I’ll have to leave tomorrow. You better remember safer place somewhere around here. You’re too close to one of our bases.”

“Aye,” two quick shakes and last drops, and Dan lifted his head, carefully looking over his shoulder. “I’ll get out.” How? He didn’t have a clue, but he’d do it, somehow. Even if he had to crawl across the mountains, dizzy and disorientated, but he’d do it. Fuck that leg, his head, and the fact he couldn’t remember things he should know.

Vadim frowned, didn’t believe it, but had no other option but to take the risk. He couldn’t stay here forever, and this was on the brink of getting very, very dangerous. “Yes. I know you will.”

“Did you find my bergan? Haven’t got a fucking clue where it is, but I guess that means nothing right now.” Hopping on his good leg, Dan tried to put some weight on the injured one. Hurt like a motherfucker, but it would have to do. He could hole up another day, then make his way across the pass throughout the night. At least he remembered the terrain, and if he were lucky, he’d cross the path of some friendly Mujahideen. He wasn’t going to die like this; not that easy to take down.

“It was down in village. I brought it up. That was how I knew you were there somewhere. I remembered your kit.”

“You better. You usually help yourself to peanut butter energy bars.” Dan flashed a small grin. “Right, nurse, take me back inside. Fucking freezing without clothes.” Clothes, shit. Couldn’t remember when last he had any.

“I’ll help you put your spares on.” Vadim manoeuvred Dan to turn around and brought him back into the cave, back to the blankets. “It’s all right there. See?”

His kit, Dan’s kit. He could give Dan some of his stuff. To make sure he had it as easy as possible.

Spotting his bergan, Dan's grin widened, eased. "Piece of cake, then." And if he could actually stand on his own two feet without pain or swaying that would help as well. Using Vadim as leverage and crutch, he lowered himself down onto the blankets. He rubbed his face with the heel of his hand once he sat. Rubbing vigorously between his eyes before looking up and baring teeth in a kick-ass grin. "That's what I do. Surviving. That's my job and I'm bloody brilliant at it."

Vadim crouched right next to him, fought that odd sense of tenderness, of not wanting to leave, to stay and make sure Dan was alright. "We'll see how strong you are tomorrow. I'll bring more water up before I leave. You could hole up another week, maybe ten days with food."

Strange to be sitting there, naked, and Vadim so close and dressed. Wasn't right, too...intimate. Yet all Dan wanted for one worrying second was to rest his aching head on that shoulder in its Soviet uniform. "No, Russkie. Too dangerous and you know it. I got to get away from this place. All I remember is bullets, RPGs, blood, screams, death. That makes me think you wiped out the village and somewhere down there are a pile of blown-up corpses, bubbling away in the sun. How long before troops will be coming in? Yours or insurgents, doesn't matter. Soviets would kill me or take me prisoner. Mudjas? I'm guessing I'm the only survivor. What the fuck do you think they'd figure out? Something fishy with 'Daan'. And I'd rather be taken prisoner or killed by your lot than 'mine'."

Vadim inhaled deeply. "Yes, you're right. You'll have to move. As much as I'd like to take you prisoner...and keep you for while," he gave a suggestive grin, earning a huff in return, "that's not how it works. You'd go to Moscow and meet some unpleasant gentlemen. Our secret service is not as well-behaved as yours."

"Aye, so they kept telling us. Nasty men in cheap suits." Pulling the blankets around himself, Dan sought to preserve warmth. Soon enough he would have to pretend to be fit enough to go on fighting for survival. He wasn't going to let himself down with negative thinking.

"You know our motto? Not 'who dares wins', the other one." Dan showed a dry grin, almost brittle. "'Never leave a comrade unless he is already dead.' I figure that goes for oneself as well. I tend to think it goes along nicely with 'never give up, never surrender'."

Vadim shook his head, felt stupid for saying that, but still did. "If there was a way, I'd stay around." Damn, that sounded closer to the truth than he'd wanted,

“Make sure you’ll be good to go.” He decided that the fire needed tending, it was getting cold.

Dan said nothing. Not a word. No quip, no joke, and no piss-taking remark. Stunned into silence, all he could do was watch the other man. Thinking. Wondering. Steeped in the strange sensation that the Russkie had just said and done something that had gone beyond and above anything he’d expected. Something so damn decent.

Vadim set up another pot of tea, tossing a handful of leaves into the pot. No chance for a proper, Russian-style tea.

“You got anything stronger?” When Dan finally spoke he had to clear his throat.

“Second half of bottle of vodka.” Vadim gestured towards his own bergan. “Horrible stuff, but good for washing out wounds. Feel free.”

“Cheers. Figure I probably shouldn’t, what with concussion and all, but shit, can’t get into any worse state, can I?” Dan flashed a grin, leaned slowly towards the other’s bergan, rummaged a moment before pulling out the bottle. Could see from the oily way the liquid sloshed around what shit stuff it was. It would do.

“Just different kind of headache.” Vadim stirred the dark mass of tea leaves with his knife, too lazy to get the mess kit, watched it twirl in the reddish light. It was too comfortable spending time with Dan. Like they were a two-man patrol out in the wilderness, following their own orders. Don’t be stupid, Vadim, you still know which side is yours. It’s the one that would throw you into prison if they knew what you’ve been doing over the last years. The one that cannot respect what you are. What you want. Fine, as long as it was weaker men who never spoke about it, as long as it remained a dark, rotting secret at the core. But nothing beyond that. No word for it. And no space. And this other man would laugh at him if he knew what he was thinking.

“Tea?”

“Aye.” Dan had unscrewed the bottle, held it up towards Vadim in salute, who nodded with a fair bit of irony. “Slainte.” He gulped down a considerable amount of the vile but potent stuff. Grimaced when he was done, sticking out his tongue in disgust. “Fuck, I need some of that tea. Quick.”

“Guess that’s the one they make with bread and sugar from pure alcohol.” Vadim poured a mug and brought it over. “Ingenuity knows no limits.”

“Ingenuity, fuck my arse.” Dan groaned, grabbed the hot tea, drank a too large mouthful and spit it all back out, against the cave wall, yelping. “Shit! Fucking hot.” The disgusting taste of the moonshine and the pain of a burnt palate were battling with each other in his mouth, and it was too much to handle. Dan started to chuckle, despite the pounding in his head. “Not my fucking week.”

Vadim laughed, too, and laughed some more as he saw the face Dan pulled. “You have convinced me. You’ll live.” Still chuckling, he reached out to put a hand on Dan’s shoulder. “You okay?” Again the urge to kiss him. Probably the last thing the seared lips needed now.

Dan’s laughter turned into a grin that turned his deeply tanned face into that of someone younger. “Aye. I’m OK. Guess I have to counteract the scalding with some more of the vodka. At least I won’t taste anything.” That hand felt good. Much better than the next swallow of vile liquid that he forced down his neck. At least the stuff was potent; he could already feel the heat spreading from his stomach straight up into his head.

Vadim squeezed the shoulder and patted it, unwilling to let go, but with no more excuses to keep the hand there. Seemed the only way they could touch without feeling strange was when sleeping, under the blanket, or during sex. “I’ll call that self-inflicted.” He lay back, head on his arm, and stretched out.

“In that case, everything’s self-inflicted.” Another swallow of vodka, then swiftly a sip of tea, more careful this time. “I didn’t need to take on the job, could have stayed in the Highlands, worked on the farm or learned a trade. Roofing, plumbing, shit like that. Would have made a living one way or another, probably married, kids, drinking every evening in the village pub and watching the world go by. Day after day. Always the same, just getting closer to the grave with each of them. One as bland as the other.” Dan managed another mouthful, the moonshine was heating his belly and firing up his thoughts.

Vadim tried to imagine Dan like that—and the irony was, he could. Like he could imagine himself as a better athlete than he’d been, more gifted, maybe moving on to become a coach. Battling every night not to see the buff young bodies in his care.

“So, aye, it’s self-inflicted. Mudjas, scars, pain, death and all.”

“It’s only when stuff goes bad that one wonders...whether there had been another way.” Vadim sighed. “If it goes well, you don’t want to do anything else in world. This way, at least, we get to meet and kill interesting people.”

Dan laughed, wincing at the ache. Raising the bottle for another salute, he grinned. “Hello there, nice to kill you.” Guzzling some more of the vodka while Vadim reached out to place a hand on Dan’s thigh, just resting it there, not looking at him. Eyes closed, thoughtful.

“See what a sad fuck I am?” Dan began to feel decidedly sloshed and hell it was good. Counteracting pain and dizziness, booze the best medicine in the world. He didn’t really notice that hand, just a comfortable weight and warmth on his leg.

“Sad enough to never want another job, even if it all goes wrong. I hope to go down one day in a blaze of glory. Fuck the pension, my brother and his family can have it. What would I do back there? Not my world. They don’t understand what I do. They don’t get it. To them, killing is a horrible task that should be punished. And of course they’re right—in *their* world. To them, we’re murderers, and they’d rather not mingle with us unless it’s tall tales of glory, prettified for the minds of civilians. But it’s not. It’s blood and gore and the complete inability to feel guilt. It’s steaming guts and sticky blood, struggling limbs under your hands and the satisfaction when that body goes limp. One more time it was *them* and not yourself. One more time before the next time, and perhaps it’s the next time that’s the final blaze of glory.”

Putting the bottle to his lips, Dan finished the rest of the vodka, not even tasting the stuff anymore. Bottle and hand came down on the ground beside him in a harsh thud, and his drunken grin turned feral, tinged with insanity without which he couldn’t do what he did. “And in my case, Russkie, the glory will never be seen. Rotting away somewhere in the mountains, in this fucking place of dust and heat, cold and stone. These endless mountains that I love too fucking much.”

“And there’s no service ribbon for you...Not even that.” Vadim raised himself on an elbow, wanted to pull Dan down onto the ground. Maybe get and give a handjob. Dan so close made him nervous in a strange way. “I’m not sure this war is glorious at all. Against Germans, yes, that was glory. They might make me Hero of Soviet Union, if they want to prop up morale, that is. But what glory is there, here in dust?”

“That’s easy.” Dan licked his lips before washing the lingering burn down his throat with some bitter tea. As bitter as a lonely death. “There’s no glory in this whole shit. No war is ever glorious. Heroes are usually dead. Besides, they rarely turn into heroes because they are super-humans, but because of circumstances. Heroes rarely *think*. Heroes just act. So, all this is, is a stage for glory, small, personal and up to each one of us.” Making a sweeping gesture down his body and on to bergan and food. “My glory is all I have: this here.”

“Not much of stage.”

“That’s all. My ‘glory’ is to be a soldier, and the best soldier I can be. I glory in what I do, because that’s all I have. I’m a trained killer and I’m fucking good at it, and that includes surviving. But one day even my luck will run out, like it almost did this time. And next time, perhaps you won’t be there, and my glory will be to go down and die. Knowing that I spent my life doing the job I wanted to do to the best of my abilities. And then I’ll be gone, and decrepit old age will be spared. There’s no way I delude myself I’ll make it past, what, forty, forty-five, fifty? Perhaps even to full pension? Bullshit. I’ll go down soon enough, but I want to have a big fat chunk of *life* before that. Eat, drink and fuck.”

“Fair enough.” And how incredibly bleak, thought Vadim.

Dan finished the last of the tea, lukewarm by now. “What’s your glory, Russkie?”

“Apart from being Spetsnaz? And getting promoted?” Vadim shrugged. “That I am more free here than I could normally be. Break rules. Be myself.” He grinned. “That is strange thing to say. Being myself. Sometimes, I don’t know who I am. Am I major of Spetsnaz, or am I father and husband? Or traitor that keeps enemy alive?” He shook his head.

Dan was silent for a moment, sufficiently drunk to say the first thing that came to his mind. “What about this, then. Forget all the crap. Spetsnaz. Family. Enemy. Be a man tonight. A nobody. And I just happened to meet you on the off chance. Here in that cave, in the fucking freezing mountains, in the devil’s own lands.”

What? Make-believe? Like children? Vadim stared, not sure what to make of it. “And how?”

Grinning, Dan leant forward. Pupils widened, the vodka had settled in well and truly, speech gently slurred. Eyes dark, almost black. “Hello, stranger. Fancy meeting you here.”

That was...flirting. Vadim felt odd, embarrassed; had no idea how that was supposed to work. “You’re drunk,” he murmured, but grinned. “What do you want?”

“Of course I’m drunk. Or else you think I’d come up with stupid shit like this?” Dan smirked. “Isn’t there some sort of foreplay involved? At least that’s what I used to do with my bimbos.” Leaning back again, hands idly moving along the blanket. The light of the flames casting his face into near-sinister shadows.

Vadim frowned, too embarrassed to say much to that. Whatever ‘bimbos’ were. Not the greatest moment to ask for linguistic clarification. “Uhm. Okay. And now?”

“You bought me the drink, so that’s sorted. Guess it’s time to compliment you in return.” Dan’s grin turned the shadows into a play of fire, catching on rows of teeth. “You’re a fucking creep, Russkie, with strange eyes, pale as those glaciers around here; hair that reminds me of sun ripened fields down in England; and a body that I’d expect in a museum, chiselled in marble, with a sign at the pedestal, saying ‘Russian God’.”

And how did ‘creep’ and ‘God’ go together? Vadim only hoped there wasn’t some haemorrhaging going on in Dan’s brain that was slowly transforming his brain to mush. Strange self-conscious thought, yes, wheat and ice and how often had he read those words to describe somebody with that combination of hair and eye colours, and he’d laughed at the cliché and thought nothing of it. But being told that was flattering—too sincere to be a cliché, even though Dan was playing around.

Dan ran a hand through unruly hair that was in need of washing, “Will that do for a start?”

“That will do. Uhm. You...free tonight?”

“As free as a guard dog that’s chained to its post.” Dan grinned, pushed the blanket down until his chest and arms were bare. “Like what you see?”

“Yes.” Did he expect to be complimented in turn? Another man. He’d never done this, not even with women. He didn’t do this kind of thing. It was as daunting as if somebody had just tasked him to write literature. Art. Make-believe.

“You are...” like a faun, a reclining marble faun, only alive, that I’ve seen on a postcard. Somewhere in a museum in Europe. Naked, spread legs, face showing the agony of lust, of wanting. Your eyes are places of shadows, deep and true and secret. “Beautiful. I mean...handsome.”

Even the vodka didn’t keep Dan from being taken aback. That word, that was...strange. Thoughts warring, playing hide and seek across his face, emotions that he’d rather not feel. In the end, laughter and joking was safest. “Don’t be fucking stupid. I’m sure as fuck not beautiful.”

Grinning, steering away from the dangerous edge of something he couldn’t quite fathom, but which seemed a dangerous abyss to fall into. Feelings of any kind, except for the basics of hunger, thirst and lust, did not belong into Special Forces vocabulary.

Vadim was too relieved to protest. Good he had stuck to the simple version.

The alcohol was coursing through Dan’s mind, he couldn’t feel the headache anymore and the pain in his leg had subsided. “We’ve got one night, soldier.”

Teeth bared in a smirk as he pulled the blanket down completely, throwing Vadim’s hand off in the process. The air was cold, but he’d had enough of the potent moonshine. Perfectly sloshed, but not quite drunk. “Let’s make the best out of it, and that means you getting out of your uniform.”

“Yes.” Vadim’s eyes were on Dan, the embers giving off the faintest of light, enough to see him, enough to want without touching. It would get much worse. He undressed, watched intently by Dan, whose dark eyes had turned black in the dim light. Boots and vest and shirt and everything else, quick, and kept within reach, then lay down next to the other. Vadim took hold of the blanket, covering himself and Dan, who stretched his legs, still half-sitting with his back against bergan and cave wall.

The moment their bodies touched, desire was back, a mellow desire that didn’t even contemplate violence. “Dan? I know...you’re probably too banged up, but...”

“But?” Dan felt warm, inside from the vodka, outside from the body that was close to his own. Familiar. Safe. Remembered something else, the deep ache inside and a horror taken away by the very same presence.

“But what?” His voice had darkened a notch.

“I want...you. Can’t...stop wanting you.” Vadim winced, but placed a hand on Dan’s body, flank, to feel him, kissed his shoulder, moving closer, brushing him. He’d be quite happy with just a hand. Anything. “If you’d...turn on the side and lift a leg, just so I can...” Fuck you without fucking you. And still feel you.

“Can what?” Dan’s addled brain wasn’t catching on fast enough. “What can you do then?”

“Fuck your thighs.” A whisper. Too fucking close to begging to speak up. Just that. Need, want, asking. By far the least violent option, no way that would hurt or be more than a nuisance.

“That sounds messy.” Dan didn’t turn, slid down instead until he lay fully on the ground. Watching the face, hidden in the shadows. Focussing was hard; cheap spirits, concussion, and a memory of eighteen hours in hell that he refused to remember. “You’re really that fucking desperate to fuck me. Aren’t you?” Voice barely more than a rumble.

“Always...been.” Vadim’s hand rested on Dan’s pec now, the calmest part of his body, while the heart thundered on, body wanting, needing, and barely kept from begging. “The one thing that always gets me off. In barracks. Just...imagining.” Remembering. “Imagining you wanting it.” Or not. Didn’t matter.

Just Dan.

“What do you think of,” Dan stilled, could hardly see the features of the other’s face. “The rape? Or how it could have been?”

Admit the truth? Then again, he had, years ago. Truth was, he had an expansive collection of things that got him off or on the way. Memories of lips, images of Dan’s body in various positions, the heat and struggle. The rape was one of them. One that always got to him. “Either. Both.”

Dan nodded. His breath audible in the cave, steady, strong. Thinking. Vodka and heat, memories and an act of goddamned decency. “You could have fucked me,” quietly. “Yesterday. Could have had what you wanted.” Another breath. One. Two. All Dan could feel was that hand on his body and the heat from the other. “Why didn’t you?”

“I don’t want you weak. I want you strong.” Vadim moved closer, placed a kiss near his fingertips on that smooth chest, powerful. “You weren’t

yourself...didn't remember. Would have been...tricking you. And you'd have killed me. Well, tried to. And I...don't want it to end."

Tricking you. That was all Dan heard. *Would have been* and the fact that Vadim hadn't done it. No rape. No taking, and yet all his Russkie wanted was exactly that. To fuck him. To have him again. That was it. Again. He'd had him before. "I remember," clearing his throat, voice felt rusty all of a sudden, "I remember when I told you I'd kill you if you ever tried to fuck me again."

In his mellow-boozed mind the whole thing didn't seem all that horrific anymore, but there was that one memory he'd never forget. The reason why and the start of it all. Of everything. The pain, the truth, the lust, and this. This...sharing. Of warmth and something else that Dan didn't want to recognise. Stuck to what he knew instead: vodka, lust and body heat.

"Yes. I remember." No moment that Vadim didn't. The threat. The memory of the knife. The careful balance, that, whenever it tipped, brought danger of complete destruction, not of one, but both. He should stop rocking the boat. Should be glad the equilibrium allowed them to get the pressure off. Still craved.

"I won't kill you." Dan didn't know where that had come from, but he wouldn't take it back. Seemed right. "I give you my word. I won't." If you fuck me now. If you do what you've been obsessed with for all those goddamned years since that night in Kabul. "I won't." Murmured.

Vadim didn't move, smelled Dan's skin, close, the warmth, words left his mind blank. Not asking why, even though that was the first thought when thought returned. Was it...something like gratitude? It might be risking too much to ask anything at all. His hand slid down Dan's front, reached for the cock, not hard, but not flaccid, either. "I'll...make it good," he murmured against Dan's skin. "It can be good."

"You better." Dan's grin wasn't all that convincing, "or I might go back on my promise."

Vadim felt that was a perfectly sane thing to say.

"Want me to turn over?" Dan frowned, but didn't say what was really on his mind. Make me forget that night in Kabul. Make it better. Make this whole shit worthwhile and don't remind me of the one reason why I would have to kill you. Tit for tat. Your back. My arse. But where do we stop.

“Yes.” Vadim felt the need rise again, the dark flood he’d always welcomed, allowed to turn into something that broke men. “No, wait...” He reached for the Vaseline, close since the ‘massage’, “stay on your back.”

Dan’s brows raised, “should I have my knife close by?” His query half mockery, half serious, but he stayed where he was.

Vadim got on his knees and moved his head to Dan’s cock, wanted him to be more than halfway interested. He took it between his lips, sucking on the tip, keeping it there with one hand. Whatever it took to make this feel good. If he could get Dan to enjoy this, there would be more times...

Now that was different, Dan thought. Better. Something he knew and forever wanted. Perhaps as much as Vadim had been wanting his arse. Precious arse. Body. Intrusion. His cock slid deeper into the wet heat of the other’s throat, and all he could think of was, why? Why had he offered? Why indeed. “Fuck.” Groaned out. For someone who didn’t like giving head Vadim was brilliant at blowjobs.

Vadim reached into the tub of petroleum jelly, thick and greasy stuff, closed the hand, rubbed it over his fingers, slicking them up while sucking on Dan’s cock, more than interested now; needed this build-up to keep himself under control. Just in case he lost it later. Couldn’t. Shit. Rubbed the fingers between Dan’s cheeks, remembered clenched, quivering muscle back that night, slid the first finger in, to slick him up.

Dan jerked, his whole body tensed. Shit. That’s what a finger felt like.

Remembered it. Not the first time, they’d had dozens of handjobs and blowjobs, some of them involved a finger up his arse. But that had been that. Just a finger, forgotten the fist, and what if the Russkie was going to go insane, went violent, did it again, tried to rape him for real. He didn’t have a weapon and he’d be in no state to fight.

“I need my knife.” Dan was hard, his body wanting, but his mind demanded precautions, vodka or not.

Vadim pulled back to look at Dan, then nodded. That might actually be a good idea. Shit. Dan’s knife was a bit too far away to reach it, but there was still his own knife on his belt. Vadim reached to the pile of his clothes, opened the strap that held the knife in place, pulled it and offered it, hilt first, to Dan.

Dan took it, head lifted from the ground, nodded, before booze and concussion swept a wave of dizziness across his mind. With his hand clenched around the hilt, he lay back down, knees bent, legs falling open. The blade was close enough to slash his face or cut his throat.

Vadim didn't believe for a heartbeat Dan wouldn't do that if he fucked this up. There was a moment of irony as well. Seemed, indeed, Dan was in control while going 'bottom'. Darren would approve. Vadim grinned, then closed his eyes as he returned to sucking, slicked fingers rubbing Dan's crack, two of them then breaching the hole, into the heat. Moving his lips up and down the shaft, he moved his fingers in the same rhythm, free hand steadying his body, as he dipped in lower and pulled back, faint noises echoing too loud in his ears.

Dan's breathing sharpened. Cock and fingers, arse and body, mind and vodka. All tipping-swirling together into a cacophony of sensations. Centred by the knife in his hand, the familiar feeling of fingers clenched around the hilt. "Oh...shit." Didn't realise he had breathed out those words, lifted his hips, moving towards lips and back onto fingers. Intrusion and ache, reminding him of fire, terror and anchoring through his centre. Massage, the Russkie had said, no thoughts nor words for 'massage' now.

Vadim met the thrusts, elated that Dan started getting into this, the sucking turned fierce, actually hungry for once, the thought that he'd have Dan this time spurred him on, gave this more pleasure than he usually felt, made Dan enjoy this, but pulled back before he got him too far, breathing harshly. "Turn around." Voice raw, jaw tired, need getting too great there. "Please."

Wanting nothing but to get off, Dan hardly heard the words. Something about *turn* and *please*, maybe move and whatever. Did it anyway, without thinking. He groaned at the loss of friction and heat. On his belly. Cock trapped between hard ground, blanket and himself. Shit. All he could make out now, was that this time, it was for real. He'd given his word.

"Don't want to...strain that leg," Vadim murmured, breathless with the sight. That powerful ass, something he knew but now he could have it. Again. Willing. Vadim moved between Dan's legs, moved the good one to the side and up, to open Dan more, to get to an angle that would allow him to fuck without putting any of his weight on the injured leg. Then lay down on Dan, letting him feel his weight, cock resting against the buttocks. "I want you, Dan. More than anything.

You...are in my blood, in my bones, I need...you. Do you understand.” Just a whisper into Dan’s ear while his hand spread those cheeks, rubbing the opening again, nice and slick.

“No, I don’t.” Dan breathed out, fingers clenched so tightly around the knife, his knuckles were white amongst purple-red skin. He wasn’t moving, felt trapped beneath the weight, couldn’t help but suddenly fight the memories. Belt: cut. Trousers: sliced. Hands: bound. Arse: raped. Pistol against his neck. “But it’s OK.”

“Press into me when I do it. Yes? Easier that way.”

Dan nodded, barely visible. Kept his eyes open, felt the moonshine course through his blood and wanted more of it. Reminded himself he’d said he’d do it. Why. Why, the fuck, why?

Vadim reached again for the Vaseline, pretty depleted by now, and slicked himself up, wiped his hand on his thigh and manoeuvred his cock between Dan’s cheeks. Heat. Good. Moved to press against the hole, slow, which made him sweat with concentration, against the tightness, inched forward, groaning, lifting his weight off Dan, groin and ass in contact, a slow movement from the hips, when his body wanted to use force, strength, weight, wanted to make it a struggle, but Vadim forced himself to still. He wanted to ask whether Dan was alright, wanted to soothe and calm, but didn’t trust his voice now, at all, too much straining with staying in control.

Weight. Pressure. Strength. Dan felt this *thing* breach the muscle, enter his body. Different to fingers, even fist. Remembered, tried not to. Too slow, too much time to think. Not enough friction for his cock. He groaned. No words, just unintelligible sounds. Only that slow, slow movement on top of him, the sensation of being filled more; ever slower, ever deeper, ever more. No way he could *not* think. Blood. Pistol. Knife. Cut throat, dead soldier and drunken voices.

He tensed, fingers of his left scrabbling against the stone of the cave.

Vadim felt sweat trickle down his flanks, shivering with the control. Expected, the way Dan tensed, to feel his own knife cut him, most likely the flank or thigh—Dan could reach him easily there. “Calm,” he breathed, forced it out. “Won’t...won’t make it bad,” sounding close to pleading.

“No!” Dan suddenly burst out. “Don’t do this. Not like this.” Too slow, too much. Couldn’t bear the tenderness, loathed the care, impossible to endure the goddamned patronising whatever it was. Made him think, remember, wouldn’t do.

Vadim felt his blood run cold—he’d expected anything but this. The bottom was in control. All it took was ‘no’. And fuck, he was in the mind to obey that. Because of the knife. Just the knife. Definitely the knife.

Dan’s voice suddenly sharpened, “Just fuck me!”

It didn’t make any sense. Vadim hadn’t wanted it like that. Had tried to understand, to learn, to try making amends, maybe, erase one bad thing with a good thing. The order was irresistible, though, and Vadim couldn’t help but move forward, fully get into Dan, groaning as he did, feel the ass against his groin, his full length inside, in that strength and heat. Needed him. Wanted him. Craved him. In whatever way. Slow, hard, fast, whatever. Just wanted.

Vadim pulled back, fast, and thrust again, slow this time, but with force, using his weight against Dan’s body. Exactly like with Mark. Still in control, only it was better with Dan.

“Oh shit!” Dan almost shouted. Fuck, that did it. That thrust eradicated all thoughts and memories. It fucking hurt, adding to the lingering soreness of the ‘massage’, and he sure as fuck wasn’t used to having anything up his arse.

His hand was losing its death grip on the knife when he lifted his arse a fraction, hissed in pain as his leg protested. Don’t let me remember.

“Goddammit, do it! You fucking want to.”

Thought and concern ceased. Vadim lost any attempt at rhythm or control, any attempt at tenderness, the words took the shackles off his body, which lunged into the act with all the ferocity of a wild animal, a mating predator. Knife, punishment, whatever. This was what he really wanted, and he snarled as he brought his strength to bear, all of it, no remorse, no nothing, perfectly willing to pay whatever price for this, brutally pushing Dan against the rock, choking the sounds against Dan’s shoulder, biting down, moving fiercely, eyes closed, driving himself close fast, much like the rape, no time to savour anything, no need to, just explode, the way there didn’t matter.

Dan knew he’d asked for it, and fuck it hurt. Forget the *make it good for you* and fuck the *calm*. He was losing himself instead, along with grip, knife and memories. No time to think, just a body that was being pounded and used and fuck,

he'd asked for it. No rape, even though it felt like one. Teeth ground, fists clenched and body braced against the onslaught but there was something, something so deep and dark and brutally honest inside, that revelled in the force and a strength that was equally pitched against his own. He'd chosen this. Demanded. Control. But it still hurt like fuck.

Vadim just couldn't stop it, nothing inside resisted this, then all the concern must have been fake, he still wanted to destroy this man, that had to be the reason, and the feeling sickened him and was great at the same time. Things were simple. He could push everything away, all the things that had happened in the last years and just do what he needed to do—nothing had truly changed, and the other's resistance made it just perfect. Again. Complete unity, struggle, pain, intensity, and he relished it, riding his own adrenaline, and the other's strength, fuck, wounded, whatever, no match, yeah, right, his. In this moment, utterly and completely his. His life, his soul, his body, his pain.

Vadim came with a harsh groan, kept thrusting into the still body because he couldn't stop, rode it out, and then pulled away, dizzy with sensory overload, too much, too far, too hard, came crashing down, realized what he'd felt—and wanted to feel—and moved away, sweat growing cold on this skin in the night. Oh fuck. Oh fuck.

Be careful what you wish for, Vadim.

Dan lay like before, his limbs in disarray and specks of blood had seeped to the surface of the bandage on his thigh. Hand lying on top of the knife, but not gripping it. Face ground into the stone, blanket pulled to the side. Lips parted. Breathing. Mind blank. Utterly blank. Dust and ashes, or the white-blind brightness of burning fire. All the same. Right back to Kabul. And he'd asked for it this time. Why. Why the fuck.

And why was he still half hard.

“Get me off.” He hurt like a motherfucker, but there was something deeper and bigger than all of this. Greater than cocks and rapes, fists and arses.

Vadim shook his head, just didn't...couldn't believe this, as sanity returned. Control. Just. No. Control. He glanced at the knife, could smell the blood and feared for a moment that he'd torn Dan—*again*—definitely blood there. Owed something. Owed something so impossible it made him shudder. Horror. Had never felt this, now did, didn't understand why the punishment didn't come.

He turned Dan around, whose body obeyed like a puppet, and took his cock, shocked, shocked that there was arousal left and that Dan could demand this and that he just obeyed, after crossing that line again. Back to zero. Same mistake. Same shit. Had known himself better than to risk this. Now, this was confirmation.

“Russkie.” Dan’s quiet voice croaked, cleared his throat, coughed. “Listen.” Felt the other’s lips on his cock and knew, this time, he’d get more than just the power trip blow-job.

Vadim glanced up, the sickening feeling growing stronger. No triumph. He had stared the beast in the face and that beast was him. Not an athlete that ended up in the army, by whatever force. Ruthless killer. No books, no philosophy, no nothing could fool him. The army was simply the place where a man like him did the least damage. If he’d ever feel half that savage need to destroy at home...if that ever happened.

“You said in that cave you’d rape me again, given half the chance.” Dan paused, allowed his legs to relax and fall open. “Fuck, I believe you.” Lifted his head a fraction, stared down at himself and towards the other, who just nodded, numb, looking pale, light blue eyes gleaming.

Dan felt and sounded strangely detached. “Now that that’s settled, suck me off.” He let head and body fall back and relax. Dizzy. Passive. Expectant.

Vadim sucked on the tip, running his tongue into the slit, did what he knew felt good, tongue running over the underside, feeling the strong veins as the cock returned to full hardness. He paused for a moment, kept it in his hand and stroked, then began to hyperventilate, saturate his blood with oxygen, harsh, quick breaths, pumping air into his lungs and out, like he was about to dive. Then bowed his head to take Dan fully, in one go, push him down his throat, felt his throat constrict, air cut off, and used only his neck muscles to fuck his own throat on Dan’s cock, spasms involuntary, but he knew they felt good.

Dan’s hands returned into fists, tight and clenched, body tensing as he pushed his hips upwards, fucking the throat best he could. This really was different. But fuck, what a price to pay for a blowjob from heaven or hell. Nauseous with pain and dizziness, but worth it. Hell and damnation, goddamned fucking worth it. For whatever reasons he was loathe to understand. It did take longer than usual, but when Dan finally came, his cock was buried deep into the other’s throat, his eyes scrunched shut, fists slammed onto the ground, and his body arching. This was no

pleasant orgasm, no mellow moments of bliss, but the cruel and harsh reality of his life, epitomized in a few seconds of convulsing and cursing.

Vadim moved slowly back, sucked the cock on the way out, as if resisting it leaving, then let it slip from his lips, now breathing again. Felt like shit, didn't know what had gone wrong. Just the fact he'd ruined it, made this just as bad and fierce as it could possibly have been. Wrong. He'd been kidding himself. Bullshit. Things had started to make sense, had fallen into place, things about emotions, about what Dan meant—but it was all bullshit, all a jumble that made no more sense. They should stop this. It was healthier. Saner.

He needed distance, stood and padded towards the cave mouth. He envied smokers now. This seemed like a damn fine moment for a cigarette. Maybe it would calm him. Give him something to do with his hands.

Dan's eyes remained closed for a long time, until he started to shiver, the cold creeping into his bones, making him feel each and every ache, and of those there were plenty. Only himself to blame for adding more pain to his collection on the night before he'd have to make his way across the mountains. Fucked up and all. But he regretted nothing, for there was nothing he craved more than truth and straightforward honesty. He was hurting, but he'd asked for it, and hell, he might even do it again. It had been...different. He sure as fuck had forgotten to think at the time.

“Russkie.” Dan turned his head towards the cave entrance while scrabbling for the blankets to try get warmth back into his body, sticky with cum and sweat. “You got a fag?” Stupid question. But the first one that came to his mind.

Vadim turned. “Still don't smoke.”

“Yeah, damn. Thought it was worth a try.”

Vadim came back, reached for the rag to clean Dan up, did so in silence, and then reached out to put some more wood on the embers. He took the knife and put it back into its sheath. “Guess we better share warmth.” Looked into Dan's face, gauging the response, and Dan nodded.

Then he lay down, close, and turned onto his side, looking at Dan's back. Couldn't keep that up and closed his eyes. Oh shit. Shit.

“Not much good that warmth does if you stay so fucking far away.” Dan's head felt a lot better, strangely enough, even though the ache was constant. “I got

to be out of here tomorrow, make the best of the night. Aye, handsome stranger?” He quirked one brow and the corner of his lips.

“Aye,” said Vadim, and it was a sigh. Stop this? How? There was no rage now, just two bodies, cold, sharing warmth, and Dan’s twisted sense of humour. He shuffled closer, kept Dan’s back warm but kept his groin arched away. Didn’t want to wake up needing. Not that that would change anything.

“Better.” Dan mumbled, lay on his side on the good leg and listened to the aches in his body for a while. Silent, enveloped by the heat of the other’s body, and entirely at a loss what to think. He could hardly go back to his threat of a few years ago. But if it ever happened again—without his consent—he’d still kill that cunt.

Shuffling back, burrowing into the body and taking the other’s arm to keep him warm across his chest, Dan fell asleep at last.

Not knowing what to think was a blissful state to be in.

* * *

Dan woke when the noise got louder, the rustling, footsteps, sounds of preparation. Mind fuzzy while waking, all he knew was in how unfit a state he was, but it couldn’t be helped. Stretching slowly, he yelped when a pain stabbed him right in the guts, all the way from his arse. What a fucking mess it all was.

“Time to leave?” His voice drowsy, he was trying hard to wake up, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, but the headache was grinding away and his leg protested with every movement. Great, Dan, you’re a wreck, and you’re going to cross those mountains.

Vadim glanced up, then came over to assess the situation. “Wait till it gets warmer,” he murmured and offered tea and breakfast. He felt a stab of guilt when he saw Dan’s obvious discomfort. Like this? Dan had no chance to survive alone. Not while being on the run. “I’ll pack, you try gather some strength, we see what we can do.”

And what will that be? There’s no threshold for more quality time. If you don’t come back, Vadim, they’ll look for you, and they’ll find you nursing a man who is by all rights and purposes your enemy. Do you believe Dan will resist the torture much? Why should Dan not tell them what you are and for how long. What you did? They will ask questions. Why. You’ll be the traitor.

Dan looked up quizzically. “We?” Taking the tea, closing his hand around the hot mug and starting on the food immediately.

“Yes. We need to move camp,” Vadim murmured. “I know there’s place east of here. I did some scouting. It’s closer to water.”

“You have to head back.” Dan stated the fact, carefully sipping the tea to wash down his breakfast, studiously avoiding having to move just yet.

“Yes.” Vadim pondered, but knew if he were in Dan’s place, he’d probably not make it. Not fucked up like this. He shook his head. “Oh fuck.” He stood, turned towards the fire. “I’ll take you there. It’s on my way, anyway.”

Dan stopped eating, studied the other. Mug in one hand, food in the other. Even forgot to chew, said nothing. Finally nodded and swallowed the food, stared into his mug. “Cheers.” Could be thanks, could be Slainte. ‘Never give up, never surrender’, was all he allowed himself to think.

Vadim nodded, lips tight. “Ready when you are.”

“Give me a moment.” Or two, or three, until he could force his goddamned body to comply with what his mind wanted it to do. Head sore, arse...whatever, and the leg still hurting like shit. Worst of all the lingering disorientation. Damned concussion. He carefully touched the bruise on his head.

Vadim packed, burnt what trash they had, kicked out the fire, making the cave look as unused as possible, transferring food from his bergan into Dan’s, strapping his canteen to the other’s pack. He’d lost his own, and Dan would need water. Antibiotics, too. He completed Dan’s kit with what he could give and what the other would need, not weighing him down. Dan could always claim he’d fleeced a corpse.

He slung the bergans over his shoulder and headed to the cave entrance. He didn’t want to see how badly Dan was banged up, and didn’t want to watch him suffer. A little dignity. The main reason why he didn’t offer a hand.

Dan watched Vadim until he left, needed all that time to get his damned body into gear, hoped he could trust it, had never failed him even though he’d got close. Once he got going, he’d make it. Yeah. Easy.

Dan started to move onto his knees. All fours, how fucking dignified. He hissed at the movement, could feel the raw flesh of his thigh muscle rub against the bandage, and felt the heat burn inside that wound. No way it wasn’t infected, but

he'd battled worse. Just had to get his arse down to Kabul, or somewhere with a mule, a cart, and a friendly Mudja who'd take him back to base. Kid's play. Sure.

Crawling over to the pile of clothes the other had pulled out of his bergan, Dan checked his spare kit. Tattered trousers, thick cotton socks, t-shirt, shirt, and the worn parka he'd carried strapped to his pack. Would do, had to. Cursing at the stupidly difficult task of putting on his socks, bending over made him nauseous, but the fire in his arse wanted to kindle another flame, one of insane laughter. What the fuck had happened there? The cave, the attack, and the whole thing back to front. It took a ridiculously long time to get into the trousers. Dan chuckled dryly.

He was struggling into the shirt, slow-motion movements of a stranded beetle, while remembering the many times they had met. Enemies, but what the fuck had happened this time? The other man's decency, saving his life, and then fucking his arse just like the rape—yet different. Made no sense, Dan huffed to himself—made all the sense in the world.

Finally getting to his parka, he eyed the boots. Fuck. He could struggle, groan with pain and almost throw up with that dizzy-head feeling, or simply ask for help. He'd rather cut off his own arm, but damn. "Russkie?" So much for arm, pride and sanity.

Vadim had only waited for it—anything. He almost rushed back, feared the other might have fallen, or been unable to move. But he was almost ready to go. Vadim glanced down at the boots. "Ah. Want to see me on my knees, eh?"

"Damn right." Even chuckling hurt Dan's head.

Vadim dropped the bergans, then knelt, took Dan's boot, opened it and offered his shoulder for Dan to steady himself.

"Of course could have done it myself, just..." Struggling to get his foot in, then the next, "... just figured it'd be quicker. Tad dizzy." Dan shrugged, almost lost balance with the one stupidly small movement, "Fucking head, eh?"

"Yes." Vadim began to pull the laces up, thought, unbidden 'slave mentality', and tensed his jaw muscles. Yes. Not just helping a comrade to not trip over his laces. The mountains had very little tolerance for stupidity. He glanced up. "You're ready to go."

He stood and gathered the bergans again. He'd carried Dan up here. Now that Dan could walk by himself, things would be easier. "Grab my shoulder or belt. Belt would be better."

“OK.” Dan refrained from nodding this time, knowing the result would still be disastrous. He’d demanded to get fucked last night, but when standing on his own two feet, he was as wobbly as a toddler. “Damned nuisance.” He took hold of the belt and started to move. Felt like shit, ready to throw up with every step, but he’d just have to do it. “Let’s get cracking.”

Vadim moved slowly, working out a pace that Dan could deal with, and then stuck to it. They crossed the saddle of this mountain, walked in a circle around the Soviet outpost, leaving village, mass grave and Mudja corpses and their cave behind. Just another patrol walk. With double the weight on his shoulders, and a wounded man trailing behind who threatened to unbalance him.

Vadim concentrated, with no strength left to talk or joke, this was hard work, but he needed to get Dan out of the way—far enough that the man had a chance to heal up, gather strength, and fight another day.

It was almost nightfall when Vadim found what he’d been looking for. Another karez system, which meant water, and the ramshackle hut of a long dead goat herder built into the rock. The most sheltered position he could think of.

Vadim checked the hut for booby-traps, but nothing. He dropped Dan’s bergan. “Home sweet home, eh, Dan?”

Dan said nothing, had no strength left, none. He’d been walking on autopilot and whatever reserves his already depleted body had found somewhere; somewhere in that place that separated a mere man from a Special Forces soldier. He nodded and dropped to his knees once inside the hut, sliding to the side until he ended up on the good hip. He was just sitting there, staring at his shaking hands; it took all of his willpower to lift his head. “If you stay...,” even talking was hard work, “...I won’t notice.”

Wasn’t what he wanted to say, but grammar, vocabulary and all the other fancy schmancy shit was far out of his reach. “Just sleep.” One more slow nod, and a smile. Boyish, almost. No smirk, nor grin, just that smile. Purely Dan, and nothing else.

Vadim flashed a smile, too, couldn’t help it. The way Dan blurred the syllables was touching in an odd way. Like Nikolai. Nikolai could fall asleep in his breakfast. His five year old son. Afghanistan just ate the time. The kids grew up without him. Vadim glanced around the hut to think something else.

“I’ll make it.” Dan slid fully onto his side, just dropped there, on the ground, and closed his eyes. “Thanks...to you, Russkie.” He was asleep the next second.

Vadim stood there for a few minutes, jaw muscles tight. He unpacked Dan’s stuff, sorted out blankets for him, and placed him on the makeshift bed, set up wood and matches for a fire, didn’t light it, though, dug out a place where Dan could piss and shit, all in the falling darkness, set up water and food, left him with pills and canteen within reaching distance.

It hurt leaving him behind. Hurt entrusting him to that savage god and his ‘holy warriors’ that thought nothing of skinning Soviet prisoners alive. He set up a simple trap with a piece of wire, hoped anybody stepping in would trip and make noise to give Dan a chance to wake up.

Then he glanced at Dan, crouching beside him for a long time. Dark hair. Didn’t want to wake him, and thus didn’t touch him.

But it was hard to not regret that on the way back, to his people.

1984 Chapter 13—Truth or Dare

October 1984, Scotland

Two months minus four and a half weeks since corpses, cave and survival, and the events that still coursed through Dan's mind, unable to shrug off their memory and forget about the Russian's actions.

He'd made his way back to Kabul after being holed up for days in the shelter the Russkie had taken him to. Staggering across the mountains once he could stand on his own two feet, slowly picking his way along the pass, still dizzy and limping, but, thanks to his enemy, at least fit for survival.

Eventually he'd encountered a friendly Mudja patrol from a tribe he'd had dealings with and whose warlord made sure he was taken down to the lowlands on one of the pack mules.

He'd said he would meet the Russian in two months, and he hadn't been able to leave a message with the tea house owner, before his contacts insisted he get immediate medical care, rudimentary as it was, then bundled him up and flown him straight out of Peshawar and back to the UK.

A week observation in a military hospital near Portsmouth, then two weeks of R&R. 'Relaxation', they'd said. 'Go and rest up'. *Relaxation*, my arse, he'd thought. Fucking unlikely! How to relax without the body of the Russian, hands on his cock, lips, cock cumming in his throat, musk and heat, strength like his own, and losing himself deep within his body.

When he was finally cleared as fit, Dan left London's Kings Cross Station for Scotland, staring out a train window for four and a half hours while alternating cups of bitter coffee with overpriced cans of beer. Feeling like a stranger in a strange land as the English countryside went by; green and entirely too lush. Further up north, the wide open plains of Yorkshire paled into insignificance against the majestic Afghan mountains. Then as they approached the station at York, he briefly wondered if he should get out, get pissed, and try to get laid, but what chance would he have in a small historical tourist town? He hardly remembered where to pick up a whore—since a throat was a throat—, let alone a rent boy. He knew nothing about the gay scene in this country—as little as he knew about what was hidden beneath the women's burkhas back in Kabul.

Newcastle, a thriving Northern English city, endless pubs and bars, enough booze to forget, but fuck it again, Dan stayed on the train, determined to cross the border. He'd given his word to his brother he'd come visit their father whenever he was back in Blighty. The family was waiting: brother, sister-in-law, three nephews. They hardly felt like relations. He'd lost interest in their lives when he'd joined up seventeen years ago. It was easier for all concerned, in case he died, like his mate, John, according to the dog tag his Russkie brought him.

The train passed along what he'd once thought was a magnificent coastline; now everything in Britain seemed small. Too many people, grey skies and grey faces. Grey lives all around him, and his own? Black and white, but never grey.

Getting himself another tiny can of beer in the buffet coach, after he'd pissed out the others, Dan stared at the sea and its equally grey waves, crashing against the Scottish coast. He thought of his brother, Duncan, four years younger and so much better suited to take over the farm, bringing up kids and all the stuff men tended to do in the village. Those were the ones who stayed, the others either found a measly paying labouring job, went down to England for better prospects, or joined the army. Just like him, but he was the only one who'd made it into the Special Forces.

Dan frowned at the drizzle outside, remembering his brother's words and his 'threat' via Bluey military mail: their father had had a second heart attack, seriously ill, and if James Douglas McFadyen died before seeing his oldest son, then whatever little was left of his family would never forgive him nor speak to him again. Him, Daniel Ewan McFadyen, the son his father was so insanely proud of, boasting in the pub for the last fifteen-odd years about his son's exploits around the world, doing heroic deeds in the SAS.

His brother was a good guy, and he'd been taking care of their father's farm and Dan's money, better than he would have. Best he reacted to the 'threat'.

Edinburgh at last. He felt like a tourist as he stepped out of the train at Waverly station. Shouldering his oversized bergan, some of the voices around him sounded familiar with their variety of Scottish accents, but most of them were simply foreign. Listening to a cacophony of languages from all over the world, he thought he caught a snippet of Russian and his head flew around. He grinned wryly to himself, almost a month since he last saw his Russkie and he reacted to a few sounds of Russian like Pavlov's dog to a bell.

Dan made his way up towards Princes Street, looking around, while letting the people pass who were busily going about their lives. Edinburgh, fine, genteel, beautiful Edinburgh, was too fucking perfect. The city felt like a lady, sneering at him, her long discarded piece of rough. The lover she'd thrown back out of the tradesmen entrance, and who was clumsily finding his way into a cold and lonely bed.

Nearly two hours to kill before his next train. Enough time for a few pints in Rose Street. He glanced up at the castle. Should he check if some of his mates were still stationed there? Nah, no point. If they were, they'd be on duty. He'd check again on his way back. Perhaps.

Two hours and several pints later he caught the train to Oban, sufficiently mellow to stay in a half-sleeping state while glancing intermittently out the window at the Highland scenery. He'd thought that once he was back in the glens and mountains with their barren rocks and green covered sweeps, he'd feel at home, but he was wrong. Even these paled in comparison to the magnificence of mountains, dust, rocks and tank-flattened villages and that endless sky, merciless sun and murderous cold of Afghanistan.

He'd been there four years; four years too long.

Once he arrived at the station, he phoned his brother and was picked up in a battered Landrover.

'Relax', they'd said, and Dan tried his best. Sitting at his family's heavy wooden kitchen table, he felt taken back into a time and a 3D moving picture in which he simply no longer belonged. Perhaps never had, come to think of it, maybe that's why he couldn't wait to leave and join the army.

Soldier. 'Be All You Can' and all that shit. And that's what he was now, no way back, and he didn't want to. SSgt Dan McFadyen, SAS.

His father looked frail, nothing like the tall, strong man he remembered from the last photograph taken little more than a year ago. Hair still dark, barely grey, but eyes dimmed. The broad back, that once belonged to a proud Highlander, now bent with disease. No longer fit to work on the farm, the deed had been written over to Duncan. He still heartily clapped Dan's shoulder, then sat opposite, urging him to spin tall tales of his exploits. Slamming his fist onto the table with roaring laughter, calling both his sons 'his bairns' and cursing them for 'silly fools',

while the kids played outside and Duncan's wife, Mhairi, prepared the evening meal.

Two months minus two weeks. Scottish food, home-cooked meals, stodgy and rich. Time for Dan's leg to heal, the bruise on his head to vanish, and his body to return to well-nourished strength. Yet his memories never faded.

Mountains, over and over again; heat and freezing cold, endless skies and sheltering caves. Blood, pain and an all-surpassing lust for one man settled so deeply into his bones, the need had become part of him. Bottomless, like the touch he craved. Vadim.

Only relaxing when he could finally walk without pain, hiking up the hills and mountains on his own, looking over the Scottish Highlands. Sitting or walking for hours on end. Watching. Thinking. Smoking cigarettes and following the smoke with his gaze as tendrils curled up into the cloud-torn sky. Scotland, his home—once upon a time.

His brother squared his accounts and explained about the investments, interest, payments, rent and bills, and most of all the properties he'd bought on his behalf, all bringing in money, slowly but steadily. Dan didn't care about his finances, as long as he had enough. What did he need back in Kabul? It was hardly the place to march into the nearest bank, get out a few quid and storm off to the next pub. He was glad his brother dealt with it all. Happy to pay him a percentage for his troubles. Surprised when he checked the sum below the line. Where had all that money come from? What to do with it one day? The day he dreaded thinking about: retirement after twenty-two years of service. He had five more to go, he'd worry about the abyss when he stepped over the edge.

Two months minus ten days, and Dan knew when he left his family's farm that he'd never see his father again. Yet he hardly felt anything. He hadn't mourned much when his mother died, shortly before he joined up, couldn't grieve now, he'd seen too much death and decay. Death had lost its meaning.

The way back down to England was just as unspectacular. Stopping over in Edinburgh, he remembered to check in with his old mates, still stationed up on the rock, spending the evening in the Sergeants' Mess in the castle's compound. Drinking pints with Infantry blokes, swapping more of those tall tales of danger and escape within a hair's breadth. Boozing while settled on the proverbial sand bags, pissed, raucous and larger than life. All of them. Real lads, just like him,

envious of his SAS job. None of them knew that Dan couldn't help but notice tight arses in black trousers and broad chests beneath polo shirts.

Finding himself down South the next day, with pounding head and fragile stomach, Dan stepped through the gate of the military camp that would take him back to his job when his hangover had receded. Ready for the usual round of briefings the following day, before flying him out in a Herc.

Two months minus one week, and Dan was finally back in a troop carrier. Ear plugs kept the worst of the deafening noise away, yelling at comrades above the pandemonium of engine and air, pissing into a sand filled bucket, spending the final hours curled up beside his bergan, on top of the sleeping bag.

Conked out despite the hellish noise, being carried back into a wilderness that was so goddamned familiar. The closest thing to his notion of home, if 'home' was mountains, heat and cold, skies above an endless expanse of nothing. Unkempt bands of goat-fuckers, flea infested caves, guts, fear and danger, and the familiar mosaics in an unexpected oasis. Shade, green, over-sweetened tea and sticky pastries, in the very centre of Kabul. Afghanistan, his fate, his life, and probably his death. Afghanistan — and Vadim, his Russian.

Two months minus three days, and Dan's first action after checking in with his contacts was to leave a message for Vadim with the *chaikhana* owner, who welcomed back like a long-lost friend; a friend with money and practical gifts from lands in the West. The search for a safe house had become easy. After four years, he knew Kabul better than his village up in the Highlands. Sleep, food, re-acquaintance with waning heat that was turning into autumn, and dust. Always dust in the lowlands. No matter whether hot or cold.

Two months, almost to the day, and Dan sat in the shade on one of the tattered cushions, sipping strong tea, stuffing himself with honeyed nuts and pastry, while watching the tea house patrons come and go. Face partly hidden beneath a rag, sporting the same light colour as his native clothing. Sandals, long, loose coat, and the Western clothes beneath. It was safer to stay native for the time being, even though his contacts had reassured him there would be no repercussion for being the only survivor of the massacre two months ago.

Two months, and he was sitting, waiting. Waiting and hoping.

October 1984, Afghanistan

Vadim's only way of dealing with the nervous tension was to exhaust himself. That meant gathering favours with the other officers, getting things done, in essence volunteering for all kinds of work that they couldn't be bothered to do.

Pulling shift after shift, working like a madman, he hardly managed to squeeze in the time to answer any letters. It was difficult to pretend. Yes, darling, I'm missing you, too. He wondered whether Katya ever actually meant it when she wrote about it. Their letters were genteel, well-written affairs, with the tenderness understated—at least if he compared them with the raucous missives other married men received, or sometimes wrote—but she made sure to include allusions to her 'cold bed' and 'missing him' in every one of them. Just to ensure that whoever read them thought their married life included sex.

Katya, in her strange way, did her duty, but he missed her like a sister, while every other thought focused on Dan. Dan, beaten up, Dan glancing at him over a steaming mug of tea, before flashing a grin, Dan, naked, checking on him over his shoulder.

Work helped. He dreaded the moment when anybody would mention they'd found a western mercenary, or see Dan's kit show up on the barrack's black market. Dreaded Dan had been found and interrogated, and used as barter against the Brits. A scandal: British soldier in a war that was the Soviet Union's internal affair. Of course they were involved, but the Soviets were still keen to be able to prove it—to play the game of finger-pointing and political blackmail, use Dan to make a point in diplomatic circles. But they'd first need a confession and then verify whatever Dan gave them.

Vadim couldn't stand the thought of Dan beaten up, chained to a chair and interrogated. He'd have to commit suicide if their relationship ever came to light—he wouldn't survive either way, Vadim was determined never to give them that much power. Suicide was the only act of treason they'd ever be able to prove. Removing himself from the army of faceless henchmen his one act of defiance. If only things could have worked out with Richard...but he was no fool. No true option. No real choice. The puppet could only sever the strings and refuse to walk, not walk of its own free will. His thoughts remained dark, and he showed his

brooding and reserved face for weeks, which turned into months. Paperwork. Exercises. Inspections. Working out.

His last few thoughts, alone in bed each night, were of Dan's smell and Dan beneath him, and how Dan sounded when he came. Sometimes he lacked the energy to jerk off, just remembered, pulling those thoughts up like a different kind of blanket.

He kept up the habit of checking the *chaikhana*. One day, two months later, Dan was there. Vadim fought hard to keep his face a mask of disinterest, and was pretty sure he fooled nobody—he wondered what the tea house owner thought of them, why they met and why they left after a few brief words. It was clearly not about the conversation.

* * *

The shade was comfortable, and yet the age old game of patience was starting to turn stale when Dan looked up and stilled. A slow smile spread across his partially-hidden face as he made a negligent gesture towards the cushions in front of him.

The eyes smiled, no, the whole man smiled at him. Seeing Dan alive and smiling. Vadim felt an odd tightness in his chest that didn't belong there, similar to the worry and fear. He nodded a greeting and grinned back, approaching as if to a friend. Wanted to take both his hands and shake them, press the other into a hug, kiss his cheeks, the whole thing, but held back. They weren't friends, but he was so glad to see Dan alive.

"Long time no see, Russkie." Dan said in Russian, while one of the waiters was approaching. Whatever the tea house owner thought, he was getting a good deal out of all of this.

"Oh yes." Vadim sat down, glanced at the waiter and leaned forward, studying Dan. "You look," good, "rested."

"Aye," Dan grinned even wider, part of his lips shaded by the rag, "they told me to 'relax'. Not an easy feat without the proper means to 'relax'." Suggestive, flashed his teeth, nodded at the waiter to bring more tea and baklava.

Vadim inhaled. Why did everything Dan ever said go straight to his cock? "So. How did you...fare?"

“They shipped me off straight away, couldn’t leave a message.” For two months he’d felt guilty. “Got the whole hog: hospital, observation, then family. Home-cooked food, exercise, sleep.” Tilting his head in his peculiar way, looking Vadim up and down, “in short, bored to fucking death.”

“But at least it was proper food.” Vadim leaned back, trying to find the calm place, the relaxed place, get out of this need, this craving, this wanting, this missing thing. Trying to find something that was cool and relaxed banter, something better than: ‘fuck, I missed you,’ better than ‘I knew you couldn’t be dead,’ something that would save face. “Hope you’re healed alright?”

“Fully healed. De-wormed, de-loused, de-nitted.” Dan smirked, “must have had more poison inside and out than the average grunt during a gas attack.”

Vadim gave a dry laugh and shook his head.

The waiter brought the tea and a fresh plate, setting it down at a nod from Dan, who took one of the glasses, and handed it to Vadim without thinking. “Got poked and prodded, fingers down my neck, up my arse, needles stuck in my flesh, blood sucked out, and x-rayed to hell and back. In short, I’m as fit as a fiddle.”

“Good.” Vadim took the tea glass and didn’t want to look away—he had long since stopped watching for a suspicious motion towards weapons. Glad Dan was here, alive, and looking as healthy and rested as he did—underneath the native rags. “I...just worked. Nothing...exciting.”

Leaning forward, Dan slipped a piece of baklava between his lips, chewing the honey sweet concoction of greasy pastry and nuts with obvious delight. “No more genocide for the last two months, I reckon.” Odd how such a word could be used in light-hearted banter, but he was reckless enough for anything.

Vadim shook his head. “Nothing different for me.” Drive the Pashtuns from their villages, hundreds and thousands of refugees. If one ethnic group refused to yield or cooperate, get rid of it. Even if they were the majority in this country. Just as insane a plan as anything Stalin had cooked up.

“Which brings me to something else.” Dan relaxed once more, leaning back and taking the fresh tea for a sip of the hot, strong liquid. “I’ve been thinking.” He pushed a corner of the rag away that had been partly obscuring his lips. Lips curved into a small grin. “I want to know if you can do anything other than what you did.” Leaning forward close enough to talk quietly, in Russian, Vadim leaning forward as well.

“What I did?”

“I want to know if you can do anything but rape men,” Dan’s hand slashing the air diagonally, “stroke, *me*.” Dark eyes betraying an odd glint. “So, can you? Can you fuck men without going into raping mode? Or, rather, should I ask, can you fuck *me* without raping me?”

Dan leaned back against the wall, slouched on his cushions, watching Vadim with undisguised curiosity tinged with cynical amusement.

Can I? Vadim tightened his lips, felt strangely challenged and accused, in broad daylight. Platon. Hardly any force. No, no true force. Platon hadn’t had much of a choice, but rape? Rape was the wrong word. Coercion? Dan had triggered it, deliberately...well, as deliberate as a wounded, shell-shocked man could...he’d tried to go slowly, gently, fuck, had tried hard to make Dan enjoy it. “I...am not sure.”

“That’s why I want you to do it again. Because after last time, I’m inclined to go back on my word, but I want to *know*. Get me?”

Vadim was numb with surprise, but nodded. He dreaded another loss of control, and wanted nothing more. Felt strange whenever he thought of last time, like he’d taken advantage of a wounded man, which was partially true. Not guilt, just uneasiness. He had decided to keep that thing, fucking Dan, shackled in the back of his mind, a fantasy, and nothing else. “What if it goes wrong again?”

Crossing his arms, Dan pulled his legs up, knees bent under the robe, resting. “Well, if I figure you can’t do it,” didn’t repeat the word, not from the distance, “then it’s back to square one and trust me, Russkie, I *will* kill you...” He lowered his voice to barely audible, designed for the other man to only just hear him, “if you tried again after that.”

A challenge and a threat. Could he? Could he control himself enough? Control that dark flood, the rising waters? Impossible odds. Wanted Dan, needed Dan, even wanted him wounded, hurting, struggling to throw him off, but also wanted him wanting. The paradox could only be explained by accepting that he wanted Dan in whatever state, whatever way, whatever opportunity. “Do you have a room?”

Dan smiled with the self-confidence of someone who’d known the odds. “Of course.” He pushed another piece of baklava between his lips, talking while chewing. “How long do you have?” Added, before washing the honeyed pastry

down with the rest of the tea. “Been a while.” As if that explained anything, and yet it did. All of it.

Vadim felt lust rise to the surface, moving with all the purpose of a glacier. “To curfew.” Six hours. He just couldn’t resist the offer, would never be able to. Back to their games, stakes rising. It had got so much more complicated since the beginning. Too many thoughts, dangers of a different kind these days.

“Remember the hotel? Got a similar one, close by, top floor. Two streets parallel and to the east. Doesn’t have a sign on the door.”

“I do.” Vadim remembered his tea and took a sip, but he didn’t feel hungry, his stomach a knot of tension.

Dan licked his fingers, glanced carefully around before nodding. “I’ll meet you at the old hotel, aye? Will guide you to the new place. Safer than you’d ever think you could be, in the centre of Kabul. No one asks questions, no one cares.”

“I’ll be there, waiting.” Shit, that had come out wrong. Vadim stood. He should move before too many people saw what sitting near that man did to his body. He’d have enough time to calm down. “Finish your food.” He made it sound generous, mocking, when all he wanted was to rip the clothes off Dan’s body right there and then.

“Cheers, Russkie, I’ll hurry.” The grin that was growing on Dan’s face left no question as to what he thought about the generosity.

Steadily working his way through the sweets, Dan watched Vadim leave. He tried to take his time but failed miserably. Eating faster and faster. Chewing the baklava still in his mouth, as usual, he left twice as much money on the plate, to keep the owner’s discretion going; then went on his way.

True to Vadim’s word, Dan saw the tall, broad figure standing close to their erstwhile hotel. With a barely perceptible nod, he turned a corner, expecting the other man to follow. No more than five minutes later, they entered a dark alley.

Vadim debated with himself all the way. What would Dan smell and taste like? What would happen if he failed? He was relieved and nervous when he reached the place, heading upstairs in Dan’s wake. He couldn’t help the thoughts, and wondering about the man’s recklessness. Why did Dan want this? Was it some kind of game? But what a strange stake. Allowing him to fuck him again to prove a point. What was the reason, the gain? He doubted Dan had taken much pleasure the last time. And before that, no. Then why?

Dan unlocked the door and pushed it open. Similar room to the one before, but the bed was bigger. Grimy, tattered, dirty, with a ceiling fan that was lazily making its rounds, chopping the air to give a semblance of a breeze on a still-hot autumn day. “Here we go.”

Dan stepped inside and out of the way, making space. Waiting until they were both in the room, then locked the door and pushed a nearby chair in front of it. At least it would make a noise to warn them.

Vadim smirked. Exactly what he would have done.

“Water seems to work as well. Luxury, eh?”

“Yes, Soviet engineers have repaired some damage. I read report.” To keep the population happy. To show it wasn’t all bad. To curry favours, as usual.

Sitting down on the bed, Dan started to unwind the rag from his head, and shook his hair. Not nearly as long as it had been, but cut into shape. No vermin, no grease, dark and thick, it looked well-cared for. Vadim was curious what it would feel like. Smell like.

Vadim realised he was too dressed and pulled the rag free, rubbing the burn scar under his throat with an odd reluctance. Wanted Dan, wanted to gain time by washing, nervous almost about getting naked and entering into that strange competition, taking the challenge. He opened his vest, belt, pulled off the shirt, placed them near the bed.

“Do you know that British saying ‘curiosity killed the cat?’” Dan flashed a grin at Vadim.

“Yes.” Vadim paused. Cat. Tiger. Who was calling the shots? Was Darren right? Dan had set down the rules, despite him being the one who would get fucked. Then why had he never put down any rules when he was getting fucked? Just allowed himself to be washed away? No control, certainly not over Dan when he fucked him. “Won’t be that bad.” I promise. I won’t hurt you this time. “What was it again? Three time’s charm?”

Dan’s eyebrows had risen, *won’t be that bad*, he couldn’t recall everything since he’d woken from being wounded and shell-shocked, but he sure as hell remembered that promise. Hadn’t forgotten either how he hadn’t been able to bear the care, the lack of speed. How he had remembered, but couldn’t stand remembering.

“Charm?” Dan suddenly laughed, fell onto his side to reach under the bed. “You’re one charming bastard.”

“First one ever to call me that. Even in joke.” True. Charm was one of the things he was decidedly lacking. Not quite what he’d been getting at, but Vadim was in no mood to argue the point.

Dan dragged his bergan from under the bed and pushed himself back up. He opened the flap, undid the cords, and pulled out a white plastic carry bag, a strange sight in the dusty and dim surroundings. He dropped the full bag in front of Vadim. The colourful writing announced the name of the supermarket, its gaudiness obscene in this place.

“Here. I depleted your stocks. Fair’s fair.” Dan added with a grin, “you won’t even lie if you claim it’s from a turkey.”

Vadim reached for it, reluctantly, didn’t like presents. They made him feel strange, especially now. Stupid. They’d given each other more than this. Food, water, care. Sex. Of course, sex above all else.

He sat down to check the contents. A glass bottle of Balvenie ‘single malt’ whisky, half a litre, a pile of bandages—good stuff, looked sterile and new. Dima would love those. Packs of pills, generic antibiotics and penicillin, then sprays and creams that were antiseptic, another small pile of plasters.

Vadim took the bottle of whisky and put it down on the floor, right next to the bed, then checked the rest. A bumper pack of peanut butter energy bars. He gave a dry laugh and shook his head at Dan. “I’ll never get to eat different flavour from this, eh?”

“Nope,” Dan grinned, “that’s because you’re such a weird-ass who likes that creepy flavour.”

Two tins of chocolate, Assam black tea, and dextrose tablets. Vadim went carefully through this small fortune in barter and survival, then returned everything to the bag. They were gifts and showed much more care than he’d anticipated. He was too self-conscious again to say much, too aware what it meant, and struggled with the words. “Very...useful.”

“Aye,” Dan lifted his arse off the bed so he could pull up the long native gown, “figured it was only fair. You’re not particularly flush on useful stuff.” He started to struggle out of the garment, but stopped halfway with it over his head.

“Besides, you bought me food and left me dollars, when I got caught out with nothing. Surviving would have been real shit without your help.”

All Vadim could see of Dan were olive green clad legs in faded BDUs, bare feet, and glimpses of a t-shirt, its cotton worn thin. He barely resisted touching him, or kissing him, or both, and put the bag down on the floor. “Yes, only fair.” He shook his head. “Fair play, eh? Very British thing, that’s what my teachers said.” He bent down to untie his laces and pull off his boots, distracted by the sight.

“Guess it is damn British.” Dan wriggled out of the garment, the t-shirt coming off at the same time, discarded both on the floor beside the bed and lay back in just the trousers. Chest bare, slightly beefier than before, yet despite the muscles and strength, his body always remained on the lean side, increasingly so with every year. Hand on his fly, he looked up and stalled suddenly. His gaze intent.

“As I said, Russkie, I’ve had time to think.” Popping a couple of buttons on his fly, the shadow of dark curls becoming visible, “why the fuck are you so desperate to fuck me? It’s good stuff, when I fuck you, but with you...it’s somehow different. It’s more than that. It’s something that eats you up.”

Vadim’s eyes were on what was being bared, slowly, not fast enough, tantalizing. Cock, hair, the skin contrasting the BDUs. He found it hard to look up and meet the gaze, because the hand there transfixed him. “What...do you mean?”

“I mean that fixation of yours. You got me, overcame me, raped me.” Dan shrugged as if it meant nothing. “That’s past.” Was it? Didn’t matter. “That’s four years ago. I still don’t understand, though, what’s going on in your head when it comes to fucking my arse.” He lifted his hips off the bed, pushed the trousers down. Almost baring his cock, half-hidden beneath fabric. “You’re fixated. Why. Why is fucking me such a big deal for you. Fucking me with your *cock*, that is.”

Vadim stared at Dan’s body, aroused just from looking, from it being there, and being so strong. Why? He’d never thought it was strange or wrong or unusual. He took the BDUs with a hand and pulled them down the rest of the way and off Dan’s feet. “Nothing else...no, wrong. Because I want to have you, completely. Your strength. Your...pain. Every motion of your body. Everything.”

“What?” Dan shook his head as if he hadn’t heard correctly, too taken aback at the answer and what it could possibly mean.

Vadim swallowed dryly. “Would you not fuck me if...I didn’t like it?”

“No.” Dan looked up, eyes widened. Surprised at his own answer. Had he been too indoctrinated by shagging girls for the first thirty-one years of his life? “Don’t think I would.” He shrugged, frowning, “at least not like that. Would try to fix it. Make you like it. Can’t bloody expect to continue fucking around with the same person if I keep doing shit that they don’t like, right? That’s bollocks. Nobody’s that fucking stupid.”

Naked, without a shred of self-consciousness, Dan lay back, one hand across his taut stomach. The other pulling the grubby pillow under his head. “And what the hell does having me completely mean. Sounds like a cannibal. What’s complete? My body? Me?”

“Yes.” Vadim answered. Both answers were good. As if there was a difference between the man and the body. He knew only too well that having the body meant having it all. There was nothing else. A body could be forced...coerced...and tricked into yielding any response. All it took was control over the flesh. The mind was nothing but chemical and neuronal responses to outside stimuli. “All. All there is.”

Dan shook his head again, slowly this time. “When you have me, what then? And what is it that you have when you have me? What difference does a cock in my arse make to a fist? To tongue and fingers inside my body and your cock down my throat?”

“It’s stronger.” I can feel you break. I can feel you yield. Not just one muscle, but your whole body. Your mind. And I can lose myself. Fuck. That was what Darren had said. He didn’t actually want control. Did he? “Pure poison, not adulterated stuff. Having you is like...owning you.” Shit. Too much truth there.

“Owning me?” Frowning, Dan’s face darkened, then let one leg, bent, fall to the side, opening. “Why the fuck do you want to own me?”

You’re lying there like that and still ask, thought Vadim, staring. Groin, ass, legs. The scar from the thigh wound still fresh, but well healed. Owning. One of his favourite fantasies. Dan as his prisoner, completely at his mercy. His to fuck, his to punish, his to touch and kiss and do whatever he pleased. Still strong, and resisting him at every turn. Strong and clever enough to turn the tables, take him instead, just as uncompromising and brutal as he had been treated. Somehow, that was just as good. Slave material. No. He couldn’t even think that without being disgusted and appalled, and worse—aroused. Fuck. Dan, of all people, prodded his

mind into regions that he didn't want to explore. Not like this. Not now. Not when his face could give too much away. He shook his head. Needed focus to remember. Owing. Why.

“So I can keep you,” Vadim murmured. “So it doesn't end.”

“It won't.” Dan answered, firmly. “Why should it?” Letting his eyes move slowly down the other's body and back up. “Not as long as there is Afghanistan, the war, and our bodies aren't rotting anywhere yet.”

“Two of those aren't going to last forever.”

Dan shrugged, gestured onto the bed, “right now, we seem to be pretty much alive and there's Vaseline in my bergan.”

Vadim was glad to be able to push the thoughts away and concentrate on the sex. On something he did want, was more than ready for. And still strangely reluctant. Too aware of the cost, the stakes. Too aware of knife and pistol, but those were part of what they did. Blowjob at knifepoint. Rape with a pistol to the back of the neck. Cutting his back open in revenge. He leaned over to pull the bergan closer and dug around to find the tub, then placed it on the bed and stood again to pull down his BDUs, removing the rest of his uniform. Apart from the watch. The usual.

He stood there for a moment, in the reddening light of the afternoon, what little found its way through the shutters, tensed his body, looked down at Dan, who was watching him intently. Pretend, maybe, that there was more to it. What if?

Did he have any words for the thing they shared? He couldn't define or measure it. Only knew he didn't want it to end. Climax set them free, it meant Dan could leave, and that he himself could leave, of course, part ways like tigers after the mating. No other way. Not meant to be.

Dan let his leg slide down, both parallel, still open. Vadim climbed onto the bed, on hands and knees above him, dipped down to take his cock between his lips, while his hand reached for the Vaseline, opened the tub while awakening Dan's interest.

“Damn.” Dan murmured. First touch, sensation of lips on sensitive skin, tightness and wet heat, right *there*, reducing him to nonsensical sounds within seconds. “Two months...too fucking long.” Lifting his hips towards that mouth, he was fully hard within a few heartbeats. “No whores.” He could never get enough of

watching how his cock vanished between those lips, sucked in, cheeks hollowed, jaw muscles working, strong, moving, neck and fist.

Vadim glanced at him with a touch of irony. He couldn't imagine Dan with women, didn't want to. Thinking about how to make him come, as his fingers dipped into the tub to gather some of the thick grease and warm it in his palm. But while that would relax, the aim was to get him ready to be fucked. His hand moved between Dan's legs, shoulders low, brushing his thighs, while his mouth worked on Dan's cock, liking the tension that built, and the warmth, the silky feeling. He allowed the cock to slip almost out, then sucked it back in, harsh, with strength, and breached the muscle with two slick fingers, causing Dan to hiss out, "Shit!" hips lifting on their own, towards the throat, and without meaning to, further down onto the fingers.

Giving Dan a wink, Vadim kept his lips tight as he pulled away, resisting it as the cock slipped out. "Been two months for me, too. Not very patient."

"No." Breathless, Dan lifted his head even higher, neck muscles tense and abs creating a hardened pattern. "Neither am I. So, get fucking." His shoulders moved, intending to turn around, wouldn't do this on his back.

Vadim allowed Dan to turn, preferring that position as well. Greased hand slowly pumped his own cock, going slow enough to keep the lust simmering, he forced himself to hold back, just for a few moments longer. He'd have Dan on his stomach or on his knees, despite the distinct possibility of ruining and breaking it, wasting the other's...generosity. Or game.

Dan turned to lie on his front—all fours and doggie style was what Vadim did, but not him. Not ever. Arms bent, face resting on his hands, no, on his already clenched fists. Why the hell did he plan this? The logic had all made sense back in Scotland, sitting on top of Ben Nevis staring into the distance. He wasn't so sure about the logic right now, but he said nothing, just spread his legs.

Penetration? Why the hell would anyone want to have anything shoved up their arse, but...fuck. He remembered another life, each and every of his usually drunk attempts to get his birds to take it up the shitter. Had been obsessed with their sphincters, breaching, taking, tight and virginal, and owning and wanting and...possessing.

Vadim ran fingers between Dan's shoulder blades, tracing the spine under the muscles, down towards his ass. Rounded, powerful, some dark hair, exactly

what he hadn't seen the first time. If it became anything like the first time, it was the last time. Just don't fucking ruin it.

He searched for the knife. There, on the ground. This time, most likely, it wouldn't be needed. They were beyond that kind of security, so why was he feeling nervous about it? He lay down on top of Dan, kissed his back, rubbed his forehead against the tense muscles, while working more grease in, listening for any signs of panic or discomfort.

Dan tensed even more. That kissing...was strange. Faint recollection of what he'd tried to do with his girls. Soothing, talking, to get what he wanted. He murmured, "If you start telling me I'm beautiful, I'm special and 'the one', then say you'll leave your phone number so you can see me again, I'll fucking kill you after all."

"No. None of that." Vadim slowly moved, to spread the cheeks further apart and press in. Slowly. Shit. Too slow for his taste, too slow for what he really needed. He felt sweat on his temples, as he inched inside, every muscle in his body coiled to control the hunger.

Dan didn't like it. That 'thing' was an invasion that didn't—shouldn't feel good. Filled, spread, strange sensation of needing a dump but he pushed back. Stopped. Stilled. Waited, then tensed. It had been easier for a moment, but fuck, he was far too sober. No booze, nothing. Just a grimy bed in a shitty hotel-cum-secret-brothel in fucked-up Kabul. Fists clenched, but heck, he'd had worse, and he'd given his word, would feel this, test it, whatever, not sure why and didn't matter just that *thing* and the man, the weight and heat, and a desperately controlled tension emanating from the body on top. Inside.

He was rapidly getting soft, but fuck, he'd do it. And he'd cum with a whole fist up his goddamned arse?

"But I need you," murmured Vadim, not knowing where that came from. Maybe from the tension and revulsion he sensed in the other. The fight. But there was nothing to fight against. No anger, no rape, no nothing. Just that kind of uneasy, barely controlled lust. "Always fucking need you," Vadim breathed, pushing further in, could feel no softness, no yielding, saw the fists on the mattress.

"I know." And Dan did. Four years of pain, hatred, lust, mercy, greed, and decency. Fuck, he'd even been walking through the aisle of a fucking supermarket

in fucking Britain while thinking of the bastard, fucking *shopping* for him and yet...couldn't. Didn't want that cock inside his arse.

No. Dan wouldn't yield. He didn't want this, was prepared to just suffer through it, nothing but an exercise in willpower and endurance. Vadim would have preferred real torture. At least, no mixed signals there. Not a man spread out under him like the most stoic victim he'd ever had.

Dan buried his face in the grubby blanket, right between his fists, pushed his hips up, moving his arse towards that cock. Fuck, if he was going to do this, he'd get it done and over with in a proper way. He wasn't a simpering bimbo who laid back and thought of England, he was Special Forces, and if he got his arse fucked, he'd do it SAS style. Discomfort, dislike or not. Breathing out, he pushed again, this time harder. He wouldn't just take that cock like a passive victim, he'd do something with it at least.

'Never give up, never surrender' took on an entirely new meaning.

Vadim bit back a groan when Dan suddenly moved, moved as if demanding. Stopping was no option anymore, the strange queasiness left him as he concentrated on the feeling. Dan almost fucking himself against his cock, maybe trying to speed it up, but without asking for it, just did. Strength, and power, and Dan giving him a rhythm, which forced groans out. All he did was fall into the rhythm, moving against Dan's motions, slowly, but with a measure of force. He began to sweat, feeling the pressure build, wanting. He shifted his weight back to allow Dan more freedom to move, to go slowly, controlled. Thought for those moments, maybe that the man liked it, wanted him, and he bit into his shoulders, murmuring nonsense in Russian, kneading the tense shoulder, kissing and biting the neck, feeling the heat rise, his body gleaming with sweat.

"Ah, shit." Dan's voice muffled from the bedclothes. That bite, right there, fuck, that was...different. He lifted his head, twisted his neck back to glance into Vadim's face, lips. Wanted teeth, again. There.

Something changed, shifted. Not a mountain of epiphanies, no sudden switch to see stars, not even a re-found lust that had been hiding somewhere, but the sensations definitely changed. Still feeling, stretched, filled, but the discomfort was gone. As if his arse had finally accepted that cock. Another bite, his Russkie seemed to be getting the message. Dan hissed, drawing air into his lungs from between his teeth. Good, more.

“Shit, shit, shit.” Dan caught his breath, forgot to notice the cock, just the teeth and hands, body heat and weight and the strength that was behind every movement—matching his own. He pushed himself up on his fists, arching his back, head close to his neck. Muscles coiling-rolling between shoulder blades down his back. Tensing. Clenching.

Vadim groaned into the muscle trapped between his teeth, lips pulled back while biting on the flesh. Dan’s sounds and motions were better now, responsive, the way he lifted from the bed as if to get closer, greeting him right there, in all the places that mattered, and the bared throat especially. His hand came up to touch the throat, to pull him back further, to feel the ragged breath, the pounding pulse. He bit again further up into the side of his neck and provoked a growl, while his body kept on pumping. Concentrating on Dan more than on any need to come, more on biting than pushing, which was good, great even, free hand moving around to take hold of Dan’s cock.

Friction suddenly. Dan felt his cock taken, stroked, he was hardening, but not fully hard. Took the bites, though, and relished the abandon. Shuddered, swallowed, that hand on his throat pulled his head further back and created pressure. Pushed into the hand and at same time backwards, arching between body—groin and hand—force. “More.” Rough voice, demanding. Pressed his throat against the hand again, pushed himself up, almost slid onto his knees.

Vadim tightened the grip on Dan’s throat, on instinct. That was what Dan wanted. He moved the fingers up to press into jugular and against the throat, knowing too well where he could put pressure and where it was too dangerous. Knew all about killing, about what the body did when there was a lack of oxygen. “Sick...bastard,” he breathed, groaning with every thrust now, into increased resistance, Dan’s strength did half the work for him. He could feel Dan was still not quite into it, but strangely it didn’t make much difference—not compared to what he felt. Wanting. Needing. Possessing. Getting close.

Dan didn’t comment, just a strangled groan, felt pressure, danger. Body went into fight mode, attack, defence and kill. His body tensed, moved faster, harder. Pressure building inside his head and chest. Like climbing those goddamned mountains and struggling in the thin air. Brutalised himself on the other’s cock, but it wasn’t about that ‘thing’ anymore, the intrusion hardly registered. It was simply about being. Forgetting. Fight and fuck. He was getting

hard, not enough, but damn, that struggle for air made his body buck and thrash wildly, turning his mind blank.

Vadim thrust harder, and harder still, unleashing the force slowly, but with no regret, no compassion. Dan could take it now, had taken the decisive step, like in the cave when he'd barely been himself. With a few more thrusts, he came, and just managed to avoid collapsing on top of him, instead he stayed inside and pulled Dan back up, into a kneeling position against him, one hand stroking that bared throat, the other slipping away from his cock, running up Dan's stomach to his chest while he fought to regain his breath, panting near Dan's ear.

Dan's breath was as ragged as the gusts in his ear, eyes open, unseeing. Hands, body, cock, heat, all rolled into one assault of sensations. Pulled his head back, coughed, moving his body and throat snake-like back into the hand. Sitting on his heels until his back touched Vadim's chest, sweat on sweat, skin touching, still connected. There. In that point. That...sensation. Pushing Vadim's hand from his chest back down to his cock. Dan's voice rough from the choking. "Jerk me off."

"Aye," murmured Vadim, grinning like a fool, Dan demanding in this situation was just too precious. His right hand slipped down, remembering how Dan liked to touch himself from so long ago when he'd seen his technique up close and personal. Took hold of his cock, felt it twitch when he bit into the neck again. Interesting. Left hand was still against his throat, to keep him under control, keep him upright, just perfect, their bodies close and tight, hot, sweating, and one. Nothing could be better.

Harsh breathing, lips parted, Dan's eyes almost closed. A hissed breath caught in his throat at another bite, expelled, then drawn back into his lungs. He shuddered, felt more passive than only a few moments ago. Held between body and hands, and fuck, he couldn't move away, even if he had any brain left to try. Chained to the spot, with nothing but skin, teeth, touch.

Vadim was stroking him, with strength, but still slow, enjoying Dan too much like this, at the same time placing small bites on shoulder muscles and throat, especially the side with the jugular, tight and smooth and powerful, Dan's hair brushing his face. "Now...right now you're mine."

Words didn't make much sense, all Dan could hear was *mine* and *you* and *fuck* and *lust* and *want* and *mine* again. Body, mine. Yours. Whatever. Lust, ours,

each. Growing, increasing. Covered in a sheen of sweat, heat between their bodies culminating in that one connection. Burning, intense, no longer a softening cock that had filled his arse, but an extension of the man whose hands and mouth were making him whimper like a pathetic, helpless creature.

If I could only touch that sound, that low, needy sound, thought Vadim, and stroked Dan's throat, wanting to feel as much of him as possible, felt that throat move and vibrate under his hand, especially as he gripped him harder there, moving up to the jaw bone, feeling the Adam's apple jump under his palm when Dan swallowed. He wanted to keep him like that, put something around his throat, something like chains or rope, and going faster, stronger, pushing him on, feeling generous as he did, and couldn't wait to feel Dan come.

Took longer than it should, not as fast and desperate as expected with two months of nothing but Dan's own hand, but the orchestra of sensations proved an over-stimulation. The hand, more force. Closing around his throat once more, the other stroked harder, faster. Pressure building, and the intensity made him groan between the whimpers and sounds of need. Unseeing, unknowing, nothing but body, no mind. Seeking both hands, body struggling-fighting backwards, against the unwavering chest, and he cried out, spasming, thrashing, coming. Noticing nothing more than that hand closing around his throat, choking him fiercely, for just one moment, that very moment of orgasm.

Vadim reluctantly released Dan's throat, remembering to leave no traces, no marks beyond a slight reddening. Professional courtesy, if nothing else. That thought made him smile. Hand was safer than a garrotte. He licked a drop of sweat from Dan's skin that was running down from his temple as he kept him close against him, and wiped his hand against his thigh, then ran the fingers down Dan's flank. Not daring to speak, not daring to let him go. Not just yet.

Coughing, drawing in breath, Dan collapsed, resting against Vadim. His eyes were closed, unheard of. Too dangerous to let go and blind himself, but not now. Trusting the Russkie with his body, his life. Kneeling. Returning. His slow-moving mind, sluggishly dragging itself back up to the waking surface.

"Guess I won't have to kill you, after all." Voice raspy, dry. Could do with water or something stronger.

Vadim gave a toneless laugh. "Damn, and I thought you keep me alive because I'm so tight." He wanted to hold him like that, but as the seconds and

moments stretched, the position became too close, too awkward, too much, demanding words and explanations and acceptance that he had no idea how to provide. It opened up a whole new can of worms. ‘Snuggling like poofs’ was over. They should move on to resting up. He pulled back and let Dan fall forward, sprawled spread-eagled on the grimy bed.

Vadim stepped onto the floor to stretch his legs, bent down to pick up the bottle of whisky, opened it and took a swallow. Not bad. He offered it to Dan.

Turning his head, glancing up one-eyed then frowning, Dan mumbled, “You should be shot for drinking Balvenie out of a bottle. That’s one of the best fucking whiskies, you peasant!” Slowly turning over onto his back, despite his words, he held his hand out. He was sticky, but the damp was cooling his skin.

“Peasant?” Vadim pulled the bottle away again. “You might be born farmer. I’m from Moscow. No peasant.”

“Oh fuck off, Russkie,” Dan grumped, too mellow to argue, his hand flopping back down on the bed beside him. “Anyone who doesn’t worship a good Scottish whisky the way it should be worshipped is a fucking peasant in any true Scotsman’s books.” Baring his teeth in a lazy flash of half-grin, he thumped his hand on the blankets. “Now be a good Muscovite and give me the bottle.”

“Might be that Scottish whisky is not exactly staple in Soviet Army shops.” Dan rolled his eyes while Vadim sat down on the bed and handed the bottle over, just now realizing that Dan was about to break his own rule. “So, you’re drinking from bottle yourself.”

“Aye,” Dan raised his brows the same time he raised his head from the bed. Mighty effort. “That’s because I’m a fucking peasant. You said so yourself.” Smirking, he set the bottle to his lips and took a generous mouthful. Keeping the whisky inside his mouth for a while, his head dropped back, bottle in his hand floating in mid air and his eyes closing with an expression of bliss. Swallowing bit by bit, slowly, relishing every moment, Dan let out a deep sigh. “Not quite as good as an orgasm, but getting there.”

Vadim shook his head, relaxing as well, but facing the door, wondering if they had been loud, if anybody had noticed. If anybody cared. “Getting there? You are strange man, Dan.”

“The whisky, Russkie. The whisky’s getting there.” Dan peered at him with one eye, handing the bottle back. “This is a twelve year old single malt whisky,

Doublewood. Means it's matured in two casks." He closed that eye, opened the other. "First one, traditional whisky oak, second one, sherry oak. Makes for that rich, mellow flavour with a hint of sweetness from the sherry oak, and undertones of spice." The second eye closed as well before both opened and he grinned. "Mark my words, Russkie, if you ever taste a fifteen-year-old, you hear the heavenly angels sing, but if you'd be so lucky to get your hand on the twenty-one-year-old? Your taste buds will explode in hints of vanilla, cherry and the whole fucking force of Scotland's finest. And that, my very own cunt, that's as good as an orgasm."

Vadim gave a laugh. "There. And I thought you had not a line of poetry in your body." He took the bottle and smelled the whisky, trying to smell anything of the stuff that Dan had described. Maybe it was all just imagination. He took a small sip, actively listening to his tongue and mouth. The heat seemed mellow, rounded somehow, several different leagues from the rough jagged spikes of moonshine.

"Ahhhh!" Dan exclaimed, waving one lazy hand about. "I can see it in your face that you're getting some of what I told you. Perhaps I can make you an honorary Scotsman after all."

And why would you want to? Vadim didn't want to pursue the thought, nor the fact that he could have been...something else, a traitor, double agent, spy, and could have earned enough money to buy this, even the older ones.

Shifting slightly on the bed, Dan frowned. "Bugger. Fucking sticky mess. Got to get rid of that." Only way was to get out of the room, down two stairs to that stinking hole that was used as the loo. He grunted.

Vadim pulled his legs up on the bed, reached down for his pistol and placed it on his stomach. He checked Dan's throat, but it only seemed reddened, not bruised. Strangling. But it made so much sense. As much sense as the blade, the pistol, the rope. Natural. "Thanks for trying," he murmured.

"Trying what?" Dan was in the process of rolling out of the bed, had one foot on the floor.

"Trying me. Trying it again. Was as...good as I thought." Vadim shook his head. Couldn't have said what was better: Dan fighting him or Dan wanting it, losing himself. Two different things. Having him, that was it. The connection, the thing that gave everything meaning. "Next time, your turn."

Dan shrugged. "You fucking bet on it." He's needed to know, and now he did know. He looked around for something to half-dress with, the trousers would

just get soiled, he reached for the native long coat. Turning his head, he flashed a grin before pulling the 'dress' over his head. "Besides, unless you're sent out," his dark-haired head pushed through the neck opening, shrugging the garment down while standing, "I'll be here in Kabul for a few months." He leaned to the side, fished about in his webbing and the sound of his pistol being uncocked was heard in the room.

"No idea. Can't say where I'll be, but I won't try to leave Kabul." Vadim leaned his head against the wall, regarding the other from under heavy eye lids.

"Don't go anywhere right now." Dan grinned and slipped bare feet into the sandals, hand and pistol hidden in the folds of the garment. "There's always round two."

"Already waiting," murmured Vadim in Russian and smiled. He still didn't have any words for it. Not happiness, not joy, but maybe an odd peace, despite what they did, because they bled the poison out of their veins and minds like this. Hanging on to sanity in all this filth and senselessness.

1985 Chapter 14—Brothers in Arms

June 1985, Kabul

Dan lay on the grubby bed linen in a small room with dirt encrusted windows in a run-down hotel in the centre of Kabul. The whores came with the stained and smeared room and so did the silence once they were thrown out, empty-handed. He wore nothing but his combat trousers. Too hot, even for him. Legs sprawled, he stared up at the ceiling, watching the slow motion of the ceiling ventilator chopping the air like an overburdened Chinook.

He lifted his hand to raise the bottle of cheap lager to his lips. A couple of gulps and a wipe with the back of his hand, then once again staring upwards, watching the chop-chop-chop, in its ever circular, hypnotising motion. He couldn't be bothered wiping the trickles of fresh sweat off his chest, feeling them pool in the hollow between his pecs. Too much effort to raise his arms, except for another mouthful of lukewarm beer, before letting them lead-heavy rest on the rickety bed.

He waited.

* * *

We can't...we don't have enough...prospects negative...unforeseen shortage...this week's casualties...officer compromised in local drug trade... two suicides...self-harm...patrol late, seek-and-rescue party advised...loss of one Hind helicopter near Kunduz..

The paperwork made Gogol's stories seem light and entertaining reading. Vadim had stopped reading Gogol, difficult enough to keep sane as it was. Time for Butterbars to get some of his work done. He stepped out of his office and ordered a passing soldier to get him the Lt. He liked the American term for a young, inexperienced Lt. Butterbars. Brilliance.

If the Americans were half as good at fighting as they were at being disrespectful, they'd be a fearsome force. Despite the noises from the Kremlin, he still expected an all-out war—expected it with a morbid fascination for what would definitely mean the end of the world. There was something deeply attractive about two forces keen and honed on each other's destruction. Romantic.

The boy eventually showed up, and Vadim stepped aside, offering his office with a gesture. “Get as much done as you can. I’ll be back before curfew.”

He grabbed food on the way and his bottle of vodka—rations might be scarce, but Moscow would face mutiny if they failed to deliver the vodka. Not that those bottles didn’t get reused for moonshine which was, according to the taste, distilled from anything between tank break fluid and piss.

At least they controlled Kabul. He could go out onto the street, despite being so visibly the enemy. The goat-fuckers had learned it was unwise to take an officer down. However, the real insurgents were up in the mountains, biding their time—and getting better and better with those Stinger rockets. Flying over the Afghan countryside was like turning a rock with a bare hand. The place swarmed with scorpions.

A narrow door in a dark alley. He entered, walking past the domestic squabble, possibly about pay, whatever. Not his business. Up the creaking stairs. He couldn’t help but notice again that this place would be a nightmare to storm. Vision blocked, and he suspected if he sent more than two men up at one time—men in full kit, not two Afghan men—the whole structure would come crashing down.

The door was unlocked. He placed his fingertips against the aged wood, pushed it open before he appeared in the door frame. Couldn’t shed the training that had taught him that door frames were vertical coffins. Never truly sure what awaited him. He expected Dan to be ready to attack, or point a gun on him, for fun and training.

* * *

A sound, but not enough to rouse Dan more than lifting his head off the greasy pillow. His arm moved, and he downed another mouthful, eyes half-closed. The door opened. Vadim stood in silence, studying him.

Vadim decided Dan took well to the sun. It certainly didn’t skin the man alive like it did him. He could never turn as dark, only golden, making the contrast of skin against skin more intense. The colours as stark in Vadim’s mind as the colours of their respective flags. Amusing, that their flags only shared one colour: red. That was also the only colour their bodies shared.

For a moment, Dan looked like he had fallen asleep while sprawling all over the bed, like men did when they suddenly found themselves in more space than a bunk normally offered, claiming more than was their right. But then, he raised the bottle towards him.

“Welcome to heaven and hell once more, Russkie.” In Russian, and he smiled.

Vadim stepped in, took a chair and jammed it under the door handle, as Dan had done, the first time in this room. It wouldn't keep anybody out, but it would make noise if anybody came in. He smirked at the greeting and let the bag slip from his shoulder.

“There is no heaven or hell. We are alone in this world. No god.” Vadim found the concept intriguing, much more romantic than the facts. He had searched for meaning too long. Now, all he wanted was to not think. He was tired of being defeated, day in, day out, not by bullets, not by superior strength wrestling him down, but by numbers and facts, arrows on a map on the wall. In a war that was now nothing more than endless paperwork, it took one enemy, this enemy, to make him feel alive.

Right now Dan didn't care about life, death, destruction, and why the fuck they were all here in this world. That would come soon enough. Waiting for the beer to be taken out of his hand, he grinned. “Trust you fucking insane Russkie to be deep and meaningful in this shithole.”

Just back from Old Blighty and a spot of well-deserved R & , he felt good, healthy, and his hair had been cut recently. He reached for the packet of black Super King's, much better than the usual Russian coffin nails.

Vadim stepped closer, took the bottle, emptied it with one quick, long swallow. He hated the taste. In his mind, beer tasted like autumn leaves, when they were starting to rot, and somebody pressed your face into the putrid mess. But the taste was also Dan. His lips had been right there, and there was something of him clinging to the glass. It was the nearest thing to kissing. After weighing it like a weapon, he put the bottle down.

Dan lit a fag before grabbing another beer, already open. He took a swig, then a deep, satisfying drag from the cigarette, blowing the smoke towards the ceiling fan. He still hadn't moved and wouldn't. Just sprawled out and waiting. The

sluggish chop-chop-chop of the rotor blades had lost his interest. Instead, he studied the man at the foot of the bed, and grinned with bared teeth.

Vadim felt his body tighten, tense in a good way. Naked skin, the dirt and grime here, and the grin that was always a challenge, always mocking.

He stepped away, out of the smoke. He needed every molecule of oxygen his lungs could process. Habits formed young hardly ever gave way.

Dan did nothing at all but watch, taking in every movement, every facial expression. This was his reward, this scrutiny of the ‘enemy soldier’. Rewards for his ruthlessness—choreographing Afghani and Soviet troops to dance the grotesque waltz of death and destruction. No guilt, no emotions. Duty was duty.

Vadim opened his shirt, resisting the urge to place it somewhere close in case he had to run. The striped shirt next, leaving only the military watch around his wrist, which drove home the point he still was what he was.

The boots. Bending down, as if mocking on his part now. A challenge. Knowing he was watched, assessed like a prized bull. He was tired of being stranded without that rolling wave that could take him and only left him when he felt like a burnt-down fire.

Finally, the trousers so he was naked, in prime shape. He had no other pastime, at least not officially. The sunburn on his collarbones, the skin flaking there, raw and white, peeling, like the bridge of his nose, the top of his ears. Cuts and scratches on his hands. The rocks. He took a step and knelt with one leg on the bed.

Dan was still sprawled flat, an invitation to get on top. Mingle sweat with sweat. Vadim grinned, his hands already on Dan’s belt.

Dan’s eyes travelled from the burnt skin, forever delicate, no matter how many years his Russkie would stay in this shithole, down towards the navel and then the cock. He moistened his lips. A good cock. Belonging to a madman who knew what to do with it. He still hadn’t moved, except for an arm that dropped the half-smoked cigarette into the nearly finished beer bottle, and put it back onto the shoddy table beside him. No visible tension. “Been a while.”

Vadim tensed his stomach muscles, his only form of armour. He had never needed shielding when simply jumping a man. Then he had been all coiled up, all rage, all need to blow, and that was it. The belt clicked open, his hands released

one button, then they pulled Dan's trousers down—just enough to hinder the legs as he let his hand run over the other man's cock. "I can see that."

Ravenous desire, fighting with pure, naked stress up in the mountains, every step could be a mine, every encounter friendly fire, or hostiles; when he stood guard, he could hear their sounds in the valleys. *Allahu-akhbar*. God is greater, let's kill some Soviets.

Dan was hard, he'd been waiting for nine hours, left alone with the goddamned fan on that claustrophobic ceiling—and his thoughts and memories. Memories of blood and pain, of survival, desperation and strength; of lust and want, and the body that was handling his own right now.

Everything in those mountains was hostile, even the sun and the wind. Vadim moved up Dan's body, then went for the muscle on his chest, teeth biting the firm, round flesh without warning, at the same time bringing his weight to bear, rubbing against him, trapping their cocks between them. He held Dan's arms down, like a crucified man, tied to a rock. His teeth traced the collarbone, breathed the mix of beer and sweat, a hint of aftershave.

Dan barely gasped, the tiniest of sounds, even in this shit hole of a hotel he couldn't stop the silence. Impact of teeth, touch of heated skin, and sweat-slick gliding of body against body.

"Make me feel, Russkie." Dan murmured in Russian, while his body arched towards the teeth and lips, those hands, that body. Yes, motherfucker, make me feel. Make me forget civilisation and take me away from all this. It was rare, this request, that need.

Vadim's teeth bared in a feral growl, teeth that wanted to rend, lips that wanted to kiss and lick and maybe suck, later, maybe, if Dan was being especially nice. He could feel the other submit, something he'd never done once in their first ill-fated encounter in the house that was now blown to shreds.

His hand trailed down to the ground and found the rag Dan wore against the dust and dirt, thought about blindfolding him, but then decided, he liked to watch that face, liked to watch the reckless power, the desire. He bit the muscle that was stretched on the shoulder, knee forcing the trousers further down, finally the foot, kicking them down all the way without changing position.

He wanted to tie him to the bed, but it was too dangerous. Kabul. Hotel. No security. Only one way to do it and make a point. With a flick of his wrist, Vadim

formed the dust scarf into a noose, and slid it around Dan's neck and throat, pulling it close, close enough for Dan to feel his own heartbeat. He'd done it before, his hands. Remembered the reaction.

Dan swallowed. Eyes flickered to the restraint. He could fight, but he trusted, had done it before. Yet this was as much for real as the killing in the fields and the mountains. No sound, just the heartbeat in his ears and the sensation of heat travelling up to his face, increasing pressure when the blood flow was held back and his air was reduced.

"Turn," Vadim breathed, impossible to know whether this was English or Russian, and he moved enough to allow a tight, squeezing rotation. Lube. Not weapon oil. He didn't care.

And now, we play prisoner.

Dan simply obeyed the order. A moment's struggle to move his body in the tight confinement of danger and heat. Adrenaline coursing, he was addicted to its heights. Coupled with the heat, focussed in his cock, grinding into the dirty bed linen, he smelled the stench of sweat and stale cigarette smoke, as his face was ground into the small space between bed, pillows, and wall. By rights, he should be frightened, but instead he was so hard, he feared he would cum way before they'd even started.

The scarf tightened some more. Fuck! Dan's mouth opened, he struggled, his body moving instinctively due to the lack of oxygen. Pressed his face between the grimy bars of the rickety bed, cold metal against heated flesh, and tried to swallow. Failed, forced in a breath, producing a rattling sound in his restricted throat.

Fuck. This time—like every time—it was for real.

Vadim thought he could feel the heartbeat through the scarf; twisted it around his wrist, free hand opening the tube, squirting the cool stuff into his palm. Dan could use some of that cold. It added edge.

"Won't rip you this time," he said, English, just sounded less tender, and he could feel Dan was grinding into the mattress. He pushed the legs apart with his knees, forcing them under the man, lifting the hips from the mattress.

Cold, slick hand coating that hot, heavy cock, the balls, just fucking with his mind right now. Fingers sliding up towards the crack, fingers on the dam behind the balls, pressing, massaging, knowing how it felt, the thumb circling the

hole, scarred, as he knew. Well. The secret scar nobody else would ever see. There was something impossibly erotic about the fact he'd been the first, and would be the last.

Nobody else could get Dan into this position, ever. Nobody else had the strength.

Maybe he'd broken or torn more than the physical resistance back then. Try as he might, imagine as he might, whenever he could find the time and energy to jerk off with the memory of raping this body, his own hand never possessed the same heat and utter insanity. His memories filled by that body underneath, chest to chest, the heat, the smell and the same insane need for destruction.

His thumb pressed against the rim, massaging straight into it, not bothering to penetrate much. It always screwed his mind, it would screw Dan's too. Give him a taste of what they both wanted. "Tell me. How much do you want to feel, Lapushka?" Everything, all the way, hard, cruel, intense fucking. But he loved how the coarse voice broke. He had left him just enough air to breathe.

Dan's body jerked on its own. Past caring; past thinking even. Too much, too fucking much. Air diminished while something else increased. Something dark and angry, bloodied and full of fucking hatred. Against the Army, Britain, his duties, Kabul, damned Mujahideen, the fucking world and himself. Against Vadim? No! Wanted him there. Needed him.

Bucking and thrashing against and into the hands. He couldn't breathe, heard a voice, couldn't understand, gasped out, no air, and too much physical intrusion. "Fuck you! Fucking hate you!"

Fuck me, hurt me, use me, give me a reason to be angry, to hate. Give me a reason to go on with this shit, to kill, destroy, survive. Give me more than just a fucking joke of a military order!

"Give me a reason!"

The flame flared up in Vadim. The darkness he was holding in check, the fascination for the other's strength and trust, transformed into a desire to make him feel the same need. That he belonged to him, was his. 'His' a simple, brutal little word, really. As simple and brutal as the way he moved in and started to enter. Well, if ramming down a door was entering, overcoming Dan's resistance in an echo of the way he had torn his soul open that first night. Dog eat dog. Man on

man. Fuck you, he thought, tenderness and need and, above all, that dark flood pounding against the anchoring of his sanity.

Lack of oxygen multiplied lust. Dan couldn't breathe, exactly what he wanted, and needed, and what set his body free. Extreme arousal, brain going mad, terror and panic, those hands, the body, everywhere...fuck!

Dan called it hatred. Vadim called it complete and utter knowledge. He pressed the man against the bed, but then pulled part of him back at the same time, impossible raging need, fucking him hard. No way to hold back, no need to, not even the thought of it. He had enough sense to let go of the scarf, but not to stop, never to stop, riding his own lust and Dan's anger, purging both with bone-grinding force.

Dan heard himself scream inside his mind, but only a groan came out of his throat. It fucking hurt, that cock tore him and speared him and split his mind apart. It brought him back into Kabul, into that shitty place and his fucking life and yes, that was it, it was life and living, not just existing. He hated Vadim right now, wanted to kill him, destroy him, and needed him. Wanted him. Hell. Pain, dirt, grime and stench and impossible heat of sweat, bodies and raw power. Heaven. Alive. Could feel his own body, fighting another's and just took and rode the strength of his Russian.

Vadim came too fast, too easy. Broken under the onslaught. He listened to his heart pound, or was it that of the man underneath? Both raced. Listening to the fibres in his body, hot, sweat-drenched; for some reason he needed to drink, drink anything, vodka, blood, anything that quenched the thirst. He rested for a moment, just one moment, felt lust vibrate through his body, like a weapon. A gift. Not willing, reason forbid this was willing, but still a gift. Felt there, here. Finally. He pulled away, sat back on his knees, felt his shoulders, his thighs groan from the amount of strength he he'd needed to invest.

Dan. The flushed skin, shimmering with sweat.

Fingers scrabbling to loosen the noose around his neck, Dan panted for breath. Eyes glittering dangerously when he craned his neck to turn his head. Not a word, but his fist was starting to close.

Vadim couldn't help but enjoy Dan fester and boil in his silence, then leaned over to get at the bottle. Uncorking, he slapped the firm round ass checks.

“Just one moment,” he said, exaggerating his accent in English. Like a peasant trying out a phrasebook. He grabbed the bottle to drink. The liquor both cooling and burning its way down.

That was enough. One step too far. Dan flung around, twisted beneath him, let his fist fly towards the bastard’s face. “Get me off, you fucker!”

Vadim ducked out of the way and spilt the vodka over half his chest, then tossed the bottle into one corner of the room, where it spun, but didn’t break, the smell of the alcohol mingling with the smell of sweat and dust and heat. Where was a knife when you needed one? Probably under the pillow somewhere, if he knew Dan well enough. He shifted position, took Dan’s legs and pulled him around, onto his back, the man seething at him, as if warning him to make one more stupid joke or even wait too long.

No time to study the body or appreciate it, his hand, slick and sticky, took the cock, and there was just a moment when he thought with irony, I’m Captain, I don’t do this anymore, follow orders, but he did enjoy the thought of the knife somewhere close. Dan was in no mood to suffer more teasing. He dipped his head, and took part of the cock between his lips, the taste of sweat and Dan stronger now than the vodka. He almost laughed.

“Fuck!” Dan cursed between a hissed intake of breath. Arching upwards, towards the heat and the burning-stinging throat, still coated with oily vodka. He could count the times he’d got a willing blow-job out of Vadim on two hands. Not now; because right now he lifted himself off the pillow and pushed his hands onto the blond head, forcing him down onto his cock. Needed to feel and to remember that there was more than the flaming pain in his arse.

Vadim fought. That was expected. Tensed his neck, his throat, his lips, fingers digging into the flesh of Dan’s thighs. Heat and firmness, the impossible soft skin, and allowed it to happen, resisting just enough to make it worth Dan’s while. Nostrils flaring to find some breath, then Dan invaded his throat, and breath stopped. Fighting every reflex in his body, the stinging fear of being choked, while he knew getting him off was the quickest way to breathe again. He moved his head frantically, sliding the cock in and out, reckless, took him as deep as he would go, sweating like a horse now, but controlling his breath. Sometimes, his coach had said, you just can’t breathe.

That’s life.

After weeks of pent-up frustration, stuck in a world back in Britain that he didn't understand anymore, Dan didn't need long. He'd only had his hand, jerking off with some mags from under the counter, no more. The world was easier in Afghanistan.

Pushing, arching, moving towards and forcing deeper, his body taking possession where he had been possessed before. One, two more moments, and he started to curse under his breath when the build-up crashed down, hard and fast.

Vadim felt Dan's cock twitch, pulse, cum spurting into his throat, the sounds that Dan made went right through him. He pulled back, wiped his lips with the back of his hand, then got off the bed to find the rest of the vodka. One taste against the other. One taste against non-taste, nothing but an oily burn. And this was the decent stuff.

Dan was breathing with closed eyes. Revelling in the glory after an orgasm. A real one, not just a hand-job, wanking in his bunk or anywhere with a modicum of privacy. Or no privacy, whatever. Fucking Muslim country, and unlike Vadim, he had no means for release. None. The sexual frustration and greed that mounted in between fucking with his crazy Russkie was a force of nature to behold.

He lay sprawled, still on his back, just as he'd been left and in almost the same position as before. Crucified by slaked lust. Lying motionless was pure contentment.

Vadim lowered the bottle, offered it to Dan as he sat down on the bed, leaning against the wall.

Dan finally cracked an eye open at the sound of liquid sloshing in a bottle, lifted an arm with effort, finished the last dregs of vodka before handing the empty bottle back to Vadim.

Their smell, Vadim thought, Dan's smell, heavy in the air. If he could only step out of this room and vanish into a lake, swim, wash the dirt away, and most of all that heat. Good food, relax, sleep all day. His memories presented a collection of the things he'd enjoyed doing before he had learned to enjoy killing people and resisting overwhelming odds, at least that was what it felt like. The superiors told him this was part of a strategy. They weren't here for the short term. Afghanistan was a long-term investment.

"It's ironic," he murmured. "We came to bring them Communism. But Marx wrote you need a proletariat for Communism. These people are still in a state

before that. Tribes. Marx never wrote about goat herders.” He put the empty bottle down, most of the contents were drying on the floorboards.

“Not again...” Dan groaned, “What the fuck are you on about?” Vadim’s tendency to get all deep and meaningful in the most ludicrous situations pissed him off sometimes. Not this time, though. Too hot, sweaty, aching and satisfied to gather the energy. “You don’t really believe all that shit, do you? It’s about survival. Communism, Capitalism, it’s all lies.” He shrugged, sluggishly pulling himself up on the bed. He found a dirty pillow to support his head, the movement revealing a glimpse of a knife beneath it, before he lay back, stretching his aching body.

“Why the fuck would those goat herders want a state like yours? The glory of Mother Russia and all that shit? Let them fuck their sheep and live their crap lives. That’s what they’re good at—that and guerrilla warfare.” Another shrug, treading thin ice with the last comment. He wasn’t going to go any further out on that lake. “It’s a job.” Dan reached for another beer bottle on the table, hit the cap on the edge and opened it, before taking a swig and lighting another cigarette. “It’s just a fucking job. For you, for me, and if anyone says it’s anything beyond that simple bit of truth: they’re talking bullshit.”

Vadim looked thoughtfully at the bottle. How should he argue against that notion? He’d never been one of the leaders in the Komsomol. Even as a ‘young communist’, he couldn’t bother arguing the fine points. Of course he believed in it. And Dan was what they had taught him Europeans were: Self-centred, materialistic and ultimately nihilist. He was right in his assessment of the goat herders, but Communism could transform this society. After all, that was the Great Plan. Russia was the fortress of Socialism, the safe place against Fascism, and from there, they could lead sorties. The question was, were the sacrifices justified?

He put the bottle down, looked at the legs, hips, the resting cock; especially that. “Why are you soldier then? Because you couldn’t find different job?” He shifted his weight, then decided to get closer, and moved up against the side Dan rested against.

“The day you bloody Russians let a man have a peaceful comedown after an orgasm, is the day I turn Communist.” Dan grumbled, took a swig from the beer, a drag from the cigarette, and exhaled slowly, staring once more at the lazy ceiling fan. “I’ll tell you why. It made sense that my younger brother inherited the farm.

He's the one with a sense for farming and finances." Another drag—another pause, while smoke curled out of his nostrils.

"I joined the army, volunteered for the Paras because I wanted fun and adventure, sex and booze. I was nearly eighteen, and wanted to prove I was a real man." Eyes glued to the chop-chop-chop of the rotor blades, Dan added with a bone-dry huff, "didn't quite work out the 'manly' way I thought it would, eh?"

"Eighteen is young." Vadim's lip quirked into an ironic smile. Young like the conscripts. He was trying to imagine Dan at eighteen. But he couldn't get the wide-eyed innocence he knew from the conscripts to fit on Dan's face. It wouldn't stick. In his mind, an eighteen-year-old Dan was the Dan next to him, minus the scars, and less bulk. "You got sex and booze," he said, smirking more. He risked a glance to the side and tensed his stomach to receive the reaction.

That deserved a punch but it was too hot, too sweaty, or something else. Something was on Dan's mind and he couldn't let go of it. "Yeah, fucker," Dan grinned at him, finished the stale beer before dropping the bottle onto the floor. "Got the booze alright, just happened to miss the bus to shagging Girlsville half-way through."

Girlsville. Whatever that was. Probably one of many jokes that held the British forces together. Vadim noticed how Dan's skin was glowing in the late sun.

A last drag on the cigarette before Dan stubbed it out on the grimy table, rolling onto his side to face Vadim, wincing at the soreness and stickiness in his arse. "Not sure about the fun bit anymore, but got the adventure alright."

Dan splayed his fingers and pressed his palm against Vadim's stomach muscles. Just watching, feeling, studying.

The touch was unexpected, sending a small shock into Vadim. The dark hand on his paler skin. He shifted the breath inside his body, moved it to his chest, as if he didn't want to disturb a shy animal that had settled on him. He chuckled tonelessly. They were both animals; it didn't matter much.

Dan paused. Silence.

"I got to be off for a while, up to twelve months." A euphemism, delivered deadpan, no inflexion in his voice, but the fingers on the pale, heated skin twitched.

Vadim felt tension return to him, inside, like a churning stomach. Twelve months. He closed his eyes again. Summer, autumn, winter, spring, summer. Bodies did things during so much time. Killed, died, gave birth. He felt queasy.

Would Dan remain posted here? They could move him anywhere in the world, a hundred places he couldn't reach. He forced himself to inhale, then exhale.

"You're glutton for adventure, huh?"

Dan's grin failed miserably for the first time. "You call the fucking mountains 'adventure'?" It was all he could say to make the other understand. "Guess you could," His hand slid off Vadim's skin, keeping contact only with his fingertips. Morse code sent across stomach muscles with every breath.

"I'm in it too deep, Vadim. No comfy desk job for me." Dan tried joking in his usual manner, but fucked that up, too. Thoughts, desperate. You won't even know if it was you who killed me. The mountains. Insurgents. Death and destruction to the Soviets. Twelve months? No ID, no backup, no one to know where his flesh was rotting if he got caught. "I'd be bloody useless at a cosy job back in Blighty, anyway."

Vadim's mind was racing. Panjir? Further South? He wanted to grab that hand and press it, remember it when it wasn't there anymore, but then he thought, fuck it. I'll take a different memory of him before he is out that door. So many places where Dan could be useful to the insurgents. Bamian, Nangahar, Kandahar, Herat. And villages, valleys, mountains and rocks, most of which had no name he knew.

He thought of the knife, thought of wounding only to keep. They'd put it down to self-harm, and Dan would have no other way to explain the injury. Twelve months. Impossible to know the plans of his superiors for the next twelve months. If one of the glory hounds decided to launch a full offensive, he'd know a couple weeks in advance. "Careful with butterflies in Panjir," he said. Butterfly mines. They would cover the whole Panjir area in mines smaller than his hand. He had seen the lists, the plans. They had to deny the insurgents free movement in that area.

Dan nodded, stalling before lifting his eyes, looking straight into the other man's face. "Don't know where I will be, Russkie." He was a shit liar, and this was simply the truth. Silence. Breathing. Fingers moving slowly, sliding, tracing along sweat-slicked skin, until his hand rested on Vadim's hip. Dan would never cease to marvel at the sensation of hardness beneath smooth skin. It had taken him too many years to find what he really wanted, he'd never grow tired of it.

“You up for another round?” Quietly, they’d said all the words they could. Time to let their bodies take over. It was all they had in the end, and all they could share.

“Always.” Vadim closed his eyes under the touch, tensed lightly, felt the fingertips like knives go right through him. He could feel the strength linger somewhere in that touch, ready to be used and reached for.

“I got a bottle of good whisky.” Silent question ‘how long can you stay?’

Vadim had said he’d be back before curfew. Six hours. He’d be in trouble. But six hours wasn’t enough against twelve months. “I have the night.” Yes, comrade major, put me into the brig. Whatever. “Let’s get wasted.”

And fucked.

Dan grinned, relief written all over his face. Shit liar, worse deceiver. “Just a sec.” He rolled back over to the other side, slid off the bed, padding over to his bergan. Producing a bottle of single malt Highland whisky, his tin mug, foil-wrapped bread and a large salami, he threw the food onto the grimy bed and uncorked the whisky. He poured a dram and downed it, head tipped back, body glistening with sweat and muscles moving amidst shadows and sun through a dirty window pane.

Vadim felt a stab of nauseous tension when Dan moved too close to the window and came within hair’s breadth of making a sniper target.

“Fuck,” Dan grinned contentedly, “that’s the real stuff.” He handed bottle and mug to Vadim before retreating back to bergan, rag, and wash basin, cleaning himself up. Getting back onto the bed a few moments later, He was ready to tuck into the food. Despite his pent-up need he wasn’t sixteen anymore, but thirty-six.

Vadim checked on the sausage, the bread, slid his hand under the pillow and drew the knife. For no sinister purpose this time, just to cut the bread and the salami. He took in the smells like this was his first food in ages. Nice, salty and greasy. He loved it. He kept the slices on the foil, took the mug with greasy fingers and took a swig, the burn smoother, less oily than vodka. Making sure he licked his fingers every now and then as he ate.

Meat, bread, booze. Simple men—simple pleasures. Yeah, right.

Dan wasn’t quite as fast as Vadim, not with the food, but the whisky was another matter. The only taste and memory that made Scotland truly home. A life and time he could barely remember, and that had never been his to keep.

“Russkie, promise me a simple thing?” Out of the blue when they had finished, after a mouthful from the mug.

Resting back, savouring the taste, Vadim turned his head to look at Dan. Oh, that body. The effect it had on him, all the time, even when Dan wasn't there. Twelve months. “Promise what?” Sometimes, this was about letters. Tell my girl I love her. Tell my mother I didn't suffer. Words that would hurt worse than the killing bullet.

“If I'm unlucky, and if you find my body, will you bury it? Some rocks would do, I can't stand the thought of being eaten by carrion. As if that mattered, eh? I'd be fucking dead.” Dan shrugged before tossing a grin towards Vadim, making light of a far-too-heavy situation. He took the bottle and washed down the taste of death and decay, chasing away unbidden images.

A shudder raced over Vadim's skin. The thought of death chilled him to the bone like a premonition. For a moment he saw himself stagger through enemy territory, looking for something that had been Dan. Minefields, snipers, Hind hellfire. He might be able to guess where he had gone, where he had fallen. He had found the occasional pilot. But he had had help. Finding a dead man in a country full of dead people was more of a challenge.

“I'll send you home,” Vadim murmured. Stay alive, he thought. Stay alive like you are now. I don't want to carry your rotting body to Kabul and hand myself in to whatever bastard is your superior or handler there, but it must be Kabul. I can't hand myself over. But I will. Fuck you. He felt his face twitch, and turned away, breathing.

“No, I have no home anymore.” Dan's hand stopped Vadim from turning over fully, fingers digging into the muscular thigh. “Not my brother's family. Nowhere to send the body to. Forget it.” His grip tightened while he moved closer. “You're as close to a fucking home as I get.”

Vadim couldn't look at Dan now. He would see that he was shaken, and the idea he was the man's home appalled him. He thought of Moscow, the long, uniform street of uniform, grey buildings with too little water pressure that took forever to get warm in winter, thought of the shops where they queued for all the necessities of life. Socialist dream. Cold, grey, barren, but people cared, huddled together like birds in winter, hoping for spring. Knowing spring would eventually come.

Small movements, groin against arse. Dan had been spent only a short while ago, but death and decay, the whole bloodied reality of his existence made him feel ten times more desperately alive.

Vadim reached for the lube, squeezed some into his hand, rubbed it between his thighs, then reached to take Dan's cock, placing it between his legs, tensing his thighs, and pressing back against him.

He thought it would take longer, but Dan was ready as soon as the hand closed around his cock. Not thinking right now, just riding the body, muscles and sinew, hard planes of sheer strength, power and reassurance that he needed so much. His. Vadim was his for now, tomorrow would come too soon.

Vadim pressed back against that body, fought the dread, the nameless, unspeakable dread of death. To be afraid to die was hard, it was a pressure on the shoulders that grew with every day. But fearing somebody else might die was like an avalanche, and he had nothing to protect himself. The goat-herders had Allah, but there was no God, not for him. Marx or Lenin had not taught him how to see people die, people like Dan. Or to not see him die, and that was worse. That was the whole fucking Hindu Kush coming at him.

Friction, yet not enough, Dan's hands tightened once more, holding the strong body. "No." He breathed into Vadim's neck, "not enough." He wanted to turn him around; why wouldn't the Russian face him? "Not enough."

Vadim obeyed, rubbing his face before he complied. Dan, dead. Fuck, no. He shuddered, aroused by Dan's need, his own, even though it bordered on desperation. You won't die. Tell me you will not die. Wordless staring, lips pressed together.

What was wrong with him? Dan sensed the desperation, fuelling his own. He moved forward, digging his teeth in slow-motion into the muscle between shoulder and neck, the very same place that bore the round scar on his own body. This time it was Dan's hand that moved between their bodies, firmly grasping their cocks.

Vadim's lips opened at the delicious pain, which went right through him, to his cock. Hips went forward, asking for the touch, head moved back as he could feel the heat, the other cock, the hand, his fists clenched.

One hand came up to press Dan's face against his shoulder, almost asking for more of that, more pain, more teeth.

“Yes,” Vadim murmured. “I’m interested.” A grin he didn’t feel.

“Of course you are.” Dan whispered hoarsely against Vadim’s skin, licking sweat and tasting flesh. He bit deeply, sharply, tearing at skin when heat rose between their bodies. Dan pushed the Russian down when he tried to roll on top. On their sides; had to be equal.

Friction of cock against cock, held in a strong grip, heavy, muscled bodies pushing and sliding, moving close, crushing and wanting, taking, giving. Dan groaned before he bit into the muscle again, a wretched sound; desperate to feel more of the body so much like his own.

Vadim’s fingers dug into Dan’s hair, against his skull. His eyes closed, nostrils flaring at the smell of sweat, fresh and healthy, sane. He groaned softly into Dan’s ear, winced with the pain, crazy. Dan would draw blood. Absolutely impossible to explain a mark like that under the shower. As if he cared. The hot flesh and strong grip drove him slowly insane, too slowly, in fact, difficult to come, the worst hunger sated, leaving him with too much capacity to feel.

“Dan, fuck...” Vadim groaned, louder, tried to be quiet, like in the barracks, but that was difficult when he felt skinned alive and raw with emotion.

Once upon a time, Dan had hated that body, smashed it, kicked it, beat it into a bleeding pulp, but now he wanted to crawl into it, or kill it and maim it, to possess it, eat, tear, destroy it, to take it and never leave it again.

Every muscle tensed as he came, a short, violent tension. Vadim felt overwhelming gratitude and rightness and lots of other things he couldn’t put a name to. Coming into and against that strong hand, the same hand that had wounded him, broken his nose. Whatever Dan decided to do with his strength, it was always intense.

A harder grip of Dan’s hand, a more desperate motion and he groaned into the bitten skin, “Mine!” He was lost, rushed over the edge, coming in the combined heat and friction that was every shred as all-encompassing as he had needed it to be.

Vadim held the head tight, heard sounds that made no sense, but then a word. He wanted to rest, heavy as lead, vast and calm like a mountain, but that word woke him up. Made him restless. He thought of Katya, and the children. This was the last place, the last situation on earth he would have wanted these thoughts, and the only one where they were possible.

He rolled onto his back, took a handful of the grimy blanket and wiped himself down. Peering at the man next to him and pretending to be tired with a heavy-lidded glance.

Breathless, heart beating, Dan felt bereft, the moment Vadim rolled over. Wham, bam, thank you squaddie. He snorted, but didn't open his eyes, sprawled half on his stomach, half on his side, stickiness on grimy bed and sweat-slick body. He lay in silence, breathing for a long while, felt like an eternity, but he couldn't bring himself to do anything at all, for every moment would take him further away, would make it less likely to ever be touched again and to feel what he felt right now: Vadim's body. The only body he had ever truly touched.

"Lapushka?" He finally murmured, remembering the word, it only now registered with him.

Vadim placed a hand on Dan's hand, liked the weight, size and shape of it, the heat, the sweat. "Yes," he murmured. "Look at your hands again. Well deserved title." He kept his voice level. That word still a ghost in his mind. But then, he wasn't kidding himself, now, was he? The way they sought each other. The way they risked all this, revelled in things only they could understand. No illusions there. He smiled, then wiped his face on his elbow.

"Fucking kitten paw." Dan shook his head. "Kitten paw..." But he didn't move his hand away, just let it rest where it wanted to. Raising a brow, a slow grin started to spread across his face. "You cunt." The way he said this word, it had turned from bloodied horror, cut into sunburnt skin, to a term of affection.

"I have to be gone before dawn." Dan added quietly. "Stay?"

He'd be AWOL, Vadim thought. Nice, deep shit. Then again, shit happened. Plenty of time to deal with whatever disciplinary measures they came up with. He was hardly a deserter. They'd think he might have had a fight (with an enemy that bit him in the shoulder?) or a sweetheart (in a Muslim country where women lost their honour too damn quickly).

"Wake me up before you go." So I can watch you leave.

Dan nodded, grinned, but the grin faltered, scalding his face. He moved at last, but only to shuffle closer, until his hand lay on Vadim's hip. Seemed lately that it had become a favourite resting place for that 'kitten paw' of his. He would wake up in time, even though he was absolutely shattered. Despite the heat and the sweat, he fell asleep.

Vadim felt him shuffle closer, as if he was seeking warmth. Only there was too much of it in the room already. He studied the relaxed face, the damp hair, the arm across his stomach. He turned onto his side, kept Dan's arm in place, and pushed back up against him, resting on an elbow, the other hand relaxed at his side, arm touching that hand, holding it against his body.

We're both lost, comrade, he thought. We are in a war we don't want to be in, we're both on the wrong side of it, and all we get out of this is...He sighed. Enough to keep me going.

* * *

True to his word, Dan had woken Vadim, then left. No words, just a touch and a nod. He was gone. Nothing left, except for an abandoned piece of kit. The full bergan stood in the corner, the usual make of standard olive sturdy fabric, with the addition of PLCE webbing loosely wrapped around it, filled to bursting. It looked new, unlike most of the equipment that was available here; personal or otherwise.

Tucked behind the backpack, barely visible, stood a pair of boots. Brand new, dull leather that needed to be coated to withstand the extremities of the terrain. They weren't standard Army issue, not the usual boots he'd seen on dead turkeys, but Matterhorn boots, the latest in Western design. Expensive, and Vadim's perfect fit, two sizes larger than Dan's.

The PLCE pockets contained pain killers, two courses of penicillin and a couple of broad spectrum antibiotics, several different kinds of bandages and a tub of Vaseline. Some of the others housed high-quality kit like compass, binoculars, flares, gloves.

In the main part of the bergan, on the top was a soap-bag, containing a couple of tubes of toothpaste, the new soft plastic type, a double pack of toothbrushes 'Made in Britain', a large pack of Wilkinson Sword razor blades and a dozen Bic throwaway ones. Squeezed in the bag was a can of Gillette shaving foam and towards the bottom, a couple of bars of soap, one Shields and one Imperial Leather, good choices, not the crap the Russians gave out which was only fit to scrub the barracks floors. Next a tube of water-based lube: reading KY in clear-cut large, black letters. None of that available here. Near the bottom, a

substantial pack of Durex condoms, in a gaudy packet that flaunted a red sports car. Ironic, really, but he'd heard of 'the curse of the perverts' by now, tales of AIDS that decimated Western gays. No such concerns in the Soviet Union, but Vadim knew better than to assume that an illness cared for the ideology that only decadent Westerners died like that.

The side pockets were stuffed with pre-packed emergency rations and tinned chocolate, as well as a large bottle of vitamins in one of the smaller pockets.

Down the inside of the bergan was a rolled-up insulation mat which weighed almost nothing and would keep the freezing cold from the ground during nights in the mountains—or anywhere else in Afghanistan. Crammed right next to it were half a dozen socks. Not ordinary ones that most armies issued, but according to the tag, these were Coolmax ones developed for mountaineers. Top quality by the looks of it—could mean the difference between bleeding, infection-ravaged feet and sound feet without pain.

Carefully stashed amongst them, to prevent damage, two smaller bottles with a brown liquid. No label, but Vadim knew at the first sip that this was no moonshine. It wasn't even cheap stuff, but Dan's favourite Highland whisky, Balvenie.

On the very bottom of the bergan, hidden between a rolled-up towel, was a knife with a curved blade. An item designed to aid survival in hostile terrain. Nothing like the crap that was being issued to either army, even the Special Forces. It was sturdy, deadly, as sharp as a razor blade and it would stay so, no matter how often it was used. It lay heavy and well balanced in Vadim's hand, a tool so perfectly crafted it was beautiful to behold. It was the same that Dan carried.

A packed bergan and a pair of boots. 'Stay alive, Russkie'.

From one soldier to another.

1986 Chapter 15—Enemy Mine

December 1985, Afghanistan

Dan tightened the belt of his BDUs as he trudged along the trail. He'd lost a fair bit of weight in the last six months. Much as he'd become a part of these goddamned mountains, they were starting to take their toll, physically and psychologically. He'd never had to work on his own for so long, and no relief was in sight, nor the chance to ever let on how drained he was. Always another path, a new group, and yet more 'What do you have us do, Daan. How do we operate next?'

He almost felt sorry for the Russkies who'd been fighting this war since 1980 at a cost of thousands of lives and millions of roubles. Strategy wouldn't win this godforsaken squabble when you were up against at least six major Mujahideen groups, with several smaller ones that Dan knew of, and an uncountable number of minor private armies. No coordination of their operations, so no system to battle against.

And he was in the middle of it all. Organising sabotage that was too alien to the Afghan fighters and had to be left to the Western soldier and his ever-changing troop of men that he kept training and re-training but mostly utterly despairing over.

They'd been walking for hours, keeping close to cover after an ambush the night before had resulted in the loss of two men and the need to leave a third at one of the camps en route, to live or probably die. Who knew in these conditions where gangrene was the cruellest killer—right after the Mudjas' own sense of revenge.

He concentrated on map and compass to get his band as quickly as possible to the next camp while avoiding any more unpleasant surprises. For once, the weather was not fighting them, but still, an unnerving sense of foreboding hung over their heads as they trudged along.

Despite the exhaustion that blunted his senses and feeling light-headed from lack of food and water, Dan was wary. Boot tracks. He stopped dead.

Mujahideen? Unlikely, the treads were heavy and a whole group of them. Soviet patrol. They proceeded cautiously.

Morning turned into afternoon, but remained quiet and devoid of enemy. Nothing except more boot tracks and occasional disturbances of the ground.

The sound of rotor blades came into earshot. Dan hissed in anger. “Take cover.”

They stayed hidden for twenty minutes, long after the helicopter had taken off again, directly overhead without detecting them.

No sound, no movement. The leader wanted to pray. It seemed safe enough. Time for a cuppa. He chucked a handful of tea leaves into water boiled in his mess tin behind a large rock to allow them some privacy.

Dusk descended. After sharing some of the meagre provision of naan bread and dried fruit washed down with tea, they set off again, walking into the moon-rise, steel blue light soon giving the mountains the eerie vision of a moon crater.

They’d only managed to march for half hour when Dan heard the sound of movements, rocks tumbling below. “Holy fucking mother of god,” he muttered. No time to find shelter, only goddamned rocks that would dig into ribs and freeze their bollocks off during the night. No choice. The Soviet patrol set up camp within earshot. Fuck. One wrong step dislodging one small stone and Dan’s Mudjas would be mincemeat.

Communicating by sign language, Dan got his men to understand their predicament. They wrapped themselves in their blankets and after a couple of seconds, even the two who were meant to stay awake and share stakeout had fallen asleep, dead to the world despite his attempts to shake them awake. He kept guard on his own. It wasn’t the first goddamned time and it wouldn’t be the last.

Well past midnight, after hours of silence, Dan managed to wake the leader. Before his head had even hit his arm, curled up on the side with his rifle clutched in cold fingers, Dan was asleep. He was woken far too soon, feeling woozy, as if he could have slept for a lifetime longer, but the ice-cold air soon revived him. He was increasingly desperate for a cigarette, but one whiff of the smoke and that would be the end of them.

The Soviet patrol broke their camp and left in the opposite direction.

“Thank fuck.” They were well behind schedule, but now the men were cold and starving, speeding up, would only make them careless.

They eventually reached the entrance to a camp shielded by several large boulders.

Dan exchanged a worried glance with the leader. No sound nor anyone coming to greet or challenge them. Worse, there was a smell about the place that

made Dan's stomach churn, reminding him of a nightmare he'd been trying to forget.

Checking for tripwires or signs of butterfly mines and booby traps, Dan picked his way inside, despite the urgent sense that kept telling him to turn the fuck back and get away from the overpowering stench. With the leader and everyone close behind him, he could hardly hold back the retching, hearing telltale sounds at his back, even before they reached the position where the guard should have been.

Bodies, dead and rotting. The memory was hard to fight.

Forcing himself to go further, Dan was the first to come across the small opening to a cave and a pile of a dozen maimed bodies. Men and women ripped apart by carrions from sky and land in their search for food. Each one killed close to where they'd been lying, then left to rot.

Bile rose to the back of his throat. He wanted to vomit, but forced himself to hold it together. Wouldn't do to show the Mudjas what they'd perceive as weakness.

He took a closer look at the corpses. They'd been rounded up and shot at close range. A mass execution and war crime like victors had been committing since time began.

A close examination of the cave disclosed all the supplies were gone. They couldn't drink the water, the Soviets would have poisoned it.

The other men left Dan to search for shells. Suddenly the unmistakable sound of Kalashnikovs firing split the silence. "Shit!" He ducked, and with his SA-80 at the ready, ran out to be greeted by the sight of his Mudjas and a small patrol of Soviet soldiers firing wildly at each other. Some of his men had already fallen, but without the shelter of the rocks, the patrol was at a disadvantage.

He took cover where he could, shooting at the soldiers, but suddenly drawing their fire. He threw himself to the side and behind a boulder, and yelled in pain when he hit the ground. Heart racing, the heated metal of his rifle against his skin and his right knee in so much goddamned agony, he had to bite his lip to stop himself from screaming. As if hitting that bloody rock was his biggest problem.

On the ground, he waited for the agony to subside. Too close to the butchered Afghans, barely able to bear the stench, but even worse were the screams that started the moment the fire exchange quietened. Fuck! He pulled

himself onto his knees, the pain bringing water to his eyes. Crawling forward, he peered across the low rocks at the carnage.

Mudjas, Soviets, dead and dying. He stopped, taking his weight off his bung knee, leg trembling and his rifle at the ready. Survivors came out from behind their rocks crying, “Allahu Akhbar”, God is greater and all that shit.

He pulled himself upright. Fucking goddamned umpteenth time he’d smashed that particular knee.

Soviet Special Forces uniforms on the ground, their light, sand-coloured camo turning rusty dark as blood drenched the cloth. Some of them still wore those odd bush hats with upturned side that reminded him of Australian troops. Probably not even Russians, but those hapless men from Poland, East Germany and Czechoslovakia who’d been drawn into this godforsaken war by their Big Brother.

Dan searched swiftly amongst the bodies for the telltale sight that he dreaded unlike anything else: blond hair, broad shoulders, eyes that would be closed never to open again, and body, hands, smell, and...no. He remembered to breathe when none of them was Vadim. He counted the corpses. Five...six...no, seven. Seven. He frowned.

Odd number.

The surviving insurgents were swarming over the soldiers’ corpses like big-arsed flies that hung like grapes on legs of mutton down in Kabul. Before Dan could hobble closer, an onslaught of fresh blood hit his senses. Hearing angry cries and torn-out words that he hardly understood in their rapid succession, he made out ‘revenge’ and ‘enemies’, but when he got close enough he recoiled. Nothing had prepared him for that, not in all those years. Knives tearing into uniforms, slashing bellies open so that hands could dive into blood to tear out the guts, while others gouged out the eyes of the dead.

Not his world. No, fuck, no! Not his goddamned world, not his men, not his culture and most of all, not his religion. No gods, no beliefs, and Allah is greater, let’s rip open some Soviet corpses, scattering their remains in revenge to obliterate their existence.

“Shit,” Dan muttered. What the fuck was he going to do? How could he stop this frenzy? He understood their hatred caused by their mates rotting away in a heap, but fuck, he wouldn’t have torn out the guts of those who’d shot them.

Did that make him any better? Probably just...different. Fuck. Limping along, clenching his teeth and avoiding the sight, Dan spotted an arm, lying closer to an outcrop of rocks furthest away from the frenzy. The eighth one? He'd better check, could be a trap. He ignored the agony in his knee, crouching to move closer, rifle at the ready.

The moment Dan reached the soldier he knew the guy wasn't dead. Eyes twitching, moaning, blood on the uniform and the arm at an unnatural angle where the bullet had shattered bone. "Oh fuck." Dan groaned, getting himself down to the ground, kneeling beside the guy and patting him down. Weapons out of reach, he took the chin and turned the face towards him. A kid. No more. A curse on this fucking war and its hapless conscripts.

The wounded arm twitched, fingers moving without intention. The good hand reached for the ground, touching dust and stone, seemingly looking for the rifle. A cough awoke the soldier further, tore him back to the surface as it became dry and painful. Eyes opened, a light, indefinite colour like a greyish green, bloodshot and reddened from too much dust and wind.

Dan murmured, glanced backwards to where the cries of revenge were ringing across the mountain and into the sky. "Why the fuck aren't you dead?" he asked in Russian.

The coughing didn't stop. With an enormous effort, the young man turned onto his side to spit out dust, reaching for the canteen at his belt, then paused.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." Dan murmured, a litany of desperate swear words, glancing backwards again. They hadn't been detected, yet. His bulk shielding the kid soldier from what was going on with the corpses of his comrades.

The soldier's eyes returned to Dan's frame, travelled up to his eyes, not comprehending. Then widened as some kind of realization hit him. He looked towards the canteen, but didn't move a muscle, trying hard to suppress the coughing reflex, as if the slightest sound, the slightest movement could kill him.

That look of realisation was all Dan needed, it told him that if the kid survived, he'd be fucked and the Soviets would have their proof that a Brit was operating in the region: training and guiding the insurgents. If the kid lived...but there was no other choice. Was there?

"Wait," Dan continued to speak Russian, went for the canteen on the belt, rifle across his protesting knees, unscrewed the bottle to let water pour past the

chapped lips. That arm looked nasty, but nothing a fairly healthy young man couldn't survive. Survive. Live.

Fuck.

“Why the hell did you lot come back here?”

The young soldier forced himself up on an elbow as he drank the water, reaching for the canteen to hold it himself, drank, deeply, and only stopped to fight that cough. Another twitch of the wounded arm, and the soldier looked at it, only now realizing that, indeed, he was wounded. He dropped on the ground again, hand going towards his pockets to find bandages. Well-drilled responses. He paused again, looking at Dan, checking his hands for weapons, then seemingly decided that Dan didn't mean to cut his throat right away. “I need to cover my wound.” The Adam's apple jumped with a forced swallow. The Russian was accented.

Dan nodded, acting on instinct. Fuck. What was the point? What was he going to do with him? Reaching into the pockets, he pulled out a bandage, applying the shell dressing as fast and efficiently as any medic would. At first, the Soviet soldier watched, then he relaxed and turned his eyes back on Dan's face, like a patient reading the diagnosis from his doctor's eyes.

“Thank you.” A faint smile, common courtesy for basic help. “Where's my unit?”

Dan hadn't quite finished when one of the Mudjas, hands dripping in blood, came up behind him, staring wild-eyed and in the fury of bloodied aggression down at the Soviet soldier, whose head jerked up, eyes widened at the sudden appearance. The Mudja shouted to the others in Pashto that there was another one, a last one. On instinct, the Soviet soldier reached for the AK that was too far away to reach.

“Oh scheisse.”

“No!” Dan had just about finished off the bandage and raised his arm to shield the kid. “He's alive.” As if that mattered, fuck! As if, indeed. He'd be better off dead.

“Not dead yet.” The man growled, and others of Dan's small surviving group of insurgents came up behind him. “Dead soon. Go out of way, Daan. Is ours.”

“No fucking way.” Snarling, Dan reached for his rifle, knew damn well that threatening all of them would just end in blood—his own, but he drew his upper

body up and his shoulders back, to be as imposing as possible. He'd worked with a few of them for a while, but most of the guys were new and he hadn't connected yet, his position of authority still shaky.

"What the fuck do you want him for anyway?" He knew, hell, he knew. The knives in their hands spoke volumes. "He's still alive, you are not going to cut him open and gut him!" Dan's left hand on the soldier's chest pressed down, as if holding him back or reassuring him. Dan didn't know, because what could he reassure him of? To live? He couldn't.

The soldier held his hand strongly, eyes on the rifle, eager to defend himself.

"No! There's no fucking way I'll let you do that." Dan's hand curled tightly around his SA-80. "Wait!" Dan held up the rifle, despite the determination and glaring anger that stared into his face. No way could he overwhelm them all, but he'd make a damn good shot at it if he had to. "He might have information. I'll get it out of him. I speak the language."

The young soldier kept staring at his AK, as if force of will alone could move it. Clearly only picking up on the aggression in the air, not what was being said, still holding Dan's hand. "Let me get the rifle," he murmured, as if not doubting for a moment Dan was on his side.

Dan stared at the young man for a second, before realisation dawned on him that the kid believed he was there to defend him. That thought tore deeper into his own guts than any Mudja knives could have. "No." He turned his attention back to the men who seemed to wager the chances of getting any information out of the soldier.

In the end, they nodded. "For now. Give you half hour, Daan, no more."

Half an hour. What the fuck would it matter anyway, and he didn't even know what he was trying to do, but he couldn't allow the kid to be tortured and torn apart alive. No one deserved that, least of all a kid.

When the others went away to deal with the corpses in ways Dan didn't want to know, he said in Russian, "I got a reprieve. But you're not Soviet."

"No, no I'm not. Heavens, no." The soldier glanced past Dan. "And you aren't Pashtun." He shook his head. "It's alright. No question. I don't want to know. Nicht wirklich. Can I have more water? I'm...German."

Dan reached for the water. What did it matter that he shouldn't give him water after the blood loss. What the fuck did any of it matter? Not his war. Not his people. Not his problem? Still, he handed the canteen to the young man, the rifle trained onto him all the time. "I need information. It's the only way." He remembered some words of German, one of the many languages that floated in his brain. "Wichtig. Information. Muss haben. Soviet troops, where and what? I need to know something, you understand?"

The soldier took another swallow, only coughing now and again. He seemed genuinely surprised to hear his own mother tongue, but the rifle brought the point home that this, after all, was not a friend, and the beginning smile faltered. "Yes, I understand. You are to interrogate me? What happened to my unit?" He took another swallow of water, eyes kept on the rifle.

"Your unit is dead." Dan shuffled to the side, cutting off the young man's view as best he could.

"Dead." The soldier dropped his arm with the canteen, not believing it could have happened that quickly, last he likely remembered, they'd been alive. "I...will talk. Of course I will. I'm no hero."

"I need to know about plans, about landmines, troop movements. Anything you know."

"Plans...mines..." the soldier was repeating it to memorize the question, struggling to keep up.

Glancing over his shoulder, what Dan saw turned his stomach, but his face remained expressionless. "I can only promise one thing. I will not let you fall into the Pashtuns' hands." He wondered if the kid knew what that actually meant.

"Oh Gott." Toneless. Another, desperate glance at the rifle, as his eyes suddenly darkened with the realization. Interrogation, then death. "Can I have...a hand grenade?" Lots of Soviet troops pulled the ring on their own hand grenades to evade capture. "Don't..." Stalling again, confused.

"Fuck, I'm trying to keep you from them, okay?" A creeping desperation was eating into Dan's bones, travelling through his blood. "Forget the shit about hand grenades, just show me on the map." He'd seen the glance to the rifle and kept it safely out of reach while fishing for the map, then spreading it out. Trying to keep the kid from the rage of the Mujahideen, yet he couldn't keep the young man from himself. He suddenly felt so goddamned tired.

“Okay. Map. Yes.” Now there was fear in the young man’s eyes, fear that would make him obey, and fear that chased away the pain at least for the moment. “I’ll show you. You don’t need to torture me, okay? I’ll tell you the truth. All I know. I do everything you say.”

The soldier forced his body onto the side and stared at the map, concentrated, trying to find the pass, the exact location of the village. It took him a while, fear and blood loss and pain probably making an ordinary task challenging. “Give me a moment...it should be here somewhere.” Speaking, as if to appease Dan, to prevent blows or, worse, torture. “There. This is it.” A dusty finger pointed to a place close to the village. “This is where we were set down. And this is...” The finger slowly tracing a somewhat haphazard line. “...where we were going. We didn’t expect to encounter anybody here. We’re just a patrol. We thought you’d long gone. We radioed for the Hinds, but I don’t think they got a clear signal.” He glanced at Dan. “We were to keep tabs on movement in this area, but we didn’t expect you to still be here. But with the Russkies, one hand doesn’t know what the other is doing.” Bitterness at the obvious mistake.

Dan’s eyes narrowed at the mentioning of Hinds. If they did get a signal, they’d really be up shit creek without a paddle. This made the situation even worse. A fucked-up situation that was already nothing but a pile of shit. “I’m not here to torture you, you understand me?”

“Yes. Yes, of course.” Eagerness to appease the captor, definitely not going to give as much as a word of protest.

“I’m trying to...” fuck, what? “do something. I’m not your friend, hell no, but I’m not one of them, either.” He glanced back at the Mudjas who had dragged the disembowelled corpses onto a pile, and smelled the first signs of burning. Smoke beginning to curl up above the all overpowering stench of blood.

“Okay. Whatever you say. I’m just...rattled.” In the same tone as if he’d say ‘don’t worry, I’ll be alright.’ Justifying, apologizing.

“Oh shit.” Dan murmured to himself. Shit and derision. That kid was going to get tortured and killed just like all of the Soviet P.O.W.s, and there was nothing he could do about it, and since when did he even *want* to do something about it? He’d been dragged in far deeper than he ever wanted to be. Six years and he just couldn’t stand it anymore.

“Listen to me, whatever happens, you stay dead quiet.” Pushing the soldier’s body back down. “Verstanden? Only chance to play dead.”

“Ja, verstanden.” The body protesting the push, but then he lay down. He kept his eyes open, not trusting enough.

“Hey!” Dan called over in Pashto. “We have to get going, I found out they signalled the Hinds and your damned fire is going to show them exactly where we are.” Dan didn’t blink, hoping they’d swallow his bluff. “Get your stuff together, we have to get moving. The soldier’s dead.”

They were looking up, a couple coming closer and all Dan could do was turn his head and hiss to the enemy soldier, “I’ll try to leave you here. I’ll try. Trust me. I won’t let them get you.” Whatever happens, and he’d promised it before. Almost six years ago, to a man he’d tortured and who had been running for his life.

“What’s...your name? Won’t tell. I won’t.” Another long glance, but the soldier was young enough to trust, and his words were just a toneless whisper.

“No. Can’t.” No way, no names, and thus no meaning. If he gave his name things would become too real.

“Then let us have the body,” the Mudjas protested. Their hatred had not abated, not even with the corpses alit, but Dan shook his head, answering in rapid Pashto, “There’s no time. No need. Come.” He stood up, wanted to scream when his knee protested, instead picked up map, rifle and the soldier’s AK. “We have to get going!” Standing in front of the kid, shielding him. This was insane and he knew it. If the Soviets had proof that all they’d ever guessed was nothing but the truth, he’d be hunted like a rabid dog. But Dan was exhausted and so goddamned motherfucking tired of all of this shit, the only thing that suddenly mattered was to save one measly life amongst the hundreds that had died around him.

“No.”

Dan drew himself up even taller, standing with shoulders squared, towering over most of them. “Do you want to be gunned down by Hinds? Don’t be stupid.” Gesturing to the pile of burning corpses. “You got what you wanted: revenge.”

All of Dan’s remaining men were standing in front of him and he could feel their anger. Their comrades had died, turned into festering corpses in the camp nearby. One false move and it was him who’d have a knife through his bowels.

“Will you get the fuck going, now?” Angry, scowling at them, he took a couple of threatening steps forward. “If not, you can do what you want and I’ll leave on my own.”

“We don’t need you, Daan. Not anymore.” The first one tried to push Dan away, but he stood, legs braced.

“Don’t be stupid. Leave the soldier’s corpse alone. You’ve had enough blood, haven’t you?” He’d barely finished when another man shouted, “Death to the infidels!”

They pushed against him, too many, forcing him out of the way. Short of starting to shoot, he didn’t have a chance. He stumbled and despite shouldering into a couple of the Mudjas, they barged past. He crashed into the rocks. Fuck!

Knife blades reflected a glimpse of sunlight. Hands tore at the soldier’s blood-drenched uniform.

“No!” Dan shouted.

The soldier fought one-handed, kicking where he could, kicking with all the strength he had left. Fighting like an animal. Biting. The pure stress of combat and pain wiping the fear away, wiping everything away until he was only struggling flesh, breath growing ragged, and fast, fighting on his back for all he was worth, not even cursing or screaming.

“Fuck you!” Dan yelled, “Fuck you and your fucking world!” His rifle butt came crashing down on the first man, then a second, in rapid succession, knocking them out of the way to make himself a clear space within the ring of bodies. Drab coloured deadly carrion, tearing at their prize, devouring the still-living flesh.

He heard a scream, the flurry of motion, saw one of the knives flashing downwards and towards the soldier’s guts. Before the blade entered, Dan had his pistol out of the holster and in his hand, aiming at the kid’s head. “I’m sorry.” In Russian, and caught a glance from those panicking eyes, before pulling the trigger. Once. Twice, and a third time.

Three clean shots where one would have been sufficient, straight through the skull, smashing the young face with hardly any beard, and splattering the brains the moment the blade sliced into flesh. Too late for pain. The soldier was dead.

Dan stood for no more than a second. Shocked to the core and unable to understand why the fuck this one life and death had rattled him, but he had no more time to dwell when the angry cries turned against him. Fists pummelled into

his body and face, and blades flew towards him. Heartbeats before his training kicked in, defending the attack. Knives cut into his back, warmth and pain on his arm. He kicked and punched, until he managed to get his rifle back up. Shooting into the air, he yelled at the top of his lungs, “You want to fight for Allah or die for him? You choose!”

Thank fuck they had enough sense to stop trying to tear him apart. Dan escaped unhindered as if something had suddenly turned them back towards the corpse itself. Like hyenas they tore into the young man’s body. He couldn’t watch. He felt sick and didn’t understand why. He’d seen worse, done much worse, oh yes, much worse, but that kid’s face, the greed to survive, and the sheer insanity of it all, was getting to him, just like the stench of burning flesh curled into his nostrils.

He went back to his bergan, safe in the knowledge they weren’t going to attack him again. Yet, the atmosphere had changed and they wouldn’t trust ‘Daan’ like they used to. Finding the bandages, Dan wrapped himself up best he could. Crouching far away from corpses and Mudjas, one hand pressed against his knee and another holding his face. His head felt heavy and just as weary as the tiredness that had crept into the rest of his body and finally into his mind.

Six months, and how much longer before he could get back to wherever he could remember who and what and why, and...

He’d forgotten.

March 1986, Afghanistan

The wind was even colder than the freezing ground, howling day after day, while he was still stuck in this mountainous hell. This winter, his goat herders said, was far harsher than any they could remember. It should be spring. Yeah, right, as if he gave a flying fuck anymore. Each day was just about survival. Surviving and killing—killing to survive.

Dan had done more of his fair share of both, and the last nine months had taken their toll. Day in, night out; the extremes of weather, the hardship of the terrain. The death, and the dying. Scraping for food and water, sleeping in caves, no more than holes hewn into earth and rock, and, if lucky, the luxury of a flea-infested tent. All he could dream of sometimes was a bed, a proper, soft, big

feather bed. If he ever got out of the mountains, he would buy one. Queen size, at least. Just for himself. Then again, what did it matter? Where would he want to go? Afghanistan had swallowed him whole, perhaps she would never spit him out again.

He was tired of the constant cold that froze a man's brain and sapped his strength. Aggravated by climbing for hours and walking for days, just to reach that cave. The cave they'd stayed in, two years ago, after the massacre. He didn't even know if he had misunderstood the encrypted message. There might be no one and nothing waiting for him.

He cursed the rocks beneath his feet that made his steps unsteady. His right knee hurt constantly these days. Arthritis from wear and tear or too much cold. Deterioration sped up by injuries like that night in Kabul: explosions, insurgents, and a fall from a collapsing building. It didn't matter. He'd laugh about his own failing body if he had any breath left in this motherfucking altitude that robbed his air and dulled the senses. He felt like he was aging fast. Funny, really, at the ripe old age of thirty-seven.

Forced to trek the long way round, too many possible traps on the shorter, straightforward path, it had taken him longer than it should. He couldn't touch the main road if he wanted to stay alive. He'd be a prize to behold if a Soviet patrol caught him, or anyone who had an interest in his head, and that would be quite a few by now.

Finally getting closer to the cave, he felt like he was being watched, but sensed no danger. Wondered tiredly if he even really cared anymore. Life. Death. The latter meant no pain and no toil, and finally sleeping.

Up in the cave, Vadim pulled back inside, secured the Dragunov rifle, and tossed some tea leaves into the metal mugs. Lemon was hard to come by in this country.

Dan made it to the plateau at last, saw the entrance, walked right towards it. Took less care than he used to, he was too weary. If he was going to be ambushed from anywhere, then so fucking be it. Ducking his head to step inside, he spotted the Russian immediately and grunted something akin to a greeting, watching the tall shape move in the low light. Funny, how the roles kept changing. Nine months ago he'd provided a bergan, full of everything the Glorious Soviet Army could not

get, before that, Vadim had given him money to survive a rough patch in Kabul. Again, it was he who was left with nothing.

Dan shrugged the rifle strap off his shoulder, then worked his arms out of the heavy backpack that contained all of his worldly possessions. He'd retained his sleeping bag, blanket, the clothes on his body, ammo, rifle, pistol, knives, but not much else.

Vadim pulled the fur hat off and tossed it onto his kit. Dan made a few noises—shuffling, mostly. Welcome home. A fine housewife he made, tea and beef jerky, and a cave with a small fire. Technically, he didn't need more. He was reasonably sure this place was no longer used as storage. The dushmans had stopped using the path down around the mountain.

Dan slipped the pack off his back, letting it hit the ground with a thud. Movements, sight and sounds. So familiar, yet a lifetime away.

Vadim turned, and Dan's gaze fell onto the Russian's boots and their unmistakable 'M' stamped into the ankle. Matterhorn, just like his own. Apparently he'd chosen the right size, back in Blighty. A place he could hardly remember and which he'd finally lost all connection with. Nothing left. Empty.

"Got some hot water?" Stretching up to full height, Dan felt every bone protest in his long abused body. It was good to move the muscles, though, easing off from the long trek. He was insane to have made this journey; insane or...he wasn't sure. "Haven't shaved in days."

Vadim placed one mug on the ground near Dan, then placed his own not too far away. "No cream." It was a private joke. Lemon, cream, sugar...a semblance of civilization. He nodded towards the kettle. "There's more. I found water." It was amazing how much water actually did exist in Afghanistan without making even the faintest appearance. He had developed a sense for the water, the hidden streams running underground in the *karez* systems or natural channels from the glaciers to the lowlands.

Dan bent down, groans turning into a guttural, low sound of pleasure as the heat warmed his hands and the hot tea slowly rolled over his tongue and down his throat. "Good stuff." A compliment from a Brit. "Even without the cream." Grinning tiredly.

It was almost comfortable in the cave, sheltered sufficiently from the cold and the constantly howling winds. Dan tried to estimate how long his Russkie had

been waiting here. The time it would have taken a small fire to warm the cubic metres of air. Would Vadim still have been here if he hadn't managed to get there in time?

Vadim sat down, holding the mug carefully by the rim, and watched. "Rough going," he commented to nothing in particular. His gaze fell onto the rifles, and with a scowl, he placed the desert scarf over them. A bundle of death. He shook his head, then concentrated on the heat and the occasional sip. Allowing the other man time, every now and then glancing at him. He didn't want to stare, had to get used to Dan once more. Especially after *his enemy* had sent off another dozen tin caskets with comrades in them.

Dan moved his fingers after warming them on the mug. They were getting stiff lately and he couldn't wait for summer. Overuse, the medic had said last time he'd managed to see one. Wear and tear. Fair enough. Overuse of body and mind—the Afghan mountains could do that to a man.

He unwrapped the obligatory rag from around his head and face, revealing not only the thick stubble, but also a new scar running from his left cheekbone to the corner of his mouth. It hadn't been there nine months ago, in the grimy and overheated hotel room in Kabul. He'd been lucky the knife hadn't cut deeper. The curve of his lips still seemed the same, but he hadn't seen it in a proper mirror and only remembered it when it itched.

The wild dark hair had grown long, reaching beyond his neck, but it didn't bother him. He'd chop some of it off if it started to annoy him, that's what knives were for, after all. That, and killing—and sometimes cutting flesh into scars that formed meaning.

Dan took the parka off, then the second scarf around his neck, followed by the three layers of jumper, vest, then shirt. Thick flannel, it didn't matter what it was nor what it looked like, as long as it kept him warm. He was down to the t-shirt, before searching for the soap bag in his bergan. All of his clothes were stained, but they didn't smell of anything other than wood smoke. He didn't feel dirty, knowing the secret of keeping clean with a handful of water, vital for survival and health.

Rummaging in the almost empty soap bag, he found a small piece of soap to lather and use for makeshift shaving foam, and his last, blunt razor. It would

have to do, he'd get new kit eventually. Maybe. Or he'd end up with a beard like the goat-fuckers.

Dan had lost some of his bulk, replaced by longer muscles. Leaner, built for defence, even though he'd been behind some of the worst attacks. A grubby bandage was wound around his right bicep, and a couple of new scars had found their way to the back of his shoulders. He wasn't even sure how he'd got each of them: shrapnel, grenades, splinters and rubble, even a fall on the rocks. Who knew, who cared.

Crouching down in front of the fire and the tin pot with its warm water, Dan ignored Vadim, solely intent on trying to see his face in the back of the buckled mess tin, since his mirror had broken two months ago. He washed his face before lathering and rubbing the soap into the dark stubble, then swished the razor in the water.

Vadim set the empty mug down, and came over in a crouch. Placing his fingers around Dan's hands, he pulled them down, away from a face that had seen more than enough abuse already. The scar made it look far more sinister. Character. He effortlessly extracted the razor, then cupped Dan's chin in his hand. "You look like walking tree," he said, disapproving.

He raised Dan's chin, placing the razor to the side of his throat, smirking when he detected the moment of tension. He'd use a much sharper knife to cut him. With this thing, it was impossible to inflict more than surface cuts—and that was something Dan would have managed completely on his own.

Dan felt claustrophobic for a moment, yet they'd been much closer—impossibly close when inside each other's body—but nine months in the mountains had got him used to more personal space than he had ever wanted.

When Vadim finished and put the razor down, Dan looked at the face before him, unsure at what stage in the last six years he had stopped wanting to smash it in with fists and boots. Familiarity. Interesting, an idle part of his mind was musing, perfection. That was it. His eyes were drawn to Vadim's lips, he'd split them but never kissed them. He leaned forward. His lips touched before Vadim could react. Dan parted them a fraction, needing to taste, feel, invite in return.

Vadim's breath caught in his throat. That touch as normal, as sane as he had thought it could be.

Dan's voice was rough and low as he murmured against Vadim's lips. "I hate you, Russkie." No. He didn't, but he couldn't find the right word for this. This feeling. Hatred was the closest he could get. The alternative was still unthinkable.

Vadim inhaled, exhaled deeply to clear his mind. Too much thought what this pledge meant. If anything.

Dan hadn't kissed anyone in so many years, he couldn't remember. He wasn't prepared for the intense sensation of heat flooding from Vadim's mouth, the simple pleasure of lips touching-moving against lips, and the new sensation of stubble. He'd never kissed a man; never in his whole life. Except...a kiss of death six years ago. Another first and last and always for--from Vadim. A rape—a kiss. And wasn't it ironic. Kissing. He'd forgotten. Fuck, how much he wanted to remember.

Vadim placed a hand against Dan's chest. Not just any man. Not the handsome Hungarian fencer who kissed him despite the risk. He had still kissed him, the rest was history, as they said.

This was Dan, Dan who seemed like a skittish horse when the silence moved away from a silence between men who didn't speak much, to a silence that held words. He expected Dan to laugh or hit him, maybe, some kind of joke. He narrowed his eyes, looked at him, and saw the extent of the weariness.

Dan was defenceless today. No armour. No knife. Dan would still fight, but he had nothing to expend, nothing to give. No extra round, no spare magazine. The other was spent in a way that felt unnatural.

Vadim wanted to say something, something about not minding, not caring, not worrying. Dan might think it was reluctance. It wasn't. He just couldn't breathe. He put a hand against Dan's neck and pulled him forward, tilted his head, rested his forehead against the other man's. He needed to find words, fall back into breathing properly, but it was like he was diving and still hadn't broken the surface. He wanted to offer food, warmth, more tea, then realized he was stalling. Didn't find any smart words, not in English, not in Russian. It didn't disturb him. He had accepted it long ago. "You're one brave man, coming into lion's den," he murmured, and meant something entirely different.

"No." Dan shook his head, not much of a motion, reluctant to move away from the close proximity and the simple but profound gesture of foreheads touching. "You don't understand." Murmured, too close to see those ice blue eyes,

his sight blurry. “I can’t remember.” He knew how to kill and how to fuck. He couldn’t remember tenderness.

Vadim bared his teeth, kept Dan in exactly the same position, hand tensing. Soldiers that suddenly went strange, that suddenly had this ‘What the fuck am I doing here?’ thing written all over their faces. It happened. Stress. Doubts. Judging from his own experience, sometimes, they were just homesick. He could deal with the stress. It meant breaking people, but he could. Homesickness was different.

It took his mother two weeks to die, her legs swollen and inflamed, going from bad to much worse and then finally, she was dead. He barely made it to the funeral. Standing there as the family mingled, kisses, hugs, the wailing. They found it hard to kiss him in that full dress uniform, its formality. He struggled to shed it once they were all together, cooking, talking about things, never anything political. His father had been critical in private, and Vadim had always felt that could destroy his career. Luckily, his father never made his opinions public, keeping silent unless with people he trusted.

Now whenever Vadim wore the uniform, the sardonic comments and puns stopped. His father knew how to use language, but didn’t speak during the uncomfortable week they spent together. He tried to help the old man back on track, but he had the feeling he didn’t actually need somebody to carry out the old wardrobe and fix the massive bookshelf, but somebody to talk to. Only, you didn’t talk to the secret service. And his father was not stupid.

After this, he had felt numb whenever he went home, put it down to the fact his mother was dead. The practical, down-to-earth woman he owed his looks to. He had changed sides, that was the feeling. Somehow, somewhere, he had become ‘one of them’, the hero turned spy, intelligence officer, fighting a war nobody understood in a country that nobody cared about. He was only homesick after a place that might have existed when he’d been a child, living in his memories.

“Tell me, what do you remember?”

“I don’t want to talk.” Dan’s neck muscles tensed resisting Vadim’s hand. He didn’t know the words and he didn’t want to search for them. “I just want to feel.” But no, that wasn’t it. “I want to feel *human*.”

Anybody else, and Vadim would have taken the mug, pushed it into his hand and told him to drink his tea. Human. Two arms, two legs, one head. Capable of speech. An animal that changed its surroundings and adapted. He let go of Dan’s

neck, then, without thinking much, took his face into both hands and kissed him. Just like that, like the Hungarian fencer. No fear, or misgivings, body to body. Fairly chaste, as the thought of teasing, arousing and passion seemed far away. Smelling the soap, the damp skin from the shave, and the long hair. Tasting what amounted to bitterness. Tears.

This was what Dan needed. Simple. Profound. His humanity lost and shot to pieces in a war that wasn't his own. All he'd ever been was a killer, but right now he was more than that. The kiss made him feel human, and the Russian's tenderness hurt like a motherfucker.

He didn't touch Vadim at first. Did nothing but part his lips and close his eyes. Couldn't stop an odd, bitterly lost sound that escaped from somewhere deep inside. Reacted, at last, opening his eyes, despite being so close, tilted his head and breathed, moved, demanding to taste. Vadim's stubble rasped against his lips when the kiss turned real; sensing scars, his own lips chapped in places, in others smooth and warm.

He'd dehumanised the Soviets, their allies, even the Mujahideen he was supposed to be organising against the invaders. He'd taken humanity from the corpses—and in return those dead eyes, maimed bodies and rotting flesh had stolen his.

This man though, those eyes, lips, hands and body, this man was alive, causing an onslaught of sensations when tongue met tongue, entering the body without force—unlike their cocks. Vadim tasted of tea, survival and strength.

Vadim parted his lips, almost surprised at the tongue. It seemed unlike Dan, somehow, to kiss him like that. He ran his hands down Dan's face, to his shoulders, enjoyed how the muscles shifted, how the man breathed, and felt himself press into the kiss. Demanding more, much more as it struck an inner chord, somewhere down there, which reminded him of lust and greed. He shouldn't be wanting this, but the kiss was sensuous, tender, and after all the months it was impossible to pretend he didn't want this, this and more, because they both could have been dead, and not met here.

Breathing hard, he pulled away for a moment. "You need to rest up," Vadim said, softly in Russian, and nodded over to the improvised bed. It would be pretty damn tight, he had done what he could, but there was only so much possible. He was here as a sniper, not as a hotelier, after all.

Dan let out a strange sound when the connection was severed. Anger, frustration, the dark-coiling fear of something he refused to acknowledge: rejection. “What?” He’d kissed, he wanted more. Wanted something he couldn’t understand and was told he wouldn’t get it. Felt like a fool. “I don’t fucking need to rest up.” His body tensed.

Vadim turned back to face the other and studied him in the gloom of the cave. Like the two first men on earth, or the last, and it was fucking insanity they were enemies. When they weren’t. Dan had shed his camo. He removed his shirt, eyes on Dan’s, the undershirt, and then, almost in an afterthought, but it wasn’t, it was reluctance, the watch. He felt tension, wasn’t entirely sure about the rules right now.

Dan’s eyes widened suddenly. That one movement he’d never seen, never expected. The watch. That one last piece of identity that Vadim wouldn’t shed—unlike himself, who had been forced to lose his a long time ago.

“You fucking well do need rest.” Vadim stood and went to the cave opening, crouched to set up the tripwire and the caltrops on the way in, then returned. “We have time.” Maybe a day or two. Hoped that Dan understood what he was offering.

Not the reaction Dan had expected, but he had no energy to query. He just sat, watching, studying the uniform that should make him shoot Vadim on sight, instead he was as familiar with it as he was with his own—more so. Hadn’t worn the British camo for too long, had touched and smelled the Russian’s far more often. He wasn’t fighting for Queen and Country, he was doing a job that had severed all connection to himself during the last nine months.

Dan couldn’t suppress the wince when he moved out of the crouch. His knees hurt more than he could deal with, but no chance to give in to the pain. Undoing the laces of his well-worn Matterhorns, he shed the socks as well but not the trousers. Not yet. “I suppose I am fucking tired.” Not just ‘been a long trek’, or any such shit. Only the bare bones of truth. He was tired. He had lost his way.

Dan stood up, forlorn in the cave and stared at nothing.

Vadim undressed completely, got rid of every last shred of Soviet Army. Sharing warmth, yeah right, meant skin to skin. He stepped up to Dan and took a handful of his far too long hair—disgrace to any army in the world. Pulling him close, to look him in the eye, before Vadim moved towards the makeshift bunk,

nothing more than a mat and a couple of blankets, his bergan serving as part insulation, part pillow.

“Get your ass down there.”

Dan raised his brows, said nothing. Exhausted. “Bossy Russian cunt.” Murmured, with a surprising sense of fondness. Trust Vadim to set the anchor and hold onto the lost frigate. He sat down on the makeshift bed, his movements stiffer than they used to be.

“We’ll see who’s the cunt,” said Vadim. Seeing Dan move, there were thoughts of infection, disease, broken bones, things only old people got, but then, the knees, that was a para thing. He knew the future held that in store for him as well. Athletes and soldiers asked more of their bodies than those could deliver forever. He crouched, waiting for Dan to lean back, then lay down as well, half covering him with his body, and the blanket.

Dan couldn’t remember when he’d been able to settle down and seek sleep without being alert in some parts of his mind. Shuffling back in an attempt to leave enough space for the equally large body, face to face. It felt warm. Smelled familiar.

“You’d make a bloody great wife for someone.” Dan chuckled tonelessly.

Wife. Vadim peered at Dan. At least nothing like devuchka. He really didn’t like that word. His hands found the belt buckle, opened it, the metallic sound odd in the cave, opened the buttons and slid the trousers down the still body, lips brushing Dan’s pec, the warm strength that rested within. He moved down, pulling the trousers with him, undressing him. It struck deep, that word, somehow. Wives waited at home and reared children. Sometimes, they sent letters, and received letters in return. “Don’t get your hopes up, I’m on top.”

Dan frowned, didn’t understand Vadim’s reaction. “Holy fuck, Russkie, take it a notch down.” Wife, to him, was someone who stood for stability, for coming home, for dealing with all the shit he wasn’t able to deal with. For providing a real life and not this insanity. Wife—an unattainable idea that only existed in men’s imagination. Mother and whore, yeah, fuck that.

“You can fuck me all you like, I’m too exhausted to fight.” Dan had never been that honest. Rarely been that acidic, either. “Does that make you happy?” Shit choice of words, knew it the moment they were out. Fuck, he’d forgotten to be himself.

Vadim tossed the trousers away, paused. When, how, and why had the rules all changed? Dan—weak, irritated, sounded as if he was hurt far worse than the scratches. He was tempted to fuck him only to check whether he could reach Dan’s strength, fan it into something to keep him going.

He lay down, looking at Dan, saw the bandage stand out against the dark skin. His fault, maybe. With the new set of rules, banter turned serious too soon. English didn’t quite carry what he wanted to say. Or not say, by saying something else. He found it hard to look at Dan’s face in the gloom. He wanted to turn him over, rest on top, maybe lie side by side and put an arm around him. Just to share warmth. And say things neither language allowed.

Dan closed his eyes, listened to the silence. Lying on his side, tense at first, until it slowly dissipated, along with thoughts that swirled in slow, lazy circles through his mind. “I haven’t suddenly turned into a whiny bitch, Russkie.” Voice dark and low, “I guess I simply came too close to the grim reaper a few times too many, even for my own liking.”

Vadim placed a hand on Dan’s hip and moved closer, touching him all the way, not looking at him, but at the dark hollow between Dan’s head and the ground. He understood the body, he didn’t always understand the man that lived inside.

Tension smoothed itself out of overused muscles as Dan shuffled closer. Silence tried to settle, but his tired chuckle chased it away. “I remember my first kiss. It was a fucking disaster.”

Vadim’s fingers moved up the side, a slow, deliberate movement. He tried to remember his first kiss. Ah, yes, a cousin who had been smitten with him. They had sworn to marry. Nothing disastrous about it, only that he hadn’t kept the promise.

“I’m here,” he said, tonelessly. Hoped it held as much as it should. Talk, no talk, kissing, heart baring, warmth, rest. Maybe Dan had meant that with the whole wife thing.

“So you are.” Dan answered, that oh-so hilarious story of his first kiss forgotten. Didn’t matter. Not any longer. Silence, then, amidst the quiet sounds of two men’s calm breathing.

“Funny,” Dan murmured at long last, “it’s another first today.” He paused, “You seem to be the one for firsts,” his breath caught, “and lasts and always.”

Vadim stopped breathing. He reached out on instinct, needed to say something and had no words for it. Instead, he kissed Dan again, nestled the man's head against his shoulder for a few long moments. Fuck decorum. "I have few bad habits," he murmured. "I'm not good man, Daniel. But I get by."

"Only my mother called me Daniel." Small smile against Vadim's lips, "when I was in the dog house." Dan was tired, yet he kissed. Taste and smell familiar—comforting—home.

Not the time for jokes, they'd long passed the need for them. Bare bones and laid open, bleeding.

Enemy mine amidst friendly fire.

* * *

Dan couldn't remember why he had woken, no dream to disturb his sleep, no sound, no fears nor danger. He felt warm, unfamiliarly comfortable, and it took him a moment to understand where the heat was coming from. Regular breathing close to his ear and a body pressed to his. Skin on skin, the echoes of the kisses lingering.

He smiled, to no one or nothing in particular, when opening his eyes. Picking out Vadim's shape in the glow of the dying fire. Home. His only home. An 'enemy' in a wilderness of insanity. He slowly ran his hand from where it rested on Vadim's hip up the ribcage, and around to the back. Calloused palm and scraped fingers met muscles on their way. Damn good. Familiar, yet he would never tire of discovering this man.

Vadim stretched under the touches, knew they were good, welcome, the rasp of a hand he knew. Strong and rough. Lapushka. Wolf's paws. Cat's paws. Paws.

Dan smiled again, his lips touching Vadim's, parting them with his tongue. "Hey, Russkie," murmured, invading-inviting, "wake up or you'll miss the show."

Keeping his eyes closed, Vadim opened his lips, teeth, welcoming the tongue, tasting Dan, that taste of sleep and early morning. Hand ventured out to bring Dan closer, front to front, one leg hooked over the other man's thighs as if he was going to roll on top.

“Show?” He repeated. What was Dan talking about? Not quite that awake yet.

Dan chuckled against Vadim’s lips. “Forget it, I’m talking bullshit.” Pouring all of his attention back into another kiss. An intimacy not only re-learned but never mastered to start with. He’d never get enough, now that he had tasted the addiction.

He pushed the leg off, hooked his own around Vadim’s instead. Rolled him over and came on top, pulling himself up to sit and straddle. As he looked down at the face in the shadows, Dan could only see the gleam of pale eyes.

On his back. Vadim grinned, liking the way Dan did something unexpected. No protest, no sir. Inhaled deeply as he felt the weight in the right place, hardened right there, placed his hands on Dan’s thighs, stroking them, not truly sleepy now, more lazy.

“Tell me, Russkie, have you ever ‘made love’ in your long fuck-career? You know, the kind women like.” Dan’s fingers and palms stroked across Vadim’s chest.

“You mean the kind that hurts like bitch?” Vadim nodded. “Yes. First one. First man, first...” Love. Oh shit. The slow, deliberate fucking, the kind that made him crazy, touched his soul, his mind, purified and elated, cleansed him. Not that there had been much to cleanse, not back then.

Uncomprehending, Dan lowered his head, trying to make out details in the gloom. He remembered sex with bodies that he had told himself he wanted, could still get off on, if he had to pay a whore for a blowjob. But those bodies had never fulfilled the deepest desire that sat at his very core. Not for thirty-one years. “First love? Who was he?” Dan pulled the blanket up over him and Vadim both, a tent in the darkness, its sturdy poles two men.

Vadim struggled for words. Who? His occupation. His name. He knew almost nothing, apart from the things the man had said to him, nothing about his past. He should try and find him, ask questions he hadn’t had a mind to ask. “He was team masseur.” It sounded stupid, he thought. “Knew me better than I did myself. He...ah.” Exhaled. “He seduced me. Not...not in bad way. I wanted...wanted him.”

Or maybe he made you want him. Entered you and fucked you with his fingers until you wanted more, and more, and took his cock. Vadim flushed, growing harder, breath going harder, too.

“Interesting memory, you seem to enjoy it. Here I was, thinking young Soviet athletes didn’t engage in such filthy activities.” Dan grinned, baring his teeth. “No offence meant.”

“I’m not offended.” Vadim grinned. “He was good at what he did.” Oh yes.

“I envy you.” Dan confessed, “I got pissed, I fucked holes and usually those two went together.” Leaning down, he gave into the sudden urge to suck on the spot he had marked, six years ago. The scar of the cigarette burn in the hollow of the throat.

Vadim moved his head to the side. “I was kid. Never knew what hit me. To be ‘degenerated’ and ‘pride of Soviet Union’ makes for some...interesting things.”

Dan lifted his head once more, faces so close, his vision was blurred as he grinned. The mention of *degenerate* and *Soviet Union* in one breath was an evil temptation to laugh, but he didn’t.

Vadim was stroking the hips, the stomach, tracing the lines as Dan tensed. “I was just damn lucky.” Reached up to lay his hand flat on the sternum, let it mould itself to the slight curve. “Never...been in love, then?”

The hands on Dan’s body, fingers that traced muscles, sinews and bones, were simultaneously welcome and distracting. “No, never been in love.” Never thought about it, either. “Never had the time, the space, the understanding.” Tilted his head, wasn’t quite sure what he’d actually said. “It’s...strange.” To be in love? How do you know, Dan, how do you know? He dove back down to the neck, burrowed teeth and lips into the spot where shoulder and throat met, couldn’t bear to dwell further on the question.

Groaning, Vadim closed his eyes, felt the teeth go right to his groin, the shifting of the other man was good, intense. He dug his fingers into Dan’s neck, free hand sliding between their bodies to lightly touch his cock. He wanted more, wanted it all the way, but was perfectly willing to go as slow as Dan wanted. He had been seduced. It was good, one of the best memories he had. But when he compared the masseur and Dan, then Dan was more intense. Different, very different. He had felt small and strange with the masseur. With Dan, he felt strong, powerful, at peace.

“Yes, it’s very strange.” Loving you. Vadim had known. For a long time. Somebody who could reduce him to reckless need, somebody who matched him stride for stride, knife for knife. Blow for fucking blow.

Dan didn’t want to think, least of all examine, this ‘thing’ that he used to call hatred. Couldn’t dwell upon it, he had to go back into the mountains, killing, hunting, planning, destroying. Too soon, always too fucking soon. Another night, another day, and off again. No time to try and understand. Or perhaps he was just a coward?

His body moved along Vadim’s, sliding muscle against muscle and hardness against hardness. Nothing soft between them, nothing gentle and sweet. None, until now.

Dan’s quiet voice was close to Vadim’s ear. “Do you have any of the lube left that was in the bergan? I lost the Vaseline and almost everything else that day I gained the scar.” Lube, Vaseline, anything, didn’t matter. “I could do with something,” Dan grinned in the dimness of the cave, “for you.”

Vadim felt his heart race at that grin. Shouldn’t be so needy, shouldn’t look forward so much to getting fucked. “Sure…” He stretched to find the opening of the bergan, dug a hand in (no, you didn’t plan this, didn’t plan any of this at all) and found the lube.

He dropped it on the ground beside them, turned his head to face it, then looked at Dan from the corner of his eye, grinning. “I guess you are making assumptions.” That *assumption* is you enjoy getting fucked, Vadim, and that is a fact.

“Maybe,” Dan smirked, “or maybe I’m just an ever hopeful bastard.” Lying on his side, he stuck the tube under his arm, felt the strange need to warm it, had never bothered before. “It’s cold, don’t want to freeze my bollocks off. Turn round?”

Odd up-tilt at the end of his sentence, not a demand but a request. Kept the other in the confinement of warmth underneath the blankets, hands on Vadim’s hips, urging him to turn around. Wasn’t quite sure what he was doing, didn’t know where he was going, just followed his instincts for once.

Vadim arched an eyebrow in a mock ‘Oh yeah?’, then, as if he was royalty, lazily, moved, his facial expression as if he was doing Dan a massive favour. Wanted to feel him inside, without appearing too eager. Then again, he could be

needy. No witnesses, and Dan wouldn't mock him for it. Or maybe he would. He pulled one knee up, to make things easier. "Not rocket science," he murmured.

"No." Dan's hand slapped the knee back down. "You got it halfway right but not quite." No, Dan? And how would you know? When had you ever tried this position? A lifetime ago, in a soft bed with pink plush hearts and a stack of teddies. He couldn't remember the girl, but had memories of the sensations.

Slow, deliberate, intimate in ways he hadn't used to engage in, but she'd caught him out in the morning with pert buttocks and a face he thankfully could not see.

"I want to take my time. Too wrecked, still, to be vigorous."

He pulled close, moulded his body against Vadim's back. Groin against arse, thighs touching back of thighs, knees in the crook of knees and chest along the length of the scarred back. Embracing the other, holding tight, Dan's fingers fanned across Vadim's pecs.

"Better." Dan murmured, lips and tongue tracing lazy patterns across Vadim's shaved neck. He grew hard, but he had time, and he would cherish it.

Vadim sighed at the touch in his neck, the breath against the side of his neck, and pushed slightly back as if to close a distance that wasn't there. One arm to rest his head on, the other hand took Dan's hand and lazily moved it across his chest, tensed the muscles to show off if anything, slowly moved that hand down to his stomach. "What if I say, please?" He asked in Russian.

"It wouldn't have any effect." Dan allowed his hand to be moved, then took over, splayed his fingers across the abs. Tried to shift and squirm to get his cock between Vadim's thighs without the help of his hand, laughing quietly at his useless attempts.

"Could either do with a little help or my hand back." He couldn't remember if they'd ever laughed or joked during sex.

Vadim raised a leg and let go of the hand to reach behind him for Dan's cock, stroking it a few times, good size, good, heavy, hot cock, moved back, back arched, placed it between his legs, trapped it between his thighs. "You finally making me your bitch, soldier?" The coarse military slang slipped from his tongue too easily, but then, Dan would understand the meaning if not the exact words. He glanced over his shoulder, smirking.

“You’ve been my bitch since you’ve become my cunt, fucking Russkie.” Dan grinned but couldn’t help groan and shudder visibly at the touch.

Vadim laughed again. Dan tough-talking. He loved it, Dan using that offensive word in a way that was never serious, even though he had that ‘joke’ written all over his back.

Dan managed to squirt the warmed substance onto his hand, lubricated himself, then rubbed the remainder into the smooth, muscular arse, before slapping the leg down.

“No, it’ll work. Just let me.” This time he guided his own cock, the position not allowing much leverage nor entrance at all, cock merely teasing.

Vadim opened his lips at Dan’s hand between his cheeks, the warm, slick touch, which catapulted him back to a lot of good sex and no bad sex at all. He lay still, as that was obviously what Dan wanted, even though it would not work, feeling pressure, and closing his eyes, part hoping Dan would still manage.

“You’ll want some leverage,” murmured Vadim. “Not...quite like with girls.”

“Don’t think I can even remember girls.” Dan chuckled, a partly frustrated sound, at having to admit defeat. “Was a good idea while it lasted.” Slightly breathless, his voice had turned into a husky rumble.

Dan pushed Vadim’s leg up a little, but not as much as before. Manipulating the body, finally able to do more than tease, he concentrated on the position and closed his eyes, relishing the indescribable sensation of breaching slowly through the muscle, gently coaxing Vadim to accommodate his cock instead of battering down and fucking him raw. “It’s...,” his hand took hold of Vadim’s thigh, their bodies so close, not an inch of skin that was not touching, “...a damn good idea now.”

Vadim stopped breathing as Dan finally got it right, cock between his legs, slicked up, mounting pressure, and he pressed against that, half-expected Dan to enter quickly, that was what he thought he wanted, but no such thing. Instead the slow way, and it made his hands clench into fists. Yes. Yes please.

His back curved, like an animal getting mounted, tensed in all the good ways, gentle, hardly any different from fingers, much more contact, much more than he would have expected, and he loved this. Loved Dan taking control, mind

threatening to go completely blank. Couldn't push back much, Dan's weight kept him pinned. Control.

Vadim was breathing hard, could feel more cock enter him. Dan was taking his time, as if he was expecting resistance or bolting or wanted to drive him insane. "I'm alright," he murmured, felt his voice go rough.

"I know you are." Dan murmured, his hand had found Vadim's cock, gripping hard and squeezing a moment, and yet when he turned to stroking, the movement was as slow and deliberate as his body, which was rolling with lazy waves of low-level constant lust.

"You're more than alright." He realised he was rambling, had entered a space in his mind and body he'd never been in before. Aroused and arousing, but slow and tender, taking his time tenfold.

Dan's other arm lay trapped beneath Vadim, leaving only enough movement for his hand to stroke the chest, revelling in the soft skin and sharp angles. "An enemy, in every military sense and some personal ones as well." Dan paused, concentrated on the slow thrusts that were merely small, smooth movements. He felt connected, more than just his cock inside the Russian's body, more than words and more than touches. "You conquered me, got to this Special Forces bloke well and truly." His voice low and husky. "You could betray and kill me now and I wouldn't give a shit as long as you stayed close until I died."

"Couldn't...betray you," a small protest, the words breached Vadim's silence, groans coming out with it, as he tried to move, to greet, to welcome, to get the other to fuck him hard, but there was precious little he could do, even that hand on his cock was controlled, and there was not enough room to move.

It dawned on him that Dan wasn't nervous. Dan was just being in control, of himself, and that meant of him as well. "Dan, fuck," he breathed, and that was more pleading than a curse. Eyes closed, focusing on every motion, every breath of the other. Could feel him up to his throat, could feel Dan's pulse inside and against his back. "I...stay as...close as I can." Because I fucking need you. Another deep moan, the sounds just slipped out, no need to stay silent, no fierce pounding, no suppressing of pained groans, nothing, just this slow, deliberate way to move.

"Good," Dan ignored the pleading, the attempts to speed up. "Because I won't let you leave." He didn't control his words, only his body and Vadim's. He

felt as if he could go on like this for hours, floating in that space of slow simmering lust and permanent arousal.

He shifted his hips slightly and the angle changed, allowing his cock to slide in deeper, but never faster. His hand retained the same rhythm, but added strength to the touch. “Your body...feels like an extension of mine.” Murmured, his eyes had closed, there was nothing in this cave but safety, darkness, warmth beneath the blankets, and their bodies. Lust was mounting, slowly and steadily, like a tender kiss that grew into deep throated need.

Vadim groaned again. Fuck. This was getting...serious. Whatever it was Dan was doing, it just went better. He wanted to spread further, push into that hand, felt spread out and taken and taken care of, no need to strain or fight or beg, just two bodies moving close, connected with flesh and sweat. His hands were fists, he reached behind himself and touched Dan’s flanks, wanted to urge him, but more than that, he wanted to touch him. Forced himself to breathe, to try and relax, join that impossible calm that was Dan, so used to the frantic way that this made him feel raw and helpless.

“Feels, good,” he whispered in Russian, trying to put into words what he was feeling. “Very good.” Few men had ever fucked him slowly. None in the army. Too many knives involved, too much kicking and punching. This was closer to the thing the masseur had done, a timeless place with no urges but the ones that his body brought to the massage.

“Yeah...” Dan breathed out, it was good, damned good, unlike anything he’d done before. Every now and then a new chapter opened, and he couldn’t imagine he’d ever stop discovering something new and good and so very much wanted. Not with this man. “Love your body.” Rumbling voice, barely above a whisper. He moved the other’s leg a little, just enough to alter the angle again, entrance now steeper, sharper, deeper as well. “Need your body.”

“You...have it,” whispered Vadim, shuddering hard as something changed again. Driving him up the walls. Even though Dan spoke of this as shit-stabbing, he was great at it. He tensed, his body trying to come, but not quite there, not quite enough intensity to lose it, and he tried to relax, focus on the other, not himself, but it grew more and more difficult to have a single clear thought.

He was all body, all want, truly a bitch right now, yes, if that gave him this kind of feeling, yes, whatever. You have it, all of it, body, strength, desire, all of it.

Close, but not quite there. Not his decision. Moaning, he tried to move with Dan's body, not silent for once, not ashamed of the needing, craving, desperate sounds he made.

Vadim pressed his forehead against the bergan, breath going much faster now, still unable to come, even though every movement inside was now torture—strength, but no speed, no real force, instead a constant pressure. “Dan...”

Please. Make me come. Don't stop. Don't you ever stop.

“No...” Dan's breathing was ragged, could hardly hear himself over the pounding heartbeat, “Not yet. Not...yet. Need to feel...more. Need more.” But his body had different plans and took over, increasing the pace a fraction. Still slow, but the strength and force of his measured thrusts were growing, while his stroking remained the same. “Always feel more...always...always you....”

Vadim cursed, he was barely coherent now. How the fuck was it possible? How could Dan unravel him so completely, his body tensing, nearly convulsing, every thrust touching something raw and primal? He wanted to come, needed to come, but he couldn't come from being fucked alone, and the hand denied it. Couldn't move enough. Couldn't beg, instead moaned against the ground, lips open, eyes shut.

Fingers clawing at Dan, forming fists, hitting that torturing flesh, but with no real strength at that angle. Couldn't bargain, couldn't force. Trapped, under control. It made him tense again, body trying desperately to push for orgasm. No. Not enough. A groan of frustration and lust, not quite forming Dan's name.

“Shit...” Dan breathed, incoherent, sensations centred in his mind, not just his cock. They were more than merely bodies. Sounds, feelings, steady rhythm, slight increase of pace and pressure, so close, his body and mind at the edge of letting go. “You...” just you, always you. My Russian cunt, my enemy, my comrade, my prisoner, my gaoler and my life. Words, unthinking. “Love...you.”

Vadim's head was swimming, all thoughts bleeding into the one need, Dan, coming, and still not enough. Those two words made his mind spin and blur, worse, much worse than anything else. Love. *Love you*. Couldn't answer, didn't have the control to do more but groan, with an urgent need that was turning painful. Still couldn't come, tried to push against the hand, begging, no pride left, no reservation, just needed, needed.

Couldn't hear his own groans echo in the cave, mind screaming for release, knew he'd do anything, absolutely everything for this man, suck him, kill, kill himself, run away, be something else, anything else, everything just blurred, darkness, a place inside that only held him and Dan. Nobody else, nothing else, no time, no place, no affiliations, no past, no future.

At last Dan's need matched Vadim's, his hand matching the strokes, faster, harder, still tender, but more pressure and friction. Lost, and yet completely there and with the other man. No one else, only his Russian, the darkness and light, hatred and love. Mirrors of each other; each the same, and both the opposite.

"Shit..." again, same word, no meaning. Breathless exclamations. "Shit, shit, shit..." Closer, more, too intense, Dan suddenly toppled over, came without warning, release had crept on him with sudden force, drawn out, different. More intense, all encompassing, he felt as if a sob was being torn out of his chest. Shaking, holding, feeling and needing to feel. Seemed it never stopped, went on forever.

Vadim came the moment the grip tightened, incoherent pain and tension of orgasm, tightening, clenching, breathless, or he might have screamed, shouted, just sounds coming out, deep from his throat, raw, nothing like Russian or English or any other language. Came, helpless, feeling gratitude, vulnerable, Dan inside as his body clenched, convulsed, felt his cum inside. That he could be like this, could be completely helpless, at another man's mercy, bared to the soul if there were such a thing.

Panting and groaning, eyes shut, Vadim could feel the sweat burn on his face. "Don't...move," he whispered. "Stay." Let me feel your weight. Let me feel you inside.

Breathless, Dan could hardly speak, arms holding tight, crushing if Vadim hadn't been so fucking strong himself. "Won't...go anywhere." He'd stay in this cave forever, he'd forget about the world outside, about killing and surviving, duties and missions, Mujahideen, insurgents, and the British Forces alike. Immobile, feeling himself softening, heartbeat slowing, breathing with the other. In sync. Lovers.

Vadim relaxed slowly, strength and tension just bleeding out of him, nicest way of bleeding, this. His hands left and right of his body, leg straightening a little, hands close to Dan's arms, sated in ways that would have made him uneasy if he

hadn't been completely safe. Remembering those words. *Love you*. His lips moved into a smile, relieved, glad, no, worse than that. Better. I do, too. Shit, I do.

Dan didn't realise he was nodding off, despite the wetness. Wrapped around and inside Vadim, he fell asleep.

* * *

Dan woke an hour later, his bladder full and his groin a sticky mess. Still half asleep, he managed to scramble up and piss outside the cave, shivering in the cold of an approaching dawn. He grabbed some water and a rag on his way back into the warmth, cleaned himself down, did the same haphazardly for Vadim.

He was asleep again only moments later, once he had moved to his favourite position, as close as he could to Vadim's back. Their bodies touching all along the way and his arms wrapped around him. Sharing heat. He slept, undisturbed, slowly waking when his mind registered the other's awareness.

Dan yawned, burrowed closer, rubbing his face against Vadim's back and shoulder, the fresh scar across his cheek was itching like hell. Murmuring, "If I offered you my body in unspeakably deprived ways, would you get up, stoke the fire, boil water and toss some tea leaves into a mug for me?" His lips curved into a wide grin.

Vadim didn't even have to see the smirk, he could feel it forming against his skin. Seemed that Dan McFadyen was back.

Vadim groaned, words registering, especially *offered* and *body*, and *tea*. He turned to glance at Dan, and saw the grin. "Yeah, sure." He reached for his BDUs, put them on, covered his shoulders and a fair bit of his head with one of the blankets and slipped his feet into the boots, without lacing them up.

He went to the fire, added more wood, poured water into the kettle, and went through the motions of making tea. Found some beef jerky as well, and had brought enough to share it, as well as dried apples and pine nuts. The memory hit him. That slow, nice fuck. Shit. The same man who had been bitter and tired when he had come here, the same man who could still cling to concepts like enemies and hatred? He shivered, remembering what he had felt. How willing and eager and how much tenderness.

Dan yawned, sleepily watching Vadim. Hair tousled, he kept brushing it out of his eyes.

Vadim waited for the water to boil, measured the tea leaves with his fingers, the sugar as well, poured the water, stirred with his one spoon, and returned to the 'bed'. Crouching and offering the mug, reaching behind to offer breakfast. Dried beef, apples, nuts. "What deprived ways would that be?"

Dan reached for the mug with an expression of thankfulness. Tea, warmth, breakfast. Sex. What more could a man want. "Don't know," sipped the first mouthful with a sigh and a grin, "is there anything we haven't done yet?" Took some of the food, chewing.

Vadim crouched, balancing the hot mug between his fingers. "I think we did lot. Well. Guess we're in for boredom, then. More of above." He laughed. "Has been while since you smashed my face in, or held knife to my balls."

"Too mellow to get worked up enough to smash your face in." Dan grinned, popped another handful of nuts. "Knife and balls can be organised, just give me some time to wake up properly." He sipped his tea cautiously, didn't fancy burning his palate.

"I could let you fuck me with your beloved sniper rifle, but frankly, I'm not half as much into gun kink as some civilians are." Laughing, Dan lifted the blankets and sleeping bag to offer the comfort of warmth.

"Tell me you're joking." Vadim took the blanket off, spread it again over the one on the ground, kicked his boots off and slipped underneath. Warmth. Amazing how much of a difference that made. He reached out to touch Dan's face, then decided against it, too weird, and touched the shoulder instead. "Guess I could live with boredom. Breakfast, security, and fucking like we are, and have. You on top one night, me next."

Dan finished the tea and the last of the food, burrowed closer, body to body, sharing more than warmth, his hand coming to rest on Vadim's hip. It felt comfortable there. "You sure you wouldn't keel over with boredom after a while? A life without regular adrenaline kicks? Can't imagine." Closing his eyes for a moment, the laughter drained away and his voice quietened. "I don't think we'll make it that far." He left the thought standing between them. Long pause, "but you never know, eh?" Smiling, because there was nothing else to do. They all hoped that the next bullet wasn't meant for them.

Vadim placed his hand on Dan's. A life outside war, outside the army. How did civilians pass all that time, anyway? Couldn't be all Sundays, at the Moscow zoo, with loud children. "Don't know, could be worth try. Lots of books left to read." He pulled the other closer, rested his head against Dan's, felt his breath. "Dying would be too easy."

"Not sure. Sometimes I wonder if dying isn't easier than living." Dan smiled wryly, closed his eyes and remained silent for a long time. Simply existing, the greatest luxury of all. "But in the meantime...", he finally turned his head to face Vadim, lips touching skin, "let's make the best out of being alive." Half an inch closer, and he kissed the other's temple, lips ghosting along skin when Vadim turned to face him. "How did that kissing thing go again?" Dan smiled, lips against lips, parted, first touch of tongue, taste, and he forget all about dying.

One more day and one more night before the cave had to spit them back out into a world of grenades, bullets and knives. Until then, they took what they could get.

1987 Chapter 16—Red Cross

June 1987, Kabul

The driver dropped Vadim downtown, they thought it might be something official. Military advisor, specialist work. Again, risky, especially with the new medals on his chest. His career was moving fast, and up, but it didn't matter, because in his unit, everybody was an officer and on the fast track. It made him dizzy, sometimes, but it was not like he was moving into any place with real power. Connections, yes, but nobody he could trust, nobody who could do what he actually wanted done.

Dan leant against a wall in a godforsaken corner of the city. Casually dressed in jeans and dark sweater, he felt as if he owned the place. All of fucking Kabul. His bright white arm band with gleaming red cross, and a plastic photo card dangling against his chest allowed him to move through this shithole as freely as anyone could. Douglas MacFarlane, humanitarian aid worker for the British Red Cross. Hah fuckin' hah.

He grinned and pushed himself off the wall to greet Vadim, limping the few steps because of the damage to his right knee.

Vadim paused to take him in, this stranger.

He was a completely different man from three months ago. The long strands of his hair completely chopped off, back of neck shaved and sides neatened. He could almost have passed for a proper soldier with that cut. His smooth face made the scar stand out even more; still an angry red line, the untreated knife wound would take some time to pale and blend into the living skin. When he took the shades off, Dan's hands looked neat, fingernails clean and cut short.

Vadim pointedly looked at the knee; one way to ask a question when he would just get mocked should he speak it.

"Welcome back, Russkie." Dan said in Russian, "good to see you in one piece."

"It's you who's back," Vadim responded, patting Dan on the shoulder. "Red Cross? I knew you were everywhere. We should kick you out of this forsaken country." He tugged at the photo card, read the little personal information, and studied the photo which was fairly recent. "No go, I need to check this on the list." A faint smirk, and a long look up and down and especially middle. "You will see

me in my office, where I can check this.” Pointing at the card, leaning closer, he added, “And I’ll show you my desk.” His hand found Dan’s jaw, patted it, a motion bordering gentle slaps. “I am sure you can convince me you’re genuine.”

Dan laughed, dark, warm chuckles mixed with gruff amusement. “You fucking idiot. I can hardly run around as who I really am, eh?” He glanced at the new tinsel on Vadim’s uniform. “Do they provide cushions for the desk with those?”

“The Afghans pay more for my head now.” Vadim moved one arm lazily to block the follow-up punch with as much conviction as Dan had put into it.

Dan smirked. After a swift glance around to make sure they were still not being watched, he nodded towards the other side of the narrow path. The limp more pronounced when he began to move, but despite Vadim’s obvious glance at it, he refused to comment. “You will find that I have been a humanitarian aid worker for quite some time.” Dan winked, making his way to an even narrower alley.

“I need to talk to you.” Gesturing with his chin to a rickety door, which led them into a ground floor room.

“Talk? Damn.” Joking was less easy when he was this close. Things always grew a little serious. Vadim took off the peaked cap and placed it between arm and chest. “Okay. I’m listening.”

But Dan did not talk straight away. The half-torn shutters and tattered window hangings darkened the room completely, except for thin beams of sunlight shining through tears in the fabric and narrow cracks in the wall. Dust danced along every speck of light. After a moment of adjusting his eyes to the murkiness, Vadim could make out a bergan on top of a rolled-out sleeping bag.

Dan bent down, picked up a large piece of wood that had been hidden in darkness, and bolted the door.

“Right.” Dan nodded and plucked Vadim’s cap unceremoniously from under his arm. With a flick of his wrist, it landed on a recently wiped-down block of wood, serving as a table. “I have to go back to the UK.” He reached for the top button of Vadim’s uniform, and started to undo it. “My right knee needs surgery, pretty obvious, huh? The quack promised it would be as good as new afterwards.” He grinned, a gleam of teeth in the gloom while each button slipped through one buttonhole after the other, then he began to unravel Vadim’s neck cloth.

Vadim stood bolted in place. He ran a hand over his hair, his shaved neck. Dan's hands on his uniform made him straighten. The uniform made this awkward, somehow, the ribbons and medals, all the brass as they called it. Different in the camo. Less official. His gaze fell on the sleeping bag. Another one of those encounters. He was sick of hiding, sick of coupling like an animal under a rock, hidden away. But there was no alternative.

“How long do you have tonight?”

“I should be back first thing in the morning.” He might get into trouble, but curfew was too early to return, and Vadim didn't want to be out after that.

“Good.” Dan smiled, his mind set on the ten hours they had. He was careful not to crease or stain the uniform. Even though it had been ages since he'd last worn his No 2s, let alone No 1s, he knew what a bastard they could be to clean. He fumbled with the polished belt buckle. Opening those bitches from the wrong side hadn't got any easier. He finally managed and pushed the tunic off Vadim's shoulders.

“The new General Secretary is making strange noises about Afghanistan,” Vadim murmured. He shouldn't bring up politics, and why mention it in the first place? The withdrawal—if it happened—would take forever. He'd be here up until the last day, helping to secure, guard and kill. And the statements might be empty rhetoric. There was unease in the army, some wondering if accepting defeat in a backwater place like this might damage their reputation.

“That Gorbachev sounds different to your old guys. I used to call Brezhnev the ‘fish’. He always seemed to breathe like a carp.” Dan was stripping a motionless Vadim like a child undressing a precious doll.

“There's this joke in Kremlin: ‘What support does Gorbachev have? – None, he walks unaided.’” Vadim laughed, and so did Dan. “*Unaided*. Cracks me up every time.” He was nervous, for some reason. It helped to move his shoulders, tense his muscles, showing off. Millions of crunches. He just didn't have a life.

“Damn.” Dan murmured, regarding the smooth chest before him, and the chuckles stopped. Raising his eyes level with Vadim's. “Been seven years and I'm still addicted to your body, you stupid fuck.”

Vadim smiled, pleased, oh so very pleased. His body remembered the things they'd done, a warm flame that spread slower than normal. Ten hours to

burn to ash. As if they could ever manage. “If you add up hours, we’re still on our honeymoon.”

“Honeymoon?” Dan laughed, “Alternative travel package tour?” Still grinning, his hand covered the warmed-up metal of Vadim’s military watch.

“You got to take it off, but you have to trust me.”

“You take it off.” Another grin, and Vadim offered his wrist. “I won’t move one muscle.”

Dan nodded and took the watch off, encircling Vadim’s wrist for a moment with a strong grip. Leaning closer, lips touching Vadim’s ear as he murmured, “I bet you my favourite weapon that I could make you move a muscle.”

Goose bumps all over Vadim’s body. Oh yes, that particular muscle twitched, obedient. Not could. Can. He closed his eyes briefly, devastated by all the right things. Breath against his ear, and Dan, playful and sexy.

Dan chuckled, dropped the watch onto the uniform pile and slapped his Russkie’s arse like a prize horse. “Now, get out of the rest of your kit yourself. If I do it we’ll never get where I want to take you, because I’d just screw your brains out.”

The slap stirred him out of that moment, and Vadim cleared his throat. “What’s wrong with screwing?” He murmured, but obliged. Boots, trousers, pants, baring himself completely, including what Dan’s proximity did to him.

“I got something that will make it even better.” Dan stood with arms folded, then took one step back, had to restrain himself from touching. Ah, that cock. Loved the cock. Could never get enough and had the persistent urge to just get down onto his bugged knees, sod decorum, forget about plans and suck the goddamned sexy fucker off.

“What’s plan?” Vadim asked in English.

“Plan is,” Dan cleared his throat, his voice betraying his own physical reaction, “for you to come with me.” He refused to give the game away, limped instead over to the pile beside the bergan, and brought it back. An armful of civilian clothes. An armband like his own, even a plastic ID. Not too well forged but it didn’t matter. A rag like all of them were wearing. “First part of the plan, get this on and cover your head. You don’t blend into the crowd very well.”

Vadim gave a short laugh, but realized Dan meant it. He liked the idea, even though the clothes were a mild shock. Getting dressed. Okay. Restrain the

urge to get into Dan's trousers right now. He wasn't twenty-five any more. Part of growing up—and maybe old. “I always thought defecting was more difficult,” Vadim joked, checking over his clothes again.

“We should be fine.” Dan grinned, cocked his head as if judging and—expectedly—approving of the other. “Not many patrols where I'm going to take you.” He went to retrieve the back pack, pulled out a spare knife and handed it to Vadim, then stored the uniform and watch in the bag before hiding it beneath a carefully stacked pile of rubble and wood. He stood and wrapped a rag around his head.

“Let's just say I cashed in a few favours tonight.” He unbolted the door and slipped back into the alley. Leading the way deeper into the bowels of the city, the limp painful but not hindering progress, while keeping his head down all the way. Two busy aid workers, nothing more.

Vadim felt naked. Strange to be out on the streets—alleys—without uniform or camo. No lying about internationalist duty, he had dropped the usual rhetoric with the clothes that came with it. It was almost like deserting his post. Both a relief and a tingle of excitement.

He always drew attention because of his height, so he slumped a little, keeping his head down. Trusting Dan to have done all the recce, he could just follow and tread exactly in his footsteps. It was a bigger relief than he thought it would be. Vadim wondered whether he should ask where they were going. But it looked like some kind of present, a surprise, and he'd hate to spoil that.

They walked for about ten minutes, ending in a part of Kabul nearly untouched by a war that had been ravaging for seven years. Lower buildings, smaller, jumbled like toy boxes scattered then stacked haphazardly back together. Dan nodded to Vadim, pointing to a corner that turned to the right and led a few steps into an alley. The sun barely reached a wall that blocked the end of the pathway, leaving hardly enough brightness to allow a glimpse of the once colourful woven rug covering the entrance.

“That's it. Welcome to heaven.” Dan grinned, took a few steps into the darkness, pushed the rug away and knocked in a curious pattern on a wooden door before pushing it open.

A young Afghan man appeared, dressed in a long robe, bowing his head. They exchanged a few words in muted Pashto, the young man glancing at Vadim, before he bowed again stepped outside and vanished into the alley.

“Everything’s ready and we’re alone for the night.” Dan waited for Vadim to enter into the dim ante-room before closing and bolting the door behind them. “This place has a few surprises, one of them is the existence of two additional exits.” Dan pointed towards the rectangle of light. He couldn’t help it, he felt like a kid at Christmas.

The room opened into a succession of further rooms. Tendrils of mist emerged from one of the doorways. Vadim went to investigate and saw a couple of large pools, one steaming. Mosaics on the walls, tiles on the floor and gleaming slabs of stone. Most of all, water. Plenty of water.

“Welcome to our personal hamam, Russkie.”

Speechless. Vadim hadn’t been able to mingle with people in places like this for years. Too dangerous. The smell of water, the humid air, and the ridiculously safe atmosphere of this small cave of civilisation in a place that was all claw and tooth. Alone. Water. Dan. These places had a reputation for sex.

For a moment, he felt inclined to forgive Afghanistan. A little. He stared at Dan, realizing something more, water for the swimmer, moisture and soothing dim light for a skin that hated sun. A gift indeed. He pulled the rag off, wiped his face with it, looked at Dan again who expected a response, and deserved one. He stepped closer, chest to chest, and kissed him, slow and gentle, a long kiss that bared his soul when he placed his arms around him and pulled him close, just to feel him right there. Not enough, but it was a start.

Dan stood stunned, passive. This kiss was a different sensation even to the re-learned kisses throughout their time in the cave. This was not a kiss of lust, but... But then he’d known for longer than he’d realised, and now more than accepted. The kiss left him strangely breathless and oddly silent. Three weeks of cajoling, almost begging, scheming and demanding had been worth it.

Vadim pulled away and walked in, nodding at Dan to follow. “Come here.”

Dan caught himself following automatically and grinned, “Bossy tonight, Russkie?” He couldn’t wait to feel skin on skin again. “Seems I’m overdressed.” Yet he stood expectantly. Perhaps he’d tell Vadim later tonight how he had royally

fucked up that knee, back in the mountains, or perhaps it simply wasn't of any importance.

Dan lifted his arms, now it was he who waited to be undressed like a puppet.

“Yes,” said Vadim, to both questions, really. His hands went to Dan's ID card, took it off, cast another quick glance at the photograph, that grin, that half-cocky, half-self-conscious grin. Dan didn't realize how good he looked, an unconventional beauty.

Eyes that almost seemed too close together, long face and classical nose, hair that Vadim always pictured as tousled, sweaty and dusty. Together, those things made him stunning,

He placed his hands on Dan's chest, where they quite comfortably rested for a few heartbeats, then pulled the rag loose, opened the first two buttons to bare the collarbones. Leaned in to taste the hollow above the bone to the left side, close enough to feel the round scar under the shirt. He couldn't understand how he had ever had the guts to shoot Dan. Young, reckless, angry. And oh-so-hurt in his pride. He inhaled, taking in the other man's smell, deodorant, sweat, shaving gel, while his fingers continued to unfasten the shirt. When it was his open, his hand moved inside, patting his front, before pulling the shirt out of his trousers so he could place both hands on skin. Stroking upwards, now touching the scar as he pushed the shirt over the shoulders and pulled it off, trapping Dan's hands behind his back. He wanted to spend time kissing the chest, but even more, he wanted to have Dan naked.

Dan forced himself to forget that time was, as always, terribly limited and therefore precious. He wanted to drag every moment out—another new sensation, until it lasted beyond Kabul and a war he'd long given up trying to understand. Touches that brought a shudder down his body; a tremor he wasn't ashamed of.

Vadim opened the belt, grinned, because he was getting better at this, and pulled the buttons open, not teasing him too much, just brushing the side of his cock accidentally with the back of his hand, once. Well, twice. Then knelt down, close enough to see how pronounced Dan's interest was, eye to eye, so to speak, and opened his boots to pull them off. Brushing the cock with his cheek as Dan placed a hand on his shoulder for support as he stepped out of them.

Naked, Dan's hands rested on short-shaved blond hair, tempted to urge Vadim to taste his cock. He might even get sucked off if he was lucky, but no, it

was about something else tonight. “Water?” Looking down at Vadim’s face, he’d never lose his fascination for those icy pale eyes.

“Should get clean first.” Vadim stood and stepped away to get the bucket. The water was cool, but not cold. A piece of cloth swam on top. He fished it out, water trickling from his hand, and wiped Dan’s chest, watching how the water ran down his body and pooled around his feet. He continued to give him a wash, every now and then dipping the rag into the bucket to get more water, enjoying the sight of the other dripping wet. He gave a short laugh at the expression on Dan’s face, took the bucket and emptied it over both of them, shaking his head like a wet dog, grinning.

“Now. More water. Come on.” Vadim strode down the steps into the steaming water. Every muscle alive. He settled on the stone inside the tub, watched Dan join him, his hand moved up to grab hold of the other’s cock, to pull him close.

“Hey!” Dan protested feebly, “you out to prove I follow my cock as well?” Dan stopped in front, grinning, bodies touching. Nowhere else to go.

Vadim leaned in to murmur into Dan’s ear. “Been thinking about this...something like this.” Difficult to tell Dan what he wanted, and how he wanted it. Could be difficult in the water anyway. Not without oil, and he couldn’t see any.

He flashed a grin, took a handful of Dan’s hair and pulled him under, holding him there just for a few moments, then let him go, laughing.

Dan didn’t come back up immediately, stayed submerged, revelling in the feeling of weightlessness and silence, just his own blood rushing in his ears, the violent world and a knackered body far away. Bubbles of air kept popping to the surface until the need to breathe took over. Searching blindly for the other body, he pulled himself up with his arms on shoulders that were equally broad, if not more so. Dan laughed, gasped for air, and shook his head, spraying water everywhere.

“Good thing the hair’s shorter, eh?” He grinned, hooked his fingers and hands together behind Vadim’s neck. Dan didn’t say it with words this time.

Mine. You’re mine.

“I got used to your *hippie* look.” Vadim grinned back, each and every tooth showed up to the molars. Saw the face intent, despite the grin, that deep expression in the dark eyes, the way Dan held his neck. Never to bow it, unless he agreed, unless he wanted the same, never about breaking, just accommodating the other. Each other.

Vadim's grin faded, dangerous ground here, the feeling went deep. As if, the more Dan put into the punch, the deeper it hit him. And Dan always put everything into his punches, and that made Vadim always, always feel it. His lips spread into a sly grin, and he grabbed Dan by the legs, took him up into his arms, and then, very unceremoniously, fell forwards, Dan and all, one big splash. Wasting a lot of good, clean, hot water, but that was the closest to decadence he could get in Afghanistan.

Dan nearly thought he'd drown, laughing under water turned out to be a bloody stupid idea, he came back up spluttering, about to pummel Vadim. "Want a fight, fucker? You lose!"

Vadim wiped his face and scalp, grinning, aware of how the water changed his eyes; the Hungarian had told him water made them gleam and shine. Just reflections, a play of light on pigments. He half-crouched, hands and arms open in an invitation to wrestle, attack the other and force him under.

"No. I've won thousand times." You will never win, Dan. Ever. "Come. Try."

Wet skin on skin. Vadim had nearly forgotten how erotic it was. He wanted Dan, wanted the way water would support his bulk, the smell it added to human skin. Kissing and licking it.

Dan bared his teeth in a feral grin. "You only want to get me on my knees." Strong and tough as he was, the Russian had more bulk and thus more power. "No fucking chance right now." Mocking. "I knew that fucked-up knee would be good for something."

Dan took the challenge anyway, always would. To the last breath. Moving forward, he shouldered into Vadim's body, to get him off balance. Being a sneaky git who liked to fight dirty, Dan snuck his hand under water, between Vadim's legs and squeezed his balls. "You'd make a pretty girl, Russkie."

Inhaling sharply at the hand around his balls, desire flared up again, worse than before, Vadim loved the squeezing, loved how quickly it became serious and bordering pain. Being Spetsnaz was just easier with an appreciation for pain.

"Yeah," he breathed. "See my pretty curls and big tits..." Decided against headbutting Dan for that, and went for the other's cock instead, just brushing it with his hand.

“Big tits you already have.” Dan grinned, his sharp intake of breath mirrored the Russian’s. “And you’re still a sick fuck, liking this shit too much.” He gripped harder, but before Vadim could retaliate, he hooked his good leg under Vadim’s and let himself fall backwards. Hand still on balls, lips seeking lips. The kiss was immediate and deep, while the rest of their bodies sank under water, Vadim on top.

* * * *

Vadim stared at the water, watching the still surface.

Last night, it hadn’t only been about the sex. Even though they’d fucked in different ways in different positions, they’d laughed even more. Banter. The other’s presence just plain good, whether they kissed, or ground their bodies together or washed. Vadim had felt more relaxed than he had ever been before. At peace with himself and Dan, a cave of a different kind. A small world unto itself. Different rules; that was, no rules at all.

Eventually, they had rested on the surrounding tiles, Vadim on his back, Dan draped across him like an especially heavy towel, Vadim’s hand and arm in the water, lazily watching the waves his fingers made, then drawing Cyrillic water letters on Dan’s shoulder. Lapushka. I love you. Random words. He enjoyed watching the letters dry on the dark skin.

Dan was still asleep. Still lying on top of him. The first rays of sunlight were shining through a crack in the shutters. He’d be in trouble. Yeah, Colonel, bite my fat one.

He lifted Dan up and placed him carefully on the ground, keeping his legs open with his knees. The sight was tantalizing, but Vadim was completely and utterly spent. They needed to leave in, maybe, fifteen minutes. He could probably still fit in a blowjob. One of the good, slow, excruciating ones. Watch Dan squirm and take that memory with him when he had to return to the barracks.

What a nice way to wake up, Vadim thought, and smiled. And what a nice way to say thank you.

When Dan woke, it was to the sensation that had no name. Heat and friction, wet tightness and suction. He’d never equated the word ‘blowjob’ with what Vadim was able to do. Far more than ‘cocksucking’, let alone ‘giving head’. A

whole universe of black holes, dying stars and supernovas. Unlike himself, who worshipped the other man's cock, shamelessly addicted to the taste, smell and sound. Vadim granted a blowjob like royalty—granting it as rarely as Dan permitted himself to be fucked.

Fifteen minutes, and Dan relished them all. Squirming into and out of those hands, pushing and feeding from lips, throat and tongue. Relishing each and every second of it, until against all odds, he finally spent himself again, and lay winded.

They made their way back to the safe house, where everything lay just as they had left it. Dan hated having to leave, and scolded himself for that weakness. It was just one of those things; the way their lives worked and their worlds kept spinning.

He sat on a pile of wood, watching Vadim turn himself back into the Soviet soldier. Brass, ribbons, bells and whistles. He sometimes envied him for all the trimmings. For Queen and Country? Nothing left.

Just one man.

Vadim's smile lit up his whole face. He looked well-fucked, and he was. Well-loved and well-worn, and well-sucked and a whole pile of other good things. He lifted up his cap and started to wipe off dust that was only metaphorical, then saw Dan's shoulders slump. He paused.

"Dan? You alright?" He stepped closer. "Don't worry about surgery. You'll be fine."

Dan shook his head, too mellow to do anything but give a weak grin. "Not worried about it. Just tired." Yes, Dan. And you'll never tell him, not even with one word, how it rips you apart to watch him leave, because leaving yourself is so much easier.

Vadim patted himself down, then found the pocket, the right one, just where he had slipped them yesterday. Felt self-conscious about it, had no idea what it meant, or should mean.

He took Dan's hand, pulled the *tasbeih* out and placed it on Dan's palm. Prayer beads. He didn't care much for the symbol, as he didn't believe in God, and even less the more he fought them, the so-called soldiers of Allah, who knew what name they called him. But he did like the stone. Afghan lapis, dark blue, with specks of gold.

“Found this at the market.” Sent one to Katya. Fuck. Katya and Dan. The two people that kept him sane.

The colour reminded him of the impossibly dark blue sky out in the mountains, sitting in front of a cave, still feeling the other on his body, everywhere, in his mouth, deeper inside. This was not part of any loot. He had seen the man carve it.

Dan pushed himself off his seat, stood and glanced at the item in his hand. He cleared his throat, closed his hand around the beads, and felt the cool smoothness. And the colour of the stone is like your eyes in the darkness.

Vadim smiled. “Really only souvenir worth taking, I’m afraid.” And I wanted to give you something more than sweat and lust and a blowjob. “I sent Katya one as well. Unless it gets stolen. Wouldn’t surprise me.” Looked into Dan’s eyes. Did I just tell him he’s some kind of wife? I guess I did. He winced.

Dan wanted to say that the stones were beautiful, the beads something special because they were not tainted with blood and death, but said nothing. ‘Beautiful’, not a word a bloke could use, and thanks for a gift that meant a lot more than a scrap of stones and a token of thoughts? No. He couldn’t possibly comment, silently slipping the beads into his pocket, needing to feel they were there, reassuringly safe.

“Listen, Dan. I know it’s mistake and I shouldn’t be doing this, but I want to. Things are going on in army. There are lot of strange noises from Moscow. If I should get...” shot, “withdrawn or moved, I want you to contact Katya. She understands.” Definitely if you show her the lapis, he thought, but couldn’t speak it. “You can find me through her.”

He reached into his inside pocket. For once he carried this, another mistake. It should be locked away in his desk. A photo, carefully tucked away in a foil sleeve. Katya and the kids. Anoushka pulled a face, which was so typically her, that Katya had decided to send this one.

“Your family.” Dan forced himself to look at it, didn’t want to see the face of the children, let alone the wife. This person who had some sort of rights over Vadim, who would know if he had died, while he was nothing, no one. An enemy without access to any information.

Vadim turned the photo and pointed at the hand writing. His address in Moscow. “Just if anything happens.”

Dan shook his head, took a step back. "I'll keep it safe." Don't talk about loss and death, about things that could happen and had not happened for seven years. Shut the fuck up, Russkie, pretend this world is not a shithole full of death and destruction, and come with me to stay and sleep in a real bed with starched linens and wake to sunshine in your face and the smell of a proper Scottish breakfast.

Fuck.

A life together would never be his, that world belonged to 'her'. When the war was over, if Vadim survived, he would become part again of a world of children, wives, daily work and feather duvets.

"I'll keep it safe." Dan repeated. I wonder if she's ever loved you as much, and if you ever meant as much as life and survival to her, as you do to me.

Vadim smiled. "Thanks. If I'm not here when you come back, Katya will know why. And she'll tell you what happened." It was always so difficult to see Dan go, and wonder whether he'd come back. Surgery. Dan was going home. He had no idea how long it would take and what might happen here while he was gone. What if Gorbachev got his act together and decided to launch an offensive? He didn't know what the plans were. He doubted the Kremlin knew, and that was scary.

Dan couldn't help but cast another glance at the photo. "The girl looks like you. When you try to be funny."

"Anoushka? Yes, when she marries, I'll give her away with leash and whip and collar. Poor bastard will need that."

"Guess it'll be a while before she marries." Dan managed a grin. And I'll never know because you'll be in that strange country of yours, the one that is falling apart at the seams. Leading whatever life an Afganet like you would lead. When you watch your daughter marry a man, will you wonder what became of this one?

Dan safely stored the photo together with the beads. "Suppose I should be glad you gave me a string of beads and not a collar, eh?" Shit. Too late. He cringed at his choice of words.

Vadim coughed to hide just how amusing that idea was. Dan and a collar. Yeah right. "That would take some explaining."

Changing the subject as quickly as he could, Dan shrugged. “I should be back in half a year at the latest. Knees take some time, but I heal well, hopefully less than that. I’ll let you know via the usual routes.”

Vadim nodded. Would be the teeth of winter. No cave, then. Difficult to leave Kabul. Dan was already slipping away, and impossible to say when he could get close to him again, touch him. “Take time. Joints are complicated.” And I’ll miss you and think of your body when I’m alone. That laugh, that expression on your face when you smile, or sleep. Shit. Fallen so very hard for this man. So hard it hurts all the time.

“Dan.” Shit, Vadim, just let him go and wait for your mask to slip back into place, killing machine and officer. “I’ll do my damned best to be here when you come back. And I...” miss you already, “will be waiting for your message.” Hoped the Simple Future Continuous expressed the sense of time and longing. Stupid English.

Dan nodded, couldn’t touch Vadim, already too late. Had to watch him go then leave himself, a few minutes later. Red Cross badge and armband back in place, rag ready to be wound around his head. Vanishing into the quiet streets of a waking city of dust.

“I will be back.” No matter what, no matter how. “I will find you.” Whatever it takes. He turned, stepped to his bergan and started to pack. What had his Russkie once said? *Have you ever loved without lust?* No, Vadim, I haven’t, but I’m loving more than I should.

Vadim stood there, thumb rubbing the rim of the peaked cap. Red star in the centre, like an oddly deformed eye where none belonged. He stared at Dan’s bent back, wanting to touch him again, tell him everything would be alright.

At loss, unwilling to face the Colonel. They had to think he was keeping a sweetheart somewhere in Kabul. He guessed it was tolerated, not welcome, but they allowed him some latitude.

I will find you.

Looking back, Vadim watched Dan’s hands pack and stuff things into the different pockets. He knew exactly where everything was going. That was reassuring—the machine kept running, Dan would be fine.

He gave the red star a baleful eye. Fuck you, and fuck what you make me do. You are a lie, and nothing else. Vadim bared his teeth, put the cap on, tipped it

into the right angle. And now we are one again, and I'll go on fighting your useless war.

The streets of Kabul didn't know the difference between them. And it was his duty not to reveal that one existed.

1987 Chapter 17—For Queen and Country

August 1987, Great Britain

Dan had only been out of the hospital for one day when they called him in. He'd half-expected it because he'd sent off his PVR, the request for Premature Voluntary Release, barely a week after surgery, and they wouldn't have wanted to waste any time.

They hauled him in to stand his ground in front of his CO and a panel, to decide if they were going to let him out in six weeks flat or make his life hell by delaying anything they could before they were forced to let him go, after paying a fee for the privilege mind you, with a pension for twelve years service, despite his twenty years in the Forces.

Pension. If he survived until fifty-five. If. Good question.

He felt uncomfortable in the bog standard uniform, but figured he'd be worse off in his No2s. The sand coloured beret itched above his ear, and the camo set of tunic and trousers felt restricting. Perfectly ironed creases in his kit, but what was the point of the shiny brass buckle and smartly worn webbed belt; why the bulling of boots and the need for roll-your-fucking-sleeves-up on such and such a date and button-your-fucking-sleeves-down on another, regardless of climate or temperature.

He'd be dead if he'd followed the rules of the drill-book.

When had he last worn full kit? The uniform with its badges, rank-slide and flag felt alien to him while there was a string of lapis lazuli prayer beads in one trouser pocket. Rank had never meant much; not out there in the field, let alone in the endless mountains. Rank meant nothing but a difference in wages, and wages didn't mean much either. It wasn't like he had a chance to spend it. With everything invested in rental properties, he couldn't give a damn.

They finally called him in. He leant on his crutches and saluted the CO and his cronies, realising he now had a hard time accepting authority as easily as he used to. They asked him if it was true he wanted to resign his position and leave Her Majesty's Armed Forces prematurely.

"Yes, sir." Dan stood at ease, legs braced, weight on the crutches. He refused their offer of a chair even though he was in pain. He preferred to stand. The whole circus seemed more bearable that way.

They interrogated him about the whys and wherefores, the reasons and the consequences for a whole hour, during which he eventually sat down. Their concerns were obvious; it was potentially dangerous to let a man like him go, but they had nothing to hold against him. His slate was clean. Model soldier, a chest that glittered with medals and awards, but none could ever replace the vastness of the Afghan sky, the majesty of barren mountains and the touch of a Soviet soldier. The smell and taste of his 'enemy's' body, and the way Vadim kissed him and made him human. His home. Afghanistan was his home.

You're my home. I will find you.

“Sir, I've made my decision. It's time for me to leave the Forces.”

They pleaded with him, reminding him that he wouldn't be able to claim his pension until he was fifty-five, unlike if he stayed for just two more years when he would be eligible for a one-off grant and be able to claim his pension immediately. They admonished him to not be such a fool, they would even find him a cushy job for the remaining period.

Dan listened, but he'd made his decision. Nothing would change his mind, nothing except...

“Sir, are you willing to send me back to Kabul?”

The answer was negative. Dan showed no reaction, no flinch, not a word of protest. He'd tried all of that before, when he'd received his orders: desk job, possibly training recruits, but never again posted abroad, let alone to Kabul. No active service anymore after they'd cut open his knee, drilled into cartilage and worked on the joint.

He didn't have any other plans than going back to Afghanistan, hoping Vadim was still alive. He had a vague idea where to find a job, but no definite leads. He was damn good at what he was doing. Bodyguard, he could do that one-handed and earn shitloads of money for easy work. Or merc, dog soldier for anyone willing to pay for his expertise, as long as it was in Afghanistan. He'd get fit, sit out the six weeks of PVR, hand in his military ID and then get his arse back to Kabul as soon as possible.

He'd find Vadim. It was all that mattered.

* * *

It was more a question of luck than knuckling down. Dan was checking in with old mates and listening to the grapevine. His best bet was bodyguard, or 'close protection' as they called it these days. Not just a way back into a job, but a much better paid one to boot.

As long as it took him back to Kabul.

The six weeks in Blighty dragged on, but at least he didn't have to stay in camp even though he couldn't leave the country. The MoD might require his presence while the PVR paperwork was going through.

Still a soldier, but no longer in uniform, Dan visited his brother, organised finances and paid his duties to the remaining family, all the time itching to get away as soon as possible.

It all felt wrong. He was tired of deflecting questions about settling down and when was he going to be too old for this life of adventure and adrenaline, and where would he find himself a wife.

Busy with rehab and physio, Dan asked for a temporary room in the Mess and worked on regaining his strength. He spent his days in the gym and tried not to overdo it, but was eager to burn off the excess energy that was coursing through his veins. Afghanistan. Kabul. Vadim. And he was trapped in goddamned Britain, in a sardine-tin sized room in a concrete barracks block.

The day he handed in his military ID, Dan got himself the earliest civilian flight he could catch. His luggage was the customary bergan and a couple of bags, filled with his few worldly possessions of clothes, cash, food, drink, medication and utilities. It was late October when Dan finally took his seat in the plane, having left Kabul in May.

Six fucking months. Would his Russkie even be alive?

October 1987, Kabul

The sun was gleaming over Kabul when Dan stepped off the plane, a brand new thick ski jacket over his arm. Late October was pleasantly cool in the daytime, but he'd need the warm clothing soon enough. He shouldered the heavy bergan,

took hold of his two bags, squinting into the sun before dropping one of them to fish for his polarised shades.

He'd followed a tip from a mate and was the proud owner of two pairs of black-rimmed, reflecting shades that made him stand out in the crowd far more than his natural height and build ever could. No need to blend in anymore. Dan slipped the shades over his eyes and grinned into the sun. He was a civilian. No soldier, no enemy, no SAS. Just a goddamned civilian.

He made his way into the centre of Kabul in a taxi. Finding a room was the most urgent thing, but Dan still knew enough people who'd be able to find him a place. It took him no more than a couple of hours before he found exactly what he needed, one of the former safe houses from long ago. He had a quick shave, locked his possessions away, stashed the cash on his body and rushed towards the tea house, hoping it hadn't been bombed to shit.

The city was quiet, it was still Ramadan, and the *chaikhana* was there, as was the owner, who greeted him like a long lost friend, welcoming Dan with the offer to wait for baklava and sweetened tea, but Dan declined. He wanted to know only one thing: What about the Russian, the Soviet soldier.

A security breach, no doubt, but if the owner hadn't talked in six years, why the hell should he now? Dan's Pashto felt rusty, but he got back into the language as quickly as he'd slipped back into his skin in Kabul. He was home. As fucking ridiculous as that sounded. *Home*. Where the heart was. The owner was eager to help and knew he would get rewarded in return, so he told Dan what he knew about the Soviet's schedule. The second and the last Saturdays in the month the blond man could be found at a place—a hotel—nearby. Saturday. Today.

Dan wanted to run, see, find, to *be*, but the owner's last words came crashing down like a ton of bricks. The message was four months old. Four fucking months. The whole world could have gone to shit in the meantime.

The string of lapis lazuli prayer beads flashed around his wrist when he rummaged in his shirt pockets for some dollar notes, appreciating the welcome, but he shrugged off the last of the well-meaning comments. No, he had not become a Muslim, and no, he was not here to pray, but yes, he could not let go of Afghanistan. He promised he would return to take part in *iftar*, the breaking of the fast, with the owner and his sons before Eid and the end of Ramadan.

Dan ran more than walked towards the ramshackle hotel that Vadim might possibly be in. The sun was setting, but he didn't feel the creeping cold. All he could think of was Vadim. Forced to negotiate with a native who demanded to know what he wanted, he didn't know what to ask for. Was it safe to mention Vadim? Fuck.

* * *

Vadim knew he was drinking too much. Only when he was off duty, but hardly a free hour he didn't spend in a drunken stupor when nothing else dulled the pain. Each time, he was still recovering when doing his paperwork, the mind-numbing routine leaving too much time to think, too much time for missing and longing, and consequently, he was always half-drunk when working out, and stone drunk afterwards, dulling pain, boredom, and longing with vodka.

The Colonel had enquired whether he was having problems in his marriage, and there had been a hilarious moment when Vadim had thought about telling him, that yes, it had been forever since he'd seen his lover, but he just managed to hold back and brood instead of spilling the dirty secret. They didn't know him like that. The Spetsnaz was losing it. Afghanistan wore even men like him down. Some, thought Vadim, likely felt relief at the fact that even he had a weakness.

The hotel had become a habit. Originally, he'd planned to find a way to blow off steam, find a male whore who'd take it up the ass from a Soviet. There had to be people like that here, but he couldn't work out how to ask for it, and when he did, he pulled back. Too dangerous. Officer, major, fuck you, Vadim, don't. You don't want an Afghan. He'd very briefly considered a comrade, but he had no taste for violence. That was over, something he'd done as a younger man, more reckless, with nothing to lose.

He'd rent always the same room twice a month, to sleep somewhere that was not the barracks, as if pretending he was still seeing Dan—and 'seeing Dan' sounded like dating, when there were no words for what they did, only that sickening feeling of loss when they didn't. He'd eat, in silence, and drink, in silence, and eventually collapse on the bed so exhausted and drunk he didn't even think, or miss, just endured the time as it slowly ground him down.

He couldn't care less; all the carefully drilled-in paranoia about insurgents wanting to earn money on his head was to no avail. He felt directionless and hopeless, and would recover enough the next day to return to the barracks. It had become a way to get out for a little, pretend there were still options. But without Dan, there was nothing, just the army, and he was sick of that. So tired.

It was getting cold. Vadim lay on his stomach, his woollen coat draped across him. Not heavy enough to pretend it was an arm, or even just a hand. He lay there, feeling cold, but too drunk to move. Too drunk to miss.

* * *

Dan figured if he had anything to lose then it was Vadim's safety, but he couldn't lose that, for if his Russkie was in this shambles of a hotel, then he'd already lost his sense of healthy paranoia. Dan confused himself with his arguing, consequently he almost staggered backwards when the answer was a simple "yes". The Soviet soldier was here, like he had always been, without so much as a single break, for the last five or six months.

Forgetting the pain in his knee, Dan took two steps at once and ran upstairs to the room, as if chased by Baba Yaga herself. Then he stopped, stalled, careful. Vadim would barricade himself in for safety. He knocked, called out Vadim's name and hoped to hear his voice—but nothing. Dan frowned, tried the handle, cautiously staying out of the firing line, expecting at least a chair to be wedged underneath, but nothing. The door simply opened into a dingy room and his gaze fell onto the bed.

Right there, in front of his eyes, with the smell of cheap vodka hitting his senses. A Soviet greatcoat draped across and the still shape of a blond man underneath. Sleeping? "Vadim?"

Nothing, not a stir, no reaction. Closing the door behind him, Dan pulled the only chair close, wedged it beneath the door handle, where it should have been when he'd entered.

Dan wanted to repeat the name, but stood without a sound. He remained at the foot of the bed, staring down at the man who seemed to have passed out. He couldn't move, frozen, when an onslaught of images, thoughts and sensations battered his senses. He wanted everything. All of it at once.

To touch, hold, kiss, fuck, feel the skin and hands and lips and words, breath and feeling. But he did nothing. Couldn't move. Wanted too much.

“Vadim!”

Name. Not ‘Vadim Petrovich’. Not a superior. Not an enemy. Vadim opened his eyes, bleary, feeling still dulled and uncaring, not sure what the disturbance was about. His face was cold, so were his hands, which were also sticking out from under the coat. Back in Russia?

He glanced over his shoulder. Dark haired man.

Dan.

Impossible? But Dan. Back, finally, back.

Vadim's hand reached out. “Come...come here.”

Dan was thawed from his frozen state by Vadim's voice. Alive. Reaction, and the absurd thought crept into his mind that for a split second he must have been worried that the man beneath the coat was dead.

It took a mere couple of steps before he sat on the bed, and no more than another intake of breath before he bent down, his hand in Vadim's cold one, and his lips found the stubbly cheek before sliding down towards the mouth. Kissing and tasting. Fuck. Bliss.

Vadim found it hard to turn over, dizzy with alcohol, disoriented, head swimming, and thought, what a disgrace, he's back and I'm drunk, worse than a sailor back on land the first night. He felt shame, oddly intense, stretched to get more lips, more Dan, turning around to pull him closer. “You're good. I knew.” He'd been worried Dan might not have made it, hadn't woken up from the operation, had died in a car crash, or found somebody English over in his country to sleep with, somebody who wasn't married, wasn't an enemy, and wouldn't return to Russia in a couple of years.

“Aye,” Dan murmured against Vadim's lips, “of course I am. Told you I'd be back, that I'd find you.” He smelt booze and desperation. Sliding fully onto the bed, he burrowed under the coat to be as close as possible. Fully clothed, just like Vadim, but he could feel the body and the man in his arms.

“I left...traces.” Vadim murmured. Sharing warmth? It wasn't that simple anymore. He should pull himself together, and banter, but he was too drunk for words, almost too dulled for thoughts. “You know your recce, and I...I know you know.” He gave a grin, felt absurdly happy in Dan's embrace, warm body, warm,

firm, alive body. He pressed his forehead against Dan's chest, breathed in. Yes. Glanced up again, eyes blurred, and he blinked, a reflex more than pride.

Dan hid the niggling worry. The man in his arms, the drunken, dejected soldier, was not the Vadim he knew. "You look like shit, Russkie."

Vadim opened up to the kiss. Fuck, he was too drunk to get aroused, well, he could always get fucked, it wasn't important, the important thing was to have Dan back. "Charming bastard..."

"I told you many times before, I resemble that remark." Dan chuckled quietly before he fell silent, kissing, and the invitation was too welcome to resist. Fuck the taste of vodka, it didn't matter, just the heat, as his tongue slipped between teeth and joined the intimate dance he had rediscovered such a short time ago, with this man.

Vadim's hand slid up Dan's hand, over his shoulder, to his neck, not sure why, to pull Dan close or to steady himself, to feel Dan's strength, to get more touch. Kissing felt uncoordinated, dreamlike and easy, much easier and less self-conscious than before.

Dan broke the kiss after what seemed forever, looking at Vadim while his hand roamed up and down his back, their bodies pressed together. He was hard, of course, had been wanking for too many months, but felt no arousal in return.

"What the fuck happened to you while I was gone?"

"Nothing. Just...duty. Duty and drinking." Vadim slowly shook his head and realised he should pretend he was alright. He was, now, nothing else mattered. He'd found a state without pain at the bottom of a bottle, and how disgraceful was that. "Sorry. Should...not. But easier this way."

"I understand." Their lives did shit to them, turned them inside out and left them raw at the seams, unravelling. Dan could see the loss of focus in the pale eyes, the dizzy expression of a drunken man. Some things were easier without feeling them. What did he know about feeling anyway?

Vadim's pride stirred. Spetsnaz, pride of the Soviet army, he really should try and give a semblance of control, of being sober, of deserving that reputation. But right now, he had nothing to prove.

Dan couldn't offer words that would make anything better, so he just said the first thing that came to his mind. "I left the army. I'm not a soldier anymore. Fancy that, eh?" His toneless chuckle ghosted across Vadim's face as his lips

touched the stubbly skin again. So much for sex and fucking, but damn, he'd had six months to think, a long time to understand about love.

"That's good. You made it out alive. That's very good." Vadim gave a broad, happy grin, as if he was still a young officer, and his best friend had just made another rank. "Congrat...lations. You can have...peace and no...no more...ah, like, rations. As much time in tea houses as you...like."

Dan ran his fingers over the goofy smiling face which made him grin. "Not quite. I came here to get a job. I have a few leads. Anything, really, as long as it's here."

Vadim leaned his head against the touch, didn't quite get it. "Why? It's nicer in London. Better food. Weather, too."

"How would you know about London?" Dan chuckled, wondering what they told the Soviets about foreign countries. Food, and most of all the weather, were legendarily bad. "You're in Kabul, not London or anywhere else. Besides, I can earn shitloads of money as a bodyguard."

"Oh. That's good. Money's good." Who could or would pay that much, Vadim wondered. The warlords? Maybe. All the opium money had to go somewhere.

Dan's other hand slid down to the small of Vadim's back, making its way through the layers of clothing to find skin. Vadim shifted closer, chest to chest with Dan, and gave another drunken grin. "'s alright, won't fall asleep when you fuck me. You want to, aye?"

"I do." Fuck, yes, any second, minute, hour, day, Dan had been thinking about this, "of course I do." Craving the heat and strength. "But not when you're this fucked." Dan's lips quirked into a grin. "I heard it's better to fuck someone when they're not quite passed out drunk."

"I'm still talking," murmured Vadim. "Still 'round." A searching, eager, almost childlike uncoordinated kiss to Dan's chin, corner of his mouth, then, full on target. Not great at seduction at the best of times, and these weren't. Hand sliding down to Dan's chest, stomach, resting there for a moment as if he had forgotten about it while trying for another kiss. "Still...can feel you."

"Sure you do." Dan grinned, moved his head a fraction, in sync with the searching lips, until they hit their target with every single attempt. "But I know a

better way to get the edge off..." snaking his tongue back between Vadim's lips. "For now."

"Okay." Vadim didn't know what Dan was getting at but trusted him to make the right decision. Whatever Dan said or wanted, it would be alright. He kissed back, the dreamlike quality of blurred reality, only all this kissing was strange.

Dan's free hand finally found skin between the layers of clothing and he shifted his weight, pressing closer, until he freed his other hand, fiddling with his own trouser buttons.

Vadim still somehow had the idea Dan would do something to him and whatever it was, it was welcome. If anything, his own fault he couldn't get an orgasm out of it, self-inflicted loss. Hand around Dan's shoulder, other hand touching skin, stomach muscles, Dan shifting, brushing his cock. Vadim wasn't sure he could give head right now, mostly because he lacked focus and Dan's tongue was between his lips, and he gave a snort at that thought, reaching down to Dan's cock and balls, squeezing both.

With a pent-up greed that sought its release, Dan's tongue delved deeper while he pushed his fly open. It was different this time, better, even though it was still his own hand that stroked his cock. Held close, kissed readily—drunken or not, hand and cock trapped between their bodies, it made everything more intense, and so goddamned right. Stroking himself with the same efficient movements as usual, Dan broke the kiss for a moment to gasp out, "fucking missed you like hell."

Vadim pulled Dan closer; he wasn't weak, just unfocused, and kissed Dan's face and throat and neck, sucking on the flesh like he hadn't been able before, but wanted, kissing and sucking with only a promise of teeth. Wanted to shed the uniform so Dan could come against him, loved the heat of Dan's cock against his stomach. "You were gone...too long."

Dan's lips parted, breathing harsher, faster, and his eyes half-closed. Just like the way he jerked himself off, and yet it was different. His fingers splayed across the small of Vadim's back, digging hard into muscle and flesh, while his hand moved ever harder. "Fucking...army..." panted, each word carried on another quick breath, "not keeping me...away..." The next word never followed, he was too close, too fast, shifting his hips towards the bed, and he came into the grubby clothes instead of Vadim's uniform. Groaning when he toppled over, he bit his

own lip before he found the other's again, teeth clashing, ecstasy tinged with hunger and too much greed.

Vadim gave as good as he got, getting very much into the kissing thing that Dan did. It felt good, felt nice, a great way to spend time, really. Dan's stubble, Dan's breath, Dan's smell, everything about him so close to the dreams and memories. He leaned back, feeling dizzy, lips open and raw. "Yes. Fucking army. You. Here. 's all good." Smiling because he was happy, just that, just a man at peace. "You here, tomorrow?"

Dan couldn't quite answer yet, needing to lie flat on his back for a while longer, just grinning like a fool. He wiped his hand on the bedclothes, leaving the other still pressed into Vadim's back. Cracking one eye open at last, he was confronted with that happy smile. "I'm here whenever, now." Grinning, reluctant to move, he added, "whenever you have the time." His lips tingled from the ferocious kissing, scraping against stubble and clashing with teeth. Almost raw, just like he felt inside at times.

"That's good." No more fear to see Dan's kit show up on the black market. No more turkeys that could be Dan. And—more time. He'd finally have an 'Afghan sweetheart waiting for him in Kabul'—how very ironic, but at least it wasn't treason anymore. Dan might have a proper house. A place to cook, and to be safe.

"Right now, though, I'll be leaving you for a short while, have to get a few things. Don't think you're up for a wander around Kabul." Dan chuckled quietly, "You sleep the worst off and I'll be back."

"Aye...pretty wasted." Vadim looked oddly smug in his sleepy drunk way. "Prefer to stay here, if you...don't mind."

"Wise words, Russkie." Dan had to grin at the way Vadim had got used to saying 'aye'. A Soviet Scots, just what he needed. "You're a security hazard at the moment."

"Always am. I'm fucking deadly." Vadim gave another grin.

"Yeah, right now in your fucking dreams, mate." Dan rolled over and covered the wet patch with a piece of the bedclothes that were soiled anyway. The room was getting colder. Dan looked around as he sat, closing his trousers. His jeans snug and worn, comfortably soft, with the back pocket holding his fag packet

in a faded rectangle, indicating its customary place. Lighting a cigarette, Dan glanced down at Vadim, inhaling deeply before exhaling in the other direction.

Strange, how he'd got into the habit of keeping his smoke away from Vadim. He grinned at that snippet of cosy familiarity. "Got a fireplace in this room?" There should be a stove, but he hadn't spotted it, and the single light bulb gave nothing but a feeble glow. How apt, it illuminated Vadim, nothing else.

"Aye. Corner." Vadim glanced to the right—towards a metal monstrosity made from welded pipe and scrap metal. "Can't get it going. Guess needs to be cleaned." He pulled his coat up to his chin, and pulled his legs closer. Glanced at the red dot that gave Dan's position away, smell of smoke noticeable, but Vadim didn't mind.

Dan's brows rose. It was one thing to get wasted regularly, when the fucked-up war ate away body and soul, but another not to care anymore about the bare necessities. He pulled another drag deep into his lungs, until he could feel the nicotine tickle the capillaries, before he stood, walking over to the stove. There was some kindling, but he'd be buggered if he could make out how to get that thing going without more light. Turning around, he idly scratched the scar in his face while finishing off the fag.

"I'll see what I can do, but I have to grab some stuff first. You take care, and don't let any strangers in." Flashing a toothy grin, which rapidly warped into a frown. The door had been open when he'd come in, and Vadim had been passed out. Fuck. Oh fuck.

"Will do." Vadim shifted a little, as if to find the best position to continue sleeping, and seemed happy to lie half twisted on his stomach, hands and feet under the coat, head drawn in, eyes closed. Like there were no enemies, nobody could possibly want him dead, and not a care in the world. The end of paranoia, of soldiering.

"Aye...." Dan murmured, threw the cigarette butt to the floor and stubbed it out, whispering: "What the fuck happened to you, Vadim?" Vadim's face softened and his body slackened, asleep within seconds. Anyone could walk in and kill him, or worse, sell him to one of the warlords. A Soviet officer, his hide would be worth skinning alive. Dan swallowed, some things remained unbearable, even after all he'd done and—worst of all—seen.

Dan searched for a key while slipping into his thick jacket, anything to make the room safer while he was gone, and found it, still in the lock, inside. Damned if it was safe to lock Vadim in, but twice damned if it wasn't even more dangerous to leave him like that. Shaking his head, he noticed his lack of hair again, still short from hospital and army barracks.

Taking the chair, Dan locked the door on his way out and placed the chair right in front, half-leaning, hoping anyone careless enough would at least make some noise as they bumped into it. Key pocketed safely, he stopped the hotel owner who was lingering at the entrance in front of a fire, demanding to know how to get the stove going for a few dollars that he slipped into a greedy hand. No one was to enter that room, no one, and if anyone asked for the Soviet soldier, the owner should know nothing about it. If all was well when Dan returned there'd be more dollars, because he would stay and there'd be no trouble.

The city was dark but remarkably lively now that sun had set and iftar was taking place. People were roaming the streets under the watchful eye of the Soviet army, its soldiers more twitchy and nervous than before. Dan knew why. This 'war' couldn't be won, by anyone, and they'd been losing it from the very beginning.

It only took him a few minutes to get one of his bags from the room he'd found. He stuffed some more food in the top of it, then shouldered the bag, grabbed his heavy torchlight, and hurried back out, buying an over-priced bottled water on the way.

When he returned to the hotel, the owner was waiting for his promised reward, which was exchanged for a bundle of fire wood. Dan made the man swear once more, with the added force of a few choice threats in Pashto, not to let anyone know about the Soviet officer. Taking the stairs two at a time, he was relieved to find the chair in exactly the same position. He knocked on the door before unlocking it, wary in case his Russkie had woken and regained some of his senses. He wasn't keen on having his brains blown away because of a drunken stupor.

Nothing, though. The room was as quiet and even colder than before, the single light bulb illuminating the still figure beneath the coat. Dan pulled the chair inside, locked the door, wedged the chair under the handle and finally dropped his bag. Standing at the foot of the bed, he looked down at the motionless body. Nothing visible except for the blond, shaved head and one hand, curled up into a

fist. He grinned, the odd sensation of tenderness so new, unused and unknown to him it made him shake his head and mutter to himself “fool,” before throwing the brand new lightweight sleeping bag over Vadim.

Vadim heard the sound of wood on wood—one hand crept to the pistol under the pillow as he peered through one eye, still drunk, but as the cover descended upon him, his lips moved into a lazy smile. Dan. No dream. Would have been a strange dream. Dreams about sex usually played out in a way that he got something out of it, too. Apparitions didn’t just show up to kiss him, jerk off and then leave. “How long...?”

“How long, what, princess?” Dan stooped to pick up his torch and bundle of fire wood, to work on the concoction that was meant to be a stove. He’d be bugged if he didn’t get that thing going.

It took Vadim a moment or two to put the sentence together. “You...been here.” He blinked, saw Dan’s ass as Dan bowed down and thought this was a nice way of waking up, even if he was in no state to take advantage. Much.

“Here, as in Kabul or Afghanistan or this room?” Dan craned his head backwards, flashed a grin, while crouching down, trying to figure out a few particularly nonsensical parts by poking around inside the front of the stove.

Something else was strange, Vadim wondered. Yes. Dan clean. Clothes, non-native, not his usual ‘clobber’ as he called it. Vadim released the pistol and pulled his hand back. “How did you find me?”

Not looking back this time, Dan’s voice sounded strained as he reached forward and upwards, awkward in this position and in a good measure of pain from that damned knee. “You think after twenty years in the SAS, the last six of them in Afghanistan more or less shagging the living daylights out of you, I wouldn’t know where to start looking for a crazy-arsed Russian?”

Vadim’s smile grew wider, just enjoying Dan’s bent back and his presence, his being clean, his being here, and the light-hearted talk. It hurt, gently, to have him back, like hands warming after the frost, a tingle and itch and burn. “Aye. Course you could. Would.” He rolled over to the edge of the bed, uncovering himself halfway, reached out and touched Dan’s back, tracing the spine under the warm jumper. He couldn’t reach further than the place between the shoulder blades.

Dan rolled his head, still working, smoothly curving his back under the touch, like a cat moving into a stroking hand. “Keep that up and we’ll never have a

fire.” Vadim’s hand paused, but didn’t leave its place. Dan was rewarded a moment later when the first flames sprang to life, swiftly eating away at the wood, growing and demanding further logs.

“There you go. Should be warmer soon.” Dan cleaned his hands by clapping them together and turned, the hand falling off his back in the process. He groaned when he got up from his crouch. “Fuck, I’m stiff, and it’s not my cock.”

Vadim glanced up at him, still smiling. So happy to have him back. The only thing that mattered, the one thing that kept him going, and the one thing that could make him forget all the gloom. “Cold, eh? Share warmth?”

“You can fucking bet on it.” Chucking some more wood into the fire, Dan bent down. “But first this,” heaving the stuffed bag onto the bed, right into Vadim’s hands. “Yours. Unwrap it. I declare it Christmas tonight.” Sitting down on the edge of the bed to light a fag.

“And I thought you were present.” Vadim gave a soft sound when he felt the weight, and struggled a bit to sit up, back resting against the head of the bed, pulling and pushing his body into position. Hand resting on the bag, he grinned at Dan. “Please, no more peanut butter. I tell everything.”

Dan pulled his face into a mock frown. “Here I am, thirty-eight years old, bringing my lover presents, and he is mocking me!” Placing his hand on his heart he tried a theatrical groan but ended up in a cocky grin instead. Realising he’d not even stumbled over the word ‘lover’, let alone the concept. Six months were a long time, stuck in hospital and rehab, mulling over and in the end accepting what had happened to them.

Lover. Vadim paused, drunk mind reeling. Afghan sweetheart. Yes. But Dan just saying it like that? It was strange, strange and unknown. That word didn’t feature when they talked. Didn’t. Couldn’t. Never had. Too drunk to think clearly. Maybe Dan was drunk too. He peered at him questioningly.

“Was I convincing?” Dan grinned.

“What?”

Dan ignored his own question and took a drag, holding the fag out of the way, he waved towards the bag. “Go on, you need some food, and I’m bloody starving as well.”

Vadim’s fingers found the laces, pulled them loose and opened the bag. The survival collection didn’t change; bandages, medical gear, food, yes, even the

mock-dreaded peanut butter bars, which were more than welcome. As usual condoms, lube, whisky. All welcome, necessary, needed and sparse indeed.

“No longer treason for you, aye?”

“No, but even if it were, I never gave a shit when it came to this stuff.” Dan offered a grin, which turned into a smile, swiftly aborted with another drag from his cigarette. The smell of nicotine and burning firewood filled the small, rapidly warming room.

Vadim placed the lube on the bed, the whisky, the packed meat and cheese and crisp bread. Glanced at Dan, giving him a smile, finding it hard to say thank you, somehow. The concern. The care. His face twitched and his dulled mind wrestled with a way to cover this up. Didn't like for Dan to see it. “I...”

“It's OK.” Dan made a curt gesture with his hand. “Let's get eating, but no whisky for you, mate, you'll stick to the water or I'll never get a decent fuck out of you tonight.” Using bravado and bare-toothed grins to deal with that big, fat, enormous thing inside. Some men seemed to be slow starters and he sure as hell was one of them.

“No. No whisky.” Vadim laughed, glad Dan had moved away from the very difficult topic of gifts. Sex, warmth. Why then were some items like these so important? “Shouldn't have drunk so much. Send postcard next time, so I'm sober when you show up, yes?” Vadim set the bag down and moved towards Dan on the bed, ran a hand over the stubbly cheek, through the shortened hair. Saw threads of silver glint in the dark, smelt the smoke on his breath. “Better make it worth your time, yes?”

Dan swallowed hard. Since when had a simple touch changed its meaning, taken on gravity and made that 'thing' inside expand ten times, constricting his throat and holding his heart in a vice grip. “I'm here.” He cleared his throat, funny how talking was suddenly difficult, “I found you, just as I promised. That's worth it.” The forgotten cigarette burned down to a stub between his fingers, eating into the filter.

Vadim was so close to Dan he could feel his breath. He gazed into the dark eyes, noticing lashes and veins in the white, the exact curve of eyebrows and forehead. Pores of his nose, up to where the stubble reached on the cheeks. Felt like he just couldn't see enough of him, never enough. “Well, it is for me, but you

seemed...more impatient?" Mocking him softly for the need, what? An hour ago? Two? Hard to judge.

"Are you complaining?" Dan smiled, oddly self-conscious under the scrutiny, "you didn't seem to mind at the time." He dropped the butt on the ground, suddenly reluctant to move.

Vadim grinned. "Sleeping Beauty, aye? You were just caught up in my male beauty."

"Yeah...", Dan drew out the sound, "passed out, piss drunk, smelling and tasting of booze. I'd call that a right old Prince Charming."

Carefully, as if nervous he could startle the strange new Dan, Vadim brushed his lips against the other man. Broad light. Without sex, just so, like in the cave. "I'd call it test firing the gun."

Dan's quiet laugh was as warm as the fire in the metal stove, and as comfortable as the sleeping bag. "Aye, I did and it works. Just had to make sure."

He lifted his hand, nearly aborted the motion in mid-air, but instead smiled and let his fingers run down the side of Vadim's face. The tips, less calloused than usual, felt the blond stubble more keenly. "I fucking missed you, Russkie. The bastards didn't want to send me back. According to them, I'm only fit for a desk job. I told them to fuck off." His hand was still stroking with slow, deliberate movements. "Politely, of course."

"Of course." Vadim breathed a short laugh. He could imagine. Hardly any chance in arguing with Dan. What Dan lacked in understanding, he had surplus in brazen balls. "Didn't court-martial you, then? And you left." Vadim's eyes opened. "You...you're free. No more freezing up in mountains, no more evading patrols." No more turkeys, and no more bullets with your name on them.

"Not quite." Dan's hand crept to the back of Vadim's neck to rest there, comfortable. "I'm looking for a job, close security they call it nowadays. Should be plenty around, here in Kabul. Got a lead, seems they're looking for some grunts for the newly installed ambassador in the British embassy." Leaning forward, he gently head-butted Vadim. "Sounds cushy, eh?"

"Better than mountains," agreed Vadim and kept his forehead right against Dan's. "I'm stationed here to help retreat. Lots of paperwork. Coordination. Talking. Will be exercises in spring, but it's just...spending time. No great offensives planned. It's burning low, fire of this war."

Nodding slowly, Dan murmured, “this war’s not going to go on forever...” he didn’t want to go there, couldn’t finish the sentence. The end of the war would be just that—the end of everything. “Still, before then we have food to eat, booze to drink, and bodies to fuck, eh?”

Vadim inhaled deeply, alcohol loosening the tongue, and thought, and emotions, it seemed. The threat of some other war was far away, this wasn’t quite finished. He couldn’t make plans beyond this war. There was another rank to climb in the next, what, five or seven years, or less. “Just...for while yet. Still have you.”

“Aye...as long as this war keeps you here.” Dan frowned. Morose shit and maudlin thoughts, he didn’t need that. Jerking his head back, he shook it vigorously. “Food. Now.”

Tightness and heaviness in his chest, Vadim leaned back and made a sweeping gesture to the bergan. “Dish up.” Sounding almost like Dan, from another day, similar situation.

Dan was glad for the sudden change, he threw his rag onto the bed, pulled out the rest of the food, slicing the packages open with his knife and arranged a spread of meats and cheeses and bread across the makeshift tablecloth.

The oven was giving off good, solid, living heat, and Vadim stood to undress facing it, while allowing the warmth to wash over his skin, and his face, reddening from the heat and maybe the strange, and not so strange thought. Lovers. No longer two men who got off on the same stuff. Comrades, lovers, even worse. Of all his lovers—and they seemed precious few in hindsight—none was like Dan. As good as Dan. Vadim pulled the shirt free and rubbed his chest in a strangely self-conscious motion, then glanced over his shoulder, smiling. “Do you...meet others when you are in London?”

“London?” Dan looked up. This was the second time Vadim mentioned the city. Foreigners couldn’t think of any other place in Britain than London. “No, I don’t usually go to London. I stayed in smaller places, near the barracks, and went up to Scotland to visit my brother.”

“Oh yes, you said. Edinburgh. Place with castle on mountain.” Vadim turned his back towards the oven and opened his belt. “Small big country.” Vadim opened the trousers and kept his hands there for a moment. “You can’t do it in army. It’s illegal. But outside. You can. Less hiding.” There are gyms and bars

and...he shook his head. Not allowed. Dan was not supposed to know about Darren, or Mark, or his trip to London.

Dan's brows drew together, but the frown vanished before it could settle. "I guess so."

Vadim allowed the trousers to fall and stepped out of them as he placed his hands on Dan's flanks, just tracing the lines there, warm skin on warm skin, and a half-drunk, half tender desire washed away the question, at least for the moment. Too long, and Dan back. He kissed Dan's shoulder when Dan pulled his jumper off, then his neck.

Reluctant to break the touch and kiss, Dan sat still for a while, before dropping the jumper behind him. Looking up, slowly, all the way from the abs across the chest and pecs, to the face that was looking down at him. A slow grin began to spread across his face. "You want to see a seriously cool scar?"

Vadim smiled. "If it's in good place?"

"Train tracks along my knee. They don't tend to have knife-wielding Mudjas running around Britain who think that slashing my face is fun." Dan flashed a wry grin, working on the buttons of his denims. Fabric so soft and well worn it slid smoothly over his hips when he lifted them off the bed, pushing the clothes all the way down to his ankles, before kicking them off. "See?" Lifting his knee, he showed off the scar running neatly down the middle. "They opened it up and drilled holes to make stuff fill back up again."

Vadim stared at the scar. That looked painful, to say the least. Nothing small or nice about it. It looked...bad. He reached down to touch the knee. "But you can use it? I mean, it doesn't hurt?"

"It's a lot better than it was before." Another question deflected, Dan pointed to his cock, flaccid on his thigh. "I think there's a scar here..."

"Would be interesting to learn how you got it," said Vadim, grinning.

"Well, you see, there was an Amazonian tribe in the mountains, all fierce Afghan warrior women, and they were fighting over me. Their queen got me by the balls and decided to mark her property by taking a hefty bite, when just at that moment a rival clobbered her over the head and I managed to get away."

Vadim gave a laugh, pushed Dan's legs apart and knelt between them, hand again touching the scar on his knee, the strange new mark on Dan's body. Imagining the cut, and Dan on an operating table, and being thankful it was only

the leg. Drunk enough to not worry overly much, and clearly drunk enough to not mind Dan's connection between 'food' and 'cock'.

"Oi, Russkie, I was just joking. It's technically your turn to get blown." Not that Dan's protest was more than a token.

"My turn?" Vadim rubbed his face against Dan's inner thigh, right up, until he brushed the cock and balls with his face. Still felt dulled and lazy, but he'd get into the spirit. Strange to think Dan kept track of who did what to whom. Vadim didn't. It depended on his mood—right now, he wanted to give Dan something. And knowing how much Dan loved to fuck his throat, and Vadim feeling generous, that was that.

"Aye," Dan drew in a quick, sharp breath, "theoretically...your turn, but..." His hand was already in the short-shaved hair, feeling the familiar buzz on his palm. No longer soft, interest sparked by the promise of lips and throat. Dan leaned to kiss Vadim's forehead, lips moving against skin as he murmured, "Seems I might be old but not past it yet." He hardened slowly but steadily, without so much as a touch.

"Tell me," said Vadim, moving forward to briefly lick that swelling head, "what you were dreaming, there. All that time off, must have been boring." Another lick, more serious now, well aware of the hand that could try and force him. But that was always part of the deal, and he wouldn't mind being forced.

One slightly faster breath every time Vadim took a lick, before Dan answered. "Less dreams more daydreams." Looking down at his hand, the head, lips, part of the face. "Your arse, your throat. In all ways, every way. Your body, all of it. With time, no threats, and..." he stalled, second hand creeping to the back of the other's neck, fingers tightening at the next words, "I dreamed of using ropes and knives, chains..."

Vadim's breath caught at the last and at the force he could feel against his neck. Strong fingers. The promise of strength, of that edge between pain and naked lust. Yes. Time. With no threat. They would be able to do things like Darren and Mark did. Tied down and fucked. He moved closer, taking Dan between his lips with a sudden hunger that overrode the teasing. Semi-drunken mind accepting the images. Tied down, stretched, moaning with pain.

Dan felt the sudden hunger, its shift from leisurely teasing to greed. His fingers tensed, digging harder into neck muscles, pulling closer, down, making

Vadim take his cock. Deep, better than images and memories. The goddamned real thing. “I’m going to fuck your throat,” he pressed out between his teeth. “Coz I fucking missed you.”

Force. Yes. Couldn’t have done it before, Vadim thought, now he could, not with Darren, shit, because Darren had never beaten him. Never broken him. But he knew the savage strength in Dan, and that was what made him do it, again. Not resisting as Dan shoved his head fully onto his cock, relaxed and accepting. Greedy enough to take this all the way without panicking, assuming the faster and harder they did it, the sooner he’d breathe again. Hands grabbing Dan’s legs, pulling him closer to the edge, falling into a quick, unforgiving rhythm as if it was him that forced Dan, not the other way round. Both. Neither.

Force and need, love and lust, it all came together. Dan’s mind blanked with every brutal push of almost painful intensity. He felt as if he could come again and again, endless orgasms, wherever, whenever and in all eternity. Losing himself too soon, he gasped and moaned, forgetting all about cautious silence. He thrust hard, keeping the head locked in place, convulsing and cumming with lips against his groin, and a throat frantically gagging against the intrusion of his cock. “Fuck!” Dan groaned out, hips bucking, “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

No breath. No air. Body fighting on its own. Vadim couldn’t deny the reflex, the training to stay alive, to keep breathing. The loss of air and control was a cold blade touching his brain. Nevertheless. The heat. Heat in his face, heat everywhere in his mouth, down his throat, running towards his stomach, burning like vodka. Heat at the back of his head, holding him, engulfing him, and Vadim was close to cumming as well. His right hand released Dan’s thigh and reached for his own cock, knew it could be fast, just a few quick strokes, but right now.

The movement of neck and shoulder under his hands brought Dan partially back to conscious thought. Keeping his hands where they were, one on the top of Vadim’s head, the other in the back of the neck. Steadying, while his cock was softening, allowing air. He could hear the whistling breath and feel the harsh movement of his Russkie jerking off.

Vadim couldn’t think of freeing himself, Dan’s grip meant he was staying right there, simple as that. Strong grip, motions not conscious, just doing what needed doing, feeling his body tense, knees on the floor, taste and smell of Dan. Dan close, never mind the kneeling, whatever, didn’t care, just took the need and

increased it, pressure already close to boiling, and he came with a few harsh motions.

Only when Vadim's shudders subsided and his body stilled, did Dan let his own hands lose tension and slide down while keeping contact. Fingers on skin, heat transferred between palms and body. "Hey, Russkie." Murmured, as he gazed down onto the other man's head.

Vadim looked up, raising his head enough to let Dan's cock slip out, and gave a grin. "Aye? Listening." He cleared his throat—it felt raw, but that was well worth it. Somewhat self-consciously reaching for the rag and cleaning himself up, but remaining on his knees.

"Nothing." Dan shrugged and grinned, lopsided. "Just testing if my voice still works." Allowing his hands to fall off Vadim's body, he shuffled back on the bed to fall to the side, supported by his elbow. "You hungry?" Still grinning, it seemed impossible to wipe it off his face.

"Aye." Vadim gave a short laugh. "You look well-fucked. Already." He stood, popping his neck on purpose, pleased when the tightness left. He motioned to the food. "And willing to share."

"*Already?* What's that supposed to mean?" Dan arched a brow, reaching for the knife amongst the food. "That was number two for me. You try and top that, old man."

"I'm starting at...disadvantage." Vadim walked around the bed and sat down heavily, pulled his legs up and stretched out, head fell to the side to watch Dan cut up the food. Darkened hand on the gleaming knife.

Looking up curiously at the way the bed moved slightly, Dan wondered about the peculiar expression on Vadim's face. Decided he was seeing ghosts, he stuck pieces of cheese and ham onto the tip of the blade, holding it out. "Eat, you might still catch me up." He arranged whisky, cheese, salami and bread in front of him before tucking in ravenously. Well-fucked, indeed. Hungry, warm, and plain old satisfied, lying on that grubby bed in front of his...yeah, shit. Lover. Dan couldn't help a goofy grin as he looked back up, watching Vadim chew.

"You'd make good porn material, you know."

Vadim managed to swallow, but just barely, and gave Dan a surprised stare. "What?"

“Well,” Dan shrugged, “for me anyway. But judging from the couple of mags I managed to snatch in a crap porn shop ‘under cover of night’, you’d beat any of the so-called studs on there.”

Studs. What a ridiculous word. Dan had gone into a porn shop and bought, well, porn. Of course. That stuff was available in London, he remembered marvelling at the ease to get whatever he wanted.

Stuffing his face with a big piece of cheese, Dan washed it down with an equally large gulp of whisky. “Let’s face it, Russkie, you’re fucking perfect, and I hazard a guess that you know it.”

Good for the cameras. Endearing athlete, in tight swimming trunks, every muscle taut in his body. Vadim had never thought about it that way—flesh was flesh in sports, and had a meaning beyond the jerking off part. He wondered what people had felt staring at him. Staring at the fencing lunges performed in the tight white dress, breeches and socks oddly enhancing male and female forms. Especially with the coiled up energy inside. Yes, he was as close to perfection as he could maintain. An end in itself. Not for anybody but himself. To intimidate. To keep up appearances in all ways that mattered.

“You should have seen me in Montreal.”

“I did, in photos.” Dan pushed himself up, resting on his hip. Fingers leaving greasy prints on the tin mug filled with whisky. “How the fuck do you think I knew who you were?” Taking a mouthful of single malt, he cherished the taste, before reaching for his pack of Superkings, tapping it open and fishing a cigarette out. “Soviet hero. Athlete, pentathlon, and then elite soldier. When you finally told me you were Spetsnaz you just verified my suspicions.” He lit his fag, taking his time before exhaling the first plume of smoke. “I never told anyone.” A rueful smile twisted the scar in his face into shapes of shadow and light.

“Not quite like that. Many of Soviet athletes are soldiers. All killers. Even women. You wouldn’t believe how much goes on behind scenes.” Vadim grinned, but shook his head. “I liked the mask too much. Delusional. Never first class athlete. Went into pentathlon because I wasn’t fast enough as swimmer.” He gave a snort. “But first class Spetsnaz. Irony, eh?”

“I was never anything but a soldier. No more, no less, and now I’m not even that anymore. Guess I’ll have to find myself something else to be first class

in.” Smoke tendrils curled out of his nostrils as Dan chuckled, “what about first class fuck?”

Vadim grinned. “Gold medal in cocksucking? Interesting...idea.” Dan laughed and Vadim reached for some of the cut-up cheese.

“Still think, was best time of my life. Apart from time...here.” Touching Dan’s arm briefly. Not here: Afghanistan, but here: with you.

Dan smiled, slowly exhaling smoke, watching the white-grey plumes waft out of sight. He didn’t try to stop himself this time, touching the no-go subject.

“Your family? What time of your life was...is that?”

“I sometimes feel like guest in their life. Russian-style guest, so...welcome, and heartfelt, part of it, but...” Vadim swallowed. The provider, covered for by the real protector.

“But?” Dan stilled, intently watching him. He knew something about feeling like a stranger in a house and amongst a family that was his own, but knew nothing about having a wife, let alone children. Children. Fucking impossible thought.

“Maybe I should let them go. So Katya’s free. So I’m not just...absence in their life.” Vadim shook his head. “I love...them very much, but what father am I? I’m not much of husband, either.”

Torn between shaking his head and nodding, Dan was reduced to asking yet another question. “Why did you marry? I mean, why did you get her pregnant in the first place?” Stubbing the fag out on the side of the bed, he let the butt drop to the floor. Did he sound like a jealous lover?

“Living with Hungarian fencer was not option,” Vadim murmured and shook his head. “I married because she promised to protect me. All I had to be was father to her child. For my career, to stay out of prison, to have life.” Vadim stood, driven up by what felt like pain, and could just be guilt.

“What if you hadn’t married.” Dan didn’t move except for his head. Following Vadim.

“No idea. Maybe different career. Maybe just left, gone somewhere else, where it doesn’t matter.” Yes, him cutting wood in Siberia. Or something. Don’t kid yourself, Vadim, you don’t have the balls for living rough.

“Would you have deserted? Left the Soviet Union and gone to a country where it doesn’t matter?”

Vadim shook his head. “I’d done my two years. But...there’s still my father. Extended family. Just running away...” so I can fuck men—and be fucked with no danger. How pathetic. “What other choice do I have? All decisions were made long ago. This way, I could travel. Meet you. That’s something.” Vadim looked at Dan on the bed.

Taking another mouthful of whisky, Dan shook his head. “Shit.” Murmured to himself, the again, “shit.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Bold-faced lie, “just me being a pathetic poof.” Lips curling into an acidic grin that didn’t touch his eyes. “Just thinking.” He downed all of the whisky that remained in the mug. “You’ll be fucking off back home. Back to the Soviet Union.” Wiping his lips, throat burning, belly on fire with the liquor. “When this war’s over, so are we.” Dan put on a fake smile. “Best get some food and fucks in before that, aye?”

Vadim nodded, speechless for a moment by the ache he felt at the thought. Could he do that, live with Katya, living that marriage for the happiness of children—well, in addition to the worry and the burden, and the hassle. No sex, no Dan, maybe the occasional high-risk fuck that Katya arranged for him. Finding a way to do this in Moscow. How? He had no idea. “Might ask to be posted somewhere else. German Democratic Republic, maybe. That’s...closer.”

“Don’t be stupid. Closer or not, there’s the Iron Curtain and they sure as fuck wouldn’t let an ex-SAS soldier through.”

True enough. And Vadim’s credits with the British government weren’t exactly high, either. Unless he did betray his country. If that offer still stood. But even then, waiting ten years. Lots of things happened in ten years. He’d be in his late forties. Dan would find another lover, and he’d make do with what he had. Spetsnaz. Resourceful. Vadim stepped towards the bed again and placed the fingertips of his left hand on Dan’s chest. “Even if that’s...how it ends, I won’t forget you.”

“Fuck!” Dan’s hands formed fists, slamming down onto the mattress, food and drink tumbling into a mess. “Don’t say shit like this. It fucking hurts, you get me? Don’t you *ever* say anything like that again. You know as much as I do that this will be it. Short of a miracle, you’re bloody stuck in your responsibilities to

your family and country. And I? I'm stuck in the West, paying for a fuck and imagining every time it was you." Shit, that was it, and it was too much.

Dan jumped off the bed, taking a couple steps back while shaking his head. Too much. All wrong. Since when had he turned into a goddamned drama queen and since when did it all hurt like such a motherfucker? "Just....," holding his hands up, palms out, as if warding off imaginary evil, "...don't say shit like that. Let's just pretend."

It hurt too much. But Vadim couldn't give up his pride, his integrity, his duty. Turn traitor, for Dan. Silent, Vadim nodded. Hoping Dan would find somebody. Not yet, not right now. But that it would be only half as bad as he feared. And that was already pretty bad. "Aye, handsome stranger. Fancy meeting you here."

"Aye." Dan nodded, it was easier like this. No talk, just pretend. Two naked men, two bodies. Nothing else mattered in the great scheme of things which trapped them both. "You hungry, stranger? For food, or just another man?"

Vadim closed the distance, looked into Dan's eyes so close he could smell him. "First food, then other, too." He grinned. "What's it going to be?"

"Right now? No promises. I've come twice, you've got to wait." Dan flashed a grin and it looked almost convincing. "We've got a few more hours yet." He didn't wait for a reply, got hold of his head and pulled Vadim into a kiss. Fierce, ferocious, utterly possessive.

If all they had was Afghanistan, then he'd make it bloody worth it.

* * *

Three days later Dan received an invitation to an interview at the embassy. Feeling lost without duties, he was glad. Once a soldier, always a soldier. Let through the high security gates, Dan was by no means intimidated by the immaculate garden and building in a war-ravaged country, instead mildly amused. He expected no one other than the Iron Lady to cross his path any moment, as British as any Brit could be, short of Her Majesty the Queen.

Even the thoughts of the Prime Minister didn't prepare him, though, for the sight of his prospective future employer when he was taken into the 'inner sanctuary' for his interview. HMA M. de Vilde, Her Majesty's Ambassador

Margaret de Vilde. Baroness de Vilde, in fact. An elegant lady perhaps in her fifties greeted him, petite, yet nothing fragile about her.

“Please, take a seat.” The Ambassador pointed to the chair opposite her impressive mahogany desk.

Dan mumbled a “thank you, Ma’am,” and sat down while frantically trying to recall what title he was supposed to address her with. Legs braced, then parallel, finally one crossed over the other, then side by side again, before settling at last on leaning back into the upright chair as far as he could. Sod the splendour around him, he wasn’t in the Mess anymore and didn’t have to stand to attention.

“Tell me, Mr McFadyen, what made you apply for the position?” Eyes focussed on him, there was no smile in her entirely neutral expression.

Nothing escaped those grey eyes that scrutinised him. As grey as her immaculate hairdo. Big. Shiny. Helmet. Hair.

“I’m looking for a job,” he faltered, still unsure about the correct address, “Madam Ambassador.” Dan figured her question was one of the most stupid he’d ever been asked. His dark eyes met hers, damned if he wasn’t going to give only as much as he was getting. If she wanted a stand-off, he was ready.

It was impossible to figure out what she thought about his answer, not a twitch in her composed face, no inflexion in her finely cultured voice. “Yes, Mr McFadyen, I took that for granted.” Precise consonants and long vowels. “What I am asking, however, is why you left the British Forces before retirement age, seeking employment in Kabul.”

“That’s not what you asked, Ma’am.” Dan countered, having already forgotten about the ‘Ambassador’ bit, and the ‘Excellency’ crossed his mind too late. He nearly flashed a grin when his response elicited a fraction of reaction. Her brows had twitched, he’d bet his twelve-year pension on that.

“But to answer your question, I realise it makes me look like an idiot, leaving two years before my full pension plus golden handshake, but they told me I wasn’t going back to active service after my surgery.”

Dan pointed to the stack of papers in front of her, “you know all that already, don’t you, Ma’am? You got my files.” Feeling strangely smug when she nodded agreement.

Sure she knew, and he was starting to wonder if there was anything she hadn't read already. Age, height, weight, shoe size, and what he'd had for breakfast. Sexual preference? He hoped not.

"And why was staying in Britain not agreeable, Mr McFadyen?" Her finely manicured hand moved to rest on the papers. Dan noticed pastel coloured varnish, as pastel as her pale green tailored suit. Yet there was nothing pale about her. She made Thatcher look like a bimbo.

"Frankly, Ma'am, I'm not ready yet to get fat in a cushy job behind a desk. I had knee surgery, nothing else, and in a couple of weeks I'll be fully functional."

He felt slightly unnerved when she didn't react. Ten seconds seemed to stretch into an hour.

"That's interesting, Mr McFadyen, but has not yet answered my question why you are here. In Kabul." The Ambassador paused. "Why security? This intrigues me. I did not glean from your files that becoming a bodyguard was a natural choice for an expert like you. I would have assumed that security advisor, survival specialist, or even mercenary would have been more fitting."

"Ma'am, there is nowhere else for me to go." Because I love a Russian, because I gave my word I'd be back. "I've been in Afghanistan for seven years." Because this is private, because it is none of your business. "Britain is not my home anymore, it has nothing to do with me, I don't fit in there anymore." No one there, no home. "I've been operating in Afghanistan for too many years, I know this place and its people as well as I used to know the Scottish Highlands." Because of you, Vadim. You are my home.

She didn't seem impressed or satisfied. Her second hand came to rest on top of the other, as if shielding the stack of paper. "Really, Mr McFadyen?"

She sat up straighter. A feat he'd considered impossible.

Shit. She wasn't buying it, and no fucking way he'd tell the truth. He'd get busted for being a security risk before he'd even started the job, with no chance to ever get a foot into this business again.

Why. Why Afghanistan. Kabul. Why, apart from one man, one enemy. "It's the mountains, Ma'am. Heat and cold, loneliness and endless skies. Those mountains, Ma'am, they fuck you up. They want to own you and swallow you whole. They try to kill you until you realise you're nothing but a fucked-up little human, and that you won't survive unless you become part of them, and so I did.

Paid for their protection with blood, pain, scars, but they've never let me down. I became part of them, and in return they became part of me." Dan tilted his head, hands resting on the arms of the chair. "I'm too fucked up for 'normal' society, Ma'am, but I'm bloody good at what I do. I do my duty, always have done. If that means that in my line of duty I am destined to die, I will."

Dan noticed too late the bemused expression on the lady's face, realising with dread that he had sworn. Way to go, Dan, in a job interview with a goddamned Ambassador.

"Sorry, Ma'am, I mean, Madam Ambassador," he stammered, "No, bug..." he bit his tongue, tried again, "your Excellency. I'll watch my language. Promise."

She suddenly smiled and made a delicate, measured gesture with her hand, as if waving all those swear words away. "'Ma'am' is just fine, and I like your explanation of the mountains, Mr McFadyen. I know what loneliness and a hostile environment are like."

Dan looked up, "You do?" He saw her face, noticed her deportment. Composed, controlled. This lady was a baroness, and one of Her Majesty's Ambassadors. It didn't go much higher, and he had a gut feeling there might be even more to her. "Yes, you do."

The baroness inclined her head and to Dan the gesture looked awfully regal. She wasn't far off the highest one in the triumvirate of ladies; the one whose picture he used to toast during mess functions.

"Mr McFadyen, you mentioned your views on duty. Can you elaborate on that?"

Dan's brows shot up. "Ma'am? Elabo-what?"

He was surprised at a rueful smile that ghosted across her face and vanished as fast as it had appeared.

"I have read your file, Mr McFadyen, we have already established that I know your career history, but I'd like you to tell me more about your personal view on duty."

"That's simple, Ma'am. I do what I'm told."

"Just like that?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Just like that. After all, that's what doing one's duty is all about: obeying orders."

She nodded once, slowly, fixing him with her unwavering gaze. “And if this entails killing, would you obey the order all the same?”

Dan frowned, “With all due respect, Ma’am, what do you think I’ve been doing all these years? I was SAS, Special Forces. I was trained to kill, and to survive, and once a soldier—always a soldier. I do my duty, no matter if this involves killing—or dying.” He sat up straighter. “Or are you asking me if I feel guilt for what I’ve done in my life? I don’t, Ma’am, just so that’s clear. I’ve done my duty, I followed orders, no matter what, and I still sleep at night. I would have died in the course of duty several times over if I hadn’t been such a lucky git, and I’ve got the scars to prove it.”

He felt her eyes linger on the scar that ran from lips to temple. She nodded once more, thoughtful, but he hadn’t finished yet.

“I’m not a nice guy, Ma’am. I don’t feel remorse for anything I’ve done,” except one thing, and even that had brought him what he’d never hoped to gain, “except, perhaps, that I feel no guilt. I’m not a good man,” echoes of another, a cave, and a kiss, “but I’m not evil, either. I just do what has to be done.”

The baroness remained silent, studying Dan for a while, who met her gaze with his own, unflinching. He felt as if this was her version of the final stand-off at high noon. He was not going to back down, either.

She suddenly smiled, folding her hands on top of the papers. “You do realise, Mr McFadyen, that you applied for the position of head of the embassy’s security staff?”

Dan’s eyes widened a fraction, “Did I, Ma’am?”

“Yes.” The corners of her lips were twitching with something akin to amusement. “You just did.”

Head of security. Fuck, he’d only applied for bog standard grunt. Dan couldn’t help but grin. “Does that mean that I got the job, Ma’am?”

She nodded, pushed herself off the chair and stood, Dan’s cue to jump up as well.

“Yes, Mr McFadyen, I have decided I shall take you on. The probation period is three months.” She walked around the desk, holding out her hand. “One condition though,” that somewhat amused expression was back on her face, “we will have to get you some suitable attire. If I required your services at a function, you would look rather out of place in your current outfit.”

Dan laughed, which made her smile. “Will do, Ma’am. I can scrub up, believe me.”

“I do believe you, Mr McFadyen, I have seen photos of you in your uniforms in the file.”

He took her hand and shook it, surprised at the firm grip. Iron fist in velvet glove, this lady seemed as tough as a Special Forces commander. “Give me the specs and I’ll get it done. Can’t be any worse than No2s.”

She released his hand. “My aid will arrange everything for you. Contract, accommodation here in the embassy, vehicle, insurance, medical cover, clothing and equipment. I trust you will find your salary to your satisfaction.” She paused, “I assume you are free to start straight away?”

Dan nodded, “couple of weeks of physio and I’m fit for active duty.” Accommodation...hell, he hadn’t even thought about this additional bonus. He was about to get posh in his old age. No more rat-infested shitholes and freezing caves, but an air conditioned room and satellite TV. Yet he’d choose a barren piece of rock over any comfort, if he could only share it with another.

“Very well,” the baroness nodded, “there are workout and fitness facilities on the compound. You should find the equipment to a high standard.”

Sure he would, Dan couldn’t imagine otherwise.

“In the meantime,” she continued, “my staff will make sure you know all about the compound and the embassy’s operations, including my schedule. Please feel free to ask for anything, and any questions at all. I do understand that it is impossible to organise security without knowing the organisation itself.”

Dan nodded, nothing else he could add. He’d never met anyone so efficient.

“Do you have any more questions, Mr McFadyen?”

“No questions, Ma’am, but one condition.”

Her brows rose quizzically. “Which condition would that be?”

“Ma’am, please call me Dan, not Mr McFadyen. That sounds like somebody I don’t know and, frankly, probably wouldn’t want to know.”

She let out a small laugh. “I believe I can accept this condition.” Smiling at him, hands folded in front of her, she looked up at him. Several inches shorter, but he hardly noticed the difference in height.

“I am looking forward to working with you, Dan.”

“And I with you, Ma’am.”

* * *

Three weeks later, Dan had settled into his room that was filled with several luxuries: stereo HiFi system, large colour TV and brand new video recorder with a small selection of films. His first week of duties had been as easy as a regimental parade, but he used as much professionalism and alertness guarding his new boss as he would training a whole camp of fierce mudjas, already planning to reorganise security to his approved specifications and get more staff.

At the end of the second week, Dan left a message at the tea house to meet at the usual place. On the Saturday, he stood waiting, dressed in sand coloured combats, comfortably worn boots, woollen shirt and jumper in muted colours that strangely suited the rest, and the heavy ski jacket over it all. Clapping his gloved hands for warmth, he watched the steam in front of his face. Kabul in November was bloody cold, especially waiting impatiently for Vadim near the corner of the rat-hole hotel.

Vadim, greatcoat covering most of his body, *ushanka* hat keeping his ears from freezing off, hurried through the alleys and streets, only stopping to greet patrols or other Soviet Army personnel. As if he was just out taking a stroll.

There were advantages to his rank, and relative freedom was one of them. Tolerated, not welcome, but the higher-ups had a live-and-let-live attitude now that the retreat was being organised. Few were fierce about upholding the Soviet Army's honour at present, all due to a mild-mannered man in the Kremlin. The retreating invaders cut their losses. Vadim didn't quite know what to make of it, but the wind was changing.

He gave Dan a mock salute when he came within view. "I guess you want to show me the wares?"

Dan's hand went up with the reflex to salute, aborting the movement mid-motion. "On the contrary, I want to show you the shop first. Wares come later." He grinned, indicating an alley off to the left with his chin. "Guess it's still safer not to be seen together. I assume you know where the Soviet HQ is?"

His grin grew out of proportion, with teeth and all. "There are a few streets opposite. Take the third one from the south. I'll be waiting at the backside corner."

Right under the noses of the Kremlin, so to speak. Safe in the eye of the storm, and expensive by Afghan standards.

“I’ll see you in few minutes.” Vadim just walked past the civilian, wondering about the location, but if that was where Dan had found lodgings, that was convenient. Just leave his desk and be at Dan’s place in what, fifteen minutes. Including evasive action.

He circled the area, walking up to it from the other direction, trying to spot Dan and then saw him, already lighting a cigarette and grinning broadly since no one was around, before vanishing through a doorway nearby.

The door was ajar, leading to two downstairs rooms, one that functioned as a kitchen with a large stove, the other with cushions on the floor and a low table. The toilet was outside. Wooden stairs led to an open plan room upstairs that undoubtedly housed the bed. The large stove was giving off heat, in fact the entire place was warmer than the barracks ever managed to get. Dan stuck his head around the corner when Vadim stepped inside. Fag in one corner of his mouth, battered kettle in his hand. “Tea?”

“Only if you have lemons.” Vadim pulled the hat off and began unbuttoning the coat in the sudden heat. He watched Dan prepare his tea. British way. It had been fairly unceremonious with Darren. Tea bag, electric kettle, and then attempt to ruin the brew with milk. One day, he’d teach Dan to make proper tea. “Maybe I could organise a samovar.”

“Does it come with instructions?” Dan puffed out smoke between his teeth, returning to the business of preparing tea the good old fashioned trapper way of throwing leaves into boiling water, then hoping for the best. Still in his thick coat, cold and sudden heat, or vice versa, didn’t affect him much.

“Yes. And it’s not very complicated.” He could easily get one from the army shop, Vadim thought. Or take the old one from his office and get a new one for there, one that was more presentable.

The sound of clattering and clanging came out of the kitchen, accompanying the luxury of running water from the tap over the stone sink. “Did you find the bolt to lock the door?” Dan called out. “Windows are secured, but can be smashed to get out. It’s a fairly good place, here. Someone in the embassy told me about the area and happens to know a cousin of a cousin of a brother of an

uncle of a father of a son...who's more than happy to rent it to me." He laughed, emerging in the doorframe.

Vadim had already checked the windows and bolted the door. "Good position. Up on the roof I could even check if that pathetic lieutenant is bothering to come to work on time." He hung his coat on a hook, still wearing the full Soviet uniform, minus hat. "Is this our...love nest, then?"

Wrestling out of his thick jacket, Dan laughed. "'Love nest', what a poet you are, Russkie. If I didn't know any better I'd call you a 'bloody poof'." Throwing the coat into a corner, he made a sweeping gesture across the rooms. "It's luxurious, though, you got to admit. Very little vermin and better than any of the shitholes of the past seven years. It pays to be *out* of the army, trust me." Pulling the jumper over his head, his shirt hung loose over the belt that kept the trousers secured on lean hips. "Did you know they pay shitloads of dosh to play nanny to ambassadors?"

"Ambassadors? So that's your secret." Vadim liked that dishevelled look. Dan made two movements and managed to look like something the cat had dragged in. "You got yourself nice work. Congratulations."

"Aye, lady ambassador. She's...something different. Like our Iron Lady. Remember the big stiff hairdos? She's one of those. Her Excellency is a baroness, and damned, she's classy. No bloody idea why she chose me as her head of security, I even swore at the interview!"

Vadim gave a laugh. "Because you're good enough to rival Spetsnaz. We guard the grey men in Kremlin. Vy...Certain units do." Vympel does. Well. He hoped Dan hadn't noticed the odd syllable. He felt stupid for keeping that part secret, but he'd signed his silence.

Dan shrugged. There were things in the last seven years he'd deliberately not heard nor seen nor understood. "Not that I complain. My room in the embassy is like a luxury suite, with bath, stereo, video, TV, and all that shit. Actually," he grinned, "I'm already getting addicted to long soaks in a hot bath with bubbles." Winking, he ran a hand through his unruly hair, "But truth be told, I feel rather out of place. Seems the mountains will never spit me back out completely."

You're glutton for suffering, Dan. Fuck the mountains. Vadim stood closer, suddenly wanting to hold and touch, kiss and forget about the tea. "It's good place. Secure. Clean. Running water. Tea." And you.

Dan reached for the smoothly shaved face, tracing the jaw line with fingers that were uncharacteristically clean, their nails scrubbed. “While you’re here, I’ll be here, and this is the place where you’ll find me. Whenever you can.”

Vadim covered Dan’s hand with his own. “Aye. They do assume I have Afghan girl in city. By now, I could have fathered whole stable of children here. Some men do.”

“You haven’t fucked me *that* often, Russkie.” Laughing, Dan felt inclined to ignore the sound of boiling water coming from the room behind him. “But I guess I might let you have another go at that ‘fathering of children’ thing, later. Been a while.” He bared his teeth in a face-splitting smirk.

Vadim grinned and released the hand. “Dan, you’re missing some bits in your birds and bees education.” He slid his hand down to Dan’s abs and prodded there. “Children don’t grow in ammo pouches, darling.”

“Well, you should know. You managed to produce some.” Tensing his stomach muscles until Vadim’s hand met nothing but unforgiving hardness.

“Now fix tea.”

“Sir, of course, Sir!” Dan’s hand flew in the perfect angle to his imaginary beret, saluting. “Tea, Sir. Immediately, Sir.” Laughing, he turned to the kitchen, busying himself with kettle, stove and mugs, and a handful of tea leaves. Making a hell of noise, but returning swiftly with a brew that was nothing short of being almost perfect. At least for a Brit. “Sugar, Sir?” Holding out one mug. “Can’t offer lemon or milk, sorry, Sir.”

Vadim settled and took the tea, cautious not to burn his fingers. “Careful. Sir-ing could trigger most unexpected reactions.” Of course, Gavriil. Or other conscripts who busied themselves doing his bidding. Like rabbits jumping over a tiger’s paws, and rarely seeing what hit them.

“And what makes you think I couldn’t possibly handle those reactions?” Dan sat down on a thick cushion opposite. “Huh, Mr Spetsnaz Major you-get-me-shaking-in-my-boots Krasnorada?”

Vadim laughed. “You can handle me alright.” Blowing on the tea, glancing over at Dan, studying the newly hatched bodyguard. “I promise you this much...if anybody on our side gets on the bad side of your ambassador, you’ll know. I don’t think it is likely, but we are not above it. Just in case. What we have is more important than duty.”

“What do you mean, are you saying you would tell me?” Dan’s face a picture of bewilderment.

Vadim shook his head. “I’m not saying anything. But if I tell you to get her out of country, or place, you will do it.” He looked straight at Dan. “That is all I’ll be saying.”

Dan tilted his head, said nothing for a long while, until he finally nodded. “Aye.” That was that, from one man to another. ‘Stay alive’, like he’d said several times before, without words, but with precious supplies and valuable kit.

Stretching his long legs out on the cushions, Dan leaned back against the wall, studying Vadim. “I assume you’ve got until morning?”

Vadim looked at the legs, gaze slowly moving upwards, over the cloth, folds, lines, the shape of the relaxed muscle underneath. “Yes. I can...get to work from here.” Circling in a wide enough movement. How odd. Leaving this place to go to work, as sane and normal as Moscow. He put the mug down and headed over to Dan, crouching near him. “Sleep is overrated.”

Own mug in both hands, Dan’s face, scar and all, began to curve and move with a slow, spreading grin. “You are hinting at sex? S.E.X.? With a member of the high society such as me? Protecting ambassadors and all that?”

Vadim laughed and moved closer, hands now on Dan’s thighs, thumbs slipping between them to open them up. “You’re common as dirt, Dan, inside. Just like this weary Soviet Special Forces major.”

Dan laughed, spilling some of the tea over his hands. “If that’s your idea of foreplay, then my idea of a pet name is, was and always will be ‘cunt’.” Readily opening his legs under the pressure of thumbs and hands, he set the mug aside to run a hand over the short shaved hair.

“You called me that in mountains...didn’t think it pet name then. I wanted you then. I want you differently now. Different...ways, and flavours. That fist...” Vadim took Dan’s hand, and felt oddly driven to say this, in this strange place that made flirting possible. When he thought of Dan, in his dejected, musky office, words like that just appeared, doubtlessly read somewhere. Tolstoy sure wouldn’t mind if those were his. It was a translation anyway, and Dan wouldn’t notice. He closed Dan’s hand with his, then brought it to his throat, and placed it against the Adam’s apple. The hand opened, and Vadim allowed it to. “...this fist has opened.”

He pressed it against his throat, looking at Dan all the time. “Fingers, Dan. We are no longer fists. All we had to do was this.”

Dan swallowed, stared wide-eyed and completely flustered. His hand moved like a puppet’s, the strings held by none other than his Russkie. “I...” he started, stopped again. Had no words for that big fat thing in his stomach that was travelling up to his throat with high speed and without mercy, even though he knew it was called love. He could only find one answer: to lean forward and kiss. Lips on lips, his body talking where he lacked the words.

Vadim’s grin melted in the kiss, amused at that stricken expression, as if Dan didn’t get it. But Dan wasn’t stupid, it only took him a while to decipher some of the code. Vadim moved between Dan’s legs and pushed forward, getting Dan to slip off the cushion and lie on the ground, with him halfway on top. He ran his hand down to Dan’s leg, took the knee and bent the leg, running a hand up on the inside, while still kissing. “Civilian,” he murmured, and it was part curse, part pet name.

Still passive, and for once it didn’t matter but felt right. “Fucking Russkie soldier,” Dan whispered between lips and tongue, his hand moving to Vadim’s belt, and tunic, pulling fabric, sliding fingers and pushing beneath layers until his palms connected with warm flesh. Cursing himself that it had taken so many years before he’d found the most profound pleasure of all: intimacy.

Vadim pressed in harder, the most tantalizing question whether to undress himself or Dan first, impatiently working on getting Dan’s shirt off without popping the buttons, then suddenly slowed. All night. Safe. No enemies. No mountains. No insurgents. No rush. He paused, frowning, then grinned. “So strange.” Keeping Dan down beneath him, he took the time to unbutton the shirt, cuffs, and slid it off that bronzed shoulder, the one with the bullet hole, dipped low to frame the round scar with teeth, then sucked on it, slow and deliberate.

All the time in the world.

“Ahhhh, fuck.” Dan exhaled, letting his head roll to the side, smiling at no one and nothing, eyes closed, simply enjoying every sensation. Lips, light nip of teeth, and always the heat, no matter where and how their bodies touched, he could always feel Vadim’s heat. Skin, inside and out. “Guess that means I better reciprocate,” he murmured, lifting his head while using his free hand to push Vadim’s neck cloth out of the way. Hooking his finger into the t-shirt collar, he

pulled it down to reveal the burn scar in the hollow of Vadim's throat. He smiled, no anger, no triumph, before his lips circled and found the scar that was his.

Vadim swallowed hard, pressed Dan's head against his body, fucking twisted, but still something that was won fair and square, scars and the right to them. Pulling Dan's shirt out from behind him and tossing it away, Dan's clothes strange, the whole man in his new appearance, different. Smelling clean instead of dusty. "Think...we could try out this carpet." He patted the space to the left. "And this one. Different pattern, understand?"

Chuckling low in the back of his throat, Dan peered right and left, then glanced towards the upstairs room. "Don't forget there's a bedroom as well and a fairly big mattress. Not the height of luxury, but I don't think we've ever had sex anywhere quite so comfortable." Pulling harder on the fabric close to his hand, baring skin around Vadim's middle, until both of his hands slipped beneath it, sliding upwards and across the chest, toying with nipples and flesh.

Vadim grinned. "You'd say that when it's me who's on top, yes?"

"Who said I don't want you on top?" Dan winked.

Vadim was surprised, but glad for the lightness, the banter about it. His turn, then. They had time, and that made many things easier, less complicated, more playful. Less urgent. He nodded towards the upper level. "What about now?"

"'On top' or going 'up top'?" Grinning, hands meeting in the back of Vadim's neck, pulling the other down into another kiss. Teasing, the way he mock-bit and chewed. Breaking away for a moment, Dan murmured, "best now, or I might change my mind about the 'top' thing."

Vadim withdrew, despite his protesting body which would have preferred to claw and dig into Dan like a burrowing animal. Lifting Dan's upper body when he pulled back, and offered a hand, standing up.

Dan took the hand, his knee still complaining at times. "After you." His face-splitting grin betrayed the sole reason: watching the arse in front of him climb up the narrow stairs.

"Of course you're after me. What else is point?" Vadim murmured, curious to see 'their bedroom'. Bed. Mattress. Clean. With the options for tea and food just downstairs. Much better than the barracks, and much better than home, in a certain way.

Dan laughed, eyeing the muscular thighs and buttocks beneath the tight uniform trousers. “Miracle after seven years with such a cheerful soul as you, don’t you think? I still fancy the socks off you.” Delivering a hard smack onto the arse in front of him, he gave a shove and a laugh, watching Vadim lose balance and stumble onto the bed, before throwing himself on top.

“Come on then, wrestle me, who wins, fucks.” But he was laughing far too hard; he didn’t have a chance and he didn’t give a damn.

* * *

Dan settled into his room in the main building, still stunned every day at the luxury of TV, Hi-Fi, radio, a maid who cleaned up after him, and most of all the bathroom with tub and hot water. Yet his favourite place was the rented rooms in the centre of Kabul, and the hours he spent there with Vadim.

One night, he’d stayed in the embassy, smoking a cigarette on the patio while looking at the stars with an inexplicable longing for the vastness of the mountains. For six weeks, he’d been reorganising security measures and training staff as well as liaising with the military. He turned his head at the sound of the back door opening. Raising his brows in surprise at the person who stepped into the cool night air.

“Ma’am, should you be out here?”

The ambassador smiled, pulling the cashmere pashmina closer around her. “Good evening, Dan. Don’t worry, I am not out here to make your job more difficult, but I was getting slightly claustrophobic inside.” She took in a deep breath of the fresh air.

Dan flicked the ash off his cigarette before taking another drag, carefully exhaling the smoke away from her. “It’s potentially dangerous, though. With the current increased threats you cannot be too careful.” Despite his words, he stepped aside to make space beside him.

She chuckled, then moved to stand closer. “Oh, Dan, I appreciate your concern very much, but who would bother trying to take me out in this veritable fortress?”

“Probably no one, Ma’am, but you never know.” Dan looked down at her, finished his fag and dropped it, stubbing out the butt. He felt compelled for some

reason to bend down and pick up the dead end. Wondering if she disapproved of littering and had to chuckle at the odd sensation of feeling like a small boy, vying for the lady's approval.

She tilted her head, looking up with a smile. "Care to share your amusement?"

He couldn't, too embarrassed to admit it and just said the first thing that came into his mind. "I was just thinking that at least I'm here to protect you, in this dangerous location, surrounded by trees and shrubs and the possibility of a sniper-spider attack."

She laughed heartily, and he realised he'd never heard that sound before. What sort of strain must she be under? He couldn't help but admire her, as she bore up to every demand of her job formidably well. The unexpected laughter made him grin.

"I feel safe with you, Dan. Not just in the presence of spiders. You are extremely professional and very good at your job. I admire that in a person."

Dan felt ridiculously proud at her compliment. "Thank you, Ma'am and it is an honour to work for you."

She chuckled warmly, shaking her head at his last words, quietly muttering something that sounded suspiciously like "silly man" to him. He'd never seen her so relaxed, let alone teasing him, or anyone else, for that matter. Always serious and perfectly controlled. Tonight, Dan mused, he truly enjoyed the ambassador's company.

"Tell me, Dan," she returned her gaze back to his face and he could sense her eyes lingering on the scar for a moment. "What are the mountains to you? I have often wondered about what you told me in the interview." She smiled, "I found your description rather fascinating."

"Really?" He felt strangely pleased. "It's hard to imagine, Ma'am, if you've never been up there. They are endless, the sky seems to sweep on forever, and all you can see are the rugged tops of them. The colour is like nothing else, the blue of the sky, crystal clear, and the shades of the rocks change depending on the time of day and the seasons. At night you can see more stars than you've ever imagined possible. They're like diamonds glittering on black velvet, with no other light to dim their icy brilliance. The longer you look, the more stars appear, until you feel dizzy, trying to fix your eyes onto any of them."

He noticed her watching him with an indecipherable expression on her face. What she was thinking? “I’d love to show you, Ma’am.” A silly notion, and of course she just smiled. “You should see the mountains in winter, when your breath freezes before your face and there’s nothing but gleaming white, so harsh it burns your eyes when the sun beats upon the snow. And the caves, Ma’am, one of the few places that offer some chance of survival. You can find water there, but you have to know how, you have to coax the knowledge out of the mountains, but when they accept you, grant their permission, the caves become like a womb, sheltering you from the elements.”

“I wish I could see it.” She shook her head gently. “You have a way with words.”

“And I wish I could take you, because when you stand up there, looking over the mountain range, then nothing else matters but breathing, moving and surviving. Even though you are tiny, you feel free. The mountains give you peace and at the same time you think that nothing can hold you back. Because all there is, is the sky, and your own, small life.”

“I really do wish I could.” She smiled, and to Dan it seemed a very sad smile.

“Were you never lonely, though, alone in those mountains?”

“I was rarely completely on my own, but when I was, I liked it. I’m happy with my own company, I guess. Must be because of the Highlands, I always used to hike around for days, even as a kid.”

“I can imagine.” She suddenly looked up again, questioningly. “Do you play chess?”

He laughed, shaking his head. “No, Ma’am, I’m afraid I’m not clever enough for that sort of thing.”

“Oh, I am convinced that you are a very man clever indeed. Don’t hide your light under a bushel, I am certain you would make a very good chess player. You have the tactical mind for it and, I wager, the ability to react in seemingly impossible situations.”

Dan grinned, “You sure, Ma’am? I’m afraid I’m not one of them there edumacated types.” Stumbling over the words with deliberate exaggeration.

“Don’t you worry,” she pulled the shawl tighter around her, looking up at him, with a twinkle of amusement in her grey eyes that made him wonder what she

had been like as a young girl. “I have known many men in my life who were highly educated, but very far from clever.”

“Guess they wouldn’t be clever enough to survive up in the mountains then, eh?” Dan winked, grinning from ear to ear.

“I guess not.” She suddenly laughed while shaking her head, as if she had remembered a very funny incident from the past. “No, you are right, Dan. Definitely not clever enough. In fact,” Dan was amazed to see her eyes had taken on an almost wicked twinkle, “I am certain they would not have survived in the centre of London without a maid, a butler, and a nanny on top.”

Dan grinned at that image, “sounds like some of my COs and OCs, Ma’am. Brigadier Snooty-face or Colonel Twit.” Impersonating one of those upper-class officers with the most exaggerated posh voice he could muster, made the more ludicrous by his Scottish accent.

“Yah, yah, jolly fine show, my good men. Toodle-loo, hooray-henry, and tallyho.” No sooner had he said the mocking words, he ducked his head, embarrassed. “Sorry, Ma’am, I shouldn’t...” but she was laughing. So hard, she had to wipe her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Oh, Dan, you have no idea how right you are. I thought for a moment my father stood in front of me, in all his glory.”

“Your father?” Dan stared at her wide-eyed and mortified.

“No, no, it’s quite alright, you had him down to a ‘T’ without ever having met him. I’m afraid we can be like that, ‘upper class twits’.” She smiled, quickly had herself back under control. “Trust me, it’s unbelievably refreshing to laugh like this.” Looking up at him while placing a hand on his arm for a moment, “thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome, Ma’am.” Dan grinned, insanely proud and wondering where the hell that feeling came from. “It’s good to hear you laugh. You don’t seem to be getting enough of a chance to do so.”

She nodded her head, as noncommittal in her skilful small talk as he’d heard her during the most boring embassy function. “Changing the subject...what about chess?”

“Aye,” Dan nodded, “I’m willing to learn, but only if you promise to learn something else in return.” He feared he was going too far, but only those who dared won.

“Whatever do you mean, Dan?” Her finely shaped brows lifted towards her bouffant hairline.

“Black Jack.” Dan flashed a grin, “and poker. I’m sure you’d be an ace at that, what with the diplomacy and all that.”

“Did you just call me a poker face?” She was trying to hide a grin, mostly failing.

“I would never dare, Ma’am.” Hand on heart, Dan chuckled.

“In that case,” she allowed the grin to break to the surface, for once her expressions uncontrolled, “you better teach me to become one.”

* * *

Vadim watched darkness sink around him, the slow fading of colour, then of lines, until closing his eyes wouldn’t make a difference. He enjoyed sitting here, far too dark to read, mind at rest. This place was as much his cave as Dan’s, somewhere he could let his imagination wander, past the landscapes in his mind, the favourite memories, Dan, but without his frantic urgency. Dan was a steady presence in his life now, a presence that was reassuringly here.

Even, of course, when he wasn’t. Late shift at the embassy, duty at a social function, Vadim had known he wouldn’t be there when he had headed here after duty. He knew Dan would come, as he always did. This could have been central Moscow, both of them had a job, and they would meet up in the apartment. Life had a strangely normal quality, but Vadim was far from complaining.

Instead, he could feel his batteries recharge, the energy that this country had taken from him running back into his veins, and he felt at peace, just allowing the time to pass, aware and alert as a sniper, an eagle upon his rock, far, far up, where nothing could harm him.

He just sat there, hadn’t even bothered to take off the uniform, felt too lazy and peaceful to do that.

* * *

Dan was glad when the function was finally over. It had been a boring mix of the usual, while he’d been ever present at her Excellency’s side, never even so

much as taking his eyes off her and the surroundings. Trying to blend into the elegance of the assembly, with pager, knife, and pistol hidden beneath his clothes.

It was well after 1 AM when Dan had done the last check and debriefed his security staff, ensuring the lady was safely ensconced in her private rooms. Signing officially off duty, he was never less than a pager alert away. No time to change his clothes, he wanted to get away as soon as possible; he'd had to force himself several times throughout the night not to think of the man who was waiting for him in their safe place. The baroness had never asked where he vanished to and Dan assumed she believed he had an affair with an Afghan beauty, needing the secrecy to protect her anonymity and shield her from religious repercussions.

He hurried into his room to find his long black winter coat. Early spring was still freezing during the night, but when he looked at the fine cloth in his hand, Dan frowned. Wouldn't do. Too obvious. He needed to find something less conspicuous. Rummaging in his drawers, he pulled out a native coat instead and found one of his old 'tea cosy' hats. Throwing the garments over his evening attire, he left without delay, making his way through the still night. No more than five minutes on foot to their place, where he knocked the agreed sign. Dan didn't fancy being shot like a rabbit if Vadim didn't recognise him.

Vadim's hand found the lighter and the flame made the room bright almost, compared to the darkness a heartbeat ago. Lit a couple of candles, then stood, stretching his back, and rolling his neck, stiff from the long, motionless wait. He turned towards the door. The Volkov showed it was past one. Sunday tomorrow, and a day off for him.

Slipping inside, Dan immediately locked the door behind him. He turned and smiled, suddenly aware how ridiculous he must look with a tea cosy on his head and wrapped in a long, scruffy looking native coat with black trouser legs peeking beneath it, and highly polished black shoes without the slightest scuff mark.

"Took longer than I hoped. Got yourself a bite to eat?" He'd left a whole stash of exquisite leftovers from the embassy in the kitchen earlier.

"Half the protein is gone, I'm afraid." 'Protein' covering the steak, salmon, prawns, and some thin pink slices Vadim couldn't quite place, but which had been good. The salmon had been topped with generous amounts of cream cheese.

“That’s alright,” Dan grinned, “I get that stuff everyday. I’m longing for a simple bite of bread and cheese, to be honest.”

Vadim’s eyes followed the odd mix of clothes. A suit? Even the proper shoes with it. “I can see you hurried.”

“Aye, it was late. Didn’t want you to wait any longer. Besides, those crusties aren’t exactly exciting company all night long.” Half twisting round, Dan pulled the hat off, shaking his hair while fiddling with the closures of the coat. He straightened back when he shrugged out of the garment, carelessly throwing hat and coat into a corner.

“She makes me wear this shit, it’s at least more comfortable than my old dress uniform.”

Dan stood in the finest, tailor-made black dinner jacket. Starched shirt, black hand-tied bow, black silk satin cummerbund around the narrow waist. The jacket fit as perfectly as a glove, smoothly accentuating every line of his tall body. Hair brushed, glossy even, despite still being ‘wild’ and longer than most men’s.

Vadim swallowed, couldn’t have placed what had the strongest effect on him. All of it. Dan. A different kind of Dan to the laid-back civilian, the scruffy, often downright dirty pseudo-insurgent, or the naked body that woke up next to him. So very different. He couldn’t help staring, then covered most of the distance and ran a flat hand over the cloth over Dan’s chest. Mixed reaction: lust and awe.

“Good taste. Your boss.” His voice rough.

Dan tilted his head, surprise written all over his face. “Aye, she’s...she’s class. Real class.” He smiled, covering Vadim’s hand with his own. “I thought you’d probably think I looked stupid.” His lips quirked into a half-grin.

Vadim shook his head. “Fuck, no.” Ran his hand up Dan’s shoulder, the material felt good, and the warmth underneath. It made Dan look civilised, sophisticated, a strange contrast to his usual behaviour. He could suddenly imagine Dan as somebody who gave orders, an officer, someone more important and more dangerous than a Special Forces soldier who gave orders at knifepoint. Felt the leather holster snug against the shoulder, just a difference in texture under the jacket. Then it struck him.

“You look like MI6.”

Dan laughed, “James Bond?” His own hands resting on the small of Vadim’s back. The uniform cloth as familiar beneath his fingers as his own skin.

“‘Licensed to kill’ while being the greatest womaniser under the sun?” He winked, “do you feel faint yet?”

Some of Vadim’s reading had included Fleming, almost as an example to the self-delusions of the west. Now, this took on a different shade of meaning. “Not a woman. And not faint,” he said, closing the last bit of distance, brought their bodies together, lips opened, teeth digging into the taut neck muscle.

Dan let out a strangled sound. Vadim knew him too well, had mapped his body and its responses many times over. His neck—the attack went straight to his groin. “No, no woman. Hell, no.” Tilting his head back, he bared his throat while half-closing his eyes. “What do you see, when I look like this.”

Dan even smelled different. Aftershave, something expensive, refined, the skin tasted of soap and sweat, and Dan. “I see very dangerous man,” Vadim murmured, accentuating his words with more biting. Hand moving to Dan’s groin, roughly kneading cock and balls in his hand, knowing he skirted pain, but knew how to do it these days. “I see fuck at knifepoint. Gunpoint. Tied down. You, me, doesn’t...matter.”

Combined with hands and teeth, the words made Dan shudder. “You’re a Soviet officer in *my* terrain.” Voice rough, no thinking, words just came to the surface. “Got lost, comrade?” His own hands slipped down, digging into Vadim’s arse, pulling him closer. Trapping his hand between their groins. “Or perhaps you got captured.” Images, memories, of knives and blood, and a silent fuck in the mountains. Dan’s breath caught in his throat.

Vadim felt a sickening stab of hot lust, so strong it knotted his guts. Good. Fucking good. How he’d wanted Dan even when he’d thought the man would kill him. Wanted him. Wanted him for the yielding, and the strength. Make believe? More real than real. He had the scars to prove it. And no gun, while he could feel Dan’s holster against his chest. Didn’t know what to say that wasn’t “yes, please” or “fuck me.” Dan demanding, all of a sudden, that new Dan he wanted just like the old Dan. Worth the wait.

Dan nodded, even though Vadim hadn’t uttered a word. “In that case,” murmured, “I can see it’s dangerous to leave the Soviet spy his freedom.” Pushing his hips forward, he steered Vadim with every small step towards the narrow stairs.

There was more resistance in Vadim’s body than in his heart. He wanted Dan like this. He had imagined slow, tender lovemaking, like they did, savouring

the time. Some nights just spent talking, or lying there thinking, with the luxury to not jump each other's bones the moment they touched, forced to make the most of half an hour, or two hours. This, now, was the fierceness of years ago, tinged, no, drenched with lust. He took a step back, and was about to head up the stairs, expecting a push or shove.

“Stop.” Dan was surprised at his own order. Didn't know what he was doing, just played along with what his body and some unknown recesses of his mind were telling him. He stood facing Vadim, just a faint rustle of cloth as he pulled the pistol from its holster. “Turn around. Slowly. Hands up. I want to see them at all times.”

The tell-tale sound, and the motion. Vadim stared at the pistol, remembered it against his neck, and him on his knees, the muzzle the darkest thing in the universe. His hands moved up, body understanding the laws of physics. Guns made gravity fail. He turned, ever so slowly, hands on the same level as his face, elbows away from his body. Could feel how hard he was.

“Good.” One corner of Dan's mouth quirked up. Mimicry of a smile. Speared by a fucking great stab of lust, right from the muzzle of the pistol to his cock and balls. What the fuck was going on here—he didn't give a shit. Just wanted. Took.

“Don't move.” He whispered, voice getting coarser, its edge serrated by lust. Free hand working on Vadim's buttons, until the tunic gaped open. Undoing the brass belt buckle, almost one-handed, he pushed the trouser fly apart. Just briefs, and t-shirt.

Vadim's breath was fast and shallow, uniform covering him, and not covering him. He glanced over his shoulder, as if to gauge Dan's mood, even though he knew Dan was as horny as he was. What he saw was Dan flashing an entirely frightening smile.

“Brace your legs.”

He shifted his feet apart, keeping the trousers up at about knee level, and that was how far he could spread them. Far enough to get fucked. He closed his eyes, fingers wanted to turn into fists with the sudden tension in the air, tension that made his hair stand on end. “What are you going to do to me?” He managed to speak without hitch. Playing along.

“I’ll show you how degenerate the West *really* is.” Dan answered in Russian, fingers of his left hand slipping between cummerbund and shirt in his back. His grin, when he pulled out the knife, was shark-like. The pistol never wavered in his hand, even when the tip of the knife slid beneath the waistband of Vadim’s briefs. “I wouldn’t move if I were you, Russkie.”

Vadim felt thin, cold steel against his skin. *Must have immobilised you to cut the lines so clearly.* He stopped moving. In fact, he stopped breathing. Dan’s Russian was sexy, intonation still sounded vaguely foreign, just not completely natural, which heightened the effect. *Degenerate.* He turned his head to the side, just slightly, to be able to see Dan from the corner of his eye. Grinning. Eyes gleaming, pistol gleaming. “Not...moving.”

Breathless.

Dan’s grin grew as the blade sliced through the fabric. One cut, another, then the waistband, and a last tug on the useless tatters, discarding them onto the floor. Moving around Vadim’s waist, the blade kissed the tip of his cock, which made Vadim’s knees lock tight and every muscle in his body tense. Unbelievable feeling. Steel. Knife. There.

Dampness created a pattern on polished steel, and Dan’s eyes narrowed as he licked the drop of precum off the blade. “Turn round. Hands on the stairs. One on each side.”

Vadim turned, lowered his hands only enough to drop into a push-up stance, while the knife vanished once more between Dan’s clothes. The pistol remained, a symbol of power, trained on Vadim. “Keep your legs apart.”

Vadim supported his weight easily, unable to move or defend himself, fingers curled around the edge of the step right in front of his chest, broad grip, broad stance. Again, he glanced over his shoulder—if only to see Dan, his hand holding the pistol, and that cool, knowing grin on his features.

“Good.” The Russian was flowing smoothly across Dan’s tongue now. “You make a pretty picture even for a Western eye, Russkie. All laid out and...,” he drew out the sentence, enjoying the last word as he caressed every syllable, “...vulnerable.”

Vadim’s knuckles whitened, keeping the position, while Dan’s hand slid beneath open tunic and t-shirt, stroking there, it felt good, but Dan avoided getting anywhere near the bared flesh of the perfectly muscular cheeks. Leaning forward

he whispered into Vadim's ear, lips brushing, and making Vadim shudder harder, which became nearly uncontrollable when the cool muzzle of the pistol caressed his jaw, "you should get a medal for being so very well behaved, comrade. They told us in school about the ugly Slav, the peasant, square-headed Russkies. They were wrong. You are exquisite. You are quite the Tsar..."

Comrade was clear mockery. The compliments were genuine, odd mixture that was both praise and teasing. Vadim raised his head, looked at Dan, wanted to kiss him, or sneer, and couldn't make up his mind. Arousing. Badly arousing. "You aren't half bad, either."

"Then it shouldn't be difficult to keep quiet, at all times, and to keep still." Following the outline of Vadim's ear with his tongue, Dan added, barely above a whisper, "will it, Russkie?"

Vadim nodded, biting back a moan at the inability to move now, to touch him, to pull him closer. So much for a quiet, calm evening with 'probably sex'. The sudden shift had caught him unaware, didn't know what to do but roll with it. Wanted Dan to do this, assume control.

Moving a step back, Dan let his pistol run up Vadim's spine, pressing into each vertebra, taking his time. Vadim's back curved away from the muzzle, unfortunately, though, with the effect his arse stood out. Yes, very unfortunate. "I want you to stay like this, Russkie. Don't turn around, don't watch, don't make a sound nor move. When I come back I want to find you in exactly the same position."

"Aye." Vadim lowered his head, let it hang, while staying in the position like one of those sick games of holding a stress position. It built strength, and he had plenty of that. Glanced at his own body, his cock, imagined the knife again, and felt himself twitch. He closed his eyes and focused on his breath, waiting, obedient.

Dan stuffed the pistol into the cummerbund before walking into the kitchen. Lube. Upstairs. Damn. Kitchen, food, fat, grease, something, anything...pulling one of the drawers open, Dan's eyes fell onto the stack of candles, before he remembered the pack of butter he had brought from the embassy. Grinning slowly, weighing the candle in his hand.

Returning in less than a couple of minutes, Dan walked through the narrow doorway, and was presented with a view that made him forget the last seven

years. Familiarity? Boredom? Getting used to a body? Wanting something new, exciting and different? Bullshit. What he saw was Vadim and the most perfect body, one that could easily compete with any in the gay mags he'd managed to buy. The arse, stuck out, its impeccable curves of smooth skin over rounded muscles. Uniform tunic loose, t-shirt ridden up and skirting the waist, trousers down at the calves, boots firmly planted on the ground and hands in fists, keeping a firm hold on the stairs. His. That thought drilled through every layer of Dan's body and mind until it settled deeply and irrevocably in his brain.

His.

Crossing the short distance with a couple of steps, the fine cloth of Dan's attire touched bare skin.

Vadim could feel him, the warmth, the exact position even though he kept his eyes closed. Easier this way, easier to accept what Dan was doing and why—following orders because it made him hard.

“You're mine, Russkie.” Dan's low voice sounded full of lust even to his own ears.

Vadim gave an almost toneless groan at that, guts tightened at the roughness, the raw unadulterated need. Claiming. Owning. Fuck. He wanted this, wanted this for the rest of his life, that understanding, the pitch of tension. Twisting his heart and mind until everything he thought about was Dan's cock entering him, driving him insane and ripping everything away so he could just lose all the rest. Everything but Dan. “Now that...you have me, what are you going to do with me?”

“I will own you. Enter you. Use you. Want you. Make you come and take you.” Word after word tumbling out of Dan's mouth without thinking. Straight from cock and guts into his brain. The pistol still there, somewhere, stashed away, neglected. Dan could feel from his fingertips to his balls that all he needed was a touch, a word, and they'd be as binding as shackles and weapons.

Vadim nodded, the *you you you* hammering into his brain. No maybes. These were actual real threats. Promises. “Yes. Do it.” As if it needed his acceptance, or anything. He couldn't protect himself. Vulnerable.

“But first, comrade, I'll prepare you for me.” Dan's hand was in the open foil, taking a slab of butter, then the candle. He positioned both between Vadim's legs, not knowing why he actually wanted to do this, but the thought of fucking that perfect arse while watching, observing, made his own cock jump. Greased

fingers finding muscle and initial resistance with practiced ease, Dan went to his knees as he pushed first a finger inside, and then the blunt end of the candle.

Staring at the goddamned beauty of it entering Vadim's body.

Vadim groaned, feeling his muscles tense as he made out there was something that wasn't flesh, cooler, slicker, entering, which was good, whatever it was, and he moved up against it. Curving his back for more, eyes firmly closed, jaw tensed, until it got him just right, a bit like a finger, less big than a cock, not as much force involved, hit him and made him clench.

Dan was watching every reaction, the quiver of muscle, movement of skin, and finally tension. He was getting addicted to seeing the extension of himself entering that body, manipulating and forcing responses. With an object, yet himself. Owing. Pushing harder, more deliberately, starting to fuck that arse, until his own breath was coming in short, shallow gasps and his cock strained so hard against the fabric he could feel precum seep through every layer.

Vadim's back was gleaming with sweat, and there were groans he tried to keep quiet, as much as he could, as usual. Not sure what it was, only what it did to him, hitting a spot inside, setting him on fire, and stoking it, but not enough, not enough to burn to ashes, just keeping him there.

Dan moistened his lips, "Tell me what you feel. What do you want, Russkie."

"Feel you watch me," said Vadim, voice unsteady with lust. And that was it, that was even more thrilling than the physical sensation, increased it and made it harder to bear without breaking down and begging for more. "Want you. I want you." Still in Russian, the language that was closer to the heart. "I want you."

"I know," Dan murmured, "I see. See you completely." One hand working on the fly of his trousers, pushing the shirt away, the cummerbund still in place, and so were the weapons. "You're mine." His voice was breathless, still fucking Vadim with the makeshift dildo, creating a reaction that pulled him along in a maelstrom of need. "You're mine, Vadim," commando, even in the suit, and his cock sprang into his hand. "Mine." The candle left Vadim all of a sudden.

"I am." Vadim's lips were open, breath harsh, and he grinned when he felt Dan making space. Meant one thing. He shifted his hands, brought them closer together, so he had more control and more strength, because he had a feeling he'd need it. Glanced over his shoulder again, Dan looked dishevelled and oddly erotic

in that state of disarray. He couldn't see what Dan had used, and might still be holding, but adored the contrast of dark skin and white, tailored shirt, of the formality and the primal raging need.

There was still enough of the grease on Dan's hand and Vadim was more than ready, he only had to pull himself up and guide his cock. "Forever." The word barely pressed out, he surged forward, entering in a single thrust.

Vadim tensed, involuntarily, but he just wanted to feel more, get the most out of that power. He groaned. Exactly what he wanted.

Dan nearly cried out, aborted the sound, bit his lip when tightness and heat gripped his cock. Pulled out, pushed forth with all his strength, punishing needing-wanting, while breathlessly moaning with each thrust, "Fucking...degenerate...I...am..."

Vadim closed his eyes again, was just feeling, the filling, moving, delicious heat, felt every thrust echo in his body and shifted his grip again. His shoulders tightened with every movement, but that didn't matter against the desire—couldn't shift, couldn't touch, but move with and against the thrusts. Groaning, he felt Dan's trousers against the back of his legs, couldn't reach out, but this was damn good anyway. Especially as he couldn't move, especially due to the awkward position. "Degenerate...alright," he murmured, and gave a husky laugh.

The angle didn't allow enough penetration, Dan groaned as he pulled out, cock just about breaching the muscle, while his fingers clawed at Vadim's hips. "Hands one step down. Now."

Vadim released the grip of his left hand, reached for the other step, feeling Dan right there, inside, but not quite, found a good place, then shifted the other hand. The adjustment changed something, the angle of hips, and he pushed back against Dan, cock heavy and hard, stomach drawn in, sides tense. Shoulders taut.

"Fuck!" Dan exclaimed when his cock went in further, only to pull back once more, completely leaving Vadim, before shoving back into that willing arse. "Teach you...lesson...soldier..." A word with every punishing thrust.

Vadim groaned loudly as it hit him just right, harsh as he liked it, deep, with Dan's full strength behind it that made the muscles of his arms bulge, jeopardizing his balance. Most of all, filled him, mind getting into the game, imagined Dan actually punishing him, like an officer with that strange sounding Russian, or a captor. He pressed back, to get more, get all of it, unable to summon

resistance, or words, or a reason why this felt so good. Impossible to cum like this. And Dan knew it. That's why he didn't touch him. That was part of the punishment.

Dan needed both his hands to steady himself, clinging to Vadim's hips in a vice like grip, leaving bruises. He came close, far too goddamned close too soon, and forced himself to stop, near agony not to fuck even harder, not to keep using that body. Stopped completely, panting and feeling the sweat spread across shirt and jacket, collar too tight.

Vadim groaned through gritted teeth. What...? Why? Was this just...gathering strength? He expected Dan to go on, willed him to, but nothing.

Instead, Dan stayed still, deep inside this time, and one hand went to Vadim's cock for the lightest of touches, which made Vadim's cock twitch, balls tighten, and Vadim closed his eyes, giving a moan that was the closest thing to begging. Feeling Dan inside, tightening around him, trying to urge him on.

"Hands further down." Dan fought for breath, voice forced, "until I say stop. I want your arse high in the air, soldier."

Vadim's motions were unsteady; again, another step, down, too aware of the cock that didn't move, too aware of the unbalanced position, and how much that looked like he was offering his ass. He was. Another step, precarious motions, slow, he had to tap into his willpower to obey the order. Bent at the waist now, Dan stood so close that he couldn't move backwards.

"Stop." Dan could hardly get the word out when Vadim got to slightly below waist level, his head lower than his arse, vulnerable, driving Dan insane. He moved slower, ever slower, pulling out in tiny increments, the effort making him break out in a sweat, worse than the violent fucking before. Both hands once more, on Vadim's hips. "Stroke yourself, soldier." Poised at the very breach of the muscle, "be my cunt and cum for me."

Vadim groaned, too far gone to protest, just knowing Dan gathered strength, pulled himself together, with far more control than he'd ever had. Pulled his right hand back, splayed the left to support his weight, and took hold of his cock, as the thought flashed across his mind why hadn't he done this before, why it was the order that made him do this? Thinking ceased when he took his cock and the very next moment Dan slammed back in, fucking Vadim in silence, except for harsh breaths.

Unleashing all the strength of his body, Dan fucked Vadim as brutally as he used to fight, just barely matched by Vadim's harsh motions, which got Vadim over the edge too quickly. Every fibre in his body tensing as he did, and the orgasm seared through him like lightning, shooting his load against his chest and throat, bent as he was.

Vadim's sounds went straight into Dan's cock and balls, and he also crashed over the edge, fingers digging so hard into Vadim's flanks they left dark bruises. Shuddering, blind to the world, wrecked with such violent aftershocks that he fell forwards, slung his arms around the broad chest, steadying himself. "Oh fuck, fuck," he groaned out, still trembling, the orgasm like electro shocks from his toes to the tips of his hair. "Fuck you, Vadim." With all the tenderness he managed right now.

Vadim reached behind, knees buckling, just wanted to collapse into the stairs, but managed to place a hand against the wall and straighten, laboriously. Dan's cock left him, softening, before turning to embrace Dan, shudders racing across his skin.

He managed to take a few steps back into the room, not sure he wanted to brave the stairs. Instead, down on the floor, lower back protesting the strain, taking Dan with him, who followed readily, drained. They stretched out on the carpet to relax. He pulled Dan's arm across his chest like a blanket and felt Dan's cum seep out, shuddering again. A right mess. As if he cared. Wondering, briefly, about the order, and why he had so readily obeyed. Decided he'd been too horny to come up with anything on his own. Pushed the thought back, closed his eyes, and breathed deeply.

Dan kept his eyes closed, lay on his side, his arm covering Vadim's chest.

Neither said anything for a long time, just breathing. Dan would have dozed off, if it hadn't been for the discomfort of wet clothes and stickiness at his groin. What had just happened? He'd never felt quite like that before. Or had he? The silent fuck in the mountains, the knives he'd used, the other weapons, and every time he'd had his Russkie under control. Power. Was it that simple? He didn't know, except that it blew his mind, and this time, it had been harsher than ever before. Giving orders...It had thrilled him to the core and he would want it again.

"What a fucking mess we are." Dan murmured, grinned tiredly, "I guess I'll have to explain this dry cleaner bill in an innovative fashion."

Vadim gave a laugh. “You think your dry cleaner can fix up my uniform, too?” He let his head fall to the side, kissing Dan’s temple. “Would be difficult to explain these stains to my second.” He grinned. “But fuck, that was good.”

Dan laughed, exhausted. “I don’t think her Excellency would be thrilled knowing I have intimate relations with a Soviet officer.”

“And there’s that.”

Dan turned his head a fraction, just enough to kiss whatever he could find. “Aye, it was fucking good. It was...different. Kind of blew my mind.”

“*Your* mind?” Vadim laughed. “Yeah, and what’s left of mine. If you’d been my officer, Dan, we wouldn’t have fired single bullet in this war.”

Sniggering, Dan tried to kiss him again, but hit uniform cloth with his lips instead, wrinkling his nose. “Best get out of the clobber and wipe the stains off our kit.”

“That means moving.” Vadim stretched, but knew better than to just lie there; besides, it was getting uncomfortable. “I’ll get cleaned up. Fix us tea?”

Dan got up with a groan and creaking bones, grinning at Vadim. “Aye, and I might even have lemons this time.” Laughing, he made his way into the kitchen.

1988 Chapter 18—Flesh and Blood

July 1988, Afghanistan

Dan lowered the dark shades and squinted against the blinding sun, trying to make sense of the dust cloud on the horizon.

Lately, they'd received warnings and rumours of insurgents being recruited for suicide killings. He chuckled. Shit, years ago, he'd probably even trained the goat-herding fuckers himself.

He swivelled slowly, checking the proceedings near the Médecins sans Frontières hospital in the former lake bed located far below his elevated position.

He'd advised the ambassador against visiting the camp, but she'd been adamant, refusing to bow down to threats from insurgents, unwilling to listen even to his professional advice.

He raised the binoculars to his eyes, scanning the desert once more, drawn once more to the dust cloud on the horizon.

It was moving, but difficult to make out speed and direction while it was so far away.

He tried to get a better focus, but the goddamned sweat was blurring his vision. Dan wiped the binoculars, dried his sweating hands and re-gripped the SA-80, before trying again, concentrating on the shape behind the dust, the moving and re-forming pattern of the yellow cloud and the dark line of the tracks that were left behind.

Damn. Definitely advancing. His sixth sense came back in full force. *Danger!* Heat pooled in the pit of his stomach.

The unknown object had just turned into a tangible threat. From the trajectory of tracks and their angle, the vehicle had to be speeding in an almost direct line straight towards the Baroness' limousine.

Fuck. His premonition had been right.

Her two guards were oblivious, impossible to see the threat from where they were standing, down in the valley—the whole damned reason why he was on the elevated point as the coordinator.

Dan activated his personal comm, staccato words while keeping the object in his focus. "Dangerous object approaching 15 degrees South East. Collision

course towards the convoy. Get the target out of there. Immediately. Do you copy?"

Nothing.

The Baroness had left the camp's entrance and was walking back to her vehicle. It would never survive the impact of a car, presumably filled with explosives.

He tried again. "Do you hear me? Get her out. Get the target out, suspicious vehicle approaching at high speed. Get her out *now*."

Still no answer, silence.

"Fuck." The situation was rapidly turning to shit.

Car. Ambassador. Bugged comm. Suspected terrorist. Half a mile away.

Fucked-up knees.

Baroness.

Shit.

"Get the fuck out of there." Dan yelled into the useless comm, had to try once more in case it worked. Split-second decision. He threw the binoculars down, chucked the comm, in the same motion pulling the shades over his eyes, shielding them against the glaring sun. Automatic rifle slung over his shoulder, safety catch off, at the ready.

Distance? Five hundred yards. Speed of car approaching? 70 miles? Time? Two minutes. Tops. How long since he'd been able to run a mile in under five minutes? Not since his knees got fucked.

Car versus human.

No contest.

Dan started to run.

Sprinting against death, running for her life. Forcing fucked-up knees and worn-out body to comply. Boots beating dust, desert air pulled into burning lungs; sweat running into his eyes. Breath panting, heat slicing red-hot fiery cuts into his lungs.

Run.

Muscles hurting, his body protested, but desperation and adrenaline pushed him further. Faster, harder, run you fucking piece of human scapheap scum. Snapshot images: Guard opening limousine. Baroness stepping inside. Rear door shutting.

Dan skidded into the dip of the valley, felt rather than saw the deadly dust of the potential suicide car approaching.

He tried to shout while forcing his way through the crowds that were lingering in front of the camp gates. Voice breathless, croaked: “Out. Out.” Raising the rifle, set on automatic, he crossed the open space, the sight of the weapon scattering humans like panicking birds.

The dust cloud came suddenly out of nowhere, hell-bent on destruction, racing towards the limousine. Dan aimed the SA-80 while sprinting, firing a hail of bullets into the oncoming car. No hope of stopping the vehicle’s momentum, too close, too fast; it veered diagonally off its target under the onslaught of automatic fire.

The guards, one of them the driver, seemed to have finally caught on. Too late. There was still movement behind the blood-splattered windshield in the four-wheeled bomb, which kept sliding towards them. Dan stopped firing, reached the limousine, impact imminent. Tearing the rear door open, he grabbed her arm, anything, just pulled, yelling, “Out. Get out.” Dragged her out of the car, threw the slight body as far away from him as possible.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dan saw the Baroness stumbled to the ground; the near head-on collision happened while he raised his weapon. He stood wide open, no cover, except for his own body in front of hers. Soft fucking target. The second guard tried to escape, screaming, yelling, but the cars exploded into a firestorm of deafening sounds.

The impact of the explosion’s blast-wave threw him backwards into the air, lost in the flaming inferno, stumbling over something on the ground. He fell on top of the object, and then an unbearable pain tore into his guts.

Dan didn’t know if he screamed, nor when he dropped the rifle, his hands pressing down on the pain by instinct. Fire, detonations, shrieking and horror, distanced wailing amidst black smoke, and pain. Just pain.

Something moved beneath him. He couldn’t make out direction, meaning, sound nor senses. Only unbearable pain. Couldn’t raise his arms, nor feel his hand amidst the unspeakable agony.

Suddenly her face in his vision. Everything else gone. Blood running down her temple; the perfect coiffure dishevelled and dirt-encrusted.

Dan stared at her, uncomprehending, except that it was all wrong. Her lips moving. Shouting? Couldn't hear a sound, nothing made sense. Nothing but pain, flaring from his guts through his body, brain, limbs, every fibre. His vision narrowed, blackness creeping in from the sides, the tunnel closing in and his muscles locking.

Tried to speak, moved his lips. No sounds. No thoughts left. Nothing but pain.

He lost focus of her face. Just the mouth, still moving. No more strength.

Pain. Darkness.

Nothing.

* * *

Coming in from an exercise, Vadim's body burnt with pain, mouth, mind, soul parched. He couldn't even remember what water tasted like, but he grinned. The Colonel had called this state 'gun-fucked,' and blasted the countryside and the mocked-up Mujahideen convoy with everything they had. Excellent work by the pilots. Hinds worked like a charm, and he was happy in a clearly malicious, gun-fucked way.

"Get cleaned up, comrade Major," said the Colonel and headed to the debriefing, while Vadim went to the quarters. A bunch of lieutenants hung out, and there was cheering at something that had just been said on the radio.

"Fuck them, they finally got a taste of their own medicine." Tough words from a young man who had come with the latest shipment of raw recruits from Moscow and still hadn't seen combat. Vadim expected the other officers would show him just what exactly they thought of that type. Taste of medicine, indeed. If that didn't help, Vadim would make sure the guy got his head tucked in a shitter. For a minute, or two.

"Who would that be, comrade?"

The lieutenant turned around, eyes glowing, face so young, so polished. "The foreign mercenaries. A bunch of the turkeys bought it a couple hours ago."

Amazing, only two weeks here and the lieutenant already spoke the lingo. Vadim stepped closer, reached for the half-empty bottle of vodka on the table, poured himself a glass. Civilisation. Don't drink from the bottle. Not when he came

in like this. It took force of will to not go wild and keep doing what he'd been doing. Kill. Even if only in his mind, only dummies.

The lieutenant grinned. "Fucking bandits blew up some ambassador-bitch, and her guards bought it. Three men down. Saves us bullets." He laughed.

Dan.

The thought was like vodka so cold it had become cloudy. Cold. Then hot. The next thing Vadim knew was that the vodka in his glass travelled through the air, blinding the lieutenant, and the glass hit the braggart in the teeth with a clang. Then Vadim was on top of him, he took the man by his collar, lifted him off the chair, didn't feel his weight at all, heard a growl fill the room, a sound like a tiger hunting, then rammed the man against the wall, dazing him, driving the air from his lungs, then let him go so he could punch him with both hands.

When the other collapsed, Vadim kned him in the face, and then kicked him in the chest. Could hear again, heard the panic, curses, but nobody dared to stop him. The lieutenants knew better than to interfere. He was their superior officer, and he could fuck this bastard any way he wanted and nobody would be able to touch him for it.

He stopped because he was tired. Because one thought burned its way through the red haze that was about killing and maiming and inflicting pain.

Dan. Dead. He was breathing hard, looking around with quick glances, but the other lieutenants were just staring at him like girls. You don't fuck with Spetsnaz. Vadim heard the other whimper through the smashed-up face. Still needed a reason to have done this.

"Mind your fucking language," he growled, delivering a final kick. "Bitch." He was itching to kill the man, but held back. Dan. He wasn't worth it. Wasn't worth killing. Everything else paled. Dan.

He left the room, headed towards his bunk, was amazed he could find it. He could see nothing. Blind fighting. Night fighting. His mind wasn't clear, seemed his body could work by itself. The same flesh and blood that had held Dan.

He stripped out of his kit, his knuckles hurt. A quick wash. Felt himself pause in mid-motion, forced himself on, forced to wash with what little water there was, rationed, never enough.

Dan. The way he had touched him. All the ways he had touched him. The pain was so bad it ate him alive, chewed on him, there was nothing, nothing that could make it stop. He changed, got the kit all in the right order, like it should be.

Think, Vadim. Leaned his forehead against the wall, forced himself to think, fight the wave of pain and despair that was coming, threatening to crash. He didn't know it was Dan. Explosion. They might not even be able to find enough to identify.

That could take time. He should stay put and wait for the next contact.

Like fuck he would.

He needed to verify the dead men's identities. Better yet, see the bodies. He'd only be able to believe it if he saw Dan torn open, torn apart, or this would haunt him forever. He didn't trust the Brits to give him the truth. Needed to see the body.

Touch it.

He shuddered at the thought. Touch what was left of Dan. Fuck. He'd handled bits of humans before. Had found downed pilots in the mountains and brought them back. And those were already festering and swollen. Dan's corpse would be worse, much worse, but he needed, needed to know it was him.

"Comrade Major."

The Colonel.

Fuck.

Vadim straightened, turned around, was about to apologize, but the Colonel shook his head. "Good work out there."

His superior remained rooted to the ground, hands folded behind his back, a wiry incarnation of death. Eyes were narrow, and Vadim felt his pulse beat up against the top of his head from the inside. He didn't meet the man's eyes, couldn't allow himself to think of Dan and what touching his torn body would do to him. But he knew. He would know what it would feel like, what it would smell like. His face twitched.

"There will be wars after this," said the Colonel, like that was thanks to him. Well, if the Colonel was sent to kill some head of state, who could say it wouldn't be? "I'll want you for the next one."

Vadim stared, feeling nothing but Dan in his mind. The Colonel made no sense. Nothing at all. Dan. "I beg your pardon?"

The Colonel smirked, an absolutely frightful expression. “You understood me.”

As if that was some kind of joke. He was out of his depth, didn't get it, knew he was ruining what he'd been building with this man, who decided on his career, judged solely by his performance, nothing else. “You were not much of an athlete, Vadim Petrovich, but you're one hell of a killer.”

A compliment. Vadim blinked, killing and killer, Dan, explosion, and this man wanting him in the next war to kill more people. It didn't end. It would go on like this until the sniper's bullet hit true. Until he pulled the trigger on himself. Until he rose so far up or grew so old that all he could do was come up with plans and strategies to kill and to train killers.

He nodded, numb, hoped it would be mistaken for humility. Krasnorada and humble. What a joke. Unable to speak, he felt as if the Colonel had taken his hand and forced it down into a steaming pile of guts.

* * *

Two days passed and no news for Vadim. No names. The Brits didn't release the men's identities. They remained a number in a news item. That was it. Vadim tried to pull strings, asked questions, but never directly. Nothing. Without going straight for the truth, there would be no truth.

He went to one of the safe houses, after duty, gathered himself up enough to change. He would never pass for Afghan, but at least nobody had to see a Soviet soldier go into the British embassy. The promise gnawed on him, the promise to bring back Dan's body from the mountains, given in a dingy hotel on the edge of desperation.

Civilian clothes. Hadn't worn them in Kabul forever. Wrapped his head in a rag, red-faced Caucasian in nondescript clothing. His accent would give him away. The pride was the worst, but he felt so nauseous he couldn't sleep. Dan's death was like a rotting tooth, it hurt, it hurt so bad nothing could stop this, apart from pulling it out, and that would take a bullet.

Vadim headed towards the embassy. He got in with a mix of sheer bravado, begging, and the hint he might have something that would be of interest to the Brits. A bald-faced lie, or maybe not; he'd say and do anything to get in. Was searched,

spread-eagled against the guard house, at gun point. A member of staff took his name. He gave Platon's name, his rank as lieutenant.

Asked to see the lady ambassador, only her, said he couldn't trust anybody else. Expected to be kicked out, but the Brits seemed more civilised than that. He was so tired, he felt like death on his feet. Sat down, was handed a water bottle, rested his face in his hands, elbows on his knees. Tried to catch a moment of sleep, intimidated by the place and the shit he had jumped into. He was in trouble.

* * *

He waited less than half an hour, left undisturbed but never alone, when a quiet but authoritative voice was heard behind doors which opened. Then the tack-tack of sensible heels before the sound stopped.

"Lieutenant Ivanov, you wished to see me?"

Vadim stood, felt ill at ease, then put his hands behind his back to stop them from giving away how nervous he was. "Yes." Platon's name would fit badly, the kid posthumously promoted, Vadim had the feeling he wouldn't be happy. If he was in a place where he could even care. Two dead men he'd held. Don't think about it.

"I am aware it's unconventional procedure, Ma'am," he wasn't sure about her title, or how to address her, hoped that was alright, and it wasn't Miss or Mrs or Lady or whatever. He was too tired for decorum. "Dan. Daniel McFadyen. He was part of your security detail?"

The ambassador's brows rose, her expression even more guarded than before. "Please do sit, Lieutenant. We don't often get such illustrious visitors." Ignoring the question for now, while she sat down opposite, studying him.

Vadim sat, reached for the water bottle to keep his hands calm. *Illustrious*. Meaning: important. Grand. What a word to use. He felt nothing like it, not grand, not important, not even self-possessed. He was out of his depth, helpless, reduced to begging. If she played it right, she'd ask him for things he couldn't tell her. Maybe she wouldn't.

She finally spoke again. "Why, Lieutenant, why do you wish to know about Mr McFadyen?"

“I need to confirm whether he’s dead or not.” I need to touch his body. I need to smell his blood. I need to do all that before you send him back in a metal tin, back home. He drew a long breath. “Not...in official capacity.”

“I assumed that.” She immediately answered. As prim, precise and proper as her whole appearance. “I am not aware of any kind of official capacity whereby a soldier of the Soviet occupying forces would enter the British embassy.”

Soviet occupying forces. Vadim didn’t have the strength to argue his point. He didn’t even know what kind of war it was, only knew it was a war and too many people had died. One too many. Bit back the party line, couldn’t have spoken it without starting to laugh or break into tears, or both. Didn’t trust himself not to.

She arranged her finely manicured hands on her lap, the grey hair coiffed as impenetrably as her non-committal expression. The stitches at her temple partly hidden by lacquered hair. “I repeat my question. Why do you wish to know?”

Vadim stared at the bottle, thought, needed a good answer, but couldn’t come up with anything better than what had been his first idea, yesterday. “McFadyen and I have history.” He looked up, hoped he still appeared somewhat dignified, herded the stoicism into his face, gathered his resolve. “We had tea together. You might call it unlikely, but we had grown to respect each other.”

“And that is all?” She queried, sitting with legs perfectly slanted to one side. The epitome of British upper class. “Why would this give you such an unparalleled interest in the life and death of Daniel McFadyen?”

Vadim forced his face to not show anything, stared at a place too far to see, far beyond the walls, saw her in the corner of his eye. Her way of speaking much different from Dan’s. Odd vowels. *Unparalleled.* What was that supposed to mean?

“I know he worked for ambassador. And I know there was attack on female ambassador. If I understood that wrong, I’m sorry to have wasted your time.” He looked at her, remained sitting, though, knew he couldn’t bait her that easily. He needed more than that. “I do not want to compromise him. It’s bad enough I compromise myself.” Put on a show of reluctance, need to satisfy curiosity, need to make it appear real. “I know I have nothing to bargain with. I ask for kindness, Ma’am. I know that is not something I can expect from West.” Now he kept his eyes on the floor. “I should not be here, but I am. I owe that man a lot. I need to know whether he’s dead.”

“What do you owe him?” Unaffected by his performance. “I repeat, Lieutenant. Why do you wish to know?” Like a bulldog, once bitten into flesh, she did not let go. Teeth lodged and jaws locked. She held the key to the knowledge, and she wasn't letting it go.

He gave a smile. She had given herself away by forcing his hand. “He did guard you. He does that to people. Gets the best out of them.” And the worst. “He spared my life. He did not kill me when he should have. I asked for mercy, and he gave me my life. My wife and children did not lose me on that day, because he did not pull trigger on me.” Looked up, used Katya again, but that should do it. Had shown his open side, lured her. If she committed herself to an attack now, he would bind her blade.

She said nothing for a moment, seemed to ponder. Her eyes steadfast on him. “If he were dead, then there would be nothing for you to do. No wreath to send, no flowers to wilt.” Nothing in her bearing nor her voice showed even the slightest hint of emotion.

Vadim frowned. “I do not understand, I’m sorry. I believe my English doesn’t reach that far. What do you mean?” Of course he had to do something. She sounded metaphorical, but he didn’t get it. Had never spoken with somebody like her, only knew he couldn’t bind the blade, slipped out in a compound attack, circular motion that made the next angle of attack very hard to predict.

She stood, took one step closer, no more and looked down at him. “Lieutenant—if that is what and who you are—if Dan McFadyen were dead, what difference would it be to you? Dead, a corpse, and gone. I asked a simple question that demands a simple answer.” She stepped to the side. “I ask you an even simpler question. If he were alive, what would you do?”

He nodded, signalling understanding. “If he is dead...” I’d go insane. I’d scream and kick and shout and finally cry, maybe, if I get tired enough. “I need to see him. I’ve seen...so many bodies that were not identified, or wrongly identified. This war taught me to not trust anything but my own eyes. I need to see body and confirm he’s dead.” Giving away an unhealthy fixation on the dead body, hoped it would pass. “If he is alive, I need to know where, and find him.”

“And if he were alive, and if you were to know where, then why would you find him?”

Vadim pressed his teeth together. Why? Why indeed. Owing a life—was that enough to brave hell and military prison to see a wounded man? He couldn't say. Everything was blown out of proportion, everything skewed, the world had lost coherence. "To tell him how I feel." Now, that was the naked truth. The words hurt him, he was getting too close, embarrassed himself, embarrassed her, opened up again to get her to do the same. Risky manoeuvre, and not even a feint. "Does that satisfy, Ma'am?" Couldn't help but ruin it, lashed out.

She stood and stared at him for a long time. Studied and considered. Patient. "Daniel McFadyen is alive. At least he was when I last checked this morning. He is in the Royal British Hospital, Kashmir, India."

Alive. Vadim felt tears well up, fucking eyes, closed them quickly to not give it away, breathed until he could trust himself. He was too tired, should not have come here this tired, shouldn't have exposed himself like this. Dan alive. Kashmir. He only had to cross half of Afghanistan and all of Pakistan to get there. Enemy territory, all of it.

Last I checked. Dan must be wounded badly. On the brink of death. He wanted to break into a run and start on his way there, right away. Go AWOL, try and find him, try and see him before he died.

"Is he stable?" Any limbs torn off? He'd seen bad shit, massive burns, lost pieces, bodies that were nothing but minced meat and still breathed. His chest tightened. No other thought in his mind, just that. Dan alive. And he was on his way, had to be. Whatever the cost.

She paused, silence in the room, longer than comfortable. "Mr McFadyen sustained considerable injuries in the blast and in the course of his duty. He has extensive shrapnel wounds to the abdominal cavity, and his left hand. He has been receiving all humanely possible care in a private hospital." Her hands were loosely clasped in front of her, her pose straight.

Abdomen. Hospital. They could deal with the infections there. Still. India. A long way. And it meant Dan might still die. He needed to be on his way. Needed to see him. Before he died. Vadim stared at the ground near his feet, the carpet had a pattern, and he studied it, eyes not really seeing. "I will go and see him," he said, gathering himself up, squaring his shoulders.

He stood, took the rag off, formed a ball, a tight ball of it with hands that wanted to strangle and punch, the country, fate, destiny, wanted to force to not feel so helpless.

“Thank you for your time. I am grateful.” And it means nothing, because I am an enemy, and you don’t even know who I am. They might work it out. Dan had identified him, after all, many years ago. He had changed, but he didn’t exactly have an everyday face. She could work it out. They might be on it already. She had implied she didn’t believe him.

“My secretary will see you out.” Raising her hand, she all but pointed to the door. “Godspeed, Lieutenant.”

Godspeed. Another strange word that sounded like some kind of blessing. He nodded, deeply, bowed almost to keep his eyes from meeting hers, and left. Nobody called on his hints he might have something to trade. Had come here as a potential traitor, left with a gift.

But it made it worse. He had imagined Dan’s body, dead, and him finding it, touching it. Here, in Kabul. Kashmir was too far away. Still, he started to work on a plan; desperate measures. Maybe he could get a mission in the south, such as kill somebody in Pakistan, strike out against their secret service.

No. He was in no state to fight. His mind was elsewhere. Applying for such high-risk stuff would get him killed. The Pakistanis weren’t beginners and they’d get him if he made a mistake. He couldn’t trust himself, now.

* * *

Darkness. Fear. Dull throbbing discomfort. Constant sound of whirring, bleeping; rustle of fabrics and voices holding unknown conversations in nothing but whispers. Dan floated blindly in intangible blackness, unable to move, to think.

Half-waking, growing more aware of his surroundings and the increasing onslaught of pain. Worst of all that thing, the obstruction when he swallowed. Couldn’t, it hurt, tried to make a sound, impossible. Discomfort grew and his drugged mind didn’t know what he was doing, only the overwhelming need to fight whatever was causing the intrusion in his throat.

Enemy. Pain. Fight. Where am I? What? Why? He managed to raise one hand, the other too heavy, unwieldy, wouldn’t budge and gripped the thing that

was causing the pain in his throat, tried to rip the breathing tube out, fighting, starting to panic.

The machines exploded into a cacophony of noise, beeping, screeching for attention, his hand got torn away, voices shouted at him, but he couldn't understand what they were saying, just the need to fight, frantically trying to breathe and move, pain shooting through his body, the beeping got faster and louder and then his hand was forced down and fixed into position.

Something warm flowed into his veins, taking him back down and away, dragging him beneath the blanket of sleep once more.

Night and day had no meaning, he was lost in confusion and paranoia. Whose hushed tones was he hearing? Who was touching his skin? Who was working on his body—or trying to steal his mind.

The doctors kept him strapped down, adding to the growing paranoia. Who was there, what were they doing, who came in? He could never find the answer.

Sedatives kept dragging his mind under and kept his body still, allowing wounds to heal and infection to subside. He suffered from amnesia induced by sedation, remembered scraps of reality like nightmares; those touches, sounds, the inability to move, and the underlying dulled-down pain.

He hardly reacted to the punctual regularity of nurses coming in every two hours, changing his position to prevent infection from bedsores. Taking pressure off one side, cleaning the skin, massaging to stimulate circulation, and keeping him moisturised. Lying with lamb's wool skin protectors under the hip, lower spine, heels and elbows. Like a doll in its cot, limp in the care of his handlers.

* * *

Vadim began to pull strings to get posted into Jalalabad province. He could call in a favour there. Old debts and old friendship. Hopefully. He needed a good story, a reason why he'd be gone.

One week later, he was on a truck south. He managed to keep up a semblance of sanity, got into smoking weed, so he could laugh and joke with the others. The Spetsnaz mystique unblemished.

Several days—and one aborted attempt at an ambush—later, Vadim’s boots made contact with the ground again. He rolled his shoulders while the kids behind him bustled to get the trucks unloaded.

The commander of this garrison-cum-mountain-fortress crossed the space in front of the main building, looking prim and proper as if Vadim were a visitor from Moscow. Full Christmas tree, and, Vadim noted somewhat taken aback, medals, a whole bar of them. Major Alexei Petkov had been wounded. Courage under fire.

“Vadim. Fuck, seeing you is great.” Vadim was suddenly embraced and kissed, one comrade to the other, too stunned to even tense at the sudden touch. Lesha. Smelling of soap, like he’d shaved just five minutes ago. “Come. You must be hungry. And...” Lesha gave him a wink. “Thirsty, I assume.”

It was an evening for memories, tall tales, catching up and boasting. But they didn’t speak about one thing.

Vadim was putting the AK back together. Off duty, sitting on the bunk, hands working blindly. Still not quick enough. Of course, no bullets, no magazine, but he was slotting dark greased steel together. Still not automatic, still took concentration, feeling for the correct grooves and slots. He gritted his teeth. The officers kept repeating this was one of the skills that would save his worthless life one day. Like belly crawling under live fire, the roar deafening, freezing his blood, shortening every tendon, and all his body wanted to do was curl up and wait until it was over. Like some cowardly cocksucker, as the officers called it.

We’ll make you a soldier yet, suka. Wait and see. Even if we have to drag you kicking and screaming. You will become a soldier, or the nearest excuse for one, you useless piece of shit.

The last two pieces. Vadim forced one in, cursing the design under his breath, even if it was, by all standards, a fine weapon, superior for its time, arguably the weapon that had won the Great Patriotic War. Still a bitch to put together when every muscle burnt from the last few days’ ‘exercise’. And he wasn’t fast enough assembling it. The story of his life. His hands were shaking with the cold and exhaustion and he could hardly think straight. All he wanted to do was sleep, but he knew instinctively there would be another drill in a few hours, when

the other recruits would have collapsed almost comatose with exhaustion. He might as well do something while he waited for it to happen.

He jammed the last piece in and checked the AK. It worked. Well oiled. He grunted and began, mechanically, to take it apart again. He'd have to do this blindly, under fire, on his belly, on his back, in any position including a handstand or both legs torn off. The AK was the reason why he existed. Why he was here.

The door burst open, a comrade came in, another of the young ones, same platoon. Misha. He was drenched by the rain, face glowing, which looked unhealthy with his haggard features. "He's killing Lesha!"

The AK pieces scattered across the floor. Vadim was on his feet, following, before the comrade had even requested his help, running at full speed after him. They were beginning to function as a team, Vadim realized. They didn't need words anymore—and Misha didn't have the breath left in him to explain. He didn't have to. 'He' was the officer who hated Lesha's guts, a meat grinder of a man, as vicious as frontal fire from an MG, and Lesha was Vadim's friend.

Out in the freezing rain, gusts of wind whipped his face. He was almost skidding on the cracked concrete, but he ran on. There was a commotion up front, out in the light of one of the guard towers.

The surface changed. Now, each step he had to drag his ankles out of freezing mud. Naked flesh ahead on the ground getting the shit kicked out of him. No. Don't let it be Lesha.

It was.

Vadim's steps lengthened, pulling his body together to race ahead of Misha like it was a competition and all he had to do was overtake him. Seeing the officer's boot hit Lesha's legs, ass, groin, ribs, ass again, mostly ass and back of the thighs. Hamstrings. That must hurt like a motherfucker. Never mind the hail, ice and rain on Lesha's naked skin.

The officer didn't stop, cursing at the man on the ground. Vadim didn't know what he was doing, or what he would do next. Too tired to think or be scared. He couldn't remember an hour or a minute in this place that he hadn't been scared in some part of his mind. He couldn't touch an officer. A superior.

They had every right to punish recruits—deserved or not. Was part of the dedovshchina, the hazing, was part of getting discipline into the worthless maggots.

The man drew his leg back for another kick, making him off balance for a moment. Vadim knew all about balance. Shoulder-charging into the bastard, he knocked him aside and made him stumble over his victim's body.

He threw all his weight on top, sending his hat flying. The man underneath sank deep into the freezing mud. Vadim pinned him down, grabbed the bastard's face and pushed it down further till it was completely covered. Feeling nothing but horror and a bizarre moment of elation even though he knew he was in deep shit, worse than he'd ever been. This was not real, not happening, he had the tail of a tiger that would kill him if he let it go. Worse. He was in a cage full of tigers while doing this.

A quick glance assessed that Misha had finally arrived.

"Take Lesha inside," he shouted, while the bastard struggled against him. Vadim let him come up for air, heard curses that seemed just as threatening as if the officer was overseeing their training. He ignored him, only kept him down, had no idea what to do with him apart from keeping him from hurting Lesha.

"Get the fuck moving," he shouted when Misha paused, staring at the sight of him lying on top of the officer, an image and story that would travel around the barracks, but that didn't matter. What mattered was Lesha.

Other recruits appeared from the darkness. Ghosts that wouldn't have moved a finger while seeing one of their own killed for the pleasure of cruelty. All witnesses. All cattle.

"I'll rip your heart out, Vadim Petrov..." Down the head went again, Vadim using all of his weight and strength to control the bastard, who was trying to throw him off. The man was powerful, but in an awkward position.

When Misha gathered Lesha up, he moaned.

Good. Alive.

They staggered away. Vadim gritted his teeth. He hated the bastard's guts, but as much as he'd love to, as much as he wanted to, he couldn't just kill him., because he'd never killed a man, and didn't want to, because killing was something they'd talked about as if it was some kind of sport, something that men did, and especially soldiers, but this, this was a superior.

What if he did?

He had no idea, so, once the others and Lesha vanished into the darkness, he let the bastard go, stepping back with hollow stomach-pitting certainty, he was making a mistake.

Breathing heavily, the officer pushed himself up, grunting. Vadim noticed Lesha's uniform, even his boots, on the ground, in a pile. This bastard did that. Forced recruits to undress—in this kind of weather, at this time of year. Amid all the wanton violence, the casual, sickening cruelty, this bastard stood out because his humiliating games often had a different edge to them. A different flavour. A taste of male flesh.

“You enjoy this,” murmured Vadim. He knew he was dead meat, but that actually set him free. The ‘thing’ nobody talked about.

He himself had liked looking at Lesha. He was good-looking, dark hair, which, in a photo from before he'd become a recruit, had looked thick and rich like fur, expressive dark, curved eyebrows that made Vadim feel strange when he looked at them for too long. A short, strong nose, greyish-green eyes, long lashes of the same dark type as his eyebrows, and the lips that opened too easily, shapes that made Vadim want to kiss him. Impossible. He'd never kissed a man. Never slipped a tongue inside a mouth, never tasted, never felt the hardness of teeth, but couldn't help imagining.

“You are the fucking faggot,” hissed Vadim. “And if you touch any recruit ever again, I'll report you.”

The officer stared at him, mud running down his front, whipped off by the icy rain, that was lashing at them in gusts. No witnesses, not in this weather. A mortal insult, the beginning and the end of something.

Vadim had no idea if his threat registered, but the fact that the bastard didn't attack him gave him an inkling of hope. He was condemned, but he wouldn't go down without biting at least. He took Lesha's uniform and boots, and headed back, running through the abysmal weather, not challenged, not shouted back.

But he didn't believe for a moment that that was the end of it.

Lesha had been covered in blankets, was shuddering violently, and the other recruits looked like they were about to bolt and run. When they noticed Vadim they looked up at him, and, as Vadim and Lesha were known to be close friends, they figured Vadim would take care of him.

Misha lingered for a moment longer, offering to bring more hot tea. Vadim thanked him. He ran his hand over Lesha's skull, felt the shorn hair against his skin, and felt yet another of those strange odd stabs of something.

They were friends. Lesha thought him some kind of brother, and Vadim was happy with that. Most of the time. But sometimes, he just thought of that body and it was nothing a brother should or could think. Vadim assumed it was because he had no brother or sister of his own and didn't know how it should feel.

Misha helped him clean Lesha and wrap him up warm, getting hot tea into him, while the bruises began to form and darken on his skin. Misha didn't mention the officer. Vadim pushed the thought away, he was as good as dead anyway. The fear hardened and crystallized in his stomach.

Just a few hours later, the officers came back, making them scurry like rats, out into the rain again, which hadn't let up, like there was just no other weather but rain and hail and snow. Half-dressed, only trousers and boots, their breath misting in front of their faces, torn away by the fierce wind. Officers shouting, cursing, kicking, hitting.

Lesha was swaying on his feet, his skin several shades of black and purple, he seemed barely alive, eyes swollen to slits, still following orders, just like Vadim. Vadim was cold, impossibly cold and wet and miserable, assuming the officers were being especially unpleasant just for the fun of it, and steadied Lesha by the arm. In the rain and in the ranks, the helping touch would be hardly noticeable.

"Vadya...thanks," whispered Lesha.

Vadim nodded and squeezed his arm tighter.

There was an order given that he didn't understand, and the recruits began to move, with him trudging along. Probably a small 'tour of the barracks', have them march in the freezing weather, half naked, just because...because.

"Not you." The officer, yes, that one, dragged Vadim and Lesha out of the line. "I've got something special for this pair of faggots."

It was digging. Vadim had expected to be locked up, or be subjected to any number of sick games the officers played. Or even other soldiers. Velociped, the bicycle. Stick balls of cotton between somebody's toes and set them alight. The victim kicks his legs like being on a bicycle. Hilarious. Makaronina, little macaroni, make somebody rock his head to the left and right, and somebody strikes each side of the neck. Locya, the deer—stand with palm crossed, facing out, against the

forehead. Then get hit by a fist, making the knuckles hit the forehead. That one was painful. Or fashka. Fill cheeks with air and get hit on the cheek—making the teeth cut the insides of the cheek.

This was different. This was digging a hole, and Vadim felt the dread bite his neck that it was some kind of grave.

The officer stood in the window of his quarters, in the light, and watched them there, outside in the rain. Fucking bastard. He'd warned them not to stop or pause, or he'd call it insubordination and make them really suffer. How much worse could it get?

"You...shouldn't have got involved," said Lesha, air wheezing in his lungs, his body struggling on despite the earlier beating, and Vadim was almost positive he couldn't see much with that swollen face.

"Save your...breath..." Vadim rammed the spade into the heavy, muddy earth, felt the ice run down his skin, knew he'd catch death this way, which was exactly what the fucker had in mind. Let the weather kill them. Die from exposure. Pneumonia. Him and Lesha. He suddenly laughed.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just so strange. We're better officer material than that cunt."

Lesha laughed, lifting the spade, Vadim saw the bruised muscle work under the pale skin, saw him struggle, knew his friend would keep on digging, because that was the order, and he was the type who would kill himself following orders. How and why Lesha could still trust any order after this was beyond Vadim.

"Major Krasnorada, eh?"

Vadim shot him an amused glance. "General Petkov?"

"Pleased to meet you, comrade Major." Lesha laughed so hard he started coughing.

Both of them snickered every now and then for the next ten minutes, the humour keeping them going for a little while longer. But Vadim couldn't shed the thought that Lesha was much worse for wear, should have had rest and maybe medical attention. Seeing him suffer like this hardened the fear and worry into something else.

Vadim felt anger rise. A hot, murderous anger that grew every time he saw the dirty bastard stand there, drinking tea and watching them.

"I'll pay him back," Vadim muttered.

They were both wet to the bones, half frozen, Lesha's lips were bluish, and that was bad. Vadim had no idea how miserable he looked himself, but his muscles were cramping. Lack of food, lack of rest, the freezing cold, the repetitive strain of digging, and the anger clawing its way up like a parasite forcing its way out.

The window opened. "Faster, you bitches." The officer leant forward. Vadim felt the warmth that escaped the bastard's room on his face. He stared at him, wanting to hurl the spade, to jump him and smash his face and skull, and felt Lesha's hand on his shoulder.

"Come on, dig."

"You pathetic faggots, going all touchy-feely out there. Dig, bitches!"

Vadim's jaw muscles hardened. He could kill the bastard now. Before, he'd been reluctant, but no longer. What had the officers said? War is about killing or being killed. This, then, was war. The officer was out to kill them, no doubt. And he could even—in case anybody wondered—say it was to 'toughen them up,' and of course, if they didn't survive, they had been too weak to begin with.

Lesha's condition worsened. Was it one hour or two? Deteriorated so badly, he didn't react to jokes or humour, didn't seem to know what he was doing, just murmured "cold, so cold," every now and then.

Vadim's helpless rage grew. Grew and threatened to swallow him. Lesha, who'd told him he reminded him of his older brother, Lesha who'd touched and hugged him much like a brother would, and if Vadim could get nothing else, this was a most precious gift. Friendship. Vadim thought of the moment when Lesha had been sitting against him, easy and comfortable closeness, both resting, Lesha nearly asleep, and Vadim's head had moved just a fraction and brushed his lips against the other's temple. Wanting and desiring him, but not demanding, nothing, just fitting in with the others.

The same man now seemed delirious. Red spots on his face spoke of fever. Lesha shook, uncontrollably, wrestling with the spade's weight. He didn't actually manage to dig.

Vadim looked up at the dark silhouette against the window, and knew the bastard was having a great time watching them like this, knowing what Lesha did to Vadim, and especially his suffering. Vadim worked on, kept somewhat warm by his seething anger, when suddenly he noticed something was wrong. He lowered his spade and saw Lesha lean against the edge of the hole, the spade had slipped

from his hands, and slowly, Lesha's legs gave way. Vadim dropped his spade and steadied him, then bent down and pulled him across his back to carry him inside. He glanced at the bright window, but the officer didn't move, didn't tell them to stop, just seemed to watch what was going on. Maybe even smiling.

First and foremost, Lesha needed to get out of the sleet, and Vadim didn't care what that meant. The officer would keep doing this.

He climbed out of the hole, shaking and in pain himself, but he had to get Lesha inside. He carried him over to the barracks, and quickly stripped the wet trousers and soaking boots off him. He was just about to wrap him in his blankets, when the door opened, and the officer came in, a belt in his hand.

Vadim only managed to raise an arm to protect his face, but the heavy brass buckle hit him on the chest. His frozen skin registered the pain, any touch was painful, but this was really bad. The buckle hit him again, and again, amid curses of "you fucking faggot, you bitch..."

Vadim managed to catch the belt before it hit Lesha, and tensed his arm, pulling so hard, the belt slipped from the officer's grip.

"Your bitch will die anyway, whatever you do," the man hissed.

The anger inside Vadim turned into needles of volcanic glass. Without thinking, he went at the officer, choked him with the belt and dragged him out of the room. He didn't want any witnesses, didn't want anybody to hear or see or interfere when he killed him. Dragged him into the only room that promised a little safety—the man's own quarters.

The officer was only semi-conscious; Vadim kicked a chair against the door from inside, then rammed the officer's head against the nearest wall. His nostrils flared when he smelt blood. The man's legs went slack. Vadim released him for a moment to properly lock the door. He found a towel and tore it into two strips, then tied the bastard's hands behind his back, man-handling the heavy body that was bleeding from a bad bruise at the forehead until he was nicely tied up and, for good measure, just in case the bastard screamed, stuffed a pair of socks in his mouth and tied them with another strip of the towel.

The man came round again, began to struggle.

Vadim had to pin him down, while the rage inside continued to grow. He wanted to cut the bastard into shreds, wanted to break him, punish him, drive home the point he should leave Lesha the fuck alone.

Struggling, powerful body underneath him. Muffled groans. Vadim suddenly felt an odd stab of something else entirely. Anger, but of a different colour, a different taste. A heat that flared up inside, stoked by rage. Strong body...he was in top physical condition, only weak for the moment.

Suddenly he knew what would break him.

Hoisting him up by the shoulders, Vadim laid him across the bed, keeping him pinned down while he tore down the man's trousers. Bastard, if it's naked recruits and naked flesh you want, that's what you'll get.

Turned on by the feel of struggling muscle underneath, getting addicted to the sound of heaving, panicking breath through a partially blocked mouth, and the scent of dawning panic, Vadim pressed against the man's ass, could feel the struggle become more intense, like the bastard's strength was returning. He opened his fly and pulled his cock free.

He lay down on the man, who tried to shout and doubled his frantic fighting, but kept him down with his chest. Opened the man's legs with his knees, could feel the warm flesh, warm and dry and hateful. There was a tub of Vaseline near the bed. Made wanking better. Vadim's lips curved into a nasty grin. He opened the tub and covered his cock with the stuff, hurried, then kicked the officer's legs further apart. Felt him shudder with fear and revulsion as he rubbed some more into his crack roughly pulling the flesh apart, forcing grease into the ass. Not for any kindness, no way, just so he could get in at all.

The man said something—hectic, mumbled words that made no sense.

Vadim grinned and leaned in. "I think this faggot here found a new bitch, you cunt." He could smell the man's fear, an acidic, sharp smell.

Vadim paused, wanting to savour his revenge. Anticipation was half the fun, and he wanted to give the bastard time to anticipate. "I'll fuck you...like you've wanted it all the time, or you wouldn't have provoked it, you fucking cunt. You'll feel me and you'll love it, because faggots like you can never get enough cock."

Then, shuddering with the effort of control, he moved in, pressed into the hot flesh that resisted, then gave against his strength, while the man screamed into the gag and did everything to fight him, clench, buck, but Vadim handled the terrified struggle just like close combat, keeping the body pinned and under restraint. The heat was intoxicating, power and revenge, rage concentrated in a rising, furious lust, and he bared his teeth in a grin so fierce it hurt.

The struggle was so fucking good, better than the elation of a fight he was winning. Vadim felt his blood pump, incredibly alive and hot after the freezing sleet outside. All it took was a fighting body underneath to warm him up, mind and heart and body. Possessing.

The flesh yielding was an impossible feeling, coloured red-hot with the man's seething hatred. Vadim couldn't help but see Lesha flash across his brain. His body, his skin, his dark hair. He began to thrust, thought of his comrade, and at the same time was completely aware this was the bastard that had tried to kill them both, but his worn-out brain didn't care anymore.

"Enjoying yourself, you cunt?" he murmured into the officer's ear, forcing in deeper, the body taut underneath, tight muscles, his own body melting heat and lust and hatred and revenge into one heady mix that hit him deeper than any drug.

He remembered how the masseur used to fuck him, and began with slow, deep thrusts, pausing every now and then to murmur into the officer's ear. "Why don't you struggle? Feels too good, eh?"

Which made the man buck, and Vadim thrust right into him, so hard the other collapsed with a sound of pain, hands clenching helplessly as Vadim found a rhythm, his own exhausted body took forever to build up enough pressure, feeling the other widen and accommodate him, softening up, strangely, the powerful body accepting him on the most visceral level.

"Who's the faggot now?" Vadim was almost positive the bastard reacted, reacted in a certain way when he thrust in, shuddering and clenching, but it wasn't all a fight, not all of it. A nice, deep, dark, absolutely devastating secret. Vadim laughed into his ear. "You enjoy it. I know what that feels like. Are you pressing down so you come, too, bitch?"

Vadim would have loved to pull out the gag and listen to the man's desperate breaths, but at least he could still feel them in his body, as he thrust harder, bringing his strength to bear, getting sounds out of the other man, pain, yeah, right, and something forbidden and dirty.

The pressure built up. Impossible to draw this out any longer, triumph and release when Vadim came inside, thrusting so hard when he did, he rocked the bed against the wall.

He remained on top of the officer, resting for a moment, listening to the way the man's breath was irregular and forced and almost choking him. "That's for Lesha," he muttered, feeling an odd, destructive gentleness.

Then he pulled out, took some of the bed sheet to clean himself up, closed his trousers and leaned against the wall, studying the still figure on the bed. Fit. Strong. A complete and utter bastard. And an ass that looked raw and glistened with petroleum jelly and Vadim's cum.

He contemplated waiting for a little while and fucking him again, because deep down, where the climax had not sated his anger, and where his own darkest desire had come alive, he loved the feeling. Loved the struggle and the anger, loved knowing how much the other hated this, and bared his teeth in another grin. Faggot, yes, but that didn't mean he'd take things lying down. But something else was more important now. Making sure Lesha was alright.

He rummaged through the bastard's kit and belongings, and found some penicillin. Lesha would need this. He stepped back to the bed, took the bastard by the shoulders and turned him around to look him in the eyes.

The officer didn't meet his gaze. He'd been right, there was an erection. Vadim grinned. "You should have told me before...I could have fucked you sooner, would have saved us some trouble, correct, suka?"

The officer's eyes stared at him now, but Vadim didn't feel like relenting, didn't give a damn about consequences. Not anymore. "If you do so much as look strange at my friends or myself, I'll grab you again—and I'll bring a bunch of friends. We're all badly in need of a nice spirited devuchka. I'm sure we could keep you entertained all night, sweetheart."

Only to drive his point home, Vadim took hold of the officer's cock, stroking him once, twice, slow, strong motions. He was positive the man was dying with fear now, and probably something else, too, which was not revulsion. "I could leave you like this, or maybe fuck you again..." The man's eyes widened, and he grunted something around the gag, which Vadim took as disagreement or a plea.

"But I have to check up on a friend." He smiled again, as he turned the officer onto his back and loosened the restraints enough so that the bastard would be able to free himself with a little time.

“You better behave, because this is just a faint idea of what I can do to you if you cross me again.” And he meant it. Nothing tasted or felt like power. Nothing he’d ever tried before. Nothing as intoxicating as control.

He gave the officer a series of slaps that were almost gentle, then left him alone. Sated, heavy, very very tired, but still concerned for Lesha.

Over the next few days, Vadim fell into the rhythm of Lesha's garrison, helped with training and inspection, led a few patrols before he began to slip. He deliberately made mistakes, and badly concealed a completely random temper and subtle failings in his discipline, showing clearly he was in trouble. Quite simple, really. Tell-tale signs that he appeared too sluggish to cover up.

Eventually, Alexei Ivanovich Petkov came into his room. A major himself, that meant no stupid rank-pulling, as if his old friend had been the type. Granted, he was only regular army, but still, as Vadim had expected, a damn decent guy.

“We need to talk.”

“Talk?” Vadim feigned ignorance.

Alexei closed the distance and took his arm with both hands, and pulled up the shirt. Revealing the marks. “What’s this?”

Vadim looked at him, did not speak, did not comment. Remembered the crush he’d had on the young man, his protectiveness, the closeness, but he’d never acted on it. Not even later, when he had started taking what he wanted. Lesha had trusted him and respected him and, in his own way, loved him. He just couldn’t destroy that, as much as he’d wanted him. Funny. One good decision there.

“You getting into drugs? Heroin?” Alexei sounded genuinely concerned. “I couldn’t care less if you weren’t who you are.”

“What? Spetsnaz?”

“A friend.”

“I see.” And he did. The old bond still held. They were still friends.

Alexei seemed on the verge of slapping him. “Don’t give me that. What happened? I heard you flipped badly in Kabul. When did you start this?”

“A couple weeks.”

“I need to report you. And lock you up.” His thumbs dug into Vadim’s arm.

“Or I take some morphine and piss off into the mountains until it’s over.”

Vadim looked at the other. “Like they do when it gets bad.”

“That’s suicide.”

“I can’t go into prison. Don’t do this to me. Give me a chance.” The words came easy, too easy, almost. He reached for the other’s shoulder. “I’ll take morphine against the pain, find myself a nice cave and you tell people I’m doing patrols of the passes. We both keep quiet, and I’ll owe you this time.”

“Why would you come back?”

“Do I look like I want to go native? I have a family in Moscow. I want to get out of here alive as much as you do.”

“And if you don’t beat this?”

“Medical exam when I come back. If the medics find anything, do your duty. But give me a chance.”

Alexei looked him in the eye. “Shame if we lost you. You think you’ll manage?” Both hands on his shoulders now, one hand went to his neck, forced him closer. Ill-advised brotherly touch. Vadim’s mind reeled.

“I have enough morphine to last me.”

“Can you kick the morphine?”

“I’ll try.” Vadim gave a weak grin. “Might take me some weed or vodka.” He pulled the shirt down and twisted out of that grip. He didn’t want to smell the other. Too close. He went to his bergan, tossed a bag of heroin on the bed, and the syringe. Italian brand, nobody used the Soviet make, they broke too easily and were never sterile. “Take this. Burn it.”

Lesha, now the keeper of this most damaging secret, took the stuff. They both were perfectly capable of keeping secrets, that was one of the things Vadim had always liked about his old friend.

Alexei had no idea what had happened that night, he’d slipped right into a fever. He had caught pneumonia, which had finally been beaten, thanks to the penicillin, but, likely, even more thanks to the fact that that bullying officer had blown his own brains out with his Makarov. The suicide was a complete mystery—it had happened the following night, after the officer had fallen mysteriously ill and not left his room. Forty-eight hours after his personal encounter with Vadim, the man was dead.

“When are you leaving?”

“Right away. Before the shakes.”

Alexei nodded. “How long?”

“I’d think about two weeks.” Vadim shrugged. “You cover me?”

“Of course. You’re a friend.”

Above all, I’m one cunning bastard.

As if ashamed, Vadim didn’t meet the other’s eyes when he shouldered the bergan. And was on his way to Kashmir.

* * *

Dan’s condition was finally stabilising. The secondary infection had slowed down the healing process, but he was improving at last. Sedation was slowly decreased until he was finally weaned off it completely. They kept his good hand restrained even when the breathing tube was removed and replaced with less invasive oxygen. The nose drip had to be kept, to feed nutrients directly into his stomach, and with his constant signs of aggression they couldn’t risk the danger of him trying to tear any probes and sounds out of his body while still disoriented.

He was aware of dull throbbing pain throughout his body despite the morphine, but at least he was feeling *something*. Something other than being dragged into nightmares that had no name and made no sense. He tried to move his hands a few times, but one was in too great pain, and the other wouldn’t budge. He gave up trying.

He couldn’t open his eyes, drifting in and out of consciousness, dozed off only to be yelled at within thirty seconds. “Breathe. If you don’t breathe we can’t give you anymore pain medication.” The foreign accent strong, somewhat familiar from a long time ago. It was just so difficult to remember the reflex of pulling in air and expelling on his own. Still lost in darkness and dulled-down terror.

The next day he finally managed to open his eyes for a minute at a time. He began to take interest in his surroundings, eventually tried to understand the regime and the rigmarole of the machinery. Nurses, doctors, a constant flow of endless people that touched him, tested him, checked him, turned him. The oxygen mask began to itch and he became aware of the discomfort of the catheters. He didn’t manage to count the IVs, gave up at the tangle of tubes and wires, but felt the oxygenation clamp on one finger and the electrodes that monitored his heart. Incredibly irritated by the blood pressure meter that automatically, every fifteen minutes, filled up the plastic sleeve around his arm.

He couldn't speak, his throat was sore from the breathing tube and the mask closing off his face. Even when they changed the mask to the twin-lines that streamed oxygen straight into his nostrils, he wasn't able to utter a sound. Too much effort, and he didn't have the strength. They didn't ask him to communicate either, except for regular checks on his alertness, and then he blinked when spoken to.

* * *

Vadim left the uniform buried under a pile of stones in a remote valley that had neither inhabitants nor name, navigated with map and stars, wore native clothes, and vanished into the wilderness.

He crossed the passes, attacked and killed a Pakistani patrol, took their kit, their car, drove all night, hid and rested during the days, driven by one thought: Dan's infection, Dan fighting for his life. He might already be dead, but at least he'd hear that from the doctor.

He'd followed him, and wondered what that meant, following, but didn't answer it, knew it in his bones.

He'd follow that body anywhere, to Kabul, to Scotland. He'd find a way to confirm he was dead, even if he had to dig up that corpse in a country he didn't know. He needed certainty.

He had to give up the Pakistani jeep, once he arrived in India. Went by bus, on foot, felt like the world was moving and he wasn't, had no eyes for anything but for the ground and potential danger. Ate what was sold or given, what he could steal or pluck from the trees; mango never tasted anything like this, he thought, sitting near the road in the shade. Begged rides with natives, who thought him either a deserter or a tourist. Spoke English and was confident they couldn't place his accent, given they could hardly speak the language themselves. Told them nothing, really, kept his head covered, hair was starting to grow out anyway. Kept his guns and knives hidden on his body.

Rides on ramshackle trucks, sleeping between sheep and goats and cages of chicken. Rested as much as he could, needed the respite since he was on his feet most of the time, desperate for yet another mile. Too far, too fucking far. Asked questions.

Found the British hospital.

He arrived in the middle of the night, had planned to sleep somewhere close, but his thoughts were fixated on one thing. Dan dying. Every breath of rest, every hour of sleep could be the one, crucial, wasted opportunity. Felt like death on two feet as he got inside, barely coherent with tiredness, asked to see Dan McFadyen, urgently. Needed to see him, please. In the names of whatever gods they prayed to, please.

They kept telling him that now was not visiting time, that he should go home and wait until the morning, and that no, he should not get so aggravated.

They were talking to him like to a child until he got angrier and angrier. The night porter at reception began to get upset at the aggression and the repeated question for one, Dan McFadyen. They were about to call for security when a doctor on night-shift walked past. One glance at the tall blond-haired man, who looked as if he'd keel over with exhaustion any moment, and then a swift conversation in Hindi. Words that increased in pace and intensity, until the discussion stopped, reception nodded, and a security guard was called.

The doctor turned to Vadim, explaining, "It is not custom that patients have visitors at night, but since Mr McFadyen has not received any visitors, we deem it appropriate for you to have five minutes."

No mention of the soldier who stood at the ready. Nothing, just a tired smile of politeness, and the typical Indian nod.

Vadim shot the guard a glance, thinking 'touch me and I'll break your neck' then turned to the doctor. *Five minutes*. All he needed. Five minutes to see and touch Dan. Needed to see him. Would only believe he was there when he actually stood in front of him. His bed. He swallowed. He was hardly coherent, and knew it, couldn't wait, couldn't pause, his legs and feet were murder, his mind frayed, tired, so fucking tired he wanted to die, forced himself to appear as normal and stoic as he could, was more staggering than walking. "What's his condition. How bad? Will he die?"

"The patient is stable." He doctor gestured towards the corridor, the guard following. "Still battling with the after-effects of infection, but that was to be expected with the extent of injuries."

Stable. Infection. Two words that registered, everything else just slipped past. He nodded, walked beside the doctor, listened, wanted to rush in, didn't even know where, needed more patience.

“You need to wash your hands and change into protective clothing.” They walked through a door into the intensive care ward, and then towards the visitor room. “You have five minutes every hour, unless we deem it beneficial to the patient to receive prolonged visits. If the patient becomes agitated, there shall be no forthcoming visits.” The doctor glanced to the side, never quite fully at Vadim.

Agitated. Beneficial. Whatever. Long, complicated words. Every heartbeat brought him closer to Dan. Dan who was not dead. Not dying. Stable. Was there a nicer word in any language than that?

“Here.” The doctor pointed to a wash basin and soap, then the scrubs that consisted of long coat and hair cap for visitors.

Vadim washed, didn't think, just did, took off some of his clothes, wide trousers, a shirt, took off the rag, scrubbed his hands, fingernails, short and bitten off, saw his face, red and burnt, didn't care, saw the glint in his eyes. He looked like a lunatic. Washed his face, the neck, and got into the stiff coat that felt like it had been laundered a hundred times, cooked, boiled, starched, ironed. Filled it out, tight at the shoulder, reached for the cap.

Wanted to see Dan so badly, bile rose with fear. Didn't want to see him hurt. Not like that. Nobody had mentioned burn wounds, abdomen they'd said, hadn't they? Maybe Dan would be so badly injured Vadim wouldn't recognise him. He formed fists with his hands, scared, as scared as he had the strength left to be.

The guard followed even when the surgeon opened another door that led to the ICU. Window-fronted rooms like glass trays mounted on microscopes.

“The guard will take you.” The hallway was quiet except for bleeping and the hushed tones of nurses and doctors.

Vadim followed like a man with no other choice, didn't quite believe he'd made it, felt unreal, a nightmare, one of those endless dreams. Smells, feelings, he wanted to sleep, desperate, didn't know what he wanted, knew he was disoriented and exhausted.

Dan's unit was in its own area, through yet another door, with only one window spanning across the corridor. A special ward in an already private hospital. The smell of plastic and disinfectant pervading the air, and the constant noise of bleeping and whirring reached through the open door. The window allowed a full view of the patient, whose eyes were closed. Clipped dark hair in stark contrast to the white pillows and the sickly pale skin beneath the former tan.

The machines stood all around the motionless figure on the bed. Still hooked up to keep track of heart rate, blood pressure and oxygen saturation through arterial lines and intravenous catheters. Lifelines curling from nose, torso and limbs to bags with different solutions and probes that measured temperature and respiration.

Dan was asleep. A still and fragile figure in the centre of medical machinery. Thin, frail, having lost a substantial amount of weight, his facial features had sharpened and his eyes had sunk in his head, giving the impression of a skull, closer to death than life. His left hand thickly bandaged, his right restrained to the bed. But he was breathing on his own, and his heart was beating in a steady line, flashing across a monitor.

Doctor, guard, all forgotten. Dan.

Vadim walked closer, first time in days without the weight of the bergan, had left it where his clothing was, moved closer, all those machines that were shielding. Not as bad, was his first thought. In one piece. He could see both legs, both arms, both hands, all the fingers. Dan looked young with that short hair, he could see the shape of the head properly, something his fingers had known, his eyes only once, had missed the feeling of that hair on his skin.

Dan, not Dan, not reckless, fearless, sweating Dan, not alive, vibrant, insulting Dan. And yet still him. Shadow of a man. That was what a bomb did to a body, yes, unless it tore it apart. He checked the legs and arms again. All whole. Did not comprehend, it was all wrong, the bleeping, the lines, the cables, Dan not responding, not resting, just switched off.

Vadim squeezed in between a machine and the bed, reached for the hand that wasn't bandaged. Clean. Aseptic. No pressure, no strength, the hand that had hit him, cut him, the hand that had been everywhere on his body, the hand he had fucked, that had fucked him, the hand that had covered his nose and mouth so he kept quiet, that same hand wasn't itself anymore.

In one piece. Stable.

Nothing he could do, no need to rush, no need to not waste any time. He'd made it. Dan was here, what a mercy, unexpected, hoped for, alive, breathing, secure. Lapushka. The pressure started from somewhere in his chest, it felt like a laugh, but wasn't, was as much a laugh as that man was a soldier. Casualty.

They'd take him home, career-ending wound. It didn't matter now. He'd rather see Dan leave for Scotland than see him dead or wounded.

Lost him, found him, and the pressure rose and he felt it crawl out of his throat, too fucking tired to care, knew it was the stress and exhaustion, nothing to be ashamed of. Dan wouldn't notice, and he didn't care who else saw it; he let it go, went to his knees and cried, held Dan's hand and cried against his arm, tried to be silent so they wouldn't kick him out, nearly choked on it, felt like he was trying to breathe fire, salt. Cried so hard, every muscle in his body hurt. Wanted nothing but to curl up at the bed and guard it like a dog, had slept in worse places in the last weeks.

The hand in Vadim's twitched. Attempts at pressure, fingers pushing against the palm. The hand tried to move, gave up, as if resigned to being restrained.

Vadim looked up, didn't care if the tears were still running, couldn't make that stop, just couldn't. Control never worked with Dan, he should have accepted that by now. "Dan?" he asked, hardly trusted his voice—or anything. "You awake?"

The machine that monitored pulse sped up, the bleeping noise increased, and the fingers made a greater effort to push against his. Dan's eyes were open. Dark eyes, large, so fucking huge in a far-too pale and thin face. Even the scar stood out as starkly as it had done three years ago, when it had been fresh and angry. He was merely looking, those bloody big eyes simply staring. Disbelief, pain and fear and tiredness, but most of all, a sense of recognition.

"You...real?" Dan's whisper was rusty and brittle. Disused and raspy from the soreness caused by tubes, his throat parched despite the water bottle on his bedside table. He couldn't reach for it, but even without restraints, the effort a Herculean task. "Real?"

Vadim reached out to touch the face, then leaned in, still crying and wrestling for every steady breath. Dan's eyes. They were the worst thing. Yellow mixed with the brown, more amber than dark, something far less right with this body than it looked, and that was bad. He got to his feet in a show of strength, didn't want to show Dan how tired he was, how broken. Leaning in, he thought fuck it, let them kick me out for this, and touched his lips to Dan's. Dry, parched, not a real kiss, yet more real than it had ever been.

Dan's eyes closed at the touch of lips on lips. Another kiss of life, how fucking ironic.

Vadim pulled back, wiped his face on the starchy sleeve, and tried to give a smile. "You got more cables in you than fucking Darth Vader."

The feeble grin a mere ghost of Dan's usual smirk. "More...like Sleeping...Beauty." The machines started to change, different noise, altered pattern. "Thirsty. "

Vadim reached for the water bottle, a squeezey thing with a nozzle, placed it between Dan's lips and gave him a little to drink, his hand shaking badly.

Swallowing was painful. Dan's eyes closed as he took small measures of water. Reduced to goddamned thankfulness for a sip of liquid.

There was a rustle behind Vadim as a nurse entered, speaking before Dan could muster the strength to try and talk once more. "Sir, you have to leave now. The five minutes are over. You may wait outside."

A bench, in front of the glass window. No one had ever sat there, no one had visited. No one would have witnessed Daniel McFadyen die.

Vadim looked at the nurse, hated her more than anybody else in his whole life and that included the British captain of the Pentathlon team. Knew if he made a commotion he wouldn't see Dan again. He reached out to touch that face again. "I'm here," he murmured, again almost choking on the words. He'd imagined seeing him and then leaving but he couldn't leave Dan like this, too much to tell him, too much to regret and apologise for, too much to explain before Dan left for home. "Rest up, soldier. I'm here."

He squeezed the hand again, turned, left, sat down on the bench, and cried, cried with the fear and the sadness and the pain, too tired to do anything but cry, didn't even have the strength to tell the nurse to wake him up in an hour, couldn't waste the time, needed to speak to Dan. Leaned against the wall and cried like a boy losing his family.

Less than thirty minutes later, a different nurse appeared. "Sir?" She stood, waiting, until Vadim acknowledged her. "Sir, if you wish to refresh yourself, a room has been made available for you. It is one of the overnight staff rooms that the surgeons are using. If you wish, you may also use the staff canteen and some fresh clothes are ready for you. You will find them in the room, if you'd like to follow me?"

Something must have happened in the meantime. Something...had shifted the already surprising treatment, allowing this rag-tag run-down Russian stranger to see a British patient, and now...now he was treated like a guest. 'On the house', so to speak. No questions asked. No answers given. Just observed.

She waited, her small figure prim and proper in the perfectly starched nurse's uniform, the jet-black hair in a bun and crowned by a neat cap. Seemingly concerned about the stranger's acquiescence, she pointed towards the window which showed Dan asleep again. "Sir, the patient is resting at the moment, but you may visit once you have refreshed yourself." Adding with a smile of generic friendly politeness, "It is safer for the patient if you change into the provided clothing."

Vadim stood, felt so grateful and tired it was pathetic. Safer for Dan if he didn't bring all the dirt of Pakistan with him. It made sense. He gathered his clothes, the bergan, followed her, as tired as after a night exercise.

No...worse.

The room was small, clean, white, a narrow bed, made for these small dark skinned people. He wanted to collapse so bad it hurt, but then, he could sleep in prison, he thought, and found that hilarious. He just didn't think he'd get away with committing this madness. He was waiting for the hammer to fall, but in the meantime, he'd get the stinking rags off. He tossed them in a corner to wash them later, checked his body for parasites, lice, ticks, fleas. He'd slaughtered the veins of his arms with the Italian syringe. If he ever did get into heroin, he'd inject the shit in the insides of his legs, or between the toes, but he'd needed something more obvious. Had needed to bait his old friend. As long as the doctors here didn't think he was a junkie soldier out to finish a job.

He couldn't be here legally, not if they ever worked out he was Soviet. No passport to leave Afghanistan, enter Pakistan, leave Pakistan, enter India. He either was on a mission, or a deserter. Vadim began to wash, half-closed his eyes, needed to focus to get the job done.

But they had allowed him near Dan. For whatever reason. He didn't believe in kindness, not after all these years in the military. The ambassador? Why would she? She didn't strike him as the compassionate type. She might groom him to be a traitor, then. Double-agent. Maybe they had already confirmed his identity or

might at least suspect he was Interior Ministry. The hammer would fall. By all rights, he should be scurrying away for self-preservation.

The clothes were a loose-fitting shalwar kameez, trousers that didn't reach his ankles, and a shirt that didn't reach his knees, sleeves that didn't reach his wrists. Cotton, a dark blue. Easily the nicest thing he'd worn for years, light, caught the breeze that entered through the shaded window. He stashed the bergan under the bed, wanted to shave, cut his hair, but needed to return scruffy and hairy to base, if he ever did. After all, he was going cold turkey.

* * *

He returned to the room they kept Dan in, expecting British or Pakistani secret service, expecting eyes and ears, and couldn't be bothered to evade or hide anything. They were both screwed anyway. As long as they allowed him here, he was fine.

But there was no one in Dan's ward except a junior nurse who sat in the corner, waiting patiently. She nodded at Vadim as he entered in the clothes they had provided. Clean, and not infectious. If he was dangerous, that seemed to be a different matter. She stood up and left the room, but not before she had moved the chair towards the bed, pointing at it with a smile and a soft "Please."

Vadim turned to Dan, who appeared to be asleep, or simply resting but soon began to stir, the restrained hand jerking, then stilling again.

Resignation had settled into every fibre of Dan's being and went bone-deep. He'd survived the blast, injuries and subsequent infections. It had taken everything out of him, to the last cell in his body and most of his mind. Loneliness, while fighting to survive, and he'd lost his strength and reason on the way.

Vadim placed a hand on the twitching fingers, pressed them for a moment, let his hand linger there. He didn't need to cry now, still fucking tired, and hurting, but better. They allowed him here.

Dan's eyes opened, his face had an almost childlike expression. He smiled, a mere ghost, and his tired voice croaked. "How?"

Vadim sat down, stroking that hand. "Just booked some time off. Colonel sends greetings, everybody hopes you'll get better soon." He inhaled deeply. "And the shit you pull just to get a new haircut, huh?" Reached out to touch the short hair.

Dan grimaced, laughing would hurt too fucking much and was too much effort. Energy he didn't have. "You...bullshit." Moistened his lips. "Thirsty again."

Vadim took the refilled bottle, and trickled some liquid into Dan's mouth. He could do that for the rest of his life and not feel he'd wasted any of his talents.

Dan swallowed with a wince, but thankful for the water. "Those who...remember me...celebrate...if dead." Talking took a goddamned lot out of him. He closed his eyes, concentrating on breathing.

Vadim smiled. "I remember you." He ran his hand over Dan's cheek again, who visibly relaxed, faintly smiling. Just fingertips, didn't want to upset, just be there, just tell Dan any way he could, he'd be there. He glanced at the machines, each one unfeeling, witnesses, helpers, remaining steady. Heartbeat, respiration, blood pressure.

When Dan opened his eyes again, he tried to look at his hand and the hated restraints. "Fought...too much...I think." Rolled his eyes. "Don't remember. Just...dark...fear...pain."

Vadim found the strap that bound his hand, loosened it, knew Dan shouldn't be tied up, freed at least that much. "Don't be disappointed I take no advantage of you. I'm too tired. Kashmir isn't exactly tourist destination for men like me."

"You should...sleep." Dan's voice grew quieter by the second. "Insane.... Russian...fucking...bastard...cunt..." He ended in a whisper, with a smile that seemed to take the last reserves out of him and he closed his eyes. Vadim could tell he was fighting sleep, but his breath evened out almost immediately, and so did his heartbeat. It slowed, but grew steadier. Unfeeling machines told a story of emotions through facts, sounds and numbers.

He must look terrible, if even Dan could see he needed rest. He touched Dan's face again, so glad he could do that, everything else would find a way, somehow. They'd got this far. "Sleep. And get better," he murmured in Russian near Dan's ear, then sat again on his chair, determined to stay right there until they made him leave. Not one minute less.

The sound of steps behind Vadim, someone entering the room. "Sir, we need to change the dressing and it will be best for the patient if he has the opportunity for prolonged rest."

The voice was male, it was one of the doctors, accompanied by a nurse. They'd left the strange Russian alone, yet there was a distanced alertness about them. Friendly, but reserved. They had clearly received instructions, but from whom, and what they were, was impossible to tell by their politely friendly faces.

Vadim wanted to offer to be quiet, not wake Dan up, if he could only stay, just like one of the machines, his duty merely to ensure Dan was there and safe.

“We suggest you take some much-needed rest yourself. You may see the patient in a few hours. It will be necessary to conduct some observation and medical tests and this might prove upsetting. Less on the patient, who will be sedated, than yourself.” The doctor’s words were kind but left no room for discussion.

How unsettling could it be? After what his imagination had already done to him? This was nothing, they’d just keep that body running, nothing unsettling about living and maintenance. Vadim stood, knees weak, stiff, tired. His back hurt, his eyes hurt, most of all the place in his chest that felt.

“You may stay in the room that was provided for you. You will find supper waiting.”

Vadim moved out of the way. “If anything changes...anything. Whatever it is, I need to be here.” Tried to make it sound like an order, but knew he lacked authority. More like pleading.

Back in ‘his’ room, somebody had taken the dirty stinking rags, maybe tossed them into a washing machine. A bowl with rice and spicy sauce and bits of meat, looked like lamb, and naan bread. Vadim tore some of it up, dunked it in the sauce, shovelled it in, not used to the spiciness, some minty yogurt stuff cooled his tongue. Halfway through the food, his body told him he was no longer starving, and he dropped the rest of the bread into the bowl, carried it over to the bed, put it on the nightstand—like a raw conscript, expecting food to be stolen—, pulled the shirt over his head, lay down and decided he could finish the food later. Slept.

* * *

Vadim woke, disoriented, but not in a bad way. Didn’t panic, didn’t freak, rested and relaxed. They had let him sleep, that probably meant nothing had changed, nothing required his presence, as if he was only a visitor. Coming slowly

to his senses, he lay there, trying to work out how much time he'd have before he had to go back. The risk was already obscene, he might as well make the most of it.

He washed again, dressed, ate the cold spicy food—nobody had entered the room in the meantime—washed the naan down with cold tea.

He headed back to the ward, hoping they'd let him stay longer.

“Sir?” A nurse stopped him before he could enter Dan's room. “Since you appear to be a friend of the patient and the only visitor, we took the liberty to assume you wished to help deliver the first solid food the patient has had since the injury?” “The patient”. Only ever ‘the patient’. No name, a number, and yet they had cared for Dan as if he were their own brother.

Vadim glanced towards the door. Only visitor. No family, no comrades, nothing. “Aye.” Solid food. Dan was getting better. Couldn't wait to get back inside.

Dan was awake at last, groggy and sniffing quietly. With the nasal tube removed he was sore again, irritated at the itching in his nostrils and down his throat.

“They said no steak yet, but you can eat.” Vadim walked towards the bed, grinning. “Might be that holy cow thing, you know.”

Dan smiled tiredly at Vadim in greeting. Not alone. No longer alone. Not dead. Not dying on his own amidst fear and terror. The darkness, the lure, fighting the urge to give up and simply let himself be dragged under. No longer.

Vadim sat down and took Dan's hand. “You look better. Hard to imagine, but you do.” He kept that hand in his. “They treat me like fucking hotel. My own room, food, seems like nice place for holidays.”

Dan blinked, confused, but at least one thing provided a constant. The hand that held his own. Fucking pathetic, really, that all he could think of was how he craved the strength of that hand. Felt weak, unlike ever before in his life.

“Why?” Croaked. Why Vadim had come? Why treat him like a guest? Why was he still alive and why the fuck could he not make sense of anything except for that hand?

The nurse slipped in quietly, leaving a tray with a bowl of puree that looked almost edible. ‘Solid food’. The term was used most loosely.

“Guess they hired me as pretty unlikely nurse. Maybe they worked out these darkies aren't really your type.” Vadim reached for the puree, smelled it,

seemed to be vegetables of some description. Gathered his thought as he took the spoon and scooped some food up in it. “Well, I decided it was smart idea to walk into British embassy.” He raised the spoon and put it to Dan’s lips. “Now, be good boy.”

Dan’s eyes widened, fixed on Vadim, not the spoon. “You did...what?” Made the mistake of opening his mouth and before he could try and find enough energy to say anything else, the spoon was pushed between his lips. He grimaced, but took the food and made a mighty effort to swallow. Wasn’t all that bad. Tasted...of food, not plastic nor sterile solutions nor the horrible taste of death.

He didn’t have to chew, thankfully, and the way the puree made its way down to his stomach was almost close to bliss. Felt like life. One step closer to living. Swallowed, grimacing again. “You...crazy fucker.”

“Yeah. Above and beyond, and who dares wins...” Vadim shook his head. Enough military talk. He pulled the spoon back and gathered more food. “Told them you’d let me live and that I wanted to thank you. Needed to know.” Another spoon between Dan’s lips, another little bit of food.

Dan frowned, but swallowed. Resigned to the food that kept coming.

“The woman ambassador gave me some trouble, but told me where.” And yet another spoon.

“Maggie?” Dan managed to utter the word before food made its way into his mouth again and he had no other option but to swallow.

“Hairstyle like that Thatcher woman? Then it’s your boss.”

The deal clear. As long as Dan swallowed, Vadim would keep talking. “Didn’t quite exactly tell them who I am, thought that was smarter. They might guess, but I don’t care.” He glanced at Dan. Another spoon, and another heroic effort to get that goddamned puree down. “Faked heroin addiction, freaked out my commander, pissed off into mountains, killed less Pakistanis on the way than I had thought, and well, barged right into this place. Quite funny, really.”

Dan was listening, eyes wide, while obediently swallowing, the first food by mouth for several weeks. But soon he raised his fingers, just a little, feebly prodding Vadim. He couldn’t anymore, just couldn’t. His stomach full to bursting after a few spoonfuls.

Vadim put the puree down, spoon and bowl went back on the tray. He took the napkin and wiped Dan’s mouth.

“Why?” Dan whispered. Why? Again. Why? “You risked...Your life...” Tell me why. Tell me. Tell me why you’re here and why the fuck I’ve been fighting so hard to live.

“No, didn’t risk anything. Well, yes, okay, nothing more than what I usually do.” Vadim shrugged. “Thought I’d at least get to say goodbye before you piss off back home.” He nodded to Dan’s abdomen. “That’s ticket home, Dan. Good for you. You’re making it out alright...” More cheerful than he felt, by far, but he needed to get Dan’s spirits up, only way for him to bear it.

“Fuck you...Russkie.” Even the raspy, quiet voice could transmit some of Dan’s intensity. “Fuck...you. Not going. Nothing keeps...here. Not soldier. You know.” The machines were getting louder, the beeping faster, aggravated, blood pressure shooting up. “No one...back. Not...away. Here with you. Fuck...you.” Machinery exploding into a cacophony of noise and the sound of feet rushing towards the room was heard.

Vadim groaned, tried a smile, but was too alarmed. “Hey, easy, Dan. Fuck. I was joking.” Because it hurts. He reached out to touch that hand again, had blown it, knew they’d kick him out now. “I needed to see you before...Just needed to see you.” Stepped away from the bed, as if to indicate he was just as startled as anybody else and raised his hands.

“Out.” The nurse pushed Vadim out of the way as she ran to the patient.

“Fuck you.” The hellish noise of the machines drowned out Dan’s desperate attempt to shout, abusing his throat and ending with the worst: coughing. Fists clenched and faced crunched up in pain, eyes shut. The nurse was talking to him, but even through the glass pane it was obvious he wasn’t listening. Face wet. Crying.

She kept talking, but Dan refused to listen and even when she turned to glare through the glass panel at the man who seemed to have caused the upset, Dan’s lips would still mouth “no”. Over and over again until she finally nodded, and the machines began to quieten.

Vadim rested his forehead against the wall outside, watched, wincing, felt guilty as hell, shouldn’t have brought up the issue, of course not, Dan wasn’t a ‘comrade’ who would go home to a medal and a pension that wasn’t enough.

Dan had stayed around because he was still tied to the meat grinder. “Good work, Vadim,” he murmured. “Excellent work.”

The nurse stepped out, shook her head to a surgeon who appeared in the doorway, spoke to him. The man glanced at Vadim before he left and the nurse addressed the Russian. “The patient asks to see you again.”

She was apparently not happy about this request. “Please, Sir, whatever you do, try not to aggravate him. He is far more frail than you might think and we are lowering the morphine dose, he will be suffering from withdrawal. He is probably not quite himself.”

“Yes, I’m sorry. I said the wrong thing.” Vadim inhaled, almost didn’t expect to be let in again, but she gestured and he returned to Dan’s side.

“I have talent to make you suffer.” He sat down again, looked at him. “All to crack stupid joke.”

Dan’s face was wet and it bloody itched. Tried to wipe it by turning his head into the pillow, made a pathetically feeble failure out of it. Looked up, just looked. Breathed. Heart beating. Alive.

“Start...again? I need to...tell you. Much. Didn’t think...get...chance.” Mighty effort, and his eyes closed for a moment when he was finished.

Vadim leaned in, supported his weight against the wall, not on the bed, didn’t want to send the tiniest shock through Dan, rattling the bed could only be bad. “I’m here. Lots of time.”

He glanced around, couldn’t see a towel, but there were some kind of sterile wipes. He cleaned Dan’s face, was close enough to kiss him again. “Doesn’t have to be now. I’m here. Take your time.” He sat down again, tossed the wipes into a bin. “Relax. Won’t do to hurt you.” More than I already have.

Dan lay with his eyes closed. Was easy to just do what he was told. To simply be. Not alone. His hand searched for Vadim’s, landing somewhere, he wasn’t sure where. Didn’t matter, as long as he was touching. Just not being alone. Dan lay still for a very long time, he looked as if he had fallen asleep amidst the quietened down beeping and the faint hiss of the oxygen.

He took a sudden, deeper breath before he finally opened his eyes again, after almost half an hour. Again he looked intently, as if he had to convince himself that Vadim was really there. “I was frightened.” Quiet voice, hardly more than a whisper. Helped to preserve what little strength he had. “Not death...but dying. Alone. Not knowing.”

Didn't know how much sense he was making, but everything was a jumble with only a few clear thoughts in his mind, anyway. "Don't leave me." I need you. I love you. And all that other fucking shit that I used to laugh about, a lifetime ago. "Don't...leave me. Can't bear..."

Vadim kept that hand in both of his, held it, would have killed to have Dan rest at his side, relaxing, at ease again. "I'm not leaving, Dan. I'm here." Wanted to deny the thought, wanted to deny thinking why go back at all? Why not simply stay here, forever? Let Afghanistan spin into chaos alone. It was a retreat anyway, unless the party had been joking. The war effort was being disassembled, things would end soon, a defeat, the end of a duty. He didn't have to help with that. He could just stay here. But it was a childish thought. He couldn't just desert. What kind of life would he run to? That of a traitor, a deserter, a coward, a selfish, wine-spined faggot. "I have some time." And then I have to go back, help with the retreat, and I have no idea where my career will take me after that. Make Colonel in a different hellhole.

"No," Dan was desperate, "not just...some time. All these...years always...some time." He took in a deeper breath but winced, it hurt to breathe because of the slashes across his abdomen, as if an alien monster had sharpened its claws on his body. "Please..."

Need to be with you.

Dark eyes pleading, too large, too big and too fucking desperate. But Dan knew deep down that it was impossible, yet but couldn't bear to accept reality. Not now. Too weak and too familiar with death. "I need you." He could not fall any further down. Rock bottom. And at the very bottom was just this one thing. The core of it all. "Fucking...love you...too much."

Vadim felt the tears again, this time no exhaustion to justify it. Pressed that hand, then, appalled at the potential to hurt Dan further, loosened the grip. "Yes...I know. Fuck, I know." He leaned in to kiss the hand, blinked the tears off, wiped his face on his arm. "I'll be with you. I promise." Almost broke into tears again, like a fucking stupid bitch. "I'll find way to get out." Who knows, it might even work. We've been through everything bad.

There might just be something good in the end. If the universe was fair. If pigs could fly. "I'd walk through minefield." He looked up. "I promise. I'll get out, somehow."

“OK.” Dan smiled. So simple. Straightforward. Naïve in his acceptance of a promise against all odds. Childlike, because he had no strength left to be the hard-arsed man and the tough killer. Right now he was nothing but a physically hurt man who had been through hell and back, clinging to this promise. “We be...together. More than just...few...hours. Wanna die...with you. Not...alone.” Tiredness threatening to drag him under again. Fought to stay awake, needed to spend every second with Vadim while he could.

Vadim kissed that hand again, looked up. “We won’t die. We’ll never die. I promise.” He’d promise anything, meant it, would die defending this man, would live and die and suffer for him. “Never alone again. Rest. I’ll be here.” He tried a smile, took Dan’s hand and ran it over his face. “We fucking deserve more than what we got so far. We’ll take it. Just get ourselves something...more.” Vadim had no idea what that *more* was, apart from being together, had no idea what life could be like outside the Soviet Union. Because he would have to leave. Traitor, turncoat, homeless scum.

“Aye...,” Dan’s eyes were closing, even though he didn’t want to fall asleep, but the exhaustion was dragging him under, “we get more.” He was asleep the very next moment.

The nurses let Vadim sit where he was, left him in peace except for refreshing Dan’s bottle, taking the puree away and telling the visitor they were going to replace it once the patient woke.

They brought food for Vadim, allowed him to eat it outside, on the bench, right in front of the glass window, and asked him to leave only when it was time to clean the patient and remove the waste, reattach Dan to nutrient solutions then redress the wounds. They left the two men alone otherwise, checking the readouts on the machines, seemingly satisfied.

Dan woke again after a few hours, ate a few spoonfuls as before, could only stomach a little, but drank some water. Did his best to swallow down a thick nutritional liquid, claimed it tasted of pureed chocolate bars. He could only ever talk a little before his strength ran out and he had to fight to stay awake.

Then he slept again. Deeper each time. More restful. Gaining strength with every hour.

The medical staff asked Vadim to rest in the provided room, where food was waiting and fresh clothing, his own rags washed and neatly folded. Two days

and nights passed as before, and Dan was able to eat a little more every time, stay awake longer, and increase in strength.

On the third day, Dan's left hand was left unbandaged except for thin gauze, allowing the marvel of modern medicine and finely skilled metal work to heal with air getting to the wound. The hand rested across his lap, and Dan tried to wiggle the fingers a tiny bit. He was about to make a feeble joke when a nurse came in, carrying a phone, trailing the cable behind her. Smiling, she announced an important call for the patient.

"Yes?" Dan's voice had become less croaky during the last days.

"Hello Dan." The female voice with its perfectly precise diction was familiar. "I am glad you are improving." Dan thought he heard a smile.

"Ma'am?" He turned his head towards the receiver.

"Yes, Dan, it's me. Please don't talk too much, it is imperative you preserve your strength." She paused, "this is also why I have not called before, but I was kept updated every day, if not every hour. I am sorry that...", she faltered, unlike herself, "...I could not come and visit. My duties kept me here, as you must know."

"I know...Ma'am. Thank you..."

"Sssshhh..." She almost sounded like a mother, hushing her child. "Don't talk, and don't thank me. What would you thank me for?" She did not mean for him to answer, but he quietly interrupted anyway.

"Hospital...must be...fortune."

"No." Her answer was firm, more like her usual self. "Don't ever thank me for this. You saved my life, Dan, I shall be forever in your debt, so don't argue."

Vadim saw Dan smile, his eyes closed once more, and heard him answer.

"Just did...my duty." Before trailing off and listening, not given another chance to talk.

"Yes," she replied, "your duty and more. Since you have done your duty above and beyond the call of it, I wanted to make sure you recuperate well. You will be flown back to the embassy in Kabul once you can be transported. I want to personally oversee your care. Is that understood, Dan?"

"Yes, Ma'am," was all he had left to say. Tired, but with a sudden surge of energy. Hoping. Kabul. Afghanistan, and this meant Vadim. He'd be close, not in another country that could never be his home again.

“Good, and now rest, get better, and hand that phone over to the man who, I believe, is sitting next to you right now.”

Dan’s shock was evident. “Ma’am?” Eyes suddenly open, he did what he had been told, moving his hand a little, indicating to Vadim to take the receiver.

Vadim frowned, questioning. This meant the woman ambassador, Dan’s boss. He had lied to her, yes, well, whatever, and she had made it possible. He didn’t doubt it. At least now he knew what the correct address was. “Ma’am?” Mimicking the way Dan had said it, still holding Dan’s hand.

“Major Krasnorada,” she paused a mere half-heartbeat, “if I am correct?”

Vadim inhaled sharply. No use denying, he had known it from the moment they had had a good look at his face. “I’m afraid I used dead man’s name, yes, Ma’am.”

“Understandably so, Major.” She used his full rank and title, deliberately. “I am not one for small-talk, let us come straight to the point. You are a member of the Soviet Forces, and you managed to cross Pakistan into India. Two countries which are known for their anti-Soviet stance.” She paused, but not long enough for him to get a word in. “You have lied, most probably to every faction involved, and risked your life in the process. Which is, I would assume, still very much on the line. While I am suitably impressed by the whole course of action, I do wonder, obviously, what the reasons are.” Another minute pause, “are they of a personal nature, Major Krasnorada?”

“I don’t care for politics. I don’t wear uniform at the moment, that means I’m not soldier.” *I wish.* That thin blade of steel that had separated his private life from soldiering, Dan from soldiering, Dan from his family, it looked like it could be pushed away. He didn’t want to think it. But knew he was deluding himself. Delusion as the antidote to madness. “Excuse me. That was...premature.” He glanced at Dan. “The reasons are of personal nature. As personal as they come. I didn’t lie to you. I didn’t tell you all of it, but I didn’t lie.”

Dan, dog-tired, was watching and listening, but he could not make out anything above the sound of the machines except for Vadim’s replies.

She was speaking again. “Personal, I understand, but while you are not wearing a uniform at this moment, Major, you were and you will be. Unless you are a deserter or a traitor. Are you, Major Krasnorada?”

Am I? All I did was steal two weeks from an army that is already retreating. I didn't take Dan prisoner, I didn't force him to give me the letters, I didn't stop a foreign merc interfering in Soviet internal business. Is that treason? Deserter? Away without leave. Well, technically, he had leave. Not officially, but his commanding officer knew. A lie, but...did it really make so much of a difference? "I believe that is matter of interpretation."

Oh, that's the easy way out, Vadim. Fall back on philosophy.

"No, Major, it is not. Not during our little telephone conversation. In a court room perhaps, but not between us. Trust me, there is not much I do not have access to, even to some information of a more sensitive nature, far locked away behind an Iron Curtain." Cool, without inflection in that perfect voice of hers. "Rest assured, nothing was flagged by my search. A search that, I presume, you can sympathise with. I could not allow you to possibly harm Dan McFadyen, you will understand. Dan, a man to whom both of us seem to owe a lot."

Chastised. But loyalty was such a complicated thing. Much more complicated than Vadim could think through at the moment. "Yes, Ma'am, I stand corrected." She had to know he was Interior Ministry, a double agent might even have given her access.

"I assume you wish to leave it like this, Major—a track record without tracks." The line went quiet for a moment. "I am willing to help you with this and ensure you cross safely back into Afghanistan. For Dan's sake."

And I wish I could just drop it, leave everything behind. Wish I could screw them all, comrades, army, motherland, Katya, my children. My father. My country. My people. Wish I could run away and disgrace everything I've believed in for almost forty years. "If you could...make transport available, that would be great help." He looked at Dan, held his hand firmly. Barely believing his luck, could not wish for more than making the way back easier.

Small mercies? Hardly small.

"Yes." Her answer. "There will be transportation, in two days, at 0500 hrs. The journey will be in stages, papers will be provided. You will receive instructions on the day." When she spoke again there was something in her voice which made her sound a little more human. "I was told Dan is making rapid progress now. Something that had been lacking for the past weeks, during which I

had been very worried. I can only assume this is down to your presence.” She paused, “Thank you, Major.” The line went dead.

Vadim lowered the phone. Two days. Two days more to spend with Dan, holding his hand, feeding him—and finding a way to explain he had to leave again without plunging him back into darkness. “A...remarkable person.” He looked at Dan, after returning the phone to the nurse. “Dan. About...what I promised.”

“You are leaving.” Dan’s quiet words cut in between.

This would be hard now. So hard, but she had forced his hand while Dan watched. “I’ll...leave my country. Leave army. But it’s complicated. I can’t stay right now. I am...not just soldier. We don’t just hand in our resignation. I can’t just run away, without...putting people into danger. I still have...family in Moscow. If I leave, they will bring down boot. I know it, I’ve seen it happen before. If they can’t touch me, they will destroy everyone that is less lucky than I am.”

Dan nodded. Said nothing. His eyes, still too large and too dark just rested on Vadim.

It hurt. Katya? Tough as she was. She was the wife, she would be made to suffer. Anoushka and Nikolai? Nothing worse than being the spawn of a traitor. Not only dishonoured—forever stigmatised. There were ways to make their lives hell. “I need to get them out of their reach first. I’ll make sure they are out. I owe them that much. Just...even scores, find...way that they won’t touch my family. A little more patience. I’ll return. I’ll stay. I want to...to try and live with you, stay with you. Start over again, without all that...that bullshit. You and me and nothing else. Dan?”

“I know. I...am sorry.” Dan was backtracking. Back-peddalling. Back...taking everything back. The begging, the fear, the unrealistic hopes and wishes and the stupidity of weakness. A vague memory of who he’d been and who he would be again, if only he were further away from death and decay. “Too tired.” He tried to smile.

“No. Oh fuck.” Vadim took that hand again, kissed it, rubbed his face against it, wanted to stay, cursed the moment he’d seen Katya, cursed the night he’d spent with her, the first one, cursed how he had tried to hide, used her to hide, how he had made a career. Be careful what you wish for. He had wanted a career.

“Maggie will...help.” Dan murmured, “True to her word. Always.” Dan refused to acknowledge everything of what Vadim had said. Couldn’t deal with the full magnitude of it all.

“She holds you dear. She would have protected you like lioness. Well, she did.” Vadim looked around in the room, but didn’t see any obvious cameras. “We have more time. You...heal up, and we meet in Kabul. There, we’ll work out how I can leave. What we do after that. Give it few months.”

“Sure.” Dan’s hand attempted another pathetic squeeze. His fingers unlike they had ever been. Clean, soft, most of the calluses gone. No cuts nor bruises.

“A few...months.” Dan didn’t believe it, but he tried, wanted so much. “I have to get...back into shape. Takes...a while. Got to...learn eating...food...first.” He was flagging, but he wouldn’t let go of Vadim’s hand. Despite his words he was still holding onto his promise with the same desperation as before.

Vadim looked at him sceptically, glanced at the door, then leaned in to kiss him. The chaste kind of kiss that was reassuring, did not mean to create any heat or desire, of course not. “Yes. You can do rest of healing alone. You don’t need me for that.” He tried a smile, then glanced again at the door, which opened. Nurse with puree. “Now. Let’s get some food into you.”

Dan’s eyes were closed, couldn’t get himself to open them. Too much effort, but he smiled at the kiss. Sulked, though, like a kid, when the puree arrived. “Do I...have to?”

Yet he did. Ate as much as he could, but after a while, the spoon still between his lips, he had fallen asleep. Just like that. *Lapushka*, indeed. Asleep in the middle of eating, like a kitten dropping into a bowl of food.

* * *

Dan was flown back into Kabul by private plane three weeks later, to receive physiotherapy back at the embassy. His room had been fitted out to support the process, and he’d been allocated his very own goddamned nurse. He would have laughed at the notion, if the laughter hadn’t caused agony.

When he returned, he was subdued, spoke little, slept most of the time, thankful to his employer for the care and most of all, for giving him space and quiet. He had dodged the grim reaper one time too many. This time it had gone too

far and he was still grappling with the bony fingers, disentangling himself from the hooded cape.

At least he didn't have to worry about Vadim, knowing he'd returned to his unit with the Baroness' secret help.

Sitting and lying in the embassy, using a wheelchair when the nurse—*his* nurse—caught him trying to do too much too soon. When she allowed it, or he could sneak away, he made very slow rounds in the garden while supporting himself on walls and greenery, refusing to use a crutch unless he absolutely had to.

Dan healed slowly, laboriously. It was the most difficult task he'd ever undertaken. The torn and cut stomach muscles leaving the core of his centre weak and racked with pain every time he tried so much as move, speak, let alone cough. Still, he was working hard on his physio. Hand flexing, muscles building back up, joints re-aligning.

Two weeks later and he could bear it no longer. He had to see Vadim, or he was going to go as mad as a tiger in a golden cage. Determined to talk to the Baroness, he was working all day on what he was going to say, which excuse to use.

When she finally had time for him in the early evening, he was taken to the garden, where she sat in the shade, glasses filled with freshly pressed juice waiting. Looking at her, he forgot all his clever ideas and all his pondering, and went barging straight ahead.

“Ma'am?” his voice still hadn't returned to its former self. “I would like to ask you for a favour.”

She sat opposite to him in the white metal garden chair. “What do you want, Dan?”

“I have to get out of here, or I will go insane.”

Her brows rose. “I beg your pardon?”

“Please, Ma'am.” He didn't know how to start nor end it and least of all the bit in the middle. Still far too exhausted to try and rose-tint any of his words. “I need a safe house. Something—anything—where I can meet...someone. Please.” He couldn't even ask for the house he'd been renting. It wouldn't do for her to know where it was.

“I don't understand.” Her face neutral. Were the words a decoy, or the plain truth? “Who would you want to wish to meet who cannot come here?”

Dan shook his head, wincing at the movement. “Ma’am...” he paused, desperately searching for words that were neither lies nor truth. “Ma’am, someone...you have met. I need...need to see...” he finally took a breath, as deep as he could without reeling in pain, “need to see the Soviet officer. You know him, you spoke to him and helped him.”

She was looking at him in silence. Both hands folded in her lap, the scrutiny of her intelligent eyes on him until he felt uncomfortable under her gaze. She knew, surely, she had to? But why didn’t she ask? He’d tell her, anything, he had no secrets, not right now. Too tired.

“Agreed.” Just that, one word, and she nodded without further questions. Dan didn’t know if he should be thankful. He felt strangely anxious about her lack of reaction. It had been too quick, too good to be true. Why didn’t she ask him any questions?

“I will have this arranged for you, but how do you propose to communicate the location of the place to the person in question?”

All those big words, they sometimes hurt his brain, especially right now, when he was still tiring easily. Feeling like a very old man, parked somewhere on the sidelines, because Death had forgotten to pick him up.

“There’s a tea house, in the centre of the city.” It all seemed too easy, yet he refused to believe she had a hidden agenda. “Someone could leave a coded message with the address?”

She nodded, “Yes, this can be arranged. I will see to it.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

She smiled at last. “It’s the least I can do.”

“You don’t owe me anything.” He looked up when she stood.

“I know.” Smoothing her skirt down, pastel twin set and understated pearls, as perfect as ever. “But I do, anyway.” She took a step closer, resting a hand on his shoulder. It felt small, he thought, and warm, and so much unlike Vadim’s. “I consider you a friend, Dan. And that is more than I consider anyone else.”

With that she left, leaving him stunned, staring after her.

* * *

Dan had been taken in one of the large cars to an address in Kabul that was sufficiently far away from the place he was renting, and adequately secure for Vadim, who, hopefully had received the note that had been left in the tea house.

Left alone by the driver, Dan felt safe in the ground floor rooms. Definitely more up-market than what they'd been used to until he'd rented the place near the Soviet HQ. He sat in a comfortable chair that had been brought as well, letting his eyes wander over a table and a place to recline. Not quite a bed, but restful enough. A bag on the table, containing some snacks, which made Dan smile. Touched at being taken care of, and ever so slightly embarrassed as well. It reminded him of the packed lunches his mum had prepared for school, a lifetime ago.

Dressed in comfortable clothes, he had refused the blanket the driver had tried to place over him, complaining he wasn't a pensioner yet and it was too warm anyway. Sitting and snoozing, once more succumbing to the lingering tiredness, Dan waited.

* * *

With matters in the south taken care of, and Alexei, the local commander, pleased that he'd saved Vadim's reputation, freedom, if not his life, Vadim had pulled strings to return to Kabul, right after his miraculous recovery from heroin addiction.

The nagging worry was there that Dan hadn't made it. That there had been an about-turn in his healing process and he had quietly, painfully died. The one thing he convinced himself of, though, was that he hoped the embassy would release information about it if Dan actually had died. Some of his time was spent trawling through information. The Brits were shrewd, but he hoped the metal-haired woman might be compassionate enough to let him know.

The message in the tea house was irresistible. They might have decided to take him prisoner, they might, might, might, but it could also be genuine, and he followed the directions, leading him to a crowded street with lots of parked cars. He didn't like it. It seemed too easy to hide a sniper or a team to capture him, but he still followed the bait. A local servant greeted him, and seemed to know what he wanted. Led him to a room, bowed, and left.

Once inside, Vadim saw Dan, slumped on a chair, asleep, but so much better than he had been. He quickly closed the door and stepped towards him. “Dan?” Moving closer, touching him on the shoulder.

“Huh?” Dan snapped awake, old instincts hadn’t died, but the sudden movement pulled on tender muscles. He winced, quickly recovering when he saw the face in front of him. “Vadim.” He smiled, cleared his throat and rubbed his eyes, trying to wake up. “Sorry I...must have fallen asleep again. Still happens a lot.” His right hand touched Vadim’s shoulder, while the left lay in his lap. No bandage anymore, just healed flesh and bones, covered with tender, scarred skin.

Vadim reached over to pull up a chair, sat opposite, knees brushing. Leaning forward, he took Dan’s wounded hand and touched it, carefully, the fingers and thumb, and the line down to the wrist. “Of course. You’re still...ah...fucked.” He gave a smile.

Dan grinned tiredly, moved the hand, the fingers, still awkward but showing off how well he was doing already. “I got dropped off earlier. Been waiting.” He kept his eyes on Vadim, every single second, could not bear to miss even a blink.

“Sorry. How have you been?”

“Been OK, cabin fever, but they won’t let me do much yet.” Following the line of Vadim’s smoothly shaved jaw with his good hand, Dan’s fingertips lingered on his lips. “I got my own nurse. Cool, eh?”

“Is she pretty?” Vadim felt a tightness in his throat, just thinking about how close it had been. Just seeing the scars, seeing what the injury had made Dan into, even if he got better.

“I don’t know,” Dan shrugged, grinned a little, “she’s not male, but I guess she isn’t too bad. The other guys keep whistling at her.” He leaned closer, wanted to kiss Vadim, but bending forward was still impossible.

Vadim had lost his appetite for war, and just couldn’t imagine it could come back. “I’ve had time to think,” he murmured. “Are you alright to talk...about a few things?”

Dan’s eyes took on an alarmed look. “What things?” Don’t leave me, you promised you’d stay with me and you’d find a way. “About how you got out of India? The Baroness told me she helped you.”

Vadim nodded, wincing almost when he saw Dan had trouble moving. Maybe talk some other time, but he'd started, and Dan seemed to fear the worst. "Yes, that too. She organized transport. Please convey my gratitude to her. I think your...access to her is likely more informal than mine." Chartered plane, jeeps, bribed patrols, over the mountains, back into the hell hole, but all had gone like clockwork.

"No, something else." Vadim touched Dan's hand on his jaw. "If you still want me to stay with you...more than what we had, I mean. You know, stay together all the time." Odd, to gamble his very existence on an emotion. "I'm willing to run away. Leave the army, and my country. This here is almost over, I don't want another one of these, and I...you mean too much to me. I'd like to try and spend, you know. More time with you. Just you."

Dan said nothing. Overwhelmed and silenced, staring at Vadim, wide-eyed and speechless.

"That's a yes, then." Vadim ran his hand over his hair, oddly self-conscious. "I hope." Quirking a smile.

"Aye," Dan found his ability to speak at last, "I mean, yes. Holy fuck, yes!" His hand trembled, cursing his physical weakness, the way he got floored by nothing but words, yet words he'd never hoped to hear—not even when he had begged Vadim to stay.

"There's one thing I need to do, and that is get Katya and my children out of it. Next time I fly home, I'll make sure she'll be alright, and when I come back, I'll desert. I could use some help with leaving the country, and finding a place to live. I don't know much, but..." He paused. "Maybe your government needs to verify some information. It's not much, but maybe it's enough."

"Of course," Dan nodded, his good hand clutching at Vadim's arm, "I'll talk to Maggie, I'm sure she'll help, it must be good to get Spetsnaz on your side, and what I hear from your home country, they are fucking themselves sideways, royally."

"I'm not important...and I don't know much, make no mistake." Vadim smiled, felt warm from Dan's eagerness and faith. Inhaling deeply, then he leaned down to kiss Dan's scarred hand. "Good. Because I love you, Dan, more than I can tell you, and I want to make things good for once." He stood, keeping Dan's hand in his, and leaned in to brush Dan's lips with his. "And you spend all nights with

me, anyway. I can feel you, inside and outside, in my mind, all the time. I want to spend days with you, too. No escape. We must be together.”

Dan smiled, felt those damned tears prick at the back of his eyes, wondered when he'd become a cry-baby. “You're with me, too.” Dan murmured against Vadim's lips. “In my thoughts, my heart, my mind, no matter what I am doing. I goddamned need you, and I want you—always.” Together, his mind could hardly grasp the concept. After eight years, through hell and purgatory, to find themselves in this; this love. His lips parted, eager to kiss deeply, while his hand pulled Vadim closer. “I want you,” he whispered between kisses, “it's been so damn long.”

Vadim kissed right back, running his hand through Dan's hair, less long and tousled than it had been, but still longer than his own. “Yes, me too.” He kissed Dan's face, the side of his throat, relishing his warmth. “But you're not up to it. Heal up first.”

“But I could.” Dan insisted, while tipping his head back and allowing access to his throat. “I don't need to do much, can just suck you.” His hand ran down Vadim's side, resting on the hip, fingers digging into the fabric.

His body had different ideas, of course, but just the thought of being rough to Dan in this state was bad. One thing to want, another to want a man who was clearly not up for it. “Keep that thought for another time, yes?”

Dan frowned, he knew Vadim was right but refused to accept it. “How long have you got?” The one question always on the forefront of his mind. Vadim, leaving, being with him, hope. The unbelievable reality of hope. He still couldn't grasp it.

“A couple hours. There's some kind of demonstration going on, no idea, but I should return to barracks in three hours.”

“That's not much. It's not enough.” Demanding, like he'd done, in the hospital. Dan immediately caught himself. “Fuck, I'm sorry.” His hand moved away from Vadim's hip, trailing back up to caress the temple, jaw, and face. “Don't mind me, I'll eventually get back to being normal, and not a whining bimbo.”

“I didn't have much time to prepare. The message came unexpected. Next time, I'll have more time. Promise.” Vadim glanced towards the recliner. “You could stretch out.” And I hold you. He offered both hands to Dan. “Let's get over there.”

“OK, that’s better.” Dan couldn’t quite suppress the wince when he was pulled up, those goddamned muscles took a hell of a long time to heal. Leaning against Vadim’s chest, not because he had to, but because he could, he tilted his head, kissing once more, with all the pent-up tenderness, love and need that he’d been harbouring since he returned to consciousness.

Vadim closed his eyes, falling into the kissing, hands coming up to Dan’s upper arms, closed around them. Wanting, with a gentle, heartfelt warmth that was sweetly painful.

“Just help me down, aye? The stomach’s still a bitch.” Dan murmured.

“Yes.” Vadim moved towards the bed, supporting Dan shuffling over, and slipped his hands under Dan’s shoulders, taking over some of his weight, gently lowering him down. Vadim then knelt down and lifted Dan’s legs up on the bed, watching him for signs of discomfort.

Dan yelped when his grin spilled over into a laugh. “Oh shit,” pressing a hand onto his stomach when he lay stretched out on his back. “I’m a far cry from the roughie toughie SAS soldier that you used to know, aye?” Grinning up into pale eyes, while working on the buttons of his shirt.

Vadim shook his head. “Also far call from man I saw in Kashmir.” He glanced at Dan’s fingers. “What are you doing? Planning to show off your scars to me?”

“Nope, planning to get some skin on skin.” Dan poked a finger into Vadim’s chest to get him to take his tunic off. “Besides, I’ve still got a bandage on, they strap me up every day, with some heavy elastic crap. Has to do with the muscles, stomach walls, intestines and goodness what.” He shrugged one-sided, managing to fiddle the buttons open and pulled the shirt apart. “See?”

“Yes. Like mummy.” Vadim leaned in to kiss Dan’s chest, finger tips carefully tracing the bandages, but nowhere near the stomach, just the side, then stood to take off his belt and vest and shirt, forming a ball with it and tugging it under Dan’s head, who grinned once more, embarrassed at the care. Vadim thought of giving a blowjob, maybe, but having seen Dan wince from even light and gentle motions, that would be too painful. “Stay there. I’ll just climb over you.”

He crawled on the mattress, lay finally on this side, back to the wall, elbow supporting his head.

“It’s not that I can go anywhere, is it?” Dan’s head turned, his healing hand tracing careful lines up Vadim’s arm, across the shoulder, back down along the smooth chest.

Vadim smiled. “No. You can’t run.”

“But I’m working on it, the nurse has a physio plan and I’m bloody determined to get fit as soon as I can. The gym in the embassy is first class.” He slowly straightened his fingers, stroking, before curling them along the roundness of Vadim’s pec, pleased with the way the hand functioned by now.

“Try isometrics. That’s what I do when I don’t have weights.” Vadim inched just a little closer. “And once you’re back to normal…” He shook his head, not wanting to get Dan horny and helplessly wanting. “We’ll make the most of it.” He shifted again, offering his shoulder for Dan to rest on, and holding him silently, until the time was up again.

* * *

Shortly after Dan returned to the embassy, a request came from the Baroness to come and talk to her, if he felt able.

Dan told her aide to let her Excellency know he’d come to her private office after physiotherapy. He knew what she would ask him, had known since the moment she’d accepted his request without so much as a question. He wasn’t sure if he should feel sick with anxiety or relieved that he could finally tell someone the truth.

She didn’t merely call him in when he knocked, she herself opened the door, offering her arm to lead him inside, which Dan refused with a smile and a shake of his head. “Not an invalid anymore, Ma’am.”

She waited until he had settled down in one of the comfortable leather chairs that stood around a small table, which held two glasses and a cut-crystal carafe with brandy.

“Dan, I need to ask you a question.” Pouring two measures of exquisite liquor, she handed one of the glasses to him. “If hope you understand.” Almost apologetic, Dan thought, and nodded, taking a sip.

“Before you ask, Ma’am, I’d like to thank you for making this afternoon possible. It meant a lot to me.”

Her brows raised a mere fraction as she settled back with the glass in her hand. “You are most welcome. In fact, this takes me straight to my question.”

The tumbler moved slowly in her hand, warming the brandy. “I have to ask you from a professional point of view, but I’d like to apologise for the personal nature of the questions.”

Dan idly wondered if this was more difficult for her than for him. He’d expected this since his request. He knew who and what he was, and his conscience was clear. Nothing but a professional—for eight bloody years.

“Who was the person you met today, Dan?”

“Ma’am, I think you know.”

“Do I?”

Dan smiled, as difficult as he thought it would be to tell the very first person about Vadim and himself, it was surprisingly easy now that it happened. It was a relief, in fact. If he’d trust anyone at all, it was the Baroness. “Aye, Ma’am.” He took another sip of the brandy. “I met the same person you have helped before. Major Vadim Krasnorada. The man who went to India, who visited me in the hospital, and the man you smuggled back into Afghanistan.”

Dan wondered if he saw relief on her face.

“I hate to do this, Dan, but I have to ask...” She could not finish her sentence, because he was holding up his hand.

“Please, Ma’am, don’t apologise. I understand, I really do, and I’m surprised you haven’t asked earlier. I must admit I expected you to want to know what was going on when Vadim came to the hospital.”

She set the glass down onto the table, folding her hands in her lap. “You were too weak. The potential to upset you was too great.”

“But surely you have made enquiries?”

“Of course. I am perfectly aware of who Major Krasnorada is.”

“Just not *what* he is, am I right, Ma’am?”

She looked at him, with an expression so neutral, if he didn’t know better he’d think she was incapable of emotions. “Not quite, no.”

Dan couldn’t help it, he had to chuckle at her choice of words and the stricken expression despite the earlier poker face. He winced and pressed a hand onto his stomach, suddenly finding her own hand on his knee, as if she tried to hush and stabilise him. It was ridiculous how taken care of he sometimes felt, and

how good it was. "I'm alright." He murmured, before emptying the glass with its last mouthful of brandy.

"I shouldn't laugh, Ma'am, but, you see, I have been dreading the moment of truth, when for the first time ever I was going to tell someone who and most importantly *what* I am. And now that it happens, it's a piece of cake. It seems you feel a lot more uncomfortable than I do." He knew he'd hit the nail on the head when an unguarded emotion ghosted across her face. "I am gay, Ma'm."

He looked at her, but no reaction came forth. She'd either suspected, or she didn't care, or she'd been simply made of steel. Dan suspected the latter. "I understand about honey traps, spies, traitors, attempts at using homosexuals for blackmailing purposes. And, of course, I know all about the great big hush-hush of this dirty little secret. It's not dirty, though, and it's definitely not little, but aye, it had to be secret." He paused once more, the fingers of his right hand caressing the thin crystal of the empty glass.

"I met Vadim in 1980 under circumstances that I cannot repeat." The sanitised version the only truth he'd allow to be known. "We were hell-bent on destruction at first. But it changed, Ma'am, it all changed completely over the years." He trailed off.

She reached for the decanter, refilling Dan's glass while studying him. "What is he to you?" Quietly, as if requiring confirmation for something she already knew.

"It's really rather simple." Dan took the refilled glass, "I love Vadim."

She glanced down at the hand in her lap and when she looked up, she was smiling. "I believe I don't need to ask what you are to him. Crossing enemy territory to turn up at a hospital seems to me to be proof in itself."

Dan nodded, saying nothing.

"I must ask you this, however," she continued, once again glancing at her hand. "In all those years of secrets, have you..." decidedly uncomfortable, and Dan knew what she was going to ask. "Have you ever jeopardised your professional integrity?"

"No, Ma'am." Dan answered firmly, "not a single time. Unless you'd classify bringing back the occasional items such as bandages, medicine, food or whisky as treason."

“No, of course not.” The fingers of her finely manicured right hand were resting on top of her left, touching the prominent ring. A gesture Dan had seen her do many times before, never giving a second thought. “I must admit, though, I am amazed that you have been able to keep this secret.”

“I was SAS.” Dan flashed a quick grin, “those who dare, win.” Taking a mouthful of his brandy.

She chuckled quietly and leant back in the leather chair. Rearranging her legs, then smoothing down skirt, twin set jacket and finally the spectacles that hung on a golden chain around her neck. Dan got the impression she was hiding something.

“How do you envisage your future, though.” She finally asked. “I assume you *are* thinking of a future for Major Krasnorada and yourself?”

Dan looked to the side, this time it was he who needed a moment to think. She was handing everything on a platter to him, and he hoped he was choosing his words right. “He is trying to get out. Desertion, or defection, I guess you could call it. He has to make sure his family is safe, though.” Dan took in a breath, shallow and slow. “Ma’am...would you be willing to help him?” He saw her brows raise a fraction, knowing this expression too well. “You would be helping *me*, if you helped him.”

She was once more looking at her hands, taking her time for consideration. “I don’t know Major Krasnorada, but I trust your judgment. Besides, I consider you a friend, Dan, and I am willing to help in any way I can, but do remember that these decisions are not up to me...”

“Thank you.” Dan smiled, relieved, remembering to exhale. He hadn’t realised how tense he’d been. He relaxed back against the smooth coolness of the leather and emptied his brandy before tilting his head. “May I ask you something in return?”

She seemed surprised but nodded.

Dan hesitated, figured this was awfully private, but the worst she could do was refuse to answer. “I have often wondered, Ma’am, and please tell me if this question is far too personal, but I have often wondered why you aren’t married.” He added before she had a chance to answer, “You’re a fascinating lady, educated and elegant. The suitors must have been knocking down your doors.”

She let out a small laugh at his last words. “Not quite. The doors are still intact.”

Dan grinned, and waited.

“Perhaps I ought to tell you.” She continued with a smile. “Yes, perhaps I ought.” Nodding, more to herself than him. “I was engaged, a long time ago, at twenty-two. He was a wonderful young man, two years older, and awfully exciting. You see, I met him while walking in the Alps, and to me he was unbelievably dashing.” She continued after sipping on her brandy, “my family had always been very keen on the mountains and we spent most of our holidays there. Walking, hiking, skiing, you name it, they have done it.”

Dan had a hard time imagining the sophisticated lady racing down the slopes, but then again he had a hard time imagining her any younger than fifty.

“Patrick was an accomplished mountaineer. He had conquered many peaks despite his young age, and considered himself to be something of an expert.” She twisted the glass in her hand, studying it for a moment before looking up with a wistful smile. “I guess his interest was something us ‘damned aristocrats’ do, while idling away our time. Something fanciful and useless, like climbing mountains.”

Dan was taken aback at her use of a swear word, but she had drawn out the vowels and twisted the consonants, he knew she was mocking. He grinned.

“Do you have any idea yet where the story is heading, Dan?” She asked, then emptied her brandy. The glass remained in her hand.

“I fear it won’t have a happy ending.”

“Too true, I’m afraid.” She smiled with a hint of melancholy. “The week before our marriage, Patrick wanted to climb one of the more challenging peaks in the Swiss Alps. It was a sort of a ‘stag do’, a last task to fulfil before entering the responsibility of marriage.” She let out a small laugh, “not that either of us were particularly responsible at that age.”

Dan’s eyes widened a fraction, it was near impossible to imagine she had ever been anything but devoted to duty. As devoted as the Queen herself. “He was lost in the mountain.” The Baroness suddenly continued. “A treacherous pass, black ice, and he slipped. His friends would have been able to save him, the rope was intact, but Patrick slipped into a crevice and hit his head on a sharp outcrop of ice and rocks. He cracked his skull. They believed he died instantly.” She trailed off, looking at her hand, and it was only now that Dan finally realised the meaning

of the ring on her finger. It had to be an engagement ring, the pearl encrusted gold and emerald glistening in the dull light.

“I’m sorry.” He murmured, glancing at her, but she only nodded, before placing the empty glass onto the table with a gentle thud.

“He was buried at the foot of the mountain. The villagers take good care of the mountaineers’ graves. I went there a couple of times and each time it looked meticulous.” She trailed off, but added after a moment, “when you talk about the mountains, I always wonder if it was the same for Patrick, if he felt a similar love.”

Dan tilted his head, studying her. “Is that why you never married?” Quietly.

“I never had the time from then on.” She looked up. “After Patrick’s death I threw myself into this career. Suddenly the idea of going into the diplomatic service took on an entirely new dimension and its momentum kept me from thinking and grieving. I had to live, and I did. I learned, I worked, I used my connections, and I rose swiftly through the ranks.” She shrugged, a measured and elegant movement of her shoulders, before leaning back again. “Here I am now, Her Majesty’s Ambassador, in a forsaken place, talking to an ex-soldier who saved my life.” Her lips quirked into a grin, rarely seen and the more appreciated for it. “Is there hope for me, do you think?”

Dan grinned and winked, suddenly able to imagine her, at twenty-two, with a twinkle in her eyes and the laughter of a carefree youngster. “Maybe, Ma’am, but I fear that includes brandy,” pointing at the carafe, “and a game or two of cards.”

* * *

“Oh my, you’re so handsome,” said Katya. She’d done her hair up, stood in the doorway like he was about to pick her up for the opera, and the smell of a meat stew filled the corridor.

Vadim let her take his coat, took the hat and hung it up, as Katya’s mother, her aunt, and some assorted children came from the kitchen into the living room. Hugs and kisses, and then a quick update from the family, while Katya served up her famous stew. Vadim ate and nodded, listening to all the things that mattered to civilians. Who had married whom in the meantime, who had had a promotion. It was customary that they didn’t ask him about Afghanistan or his career, skirting

around the issue. Instead they asked him whether he'd got enough to eat, and whether he was healthy, and whether he had heard a certain piece of news.

His flat was a friendly place, with lots of people who cared. He glanced over his shoulder when the door opened again. Anoushka. Nikolai. Both went to the same school. Suddenly he had two hands full of blonde girl clinging to him, calling him daddy daddy. He closed his eyes briefly, held the small body that seemed warmer than that of an adult, and stroked her head, while Nikolai looked at him with wide eyes, reluctant to come closer, clutching his schoolbag instead. The shy one, less straight-forward than his biological father.

I'm taking good care of him, Sasha, as best as I can. As much as I can possibly, with what I am, and what I'm doing.

Katya headed over and touched her son's shoulder. "Say hello to your father," she said. Nikolai still seemed reluctant. "He has been missing you so much." The voice carried just a hint of sharpness.

Nikolai walked stiffly towards Vadim. "Hi dad. How are you?"

"I'm very well indeed, thank you." Vadim released Anoushka, who gave him her almighty pout in exchange, and reached for Nikolai, who suddenly pressed himself close, and then, just as suddenly, released him and dashed off.

"Don't mind him, dad. He's stupid," said Anya in the tone of a wizened old woman.

"You're not supposed to say that about your brother," said Katya.

"But it's true."

"Shush."

And Anya obeyed.

Vadim sat down, so she climbed onto his lap, insisting on feeding him with some of the bread near his soup bowl, until he laughed and pushed it away. "It's enough, thank you, my sunlight." At which point she gave him her sweetest smile and cuddled against his chest, his hand resting between her small pointy shoulder blades.

After he had caught up with the family, Katya's mother and aunt left, herding their children with them, and taking Anoushka and Nikolai as well. Vadim followed them to the door, saw Anoushka wave at him with both hands, and Nikolai looking at him from the side—disappointment and sadness in his eyes, as if

he knew what was going to happen. That was nonsense, though. Maybe the kid was just cranky, after a bad day at school, or a fight with his friends.

Some banter between the women—they took the children so Katya and Vadim had some time to themselves. Knowing winks, and Katya managed to blush a little. Not too much.

Then the door closed.

Katya inhaled and leaned against the wall of the corridor. “It’s good to see you.”

“Yes.” Vadim stood close, saw her look up at him, her blue eyes dark in the gloom.

“Come on, let’s go into the kitchen.” She took his hand, and Vadim held her fingers, carefully, like she could slip away or melt from his touch.

She didn’t ask about Afghanistan. Instead, she began to put dishes away, placed some cakes on the table and poured him tea, told him about the children, about the small tragedies and triumphs of two small humans that somehow were in his life, and he couldn’t imagine them leaving it. He felt sorry they were gone, he could have listened to them telling their own stories in their own words, including all the hyperbole of children.

They talked until he was yawning so hard he knew he needed rest; the military life didn’t last for long past curfew. He was used to his rhythms and times, waking at five, fully awake at half past, hungry at six thirty. She smiled and left the kitchen to prepare the bed. Vadim stood and watched her remove the top blanket, set her pillows and cushions aside, and then found one of Anoushka’s dolls in there, which made her smile.

The bed. He remembered the first months, even years, but most of all while she was pregnant with Anoushka. Her head resting on his shoulder, arm crossing his chest, fingers hooked into his other shoulder, the length of her body pressed against his, seeking warmth, and sometimes, he thought, strength, too. And him lying there, staring into nothing, wishing, for once, he’d just be normal, could be what she wanted and needed, instead of some kind of brother she had ended up married to. He relished the closeness, but all the while thinking of struggling flesh in the barracks, the taste of steel and oil and dirt, of fresh faces and ripping uniform cloth.

“Do you...want me to sleep on the couch?”

She looked at him. “Why?”

“It must be strange for you when I come back.” Didn’t add the word he’d meant to say, out of habit. ‘Home’.

“Do you want to sleep on the couch?”

“I’ve been sleeping uneasy. I might wake you.” He didn’t want to smell her close, didn’t want to feel her warmth and be deluded and sleep-dulled enough to even imagine for a moment it was Dan. Being close to her would feel wrong, even if they didn’t touch. He felt like a guest in his own house. In his own family.

Without arguing—she never did—she set up his bed on the couch in the living room, said good night, and closed the door.

He stood in front of the book shelf, eyes moving across book spines, titles, authors. Nothing spoke to him, none of his favourites, and none of the books he’d inherited from his mother, and her brother, which he’d planned to read when he’d find the time. Too busy waging a war down south. Too busy running, too busy stealing every moment he could get from the man he was officially, like the prisoner wearing away the cell that kept him trapped, wearing away the life of Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada, model soldier, second class athlete, Interior Ministry killer.

Amusing, really. He’d never thought about it like that, but he’d always assumed Dan had been forced to realise what he wanted and what he was.

But Dan actually changed him as well, had pulled away the thin wall that separated his army career and his family. His private life and the man he portrayed. He couldn’t keep it apart any more, couldn’t keep it under control—he was drowning in his own lies, habits and deceit, and the emotions that he couldn’t keep in check. He had to accept what he wanted, and what that meant. Over. He’d failed. And won. And he wasn’t sure whether it made sense to think of it in this way.

A second chance. A new life, if he dared, if he was strong enough to claim it. He lay with his eyes open, looking at the familiar shadows in this room, thinking of blue skies, and caves, and the heat of one body. Live together.

How? Like Marc and Darren? Just like that? Where? Edinburgh? London? Him, a dissident, of all people, turncoat, traitor. He’d offer what information he had, assuming nothing he said would kill any of his comrades, wouldn’t make Lesha’s job any more difficult, but would he ever really know? Feeling the change in the air, or the threat, what if the whole world went to hell?

He fell asleep, and woke. Next morning, they visited his father, and there was careful chatting and unguarded emotions, as his father made graceful, harmless conversation. Vadim knew he sympathised with the ‘progressive’ elements, Gorbachev, the whole talk of transparency, *glasnost*, and he didn’t want to argue, because seeing his father animated and idealistic was a good thing, and he didn’t want to talk doom and gloom. Maybe it would all turn out good, and Socialism could be reformed without everything falling to pieces.

Katya left to pick up the children.

Vadim didn’t want to linger with his father, so he walked the streets where he’d grown up, greeting old neighbours, answering polite questions. Moscow. Home. His country. He walked, even though taking the metro would have been easier and faster. He’d found the address through a few careful questions, had been in touch with another ex-swimmer, now a coach himself, after a long career.

One thing he needed to take care of, before it was all too late.

He rang, and the door opened. He climbed the stairs.

In the open doorway stood an old man, shoulders hunched forward, starting to gnarl up, clothes too large for his frame, arms and legs thin, belly pointing forward, curved. Clouded eyes looked up at him, seemed to slowly climb up the buttons of his uniform, up to his rank, his throat, his face. The old man’s eyes widened. “Vadim.”

“May I enter?”

The old man shuffled to one side, opening the door so Vadim could enter a flat where everything was in its designated place. One wall covered with photos, the smell of dust and old man heavy in the air. “I wasn’t sure you remembered me.”

“Remember you...” echoed the old man, and a brittle smile appeared on his lips. “Of course I do. Such a talented young man. And now you’re so handsome...but you always were ha...” He paused, as if noticing suddenly he’d spoken aloud, and he looked up at Vadim, a sudden darkness in his eyes. Fear.

Well done, Vadim. Making an old bundle of bones scared of you.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Don’t mind me. Vadim. Please, don’t.” Like a plea for mercy.

Vadim sensed the man's guilt, and suddenly his fear fell into place as well. As if he'd come to break this old man, break him and make him pay for something that had happened twenty, no, almost twenty-five years ago.

"A...are you...how are you?"

"I'm fine. Just returned from Afghanistan."

That shut the old man up, who stood there, weak and fragile, with eyes that never moved from his face, still recognizing the boy in the man. The athletic talent in the killer, proud symbol of one of the mightiest armies in the world. Vadim reached out to take the old hands. Hands, he remembered, that had been on his body, everywhere, taught him things about sex and about himself, entered and soothed him, relaxed him and made him shudder. "Don't worry. It's all good."

"All good," murmured the old man and exhaled, didn't seem to dare move away, and Vadim thought how strange, what a gentle creature this one was, fragile now like a bird. "I'm glad. I didn't...I didn't want anything bad happen to you, Vadim. Never. Please believe me. I would have never harmed you."

"You haven't harmed me." Vadim caressed those old hands with his thumbs.

The old man looked at him, and suddenly smiled. "So...you married? You have children?"

"Yes."

Now the relief was even stronger. As if what the masseur had done hadn't destroyed Vadim's ability to have a family and have sex with a woman. A temporary aberration, a phase of interest in men, to finally take the usual road, fit in with the rest of the world. "I'm glad. I was...worried about you."

Vadim looked around, didn't see anything that indicated this old man had ever had a family, no wife, no children, the pictures on the wall were of athletes, of competitions so long ago that Vadim couldn't place them, young athletes and older functionaries, trainers, doctors.

This man had never broken free—had remained trapped in his role, and Vadim couldn't even imagine what he might have meant to this old man once upon a time. He could see shame, a bad conscience, like his actions had still haunted him, and he had feared Vadim would come one day to take revenge.

As if.

Worried about me. Worried he had broken something, spoiled, left Vadim unable to function. “Do you remember what you told me? About winning?”

The old man smiled. “It means you won in the end. I’m glad you’re happy. You deserve it, Vadim, you were always looking for something more, always stretching to excel. It’s good to see you won.”

Vadim inhaled deeply, could feel just how much this man envied him that it all had been nothing but a phase, that he was perfectly normal. He gently squeezed the old man’s hands. “I’ve come to thank you for your care. You’ve made a lot of things easier for me, back then.”

He couldn’t bring himself to say more than that, couldn’t wreck that hope and replace it with guilt. Forgiveness, if anything, for a crime he was guilty of himself. Something they’d shared, and which was now a secret, acknowledged, but forgiven.

He was deeply thoughtful when he left. He’d only stayed around to look at himself, old photos, young Vadim Krasnorada looking open and vulnerable in the pictures, the tall blond one that seemed oddly serious and grown up when he shouldn’t have been. Vadim felt a strange tenderness for that youth who had had no idea what was waiting for him, or even what decisions he’d make just a few years later.

He returned to his flat, and his children did claim his time, Anoushka more than Nikolai, while Katya cooked.

It was the weekend. Katya’s mother came later and took the children away with her—unexpectedly. Vadim looked up, questioningly, when Katya moved to stand right in front of him. “You’re not even here,” she said, matter-of-factly. “I know you have something on your mind. You’re somewhere else entirely. What is it?”

His plan, while perfectly rational in Kabul, seemed insane in Moscow, and the last days had made Vadim question his own resolve. “Things are going to hell,” he murmured. “This country, the army, Afghanistan. Everything. I’m planning...to leave. I’ve provided for you and the children. There is more money, and you’ll be safe.” He dug his hand into his pocket, pulled out the wad of money, and placed it into both her hands, closing them around it.

She gave the money a glance, then looked at him again. “What happened? Why?”

“I need to get out. I need to get out of this country, out of this uniform. I...”
He struggled. “I need a life. I can’t hide any longer. I don’t want to be pulled into another war. I’ve served my time.” He felt frantic, clutching for understanding, but her face remained immobile. “There’s more coming, Katya. All this is just the beginning. You need to get out of this country before everything goes to hell.”

“And you?”

“I’m running away. I’ll desert.”

She stared at him. “What happened?”

“I’ll apply for...political asylum. I have a friend who...promised to help me.”

Her look of incredulity became suddenly warm and changed to tenderness. “Oh Vadim.” She placed a cool hand against his cheek and looked deep into his eyes. “You’re in love.”

“What?”

“Why else does a man run away. A man like you.” She kissed him on the cheek. “Who is it?”

“I can’t tell you, I’m sorry. That would be a risk to you and...that person.”

“The man,” corrected Katya. “Correct?”

He felt oddly queasy. “Yes.”

“An Afghan? No, I don’t think so. Another Russian?”

He took her wrists and moved her hands out of his face. “Katya, please. It’s not a game. It’s not even a bout.” He kissed her palms. “I need you to leave me. To make sure you’re safe, and to cover for me. Just once more. Just one last thing.”

“Of course.” She shook her head, chiding him for that nervous pleading. “Are you sure you want this?”

“I wish...I wish I had been...something else.” He closed his eyes. “It’s not easy. I love you, and the kids. But...you have to understand.”

“But I do.” She smiled. “You’ve fallen in love, and you want to go away with that man. I hope you find what you are looking for.”

Her complete compliance was what he had hoped for and what shocked him at the same time. She just shrugged it all off, accepted the facts like there was nobody else involved. Willing to stop twelve years of pretence, lies, and masquerade at the drop of a hat.

“I need you to leave me. My superiors will come looking for me. They will assume I told you where I’m going, or at least have hinted at it. You need to leave me before I run away. They must believe our...marriage was already dead, and we don’t care about each other. No trust, no love. Nothing.”

She nodded. “Any idea how?”

“Just leave me. Make a scene. Take the kids and storm off. Move in with your parents.”

“That’s not a fight. That’s a domestic squabble.” She reached up for her hair, pulled the comb out that held most of it in place, and dropped it on the floor.

Stepped out of her shoes.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m getting ready to fight.” She gave him a strange little smile.

“Now?”

“The kids are out for the night.”

He stood, speechless, and thought he could see compassion in her face, again that tenderness.

“Whatever I’ll do or say, Vadim, I’ve always loved you. Don’t forget that. Don’t you ever forget how much you mean to me.” She stepped closer and kissed him, gently, tenderly, her whole heart in that kiss, like in Montreal, when they had both been in love and innocent. He returned it, her lips softer, sweeter in a way than Dan’s, too soft, but he felt that strange familiar tenderness himself. Like a part of him. Somebody he loved, but just couldn’t desire. Things would have been so much easier if only he could.

“You will have to hurt me. Are you strong enough?”

“Hurt you?”

“Break my arm. Hit me in the face. Hit me hard enough that they believe.” Her lips trembled. “So I believe.”

He groaned, suddenly it was all madness, he couldn’t do it, secret service be damned, there must be a way to not do this, when her kiss suddenly broke. The next thing he felt was a searing pain across his cheek—her fingernails digging into his skin, and then she hit him full force in the face. “You fucking bastard,” she shouted at him, while he was reeling from the unexpected pain, and another hit square in the mouth stunned him even more.

“You sorry excuse of a man! You impotent freak. You think you can teach me?”

More hits to the face, clawing, biting his hands as he tried to calm her down, shocked and appalled and utterly unable to act. Her curses and abuses biting even deeper than claws or teeth, as she started to scream as if he was ripping her apart. He understood what she was doing, she tried to get him angry enough to do it, and with more desperation than anger, he backhanded her.

Her head flew back and hit the cupboard, rattling every dish inside. Her blonde hair turned red and wet. She crumpled to the ground, kneeling, and screamed with anguish as he took her arm and broke it over his knee.

Just a bone, just a Sambo move, but he'd have preferred to have it done to him.

Her screams and sobs were almost too much—and even worse to hear the neighbours gather in the corridor outside, talking amongst themselves whether they should act or not.

He stood there, his skin frozen. He was sweating. All he could feel was the echo of her breaking bones in his fingers, and he had tears in his eyes.

“Forgive me. Just, please, please forgive me,” he whispered.

The doorbell rang. Vadim couldn't bear facing anybody now, smelled blood, her blood.

The doorbell rang again. Somebody knocked, insistent.

“Go on, you bastard. Are you too much of a coward?” shouted Katya from the kitchen, voice strained with pain.

Vadim opened the door, looked into the faces of the people living in this house. Pensioners, a young man clutching an old fashioned revolver, he lived downstairs and studied music at the conservatory or something. He'd always believed in letting people have their lives and their secrets.

Another man, police from what Vadim had heard, stepped out of the crowd, casting a glance inside. “It's none of my business, Krasnorada, what you do with your wife, but fucking do it without waking up my daughter. Understood?”

Vadim felt like breaking the bastard's neck, as there was a sudden motion, and Katya, somehow, he had no idea from where the woman found so much strength and willpower, managed to run past him, managed to get through the ring

of grey, powerless faces. He could hear her sob and cry out on the stairs, when she moved that broken arm.

The policeman gave him an angry stare, then turned to the side. “He’s not the first veteran who goes insane. You calm down, Krasnorada. No more shouting in this house.” Satisfied that Vadim seemed to comply, the policeman shushed the pensioners away from the landing, and gave Vadim a baleful last glance, as if to warn him to stay invisible and inaudible while he was there.

Vadim closed the door. Saw the smear of blood on the wall. Picked up her earring, her shoes.

He found vodka, and that helped.

1989 Chapter 19—No Man’s Land

February 1989, Kabul

“Trouble at home, Vadim Petrovich?” The Colonel handed him an official looking letter, which had been opened. They hadn’t even taped it back up.

“Comrade Colonel?”

“Don’t play dumb. Take it.”

Vadim took the letter, opened it, saw Katya had filed for divorce. The address was in Budapest. C/o somebody he remembered. The fencer. Szandor who had been one of the few proper lovers he’d had. Good choice. Szandor would rather let himself be ripped apart than allow anything bad to come to her. Gentleman fencer, slightly effeminate, whom the papers had called ‘old school dandy’. He looked up into the Colonel’s expressionless face.

“My wife filed for divorce.”

“Why?” The Colonel stood, both hands still on the desk. “Tell me, Vadim Petrovich? You seemed very much the family man to me.”

It’s none of your business, raged a small voice in Vadim’s mind. You can’t control everything I do, every breath I take, every decision, including whom I fuck, whom I love. I did my duty, didn’t I? “There was a disagreement.”

“Violence?” The Colonel seemed bemused.

Vadim inhaled sharply, and gave a nod. “She was being a bitch, with all due respect, comrade Colonel. Spoilt, and unfaithful.” He pressed his lips together, needed to summon memories to act the part of the wronged husband who’d lost his patience.

“Then why didn’t you teach her a lesson and her lover, too?” The Colonel’s eyes narrowed. “You should be resourceful enough for that.” He straightened and came around the table. “To clarify, Vadim Petrovich, I find it hard to respect a man who doesn’t have his family under control. It’s part of his private life, and an officer with a chaotic private life loses his anchor. I can’t have a man with responsibilities just float out to sea because of his wife.” He was close enough for Vadim to smell his breath. “I believe in men controlling every aspect of their lives. That includes wife and children.”

Vadim swallowed dryly, blanked his mind so nothing of his loathing and anger showed in his eyes. “Yes, comrade Colonel.”

“I expect you to clean up this mess. This doesn’t reflect well on you. Or us.” The Colonel gave him one of his trademark stares, then dismissed him with a motion of his hand as if he was about to bitchslap him.

Vadim managed not to flinch.

Once he was in his office, he signed the papers. Who knew what the Colonel was implying. Clean up his private life? He’d do that. All he had to make sure was that Katya and the children got out and were safe.

But he had to tread ever so carefully. The Colonel on his tail was the last thing he needed, and even though he’d been seeing Dan regularly—as regularly as he could—he worked hard to appear like a man without much of a life. One that was determined to make Colonel himself in a failing state, one so eager for the goodwill of his superiors that he had no will of his own.

Dan had assured him the Baroness would help him and organise everything for changing sides. They would have to run a check on him first, and he dreaded the visit to London coming up. Leaving his country only to be incarcerated for murder? The irony. He’d come close to confessing the story to Dan several times, but Dan seemed to hope for a better future in a way that Vadim couldn’t manage. Britain most probably wouldn’t forgive hit men, least of all those who had been offered a chance to defect and hadn’t.

It was all hanging in the balance and in the void; not quite letting go one side and not quite gripping onto the other was more of a mental strain than Vadim had anticipated. He found himself staring at his paperwork when he was supposed to approve things and issue orders, and his mind knew only one frantic chorus: When? When? When?

He sneaked out whenever possible, manoeuvring like a chased rabbit, feeling the stare of the hunter in his mind, and met Dan to check on him while he was healing and steadily gaining strength, exchanging kisses and vows, tender sex until he was back to strength. Vadim felt too petrified to make any plans yet, even though Dan sometimes did.

Dan told him about his home, how he’d show Vadim places he called lochs and glens, how they’d be in the highlands, and of that castle on the mountain above Edinburgh. Dread mixed with hope. Eating at his soul, his strength, while he hoped for one thing he couldn’t force: mercy from the enemy.

* * *

For months, Dan worked on his strength. Doing every exercise he could, only held back occasionally by the nurse, who kept him from overdoing it, until she, too, left. Late autumn and winter passed, and Dan was getting more desperate every time he spoke to the Baroness, asking if there were new developments in helping the Major to defect. Nothing, though. No 'yes', and not even the dreaded 'no'. Complications, she explained to him, refusing to elaborate on exactly what those were. Foreign Office, immigration, government and internal security, and whoever else might be in the business of offering refuge to a desperate man.

When Dan had asked for her help, she had agreed readily, surprising him with her lack of questions. He knew she was working on trying to get a deal for Vadim, but what did he have to offer? The question kept churning in Dan's mind, while the worries grew. Who was Vadim and what did he know? Not much, so why should Britain take any risks and accept him as defector? Vadim was only a small fish in the big pond of upheavals in current Eastern European politics.

Christmas came, and Vadim told Dan that he had received and signed the divorce papers, but that was all he knew. Dan never lost the nagging doubt there was something more.

Kabul was cold over New Year and Dan mostly stayed inside, with the occasional foray into the outdoors once he was fit again. Guarding the lady ambassador whenever she had dinners, soirees, matinees, and whatever other fancy shit they called those functions. He was bored of the goddamned small talk. Genteel faces and polite manners around him just didn't feel right. In the beginning, he'd relished the luxury and ease of his job, yet it was beginning to wear thin. He became desperate for news on Vadim's status, hoping political asylum would be granted before the last soldiers of the Soviet forces were pulled out of Afghanistan.

January passed and then February made its way into the year, with almost all of the troops out of the country, and still no news, despite the Baroness' endeavours.

The time had come, Dan could feel it in his blood, drilling down into his bones and rushing into his lungs. He could sense it in every cell, and taste it in the wind.

He didn't need to be told, nor had to read the news. The Glorious Soviet Army had pulled its tail between its legs and was leaving the country. Beaten, defeated. There were no winners in this war, and he dreaded the day Vadim received his marching orders.

* * *

After a too long day, Vadim crossed the mostly empty barracks. The air of frustration, of tiredness, of worn-out minds and hearts was palpable, and he felt nothing, only drained. Ten years of his life. Many people dead, displaced, many conscripts forever haunted by this place, An extravagant waste of time and effort. Making sure the small wheels turned, learning how to wage war in a country where all the odds were staked against the invaders.

Vadim paused, stood there in front of the placard.

'From the grateful Afghan people to the Soviet brothers.'

What now? He had no idea. No idea at all who would be wielding power here. If there was power to be wielded, and Afghanistan not just a waste of everything. He kept the piece of paper in the front pocket.

He, too, would be gone. He could feel the unease, the shudders of tectonic shifts in Moscow. Growing unrest in Europe. The ice was thawing, making everything treacherous. Things were moving. He had no idea where they'd send him. To Moscow, first, with the rest of his unit. And after that? There were enough places where he expected trouble.

'Grateful Afghan people.'

Shaking his head, he moved on, towards the place in Kabul. He was pale and silent when he closed the door behind him, bringing the February frost with him into the room.

Dan turned around. He'd been in the main room, doing...nothing. Just standing, flexing his knackered hand around scissored steel, building muscles and strength. Something to do while deliberately *not* thinking.

"Vad..." Dan never finished his greeting. He could see it in the other's face, knew it from his stance and understood.

"When?"

Vadim pulled the *ushanka* off, began to unbutton the greatcoat. He couldn't look at Dan now, his own mind blank, a dark place with hectic movement that made no sense. Run away? Where to? Disobey? How? "Monday." He shook his head. "Already. I can't...imagine not being here."

"No." Dan dropped the device, swivelled around. "That's four days." Impossible, it couldn't be. There wasn't enough time left, had never been enough time in the first place.

"Yes." Vadim felt defeated. It was becoming a habit. In war, in his private life, in love, too?

"Maggie's trying, I know she is, but something's cropped up that doesn't make any sense. Some sort of security problem, but no-one will tell me what. They're still vetting you. Apparently, they just don't believe your request to defect is genuine."

Vadim shook his head. He'd never been more genuine. He'd had more control with the muzzle of Dan's gun between his teeth, on his knees, hurting, expecting to be executed. This feeling was worse. He'd be destroyed by a force he couldn't see nor fight.

Dan stepped closer, until his chest touched Vadim's, which made him look up again. "It's because you're fucking Spetsnaz, isn't it?"

Anger blazed in Dan's eyes, fuelled by nothing but desperation. "But you're more than that, aren't you?"

"Yes." Spetsgruppe Vympel. Killers, assassins, counter-terrorists. They'd kept him there to strike, every now and then, so they had a man in Kabul, kept him under cover like a mole, used him like any other officer to do his duty. Keeping him ready in case he was expected to storm the presidential palace again. "A special detachment."

He'd always suspected but Dan didn't want to hear it confirmed. "You cannot leave." His voice was suddenly quiet, and he felt as if each word turned into death. "You *cannot*, Vadim." Shaking his head, his hands digging into Vadim's shoulders. "You might never return from behind the Iron Curtain, no matter how much the East is falling apart."

"I think it could be Eastern Europe next. I speak some German, remember?" Vadim's face twitched, it hurt badly to think about it, worse to accept

the facts. Out in the cold. Defeated. Dan still didn't realize there was no place to run. "Fuck, hold me."

Dan's arms moved around Vadim; he had his strength back, and was holding him with everything he had. "No." As if his refusal changed anything. "You've got to get out of there." Hopelessness was worse than anything, even that night in Kabul, nine years ago. There had to be another option. "Something, anything? Vadim..." Pressing Vadim's body to his, two men, once enemies, now equals—lovers. "There must be something." Dan whispered, knowing he was being foolish.

"I...just can't think," said Vadim, fighting the despair. No longer resourceful, war weary, drained, bleached out, unable to tap the strength he'd once possessed, the anger. The cunning bastard Spetsnaz seemed so far away.

"Maybe...wait. Till I get posted somewhere else. Maybe I can get to a British embassy if they've made up their minds."

"Aye, that would work." Dan couldn't think of anything else. It couldn't end like this. Just...over. Vadim divorced, free from that woman and her children, away from family and anything keeping them apart. "You're mine." Whispered, beginning to kiss along jaw and down the neck. "You're mine, no-one else's." Lips, teeth nipping, tasting skin. "Not even Mother Russia's. You're mine."

Vadim groaned at the touch, the pledges again, vows, ownership, caring, claiming him when he felt detached from anything, everything, hanging in the void. Dan pulled him in. Anchored him. Secured him, like one mountain climber to the other, rope and irons and nothing but the abyss if the rope failed. "It will work. I haven't got this far to give up."

"It'll work." Dan's kisses grew more intense. "It must." Because you're mine, and you belong to me.

* * *

19th February 1989

Sunday, the last day. The final day.

Dan had pleaded, searched, gambled and finally found a room in the best hotel in Kabul. The last one standing throughout the war offering a modicum of

luxury. Vast bed, bathroom, proper hot running water and clean sheets. The Baroness knew where he was, had even helped him find the place, as covert an operation as possible.

Vadim. The end.

Sitting on the bed, Dan waited like a condemned man, a prisoner in the hotel room biding time until his execution. The morning would come too soon, and it would be over, except for the hope that somehow, someday, Vadim could make it out. They had until dawn, eight precious hours.

* * *

‘Don’t make a mistake now. We need you, Vadim Petrovich’, the Colonel had said, and smiled at him, when Vadim turned down the invitation to eat and drink. The last officers left in style, getting drunk on the last night away from home. Vadim had politely declined the company. He’d be fucked if he wasted his time with them.

Instead he took the other invitation, the one that would carve out his heart and make it tonight’s dinner. He was aching inside, a pain that told him it was, indeed, love. He’d known it, said it, confessed to it, but now that it was at risk, maybe for years, maybe forever, the pain was so keen he knew it was the real thing. Only the real thing could hurt so much.

Cheer up, he admonished himself. Don’t make this a funeral. It wasn’t. It was a start. He rapped on the door, straightened his shoulders, and forced his lips into a smile.

“The door’s open.” Dan stood up, hand hovering close to the small of his back. Despite knowing who had knocked, the pistol was never far away. He’d lived in luxury—and mostly in peace for the last two years, but old instincts died hard.

Vadim closed the door after slipping in. Hadn’t had any chance to shed the Soviet uniform, everything else in his room in the barracks was packed and ready to go. Presents for friends and family. Photos of dead and departed comrades.

“I’m right here.” Dan’s lips curved into a smile he did not feel. Standing in his best clothes, he had the string of prayer beads wound around the wrist of his fucked but functional hand, hair washed and brushed, gleaming. Wild, still, too long, but he knew how much Vadim liked that. Freshly shaved, above and below,

and he'd even tried not to smoke too much, so as not to taste and smell of nicotine. Food and drink stood on a table nearby, exquisite snacks provided by the embassy, and the best vodka and whisky, together with a bottle of wine from the Baroness' personal stash.

Vadim looked over the feast. "Ah, good, I haven't eaten much today." He pulled the gloves off his hands, cast them onto the nightstand, the *ushanka* followed. "Our two man party, Dan?"

Dan wanted to scream, or kill and maim. He was still SAS, inside, and as a soldier, he would keep going on. 'Never give up, never surrender'.

"Sure." He tried to smile again, but it threatened to falter. "We've got eight hours, I thought we'd better make the most of it."

Vadim shed the greatcoat, hung it up on a hook near the door, then paused. "Dan...promise me one thing? Will you bite and fuck me so hard I'll still feel you in Moscow?"

"Shit." Dan's bravado faltered, and with a couple of steps he crossed the distance, arms around Vadim, kissing him, murmuring, "Anything. Fuck, anything you want from me."

Vadim pressed him close, returning the kiss so hard it hurt, but he didn't care when all he could feel in his heart was a raw, throbbing pain like from amputation. "I want..." He forced their lips apart, placed bites on Dan's chin, down the soft flesh above the throat. "I want you to fuck me as hard and deep as you can." Leaving red traces, bite marks with every movement, hand going to Dan's groin, pressing him through the cloth. "I want you to tell me how it feels fucking me, and ask me if I can feel you deep enough. I want to feel you in every joint of my body, with all your power, I want to hurt, and I want you to come inside me. Then..." He grinned, feeling the reaction his words had on Dan, the grin that of a predator, "Then I'll make you feel my pain. I'll have you, Dan, and if you scream, that's good because that's what I want to hear. I want to hear you scream my name while I press you into that mattress. I don't care tonight. Tonight, I want all your pain, and all your lust. Do you copy, soldier?"

"Copy." Dan groaned, shuddering under the touch, bites and possessive words. Insanity, and it was just what they needed. He steered Vadim towards the bed, while working on getting him undressed. How he hated the uniform that had become more familiar than his own had ever been. It was the uniform which would

take Vadim away, that, and the Soviet people. In his eyes, Mother Russian was a fucked-up aging whore, scrabbling to keep her sons around her on her death bed.

Vadim felt the bed against the backs of his calves and helped Dan shed the tunic and shirt, casting away everything, undershirt, watch, only leaned down to get rid of the boots, when he felt Dan's hands pull down his trousers. When he fell down on the bed, he was already hard. He moved to the middle of it, grinning up at Dan, stroking himself while watching him undress.

Dan had never got himself out of his clothes so quickly before. He tore at his shirt, threw it into a corner, belt, trousers, boots, socks, all in a jumble, discarded. His body groomed: shaved, scrubbed, smoothed.

Vadim's eyes were wide, staring at Dan, his *lover*, bared like that, trusting him, prepared for him. "Come here," Vadim murmured, throat suddenly parched.

Dan crawled between Vadim's legs, one arm on either side of his head, gazing down. "Do you know what you look like when you lie like this? Do you know what it does to me?" His cock answered his question, but still he asked, eyes darker than ever.

"You do the same to me..." Vadim ran his fingers up Dan's arms, traced the lines of muscle up to his pecs, down towards his abs and the lines of ragged scars.

"When you're like this, Vadim, I want to own you, and taste you, burrow all the way into your body until I feel so much it fucking hurts and your scent clings to every pore. I want to hurt you, tear you apart, fuck you until you plead and scream and bleed, and all that, because I can never get enough of you." Dan's breath caught in his throat, allowing himself to feel. Anything, and all of it. You're in my blood, Vadim, and I want you to bleed for me again, tonight."

Vadim gave a groan, the words, the images, the promise. *Bleed. Hurt. Pain. Owning. Never enough.* Lust welled up, washed the pain away, if only for a moment, he knew it would return, and he knew that whatever pain Dan would give him, would help him deal with that other pain. He stared up into those manic and hurt dark eyes. "Make me bleed. I want to taste my blood on your lips so I know I'll live."

I'll live. Vadim's eyes strayed, for a moment, towards where he'd left the pistol. Suddenly, suicide was an option. Fuck their hearts and minds out, then swear a suicide pact. It would just end. It would end on a good note, and after that,

nothing. Not being apart, ever again. No suffering, no pain. He was willing to do it. He was perfectly capable of that. Then he looked back into Dan's eyes, and his hands touched the scars on his abdomen. Dan, torn up, Dan suffering, Dan, weak and human like any other casualty. He was willing to die, but he wanted Dan to live. He felt an embarrassing wetness well up in his eyes and forced it down.

Dan's hand suddenly moved, covered Vadim's hand on his own abdomen, pressing closer, hard, until fingers dug into scars and flesh. His weight unbalanced, he spread his legs further, while swooping down. "You'll remember tonight." Teeth digging into soft flesh of neck and throat, right above the cigarette burn. The bite answered by a drawn-out groan. "You'll remember *me*."

"Always...to my last breath. Last bullet. Last thought."

Lips moving, cursing, loving, whispering, "You'll wear me on your skin, and in return I'll carry you in my flesh."

"Do it." Daring Dan, daring himself, daring the whole fucking world with this, complete freedom in destruction and pain if they could have nothing else, they'd take this.

Dan was biting along jaw and throat, down to shoulders and chest. His body came down, crushing both their hands between their bodies, trapping their cocks.

Vadim moved against Dan, free hand on the last curve of his spine, above the ass, pressing him in with all his strength, and pushing up to grind against him, already dizzy with lust, stoked with pain. All he wanted was to burn to nothing. The bite marks throbbed and heated his skin further, it would look bad, but he didn't care. The Afghan sweetheart was one fierce bitch.

When Dan looked up, his eyes were on fire, the almost black eyes of a madman, and the madness was nothing but pain. Pain and fear; fear of ever more pain, because this was it, the last time, the final time, no matter how hard he tried to hope. "Do you remember the first blow job? Do you remember the knife?" He came up, lifted away from the friction to sit on his heels. "Do you remember all of the last nine years?"

Vadim pressing his lips together. He'd never forget that fear, another guilty pleasure because it could still arouse him, the memory of it. Spread out for the kill, mind fucked, while Dan tried out how to drive him insane. "The...only thing that means anything," he whispered. "You. Our time."

Dan reached forward, searched beneath the pillow and pulled out a knife. “This time it’ll be for real.” He pressed the blade against his own chest, skin warming up steel. “Spread your legs, Vadim. Open up for me.”

For real? Knife? Vadim flushed, lust stronger than any fear. Whatever Dan planned. Cut him, gut him, he didn’t care, was too far gone, too desperate, too much in love and lust. He pushed his legs apart, brought the knees up. Hands reached up for the pillow, stretched now, chest and stomach taut. Whatever happened, he’d never regret this. Dan did it, that meant it was all good. And it wasn’t about dying, not anymore. Never again.

“I don’t need a whole word this time.” Dan murmured hoarsely, transfixed by Vadim’s body. How it lay open, as if for slaughter, trusting him with his sanity and his life. “Don’t move.” His left hand came to rest on the inside of Vadim’s thigh. Fingers splayed as they pressed into the muscle until the skin was pulled taut. “You’re still my pizda, my cunt...” quiet voice, Dan’s throat felt oddly constricted, “but ‘cunt’ means lover.”

Vadim kept his eyes on the tip of the knife. He hadn’t just accepted to be cut? Had he? He remembered the pain on his back. It had been agony. Agony and a lifetime of shame. He brought his hands back down and cupped his knee in his hand, steadying it, in case the pain would be too bad. Felt himself begin to sweat. “I’ll be...steady.”

The knife came down, the circle closed as the blade started to cut into highly sensitive, smooth flesh. Away from the artery, but as close to cock and balls, and as much hidden from view, as Dan could manage. Razor-sharp steel cutting the first line into the flesh. Deep enough to scar, deep enough to mean it.

Vadim groaned with clenched teeth, the pain was keen, keen and clear, sharp, and it made his cock jump. He’d have expected himself faltering, but the lust was just as steady as his grip. No, it grew. Just the place, the very lethal possibility, and that close to his balls. He breathed the hurt down, accepted it.

Dan’s cock was so hard, he felt it throbbing. Again, the blade moved, lines filling with blood, making Vadim groan again, pain and lust mixing in that sound, and a shudder raced through the powerful body.

Only one letter, it was all Dan needed, and it would stay with Vadim forever. “You’re mine.” He whispered, the last cut, blood red against pale flesh. He

suddenly dove down, tongue lapping and lips moving across the Cyrillic letter that stood for all of ‘mine’.

Vadim hissed, arching up, half expecting Dan to swallow him, but he didn’t, instead the sucking in a more intimate place, if that was possible. His blood. Now he wanted that blowjob that had been part of the deal last time, and gave a grin, nodding, accepting all this without questioning—knowing what Dan had ‘written’. “Yours.”

“As much as I am yours.” When Dan came up his lips were smeared with blood, and he pressed the knife into Vadim’s hand. Tit for tat this time. No more battles. “Cut me.”

Vadim rolled onto the side, the bite of the wound constant, but he didn’t care. “I want them to see it,” he murmured, and Dan nodded and kneeled. No protest, only submission.

Vadim was hypnotised by Dan’s bloodied lips. Better than cum. He moved to kiss Dan’s neck, the taut shoulder, and put the blade against Dan’s powerful biceps where any uniform bore the flag. Pressing the steel in, with a moment of resistance, but the blade was sharp and went slowly in. Blood began to run.

Dan hissed, eyes closing for a moment while his hands clenched into fists, tensing until every muscle in his body stood out. It hurt, but it seemed right that his cock jumped. Despite the pain of the marking, or because of it. No way back.

Vadim licked his lips, pulled the blade back, and placed the tip at the lower end of the cut, pushed it into the wound and pulled it back up, forming the English letter ‘V’, point towards the left elbow, while Dan shuddered, breathing harsh and fast to deal with the pain. His blood dripped onto the bed and stained the white sheets. Vadim dipped down, licking the blood from Dan’s hand, up to where the wound was.

Dan turned his head, he couldn’t see, but he didn’t have to ask, had felt the blade and only one letter could form a meaning with two diagonal strokes. “I wear you on my skin.” He murmured, hoarsely, while watching Vadim, “and I want to fuck myself into your body. Until I can go no further, until you are so sore and used, your asshole will never be tight again. Will never again accept another man, like you accepted me.”

Vadim swallowed blood and spit, grinned with stained teeth. “Can’t have anybody take me. You won me when you broke me, but that’s it. Won’t have it.

Nobody else's bitch." He grew a touch more serious, leaned in for the kiss, mixing blood and taste again, hands digging into Dan's mane.

Teeth clashed, Dan tasted metal and blood, the kiss nothing but furious. A rage that came from a depth he'd never encountered before. Hands clawing, arms holding, then pushing, blood smearing across their bodies, staining the sheets. Two 'enemies', and both the same colour, their blood. Red—for the Soviet Union—for Britain. Red in both their flags.

Losing balance, Dan landed on top, across Vadim's body, while he kissed and bit, mauled in return. Pain burning in so many places, it helped to forget and would help to remember. "Kneel."

Vadim's eyes flared with lust, and he showed his teeth in part grin, part snarl, the constant pain a reminder of the knife, of the trust. He'd get bandaged up later. Clean up and bandage, and remember. It was all about remembering. It made perfect sense.

Dan couldn't speak, could only search for the lube on the bedside table. Blood made a goddamned useless lubricant, despite running down Vadim's thighs, coating his arse.

Vadim sat back on his heels, felt the mess trickle down his leg, and glanced at the cuts. Clean. Not gaping, but not shallow, either. Idly touched his cock, watching Dan's stretched out body, and grinned to himself. Understanding, a connection so deep, nobody could sever it. Not a year or two. He'd find a way, he'd made it this far. He'd find this man.

The lube was no sooner in Dan's hand before he worked it into Vadim. Rough, no time for niceties, he was going to fuck him as if he were invincible. Fingers coated with blood, lube, spit and precum, he knelt behind the arse that he'd possessed many times and would never get enough of. "You should see yourself."

Yes, pride of the Soviet Union, Special Forces, officer of the Soviet Army. Vadim bit back a laugh. Fuck all that. He'd never been more himself than feeling the blood seep into the mattress. Love and war. All the same. At least, this was *his* cause.

Dan murmured hoarsely, "You should know what it does to me." Vadim's hips in a vice grip, leaving fingerprints of blood. His cock poised right there, at the ring of muscle, yet nothing tense or resisting about the body beneath his hands.

No mockery, Dan didn't mock him. Dan meant it, every word and every touch. Vadim curved his back, pushed out his ass, towards the heat he craved.

Dan pressed forward, bit back a cry when he breached through and buried himself inside. Deep, deeper, until he could go no further, with Vadim shuddering and groaning at the feeling, the burn, yes, but even worse, the lust.

Vadim's mind blanked when he heard Dan speak. "I feel you." Dan groaned out, pulled back, barely inside. "I fucking feel you!" He rammed forward, with all his strength and all of his pain. With all that goddamned motherfucking love and lust that was killing him now.

Every muscle of Vadim tensed, his guts knotted up with pain and need, lust, the pleasure to be hurt and used and needed, of finally getting what he'd wanted all day. Like coming up for air before a long dive in dark water. He would have to get all he could to make it. Intense enough to die for, if he had to.

"Do you feel me?"

"Right to my heart," murmured Vadim, and gave another groan, willingly, wanted Dan to know just how right it was, how good it felt, and grinned with tender irony at his own thought. Dan knew. Dan could read it in everything. Clenching around him, glancing over his shoulder, grinning. A challenge, of sorts, even if it hurt, it was supposed to hurt to spike the pleasure. Pushing back against Dan, he urged him on. "Nobody else. Feels...like this," he murmured, breathless. "Nobody else can...match me. You have me. Always have. Just you."

"Nobody." Dan pulled back, slowly. "No. Never." Then he lost all words, let his body lose, and fucked Vadim. Fucked him as mercilessly and as brutally as he had wanted. Fucked death and fear and loss out of both of them. Fucked so hard his cock was sore and his muscles ached. Concentrated on the pain in his body, the bite of the wound, and the slickness of blood, to hold himself back. Fucked until he thought there was no more oxygen left in the room and his lungs were burning, letting out sounds akin to a tortured animal.

Lust bled into pain, pain into lust, all of Vadim's strength used up just withstanding the fierce onslaught, sore, yes, hurting, drenched in sweat, taking every bit of added pain and converting it into more lust. Shuddering with exhaustion, Vadim couldn't think, washed away by the sensation, allowing all of this to happen, his own fierceness demanding everything Dan could give, until it was close to suffering.

“Mine, mine, mine.” Dan still hadn’t touched Vadim’s cock, and the strain was becoming unbearable. “You’re mine. Come for me. Come. For. Me.”

“No,” Vadim protested, couldn’t come, not without help, didn’t have the balance, and wanted something else. “I...want to...feel you...” Clenching against him, gritting his teeth against the pain as he slammed back against Dan. “Fucking do it.” He’d have Dan, alright, but on the same terms.

Vadim’s answer caused a final lurch, and Dan let go, the knowledge of getting paid back, matched stride for stride, with every bit of pain and strength, crashed him over the edge and he was cursing in English and Russian when he came deep inside Vadim’s body, shuddering, thrusting erratically, until he wanted to break down, his whole body trembling with the exertion.

Vadim groaned, determined to remember that—how Dan sounded, what it felt like—and shifted his weight, reaching for Dan’s flank as he moved, pulling away, legs shaky, whole body unsteady, needed to come. Saw Dan collapse, spreading his legs, stretched out on the bed, as he usually was.

Vadim reached for the lube, rubbed it between his hands, cool against the sweaty hot skin, and moved over to straddle Dan’s thighs, rubbed the lube into the spread ass. It would hurt, even though he’d never last as long as Dan had, which was probably a mercy.

Dan breathed into the blood-stained sheets, heart still beating wildly, breath struggling after the exertion, but his hips lifted towards Vadim, and his legs opened wider. He’d hurt like fuck because he’d just come, but he didn’t care. He wanted Vadim to take him, fuck him, like he’d done before. It had to be equal. Pain for pain, blood for blood, and their cum deep inside each other’s body.

Vadim remembered a dark place in his heart, a memory that never failed. He took Dan’s hands and stretched to get at the scarf, crossed the wrists behind his back, and tied them, without any protest.

Dan knew and understood, and he accepted. Nine years, and a memory that had changed him, altered the fundamental elements of himself, rearranged every molecule of his being. Things he could, or couldn’t do any longer, and others he’d never forget. He merely flexed his muscles, closed his eyes, felt his body struggle enough to make it worth Vadim’s while and his own. While breathing in the scent of blood, sweat and cum.

Vadim pushed Dan's ass cheeks apart, leaning in to enter him, lowered his weight at the same time as he thrust forward, hissing, too close, too fucking close to perfect, and paused, working hard to compose himself. Kept control only to make it last, not to take care of Dan. Pushing against a body that had a mind of its own, that never merely accepted this, always tightened, always struggled until it finally broke in the best feeling of the world.

Covering Dan, he felt Dan's hands dig into his stomach. He slid in a little deeper, knew it had to hurt like a bitch when he heard Dan's scream, muffled by teeth dug into the sheets. Summoned what strength he had left, to move. Fierce, deep thrusts, powerful, no accommodation here, no finding of a rhythm, just breaching and using the helpless body, like he had done back then. He shook his head, brought his lips up to Dan's ear, breathing into it as he struggled for words. "You're perfect, Dan. I can feel your pain."

Dan didn't answer, his mouth filled with bloodied fabric, but his eyes were wide open. Nostrils flaring with his frantic breathing, and fuck, it hurt, hurt just like the memory, but this time for different reasons. It was what he needed, the fighting, the violent thrashing against the overpowering weight and strength. And most of all the illusion that he was helpless. Perfect. Fucking perfect, even those tears of pain, creating damp patches on the soiled bed.

Everything, simply perfect.

They had come back full circle.

Vadim couldn't last that long, used the struggle and pain, used Dan in a way that would have been impossible otherwise. Dan would never have accepted this, a strange farewell present, another vow written on the other's body. Vadim bit into Dan's shoulder, hard, and sped up, much like a quick, frantic rape in the barracks, the same kind of breathing, the same speed and darkness, but with layers upon layers of meaning. Not just a body. He could feel Dan break underneath, like glass under a boot heel, splinter, accept against every instinct in his body, fucked harder, and finally came, wincing with his own exhaustion and soreness, while Dan's body shook underneath him.

Vadim pulled out, and rolled to the side, facing Dan, reached for his head, and pulled him close, still tied up, kissed his sweaty forehead, ran his hands through the mane of damp hair, licking sweat off his temple. Reluctant to untie him.

“Oh fuck.” Dan murmured, eyes closed now. Just lay there, hurting. The pain was travelling through the core of his body, and yet it was a good pain. Like it was meant to be. He didn’t move, not even a twitch of a muscle, more passive than he’d ever been in all those nine years; in all of his life. This was it, the last night, no more hours, no ‘next time’. He simply let himself be stroked and kissed, his body relaxing completely and his mind accepting. Everything.

Suddenly understanding the nature of submission.

Vadim couldn’t stop touching him, idly stroking his shoulder and back as he shifted to lie as close to Dan as possible without actually embracing him—he lacked the strength to do that. They were both a mess. For once in a nice place, and they ruined the covers. He gave a low chuckle. “Should...get cleaned up..” Thought about it, slowly, mind hardly responding to any efforts he made. “Bandages. I think. Ah, fuck.”

“Hm?” Dan dragged his eyes open, blinking at Vadim. Bandages? Oh, yes, the pain. The blood. “Aye.” Bandages...where the fuck...Dan’s mind didn’t want to do his bidding, lost in a state where every muscle was completely relaxed. “Don’t want to move. No bandages. Not bothered.”

His eyes fell shut again, ignoring the blood that was seeping out of the cut on his arm, dropping onto the sheets and adding to the mess. It would stop bleeding, soon enough. “Hold me.”

Vadim gave a tired grin, shifted his cut leg—anything touching that hurt like a bastard—and turned to lie on his side, one arm under Dan’s head, hand between his shoulder blades, the other in the small of his back, too exhausted to press, push, or pull, touching his forehead to Dan’s, and breathing in his breath. “Where...will you go? How can I find you, Dan?”

“The Baroness,” Dan murmured. “You can always find me through the embassy.” He began to mumble, could hardly string the few words together. He had no chance to find Vadim, and could do nothing but hope to be found. “Maggie...” Despite the pain and discomfort of his position, still bound, he had fallen asleep.

Vadim smiled, dog tired himself, but there was the itch and pain from the cut, and his body seemed to think he should be awake because he was wounded. He sighed, content and relaxed, but still aware, having Dan close like this—another memory he’d keep for the time that came after. They’d gone through months and

months of being alone, but maybe it got harder the older they got. More mindful of time. He wouldn't waste a moment. There had to be a way to get to Europe, the continent often became restless, disorientated. He could slip through cracks if they opened. All a question of timing, like storming a house.

He fell into a shallow rest, not quite sleep, still conscious, the constant burn on his thigh a nuisance that kept him awake. He'd definitely be walking funny tomorrow, but he could always claim it was his lower back that gave him trouble. He let go of Dan, rolled onto his back, stared at the ceiling, thinking, until his lids became too heavy.

No more than an hour, if that, and Dan woke out of the exhaustion. Bereft of touch, and most of all, in so much discomfort he didn't know where all the goddamned aching came from. Stiff all over. Tried to move his arms, shoulders protesting, until the soreness in his arse brought back the memories. He woke with a start, trying to peer at the clock. Hardly six hours left, two of the precious eight already gone. He tried to speak, croaked, cleared his throat laboriously. "Vadim." Nudging him with his forehead, touching his shoulder.

Vadim turned his head, drifting closer to the surface now and was awake. He smiled, seeing Dan like this was good, the way the shape of his shoulders changed because his hands were bound. He placed his fingers against Dan's face, and leaned in to kiss him. "Aye?"

"I hurt like a motherfucker." Murmured against Vadim's lips, while Dan was shifting between a smile and a grin. "Hungry. Gagging for a fag. Sore. Sticky. Aching. Dirty. Stiff, and bloody trussed up like a roast chicken." Lifting his dark eyes, they seemed to ask what his Russkie was going to do about all of that.

Vadim grinned back at him. "Shower first?" He took Dan's shoulders, lifted him a bit, then pulled the pliant body with him towards the edge of the bed and helped him stand.

"Russkie, get the fucking bondage off me." Dan mildly protested, disgruntled.

"Later." Vadim winced as the cuts on his thighs opened and he felt more blood run down his leg. The bed looked like a battlefield without corpses, red marks and pink shadows of stains. Vadim laughed. "I guess virginhood is proven." He shook his head. Just too bizarre.

“Very fucking funny.” Dan couldn’t quite stop a grin. Whatever the future would bring, they’d carry the hours with them, carved into their skin.

Vadim led Dan towards the bathroom, stepped under the shower first, to make sure the temperature was right, then helped Dan in as well. “Face wall.”

“You do realise this would be a hell of a lot easier if you simply untied me.” Yet Dan did as he was told, standing with his legs braced under the spray, hissing when hot water hit the cuts on his biceps. Bowing his head, the heat began to soothe the ache in the rest of his body.

“Like to see you like this. Touch you like this.” Vadim found the shower gel the hotel provided, ran the washcloth under the water, poured shower gel in and rubbed the cloth to build up some suds. He began to wash Dan, starting with his neck, tracing the lines of muscle, above all, feeling him, alive, warm, powerful despite his predicament. Soaped up his back, then reached around for his chest and pecs, cleaning him.

“You kinky bastard.” Dan flexed his hands and arms, the bondage pulled his shoulders back, making every muscle stand out in intriguing ways.

“But you like it, too.” Vadim grinned and bit gently into Dan’s shoulder. “What does this make us, then?”

A dry huff was Vadim’s answer, and a minute shiver that ghosted across Dan’s body. “Two kinky bastards, I guess.” He kept his eyes closed beneath the curtain of his wet, dark hair. Unthinkable, all those years ago, to trust his ‘enemy’ with his life, and most of all his sanity.

Vadim knelt down, gritting his teeth against the pain, and cleaned up Dan’s legs, cock, ass, smiling as he did so. He glanced up. “I don’t think we’re quite ready yet for another go, eh?”

Dan laughed, shaking his head ‘no’.

Vadim stood again, gave himself a quick wash, and of course didn’t quite manage to keep the soapy water out of the cut. Never mind. He’d had much worse. Then he stopped the water and reached for the towel, running it over Dan’s body, swiftly and efficiently—he’d towelled both Anoushka and Nikolai, nothing but tenderness in this. He’d miss the kids, despite what little time he’d actually spent with them. Sometimes, he missed being a father.

“Are you going to feed me, as well?”

“I think I could live with you sucking food from my fingers.” Vadim laughed and helped Dan out of the bathtub, watched him lift his eyebrows, and took the answer as a ‘yes’.

“The cuts have started bleeding again.” Dan glanced at his biceps, then nodded towards Vadim’s thigh. A thin rivulet of water mixed with red ran down the inside of his leg. “There’s a first aid pack in my bag.” No longer a bergan, but a sports bag. Epitome of his new life and transformation from undercover soldier to an embassy’s head of security. And what a brilliant head of security he was right now, Dan thought with a wry grin. Cut and cutting, cumming, raw, inside another man’s body, getting fucked in return until he screamed, and, worst of all, walking around with his wrists bound. But no one would ever know.

“Sit down. I’ll get it.” Vadim gestured towards the bed, then went to fetch the first aid pack. Had Dan expected this? A tight dressing should be enough, no need to stitch. He’d had that much control. After cleaning the wound, he covered and bandaged it tightly, then washed his hands again and checked on his own wound.

“You do realise that would be a hell of a lot easier if you untied me and I did it for you?” Dan grinned, shaking droplets out of his wet hair. The water tickled its way down his back. He wriggled, grimacing, unable to scratch.

“Can’t trust you not to try and give me blowjob, and I’d hate to disappoint.” Vadim commented and cleaned the cuts, then bandaged himself. As naturally as if he’d received these in combat. “Damn inconvenient place.”

“Aye, and damn convenient for you to know it’s there, but unable to be seen by anyone else, unless they get up close and personal.”

Vadim laughed. “There’s just you, Dan. No conscripts. Haven’t, for long time now. I do all my close combat with you these days.”

The realisation hit Dan that he’d been fucking monogamous for years. For some reason, that embarrassed the hell out of him, and he flashed a covering grin before glancing backwards, looking at the mess the bed was in. “Fucking disgrace, you better turn the covers upside down.”

Vadim stood, fastened the bandage and headed towards the food. Salmon, lobster, tiny bites with several layers of things he didn’t know or couldn’t identify. He took a handful of those and went back to Dan, offering him one close to his lips. Salmon and cream cheese on a small square of bread.

Dan laughed, but took the bite nevertheless, talking while chewing. “Last time I was hand-fed it was by my mother, when I was a baby.” Conveniently forgetting the hospital in India, and a weakness that had gone beyond the physical. “You could let me smoke a fag and feed me some of the wine as well. When you’re done with that, your cock, please.”

Vadim laughed. “First have to make sure you’re not hungry.”

“I always will be hungry for your cock, no matter how often I suck it.” Dan grinned while Vadim poured him some wine and offered the glass, then leaned in to kiss his lips before Dan could lick the wine off.

Vadim took a sip himself, then got the packet of cigarettes from Dan’s trousers, helping him smoke with a look of disgust, that amused the hell out of Dan, then went on feeding him. Every now and then alternating and teasing him with a bite only to have it himself, or pushed his thumb in with the bite, making Dan lick it, and giving him a grin when he did, and Dan laughed in return. Five hours now. Not yet. Not yet. Still time.

“Vadim?” Hunger was finally sated and the wine was down to less than a glass. “I really do want you to untie me soon.” Dan slowly licked a last bit of cream off his lips. The mini strawberry tarts had been his favourite, as always. “I want to hold you.”

Vadim’s face grew serious and tender. He looked away, then stood behind Dan, undoing the knots, running his hands up his arms, avoiding the bandage, then massaging his shoulders, while Dan let his head drop, purring under the strong kneading. Vadim felt words like lumps of lead in his throat. “There. Free.” He kissed Dan’s neck again, clean skin, soap, hair still damp. “I guess I’ll regret it.”

Dan lifted his head, then let it drop backwards so he could look at Vadim. Rolling his shoulders before lifting his arms, which were stiff at first, aching, until he touched Vadim and pulled him down with him, letting himself fall backwards onto the bed, feet still on the floor. Cupping Vadim’s face with his hands. “No, I don’t think you will.” Kissing before Vadim could answer, slow and languid, as if they had all the time in the world.

Again, Vadim felt that tightness in his throat, and kept his eyes shut, hoping Dan wouldn’t notice. Funny, he thought, we’ve been so lucky, having this, but I can’t help wanting more. More of this. More of Dan. More life. He fought the pressure and relaxed, concentrating on the tender kiss, stretched out on the bed,

hands in Dan's hair. He willed himself to remember this, too, kissing, Dan's hair between his fingers. If only he could ignore the pain, but it was there, all the time, and growing worse the more tender this became. Just don't fucking make me cry, Dan. Please don't. Hard enough as it is.

Dan's hands were everywhere, stroking Vadim's smooth skin, memorising the sensation of imprints of fingers and palms, how it felt to stroke along the shaved neck; the heat of Vadim's body, especially between his legs and running down his arse, between the cheeks, leading to tight, dark heat, and a yielding that would stay with him forever.

He rolled both of them onto the side after a while, face to face, never ceasing to kiss and stroke. Still on the messy bed-clothes, but he couldn't bring himself to stop, because if he did, the last hours might already be over. "Hold me," he murmured with a strained voice. "Just fucking hold me."

Vadim was too shaken to say much, or do much, when he just wanted to curl up like a hurt child, because that pain in his guts and heart grew worse and worse. He held Dan with enough strength to constrict, but Dan was easily strong enough to withstand his strength.

Dan didn't want to say anything, but the words were unstoppable. "I fucking love you. Don't leave me. You've got to find me."

Again, fucking tears. Vadim shook his head, then pressed his face into the crook of Dan's shoulder, hoped to hide his weakness and felt like a man condemned to die. "I will...find you. If it's the last thing I'll do, I'll come back. Nothing will stop me." He couldn't bear the thought of suicide now but clung to the hope that whatever happened, they were both well-equipped to deal with anything that came. He couldn't say the word. *Lapushka*. Couldn't push himself over the edge.

"Aye," Dan whispered, "we'll be together." Tender kisses, now, light touches of fingers, hands, body, skin, and again and again his lips. "If you can't...then I will. I will find you. Wherever and however. Whatever it takes." Pleading, as if he could turn make-believe into reality, by just believing strongly enough. "Whatever it costs." Dan wanted to scream and cry, and tried so hard to concentrate on another sensation instead: lust. At least lust would prove they were still alive, and still together. "Anything."

Vadim smiled a sad, very tender smile. “This...this is just more of same. Not different. Just away from here. We will find place that’s not Afghanistan. Just little while now.” He ran his fingers down Dan’s face, and forced that smile to stay. “Best time in my life—everything’s just noise. Noise and smoke. I’d die for you, Dan. No questions asked.”

“No, Vadim. No.” Dan’s dark eyes were unforgivingly intense. “You must not die for me, not ever. You must live for me, you understand?” His fingertips rested on Vadim’s face. “Give me your word, you will live for me, whatever happens. Even if I never see you again. I need to believe that somewhere, out there, you are alive.”

Vadim shook his head, trying again, with not much success, to suppress the emotion. No way out. No suicide. He’d just have to live off hope. “Aye. I’ll live. You...take care, too. Whatever happens.” Just in case there’s a war, a meltdown, if the earth just grinds to a halt and we are all hurled into space.

“I will. I give you my word, whatever happens.” Dan took a deep breath before he managed to smile. It felt like lines being etched into his face with acid, but he forced a smile instead of tears and this goddamned pain. “And now, Vadim, I want to fuck you. I know you’re sore, but I want you, one last time, and then, finally, I’ll suck you off, because I need to take your taste with me.”

Vadim wasn’t sure he’d be able to get hard, the demand was fair enough. The pain would be a good antidote. “Just careful with the bandage,” he murmured, and reached for the lube. “And let’s get rid of the covers.”

They got up, Dan standing and watching as Vadim pulled the messed-up covers free and tossed them on the ground, revealing the mattress underneath. No blood. Both of them got back onto the bed, facing each other.

Dan lay on his side, stroking Vadim’s chest. Vadim squirted lube into his hand, then pulled his good leg up and pushed a couple of lubed-up fingers inside. Oh, this *would* hurt. Vadim grinned at Dan with wry humour, then kissed his chest, moved downwards, and ran his lips to Dan’s cock, taking it between his lips. Another thing he’d miss, oddly enough, mostly what it did to Dan, the way he breathed.

Dan’s hand dropped to stroke the short hair, while his eyes closed, determined to remember every little thing. The way Vadim’s lips felt as they closed around his cock and slid down, the way the teeth scraped lightly. How he

breathed in and pushed himself further in, until he could feel his cock against the back of his throat. He was rapidly getting hard, despite the pain inside and out. Desperation did that, and the knowledge of time against them. Opening his eyes, Dan stared at the sight for a while, took in the movement. Head, lips and face, until his breath became ragged, knowing he couldn't go any further or he wouldn't be able to do what he needed to. "Lie on your side."

Vadim glanced up, and reluctantly released the cock. He wasn't quite soft anymore, and hoped whatever Dan did would get him fully there. He turned his back, and twisted his neck to get a kiss as Dan moved up closer behind him. This gave Dan full control, but just doing this would be good, didn't actually matter if he came or not. Or whether it hurt. The taste still on his lips, the memory against the back of his throat. It felt like carefully stocking a museum he'd be able to wander through, as long as he did this well enough.

If anything, Dan was even more careful, slower, working with minute movements. Lying behind Vadim, on his right, avoiding the cut on his biceps. His chest touched Vadim's back, and their legs were moulded close, with the cut leg angled away. Dan tried not to touch the bandage, yet their bodies were so close, not a finger could move between them. "I remember when I first looked at you." Dan's voice was hardly above a whisper as he eased his cock against the sore muscle, moved no more than a fraction, the most gentle rocking movement, as tender as his hands and his lips that kissed the back of Vadim's head. "*Really* looked at you." He didn't know why he had to talk, but all those words wanted to come out and be uttered. It was his very last chance.

Vadim felt Dan inside, sore, aching, stretching him again, but it was all welcome, and the slow deliberate tenderness did strike a chord and made him harder. Didn't know what time Dan was talking about, probably the time in the mountains, when he'd been tortured, helpless, at the mercy of a man who didn't give any mercy, no quarter.

"I hated you." Dan's gentle movements continued, as slow and tender as if Vadim prepared him for his fist. "You were so goddamned perfect and yet so flawed."

"Flawed...is one...way of putting it." Was he still the same man? The same cunning, brutal Spetsnaz who'd raped just for the rush of it, the man who kept a

core of steel even under pressure. Didn't feel like it. Vadim felt he was pretending to be that, when this was the thing he wanted to be. Just a man.

Softly chuckling, the sound hurt the back of Dan's throat and burnt in his eyes. "I thought I was better than you." He felt too much, was tearing himself open with all of this, but nine years deserved all his pain. "How wrong was I."

Vadim reached behind him to touch Dan's neck. "I wanted you even then. And I was...curious. I tried to...get into your mind, and instead let you in. Not good, and yet best thing I've done in this whole war."

"Best thing I've done in all my life." Deeper and deeper, no matter how slowly, until Dan could finally feel himself, for the last time, embedded deeply within Vadim's body. He began to rock, while dropping his hand to Vadim's cock, stroking as unhurriedly as his hips were moving. Time was stretching, and he dragged out every remaining second, staying within low simmering lust, while Vadim's breath shifted, felt more pressed, part pain, part desire.

"I'm not the same man anymore." Dan murmured, "Without you I'd probably be a drunken wanker, gibbering on about past glories. A security guard in a parking lot, drinking myself to death."

"Dan..." Vadim leaned into the other's body, watched Dan stroke him, felt desire grow stronger than the pain, barely. "Just while longer, and I'll be different, too. I'll no longer be...that soldier. No lies."

"You already are different. Just a man." Dan's voice was getting husky, his movements increasing a mere fraction. Hand and cock, now an extension of the other. He fucked as gently and tenderly as he could, all of his love and all of his lust pouring into every tiny thrust and each searching stroke. "And I so very fucking much love that man."

Vadim felt himself tighten up, body finally translating the touches and dealing with the pain, lust grew, and he groaned, wanting nothing more in the world to last but this, this tenderness, Dan talking. The illusion that there was no marching orders, he'd stay here and that was the end of it. Happily ever after. "And I love...you." In Russian. "You're killing me with this..." he gave a near-silent laugh. "Difficult to...endure..."

"Difficult to part." Dan groaned, he sped up slightly, but his stroking remained slow. Couldn't let Vadim come. "Most difficult...ever." He concentrated on nothing but his feelings. Every sensation, no matter how small or big.

Imprinting them into his memory, if he had to feed from them for years to come, he would. Finding partners for sex, whores perhaps, but never lovers. No one like Vadim, never again.

It took him a long time to build up his lust, deliberately so, until he finally allowed himself to let go, all the way murmuring words that made no sense but were full of meaning. Love and need, and not a moment of embarrassment that he might behave like a sissy and not like a man. He knew who and what he was. When he came, it was with a low sound of pain or lust, as his body was gripped by Vadim's and his own was wrapped around his lover.

Vadim was desperate, his body in agony, but he didn't care, relished in the closeness, the lust Dan found in his body and fanned, fanned, kept himself there again, on the edge. Releasing it would be a mercy in many ways. As if Dan tried to make a point, a point that it was him who did this, and that was what he wanted. He reached behind and touched the other's flank, stroking the sweaty skin, while lust still held him like the pain. They fused, whirled in his mind and body, mixed up, impossible to say which was which. An intense pressure and ache. He turned a little, sought Dan's lips, kissed him again, placed his hand on the hand around his cock, stroked the strong, swollen veins of Dan's hand, traced the line of the wrist. Body tensing, but couldn't shed the pressure. "Help me cum."

"Not like this." Dan gently swatted Vadim's hand away. Easing himself out of the much-abused body as carefully as he could, he rolled Vadim over to lie on his back, while he once more knelt on the bed, between the other's legs. "I told you. I want to taste you." Taking that cock in his hand, for a moment marvelling at the perfection of girth and length, the way the veins stood out, the precum glistening on the swollen head and the balls nestled heavy below. "Even your cock is fucking perfect," Dan murmured before he lapped at the slit, concentrated, fully focussed, and doing nothing but teasing and coaxing, before slowly sucking it inside, creating a vacuum of friction and wet heat, while his tongue worked beneath the ridge and along the length. He so loved giving head, they could stamp 'cocksucker' on his forehead and he'd simply laugh, because that's what he was, addicted to the smooth hardness down his throat, tasting cum, and sucking Vadim's cock.

"Ah, you...yes." Vadim's hands dug into the mattress, then found Dan's shoulders and squeezed them. Moving up into the heat, eyes closed, trying to get deeper and faster, because now that the pain had subsided and had become a dull

throbbing, lust grew out of all proportion. Mindless, he pushed up, feeling the cut keenly as he did. “Please.”

Dan was careful not to touch the bandage, while his hands moved up the shaft, then replaced them with his lips as he breathed in sharply, pushing himself down as far as he could, ignoring all reflexes, while breathing in the musky scent, the essence of Vadim. Kneading his balls, working on flesh and skin, while increasing speed and suction. He was merciless, knowing just what to do, and how to do it. Knowing Vadim inside and out, and playing his body like an exquisite instrument. Come for me, he thought, let me taste you, while he kept his eyes open, taking in every sight and sound, never to forget those words. *You*, and *please*, and he thought, I fucking love you, I want to stay like this forever, and the parting will kill me in a few short hours.

Vadim lost all coherence and despite his body’s exhaustion, there was no way he could resist, like a switch that was being flicked, a trigger squeezed, and he came, loudly, groaning and pleading, every muscle in his body knotting up and the pain only pushed him deeper. Stars, blackness, tunnel vision, the orgasm felt like a tearing of the fabric of his being. He collapsed back onto the bed, feeling Dan swallow, and suck, drain him like he did. Reaching idly for Dan’s head, running his fingers through the damp hair, lips half open, lids heavy, looking down at him.

Dan came back up, licking the spent cock clean. Lingering for a moment, until he lifted his head and smiled at Vadim. Vadim sated and spent, completely relaxed: Vadim how he rarely was. “I’ll never forget this sight.”

“What...sight?” Vadim wasn’t even curious, just speaking the first thing he thought.

“You, looking well fucked.”

“Oh. That.”

Dan moved up, covering Vadim’s body with his own. Just hold me, Dan thought, but he didn’t say it, instead lay on the body and wrapped his arms and legs around it. With every bit of himself and with all his strength, as if he refused to ever let go.

With effort, Vadim brought his arms up and splayed both hands on Dan’s back, feeling him breathe. The weight was good, protecting and reassuring, sharing warmth and everything they had left. Vadim’s eyes closed, and he slipped off to sleep with the odd feeling all would be good.

~ End of "Soldiers" ~