

# **Special Forces: Mercenaries (1989-1992)**

## **Part 1: Chapters 19-34**

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## **About Special Forces:**

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

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

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

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

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## 1989 Kabul—Prologue

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How many more?

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

Heard the sound of boots running up the stairs.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The noise was deafening, ringing in Dan's ears, as the world lost all sound and the grenade tore the men apart. Unable to hear anything, Dan threw the duvet aside. He was bruised, the rifles heavy, but he wasn't going to let go of them, not

yet. He had no idea what was still waiting for him. His body was in working order, so he jumped out of the corner and ran towards the door. A wounded soldier was trying to run away. He aimed roughly with the AK, yelling towards the man's back, in Russian, "Go to hell." before opening fire and mowing him down.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Landing on both feet, Dan rolled forwards with the impact. Checked weapons. Moved. Leg still functioned. Superficial cut only. Getting back up, breathless, he set off across the roof-top. In full view, no cover, if he didn't make it in time, he was a sitting duck. Sprinting, he glanced backwards. Men at the window. He let his AK loose once more, firing roughly in their direction until the magazine ran out. He threw the weapon away, and yanked the second one off his shoulders.

Where to now? He spotted a skylight. Hopefully the extension was a utility room or something, anything that lead outside, just not the back door. They'd be waiting for him there. He kicked the glass in with his boots, splintering the whole frame when the wood gave way, leaving a hole just big enough for him. Nothing moved below. "Who dares...?" He muttered.

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

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

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

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

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

"Looking for a way out?" The voice was calm and mocking, coming from somewhere between the surfaces of steel. English words. Whoever had spoken had

very likely already selected his position—and would be keeping himself covered. “Maybe to tell the rest of the CIA that their agent is fucked?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dan laughed, a short-sharp stab of a sound, while horror slammed into his guts. ‘Honey-trap’, how would that bastard know? “I just killed at least a dozen of

your men. What makes you think I'm a honey trap, bastard?" He managed to touch the colander, moving it ever so slowly to try and get a glimpse of the man.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He tried to force himself to act, to do something, anything, move, get the survival instinct to kick in. Finally, one thought managed to tear him out of his

frozen state. *Vadim*. It was up to Dan if he was going to have any chance at all. Now that he knew, he'd found a handle on the Colonel. A possible way to crack him and make a mistake. He was certain he'd seen a shadow move towards one corner of the room. He gently let go of the colander, sliding silently down and creeping towards the edge while talking. It took all of his willpower to force his voice into a semblance of carelessness. "I bet you enjoyed watching, didn't you?"

Soundlessly moving the rifle from across his shoulder, he placed it on the ground. He had to be fast and the weapon would be nothing but a hindrance. "Makes me wonder, what went through your head? Wanting to jerk off while watching, imagining you were the one who got fucked or maybe the one who did the fucking?" Dan's hand slid to the knife in the small of his back, silently moved its position to the front with no more than a rustle, tucking it down carefully. "Tell me. Have you ever tasted a man's cum?"

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

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

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

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

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

Dan's eyes narrowed, listening carefully to every nuance, trying to get a picture of where his foe could be. He was pretty sure he'd hit him. Good. The man

would make a mistake eventually, even though ‘eventually’ was what Dan couldn’t count on. He had no time, he’d have to act soon or more soldiers would be piling in and then he’d be fucked.

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

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

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

Shit. He’d been wrong.

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

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

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

The Colonel snarled at him, almost too breathless to speak, struggling for air himself, but holding on with the determination of a bulldog that had its jaws locked. “Speaking of...fucking, you...degenerate...piece...of shit, I’ll...drag everything out...of you. Every...last drop...of blood...in...Moscow...your death...will be...one...long...extended...nightmare.”

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

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

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

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

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

Dan froze, eyes widening for one split second. Those words hit deeper than twenty years of soldiering and all of his SAS training had ever prepared him for. No experience, no tricks, nothing had equipped him against the effect of those images that flashed across his mind.

Vadim. Raped. Vadim.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Smashing Dan's face into the floor again, The Colonel took him by the shoulder to turn him around.

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

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

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

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

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

The Colonel's scream turned almost immediately into a ghastly choke, and his grip loosened. Both hands went to his belly, trying to hold the guts in, pure instinct as he tried to get away. Blood running down the camo, as glistening flesh appeared in the cut. Almost instantly, the sweating face turned white as paper, as

the Colonel tried to stagger away, holding his guts in with his arm, reaching for the fridge to support his weight as trauma-shock denied him control of his body.

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

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

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

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

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

Dan let go of the body as if it were hot, then wiped his face, blood everywhere. He was drenched with it, his hair, face, clothes. His own body felt as

if it had been slaughtered, too. His gaze flickered around the kitchen, saw his pistol that the Colonel had kicked away, reloaded the two clips with shaking fingers and painful breath. No more glances at the dead man. No time to find the AK, anyway he simply didn't have the strength to carry the weapon. No idea if they were waiting for him at the back door of the kitchen exit, but he had to try. One more stab at living.

Dan staggered forward, stumbled, then managed to fall into a trot, forcing his body to comply as he made his way down the corridor he should have taken the first time. Another steel door, but this time unlocked when he tried the handle. Kicking it open, he expected gun fire, but nothing happened, no one there, except for early morning light in a deserted city of death and dust. Dan started to run, two streets and one corner away. The embassy. He had to make it there.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 1989—1990 Chapter XX—Touché

1989—Moscow, 19<sup>th</sup> February

The bag over his face started to dry. Vadim could almost breathe normally again. He could smell the lingering terror of whatever poor bastard had worn this before. Sweat, tears, a rank smell like dried vomit.

Hands tied behind his back, they made him walk. ‘*They*’ were a group of men that had been with him since he had regained consciousness. His mind kept working, kept to survival routines. *Determine number of aggressors, angle of attack; learn what you can about them, their intentions and strategy.*

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

He didn’t know where he was. Or when. He had no way of tracking time, and they were guarded when they talked. The plane could have landed anywhere. The car could have gone anywhere. They could have marched him anywhere. Wherever this place was, it was cold.

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

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

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

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

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

Disorientation.

*Dan.*

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

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

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

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

The usual double-think did not yield results. He had no idea why, or how, or when, or what next. He had worked too long towards this one slim chance, had dared to imagine that other life, and seeing it now vanish into nothing, there was no replacement. He'd thrown away the life he'd had, trusting on Dan to pull him in, secure and anchor him. The rope was severed, and he was hurtling into the void. Disoriented, aching in too many places.

The door opened again, and men entered.

The atmosphere changed at once. No word was spoken, but Vadim tensed and felt a punch just below the solar plexus, a vicious, painful hit. He doubled over, thankful the blow hadn't been to the groin, and was amused at that thought while his stomach seemed to want to spill everything he'd not eaten in the last hours or day. As if that had been some kind of signal, there were more punches and kicks, while Vadim collapsed, desperate to breathe and not vomit, the pain sharp enough to forbid every memory.

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

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

Pain, and more pain, but not repetitive, every kind of pain . . . different, sharp, pounding, tearing, blunt, crushing. Dark red and lightning coloured, unable to predict where the next impact would come from. Vadim tensed only to pit the remaining strength of his muscles against theirs, knowing which side would win, but focussed on keeping as much of himself intact as possible.

He screamed with what breath he had left, sobbed, allowed them to hear the pain—it didn't cause them to stop, but maybe it might mislead them about his real state. He needed to keep his wits together, despite the raging pain. Fight a silent fight to preserve the core.

Eventually, the beating stopped, almost as if they'd lost interest. Completely random. Disorientation. Surprise and excessive, determined force. And, above all, cunning. The three principles on which the might of the Soviet Union was based.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

were on the table, and decisions were made, all he really had to do was somehow get through it. It wasn't the terror of not knowing, nor the humiliation of begging. This was their set of rules, and they'd play the game according to them. There was nothing he had to do, and nothing he *could* do. No alternatives. It was inevitable.

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

Vadim's jaw muscles tensed. What was the man playing at? He had assumed he was just prodding and checking for something that would betray a weakness, a soft spot, to put a dagger in. Trying to open him up, gauge reactions. Nothing but probing. But *masochist*?

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

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

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

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

"Why?"

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

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

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

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

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

*I need to see his body.*

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

*I need to see the body.*

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

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

### **1989—Kabul, 19<sup>th</sup> February**

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

Dan sat crouched and in pain, a mess, despite having been cleaned and bandaged up. Some of the injuries had to be stitched, others were held together with butterfly clips. The worst was the headache, his forehead bruised and the skin

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

“Aye, Ma’am. Who else would have kidnapped him? They were Soviets, their uniforms just like the troops that had been sent to kill me.”

She pulled a chair closer before taking a pad of writing paper from the desk, together with her fountain pen. Sitting opposite, she leaned forwards. Her clear eyes narrowed. “Tell me everything that happened, Dan, from start to finish. Tell me about last night and this morning, and tell me all you believe has been of importance since you met Major Krasnorada. The more I know, the better I will be able to ascertain the situation.” She nodded at him, but Dan glanced warily at her paper and pen, while holding his aching head. The painkillers hardly touched his sore body. “Don’t worry,” she added, “all you tell me now will remain between us. I give you my word I will help you.”

Dan had never seen her face so determined and fierce. “You were also targeted, Dan. No one is going to try to kill one of mine, without me retaliating. Not even the KGB.”

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

### **1989—Moscow, 13<sup>th</sup> December, ten months later**

Again the door opened and the fear returned. Startled like a wild animal, Vadim didn’t resist as the guards grabbed his arms, forced him against the wall, tied his hands back, and put the sackcloth over his head. To stop him recognizing any other prisoners, he assumed.

Always the same. A year or two, or thereabouts, he didn’t know. Keeping track of time was too difficult; it had felt like an eternity. Often, he was too exhausted to keep his calendar. Lately, he didn’t remember to. Couldn’t remember whether he had marked the day down already or not. They screwed with the times when the light was on at the end of the corridor, with the rhythm of what were supposed to be his meals. No steady rhythm to his sleep, his awakening, no rhythm his body could remember or hold on to. He didn’t know whether he woke up from

something outside disturbing him, or from the usual five o' clock routine. He had no way of telling. It felt like there had never been anything else but this in his life.

They pushed him down the corridor. Not a word was spoken. Nobody ever uttered a single word. There were no signals from any neighbouring cells. He was alone in that hole, alone. Cold. The darkness and numbing silence only torn when they interrupted his sleep, when they emptied a bucket of water over him to wake him just increase his suffering.

He spent days tied down, chained up like a dog, for no other reason but to make life miserable and not allow a dulling of the discomfort. Sleep deprivation. Hunger. Cold. He knew the methods, but they still cut to the bone.

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

But that was denied.

Vadim didn't resist, didn't fight, couldn't, it seemed he was standing beside himself, with only rudimentary control over that body. Things happened *to* him. He didn't care much—it was all cold, hunger, pain, fear, but even the fear was dulling into a nameless, leaden dread that felt completely impersonal. Those were not *his* emotions. Therefore they were of no consequence.

They reached the room. Any room. Pushed inside, somebody kicked him in the legs, and Vadim collapsed onto his knees, fell onto his side, and it took focus to try and get upright again. His sense of balance was fucked. They removed the sackcloth. The light was too bright. He wasn't used to light any more. It hurt his eyes. Everything hurt.

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

“I think we're almost there,” murmured the interrogator. The only human voice he heard that was not a memory or his own voice. Vadim didn't quite believe it, but his memories and dreams were washed out these days, had lost all colour. Reality wasn't much better. The hole had taken all strength, all memories, and left nothing but the dread. He knew he'd been stripped of all that, but didn't actually know what 'it' was or signified, knew it had been important.

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

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

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

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

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

Vadim didn't understand. "What?"

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

That would be good, thought Vadim.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **1990—Dubai, 12<sup>th</sup> January**

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

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

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

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

One year, almost one year later. Eleven months, and they’d fought for Vadim’s release, with the Baroness doing most of the work. She’d proposed an exchange of political prisoners, offered bribes—money, advantages, anything they could possibly offer, but it had either not been enough, or the hatred had run too deep. The KGB hadn’t let go of Vadim, no matter what the Ambassador and her contacts had tried, and regardless of the crumbling state of the Soviet Union. The vast empire was pulling itself apart, torn into pieces by a force from within its own bowels.

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

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

He'd been clinging to his duties, pushing his fitness, while his mind was unable to cope with anything but the memory of Vadim. Even jerking off had become impossible; the oppressiveness of not-knowing too great, and the pain of hope unbearable—amidst the growing hopelessness.

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

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

Once he had sat on the chair in front of her desk, she looked at him for a moment with that unwavering gaze. When she spoke, her voice was quiet. "I've received a fax from my contact in Moscow. It is the copy of an official document."

Dan stared at her face, not at the paper in her hands. He couldn't bear it. The cold fist in his stomach was twisting his guts because he knew deep down what the document said. All she did now was verify what he'd refused to accept. Too late. He'd run out of time, reality was right there, in her hands.

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

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

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

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

She inhaled, no more than a minor pause, before inclining her head in a measured nod that told him she understood. Placing the reading spectacles that hung on a gold chain around her neck onto the bridge of her nose, she pulled another piece of paper close and began to read.

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

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

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

She leant forward, and spoke gently, as if addressing a disturbed child, trying not to sound patronising. “Dan, it *is* true. It is official. He will be executed.”

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

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

“Do you believe me, Ma’am?”

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

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

“They can do it, Dan, and they will.”

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

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

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

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

“I know, Ma’am.”

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

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

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

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

Her brows raised merely a fraction, but she didn’t query his request. “I will.”

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

**1990—Moscow, 9<sup>th</sup> January**

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

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

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

"You are...?"

"I am sorry."

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

"Yes, I did."

"So you did disgrace yourself with a British subject?"

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

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

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

"Is there anything wrong with him, comrade Konstantinov?"

The interrogator shook his head. "Despite comrade Krasnorada's many failings, he's still afganets. They often bring...certain conditions with them when they return."

"But is he fit to stand trial?"

"Certainly. It is a temporary, if recurring condition."

"Well then. Did you understand my question?"

"He's asking whether you disgraced yourself with Daniel Ewan McFadyen while serving in Afghanistan," prompted the interrogator to help him.

*Daniel Ewan McFadyen.* I didn't know he had a second name, Vadim thought, and felt his shoulders tense, his body shaken from something inside, something powerful, like an earthquake. Dark eyes. Huffed laughter. That man's

body close to his, moving, holding him, reaching inside, opening him up and making him whole.

“I...I did not.”

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

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

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

“I did.”

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

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

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

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

He answered, “Yes, I did,” whenever the judge expected it of him. The confession was long, exhaustive. Collaboration, sabotage, weapons trafficking to rebels, conspiracy, whatever. High treason, yes, that too, on top.

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

### **1990—Hungary, 27<sup>th</sup> January**

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

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

The weather should have been dreary grey with blankets of dirty snow, but this January had turned out to be a freak month in Budapest. How apt. Still cold, though, and growing rapidly colder now the sun was setting.

He glanced at the piece of paper, checked the address before putting it back into his pocket, feeling the familiar smoothness of the lapis lazuli beads against his fingers, warmed by his body. Keeping both hands in his jeans pockets, he pulled his shoulders up to his ears, not used to winter anymore. Dan lifted his head with a deep breath into the crisp air and stepped into the magnificent building with its fading beauty that served as the fencing salle. The entrance was deserted, whoever was meant to be manning the desk was nowhere to be seen, so he walked unhindered around the corner and found himself in front of a double door.

One of them stood open, allowing the view into a large rectangular room with golden brown wooden floor, shining with polish, and several tall windows all along the wall, mirroring the inside against the falling darkness. Dan stepped inside, saw two slender white-clad figures with fencing masks working with deadly intent and skilful precision.

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

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

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

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

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

Dan swallowed a gulp of fear, tension residing in his stomach. He was asking too much, but he had to try. Less than two weeks now. Ten days and seven hours, to be precise. He could probably make out the minutes if he checked his watch. Hands still in his pockets, he crossed the room with measured steps.

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

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

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

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

His only chance.

“I believe you’re the person I’m looking for, Katya...” What surname did she use now? Had she kept the old one or assumed another? “Krasnorada?” Even speaking the name out loud hurt. Hurt so deep inside it made him shudder.

She stared at him for a few seconds, then glanced at her training partner. “Thanks for the play, Szandor.” In English again, her voice as cool as a bucket of ice water even after what had looked like a strenuous bout.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dan watched warily; even blunt, the weapon was still a piece of steel. Vadim had told him of an instance when someone's blade had slipped past a mask and gone through the throat.

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

She-wolf. Lioness.

"Aye." His arm hung loose at his side, the other had never left his pocket. "I am that man." What else could he say?

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

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

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

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

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

*And the British weren't meant to be there?* Dan snorted to himself. As if that alone made it impossible.

“I cannot see in what other capacity you could have met. He did possess sensitive operational information. You imply it was a personal matter, which is highly unlikely. Do you follow me?”

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

She pressed her lips together and didn't say any more. A hint of pain showed in her eyes. Then, voice cold: “He had a brilliant career in front of him. He could be a powerful man now, and you exposed him to the world. I don’t believe for a moment he committed treason, but they do, and they will kill him for it, just as a warning to others.” Her breast rose as she took a deep breath. “I am not stupid, and women talk. I know he had his ‘bitches’ in the army.”

Every word a slap, each sentence a knife cutting deeper than his own blade had ever cut Vadim. Then the last word. That...misunderstanding. Not of who was who and who did what, but of what they had. “*Bitch?* You think I am his bitch?” Not ‘was’, no, not yet. Refusing to accept the inevitable before it was time in ten days and...six hours.

She took another half-step away. “I don’t believe for a moment you were anything else. Anybody else would not have destroyed him like you did.”

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

“What kind of favour?” Her jaw muscles tightened.

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

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

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

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

She slipped into a light sweater. "His father is heartbroken. His only son. The mother is dead. And Vadim...convicted of these things. I imagine the KGB talked to his father as well. Can you imagine what that means to an old man? Do you have a family, Mr McFadyen? Can you even for a moment imagine what you did to us?"

Dan's brows rose. Attack, fire, near-defeat, not even a counter attack. "What *I* did? Do you believe Vadim fell victim to *me*?" But then she thinks you are his bitch. Too resigned to fight the notion, but the mere thought that what he felt—this motherfucking love that wouldn't stop—was nothing but being about butches and bitches, was cutting deeper with every minute.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Your intentions, then?"

"My intentions? For him to know before he dies that I still love him, always will, and I am alive and will continue to fight for him as long as there is anything to fight for. I would do anything." Dan swallowed. "Anything at all for him."

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

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

Dan nodded. What else?

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

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

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

“Do you want tea or coffee?” She went into the kitchen stuffed her discarded fencing gear into a washing machine, added detergent, and started a programme.

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

Dan watched silently as she went through the motions—taking the coffee machine out of a cupboard, wiping it down quickly, adding coffee powder from a glass jug, water from the tap, switched the button, then looked at him again, quizzically. “Please, have a seat.” Either remembering her manners or hospitality. “I need that shower.”

She headed off down the corridor, and as if in an afterthought took the letters with her. He heard the click as she locked the door, and a few moments later, the sound of water was audible.

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

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

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

Had she been crying in the privacy of the shower? Her eyes seemed puffy. She put her hands on the work surface, straightened her arms, head lowered. “I could make you pay for this.” Her voice still vibrating with something. Her lips pressed together for a long moment. “I guess I will.”

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

“I failed to get pregnant. My clock is ticking, but I want another child. The last one.” She took two mugs with one hand, the click of the ceramic betraying her shaking hands. With her jaw clenched, she set the mugs down hard. She stared into the open cupboard for a long moment. “The letter from my gynaecologist. The insemination failed. I am not pregnant.” She reached for the sugar in a simple glass jar, unscrewed the lid, measured three spoons, her actions now forceful, precise as she poured the coffee into one mug, stirred it for him. As she set the mug down, she stared into his face. “That is the only thing I want. A child.”

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

“What does that have to do with me?”

Her face was nearly without expression, maybe a hint of derision. “You are a man. I believe children happen when a sperm fuses with an egg.” She stayed put, no closer and did not pull away. “You seem healthy enough, and being a homosexual does not make you infertile.” Her eyes held a challenge, and then she moved away, like a fencer having scored a point. “Szandor is a friend, but he is out of the question.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He raised his hand to wipe across his face, coffee forgotten. She resented him, he'd expected that. She accused him, and he hadn't counted on how much that hurt. "Will you do it? Will you talk to his father?" He looked up once more, straight into her eyes. He was selfish, and he knew it.

"Yes. I will break his father's heart."

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

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

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

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

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

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

She crossed the distance swiftly and backhanded him, her face a mask of seething rage. “Don’t you dare! It was *you* who ruined him. Don’t you forget that.” Her eyes ablaze. “My children are none of your business. At least I gave Vadim more than death.”

His face stung, his immediate reaction as always to defend, attack and *kill*. He shook, brimming with rage, fists clenched, fighting his own instincts. Those words, more painful than the rape, but perhaps it was the price he had to pay for the torture.

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

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

She looked at him, no trace of fear in her eyes. He was strong enough to break her, angry enough to do it, but maybe being the wife of a Spetsnaz officer had prepared her for violence.

“One more thing: Are you healthy?”

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

“Good. That means we have a deal.”

He couldn’t do it. Had to.

Vadim.

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

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

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

Fuck, the beads. Dan balked at her reaction. Fuck the bitch. Too late, her accusations and mockery would never leave him.

He turned his head when she moved past him to the bedroom, didn’t follow at first. Walked over to the beads instead, carefully picking them up, and stashed them in his inner jacket pocket this time. He couldn’t bear to have anything of Vadim’s anywhere near this...thing. Crime scene. That’s what it felt like.

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

Heavy curtains were drawn across the window, the bed a large, low futon, black sheets and covers, the room held very little else, two matching nightstands, an alarm clock, a bookshelf. She had dropped her bathrobe, her body lean and muscular, toned, not exactly boyish, soft and rounded in the right places, but hiding her strength underneath. She stood at the foot of the bed, facing him, naked, only her hair done up.

He hated her more that moment than he had ever hated Vadim. Ten years ago his body had been raped. Today it was his mind. “I want you to give me your word. I don’t know if I am even fertile. Give me your word *this* is my part of the bargain, and it completes the deal. In return you will talk to Vadim’s father, and you will find a way to deliver a message from me.” He took his jumper off, dumped it on the floor, unbuttoned his shirt.

“I will ask you for a sample tomorrow,” she said. “That increases the chances. But yes, that’s it. All the fine print.” She watched him undress, her gaze glued to his chest, remaining just as calm as she’d been most of the time. “I will deliver the message, tomorrow.”

Dan pushed the shirt off his shoulders, let it drop on top of the jumper. Every mark, every scar on his body linking him to Vadim. The neat, precise circle on top of my left shoulder where Vadim shot him instead of killing him. The ‘V’ cut into clear lines of scars on his left bicep – a companion piece to the one Vadim carried on his inner thigh. The dead, ragged flesh peeking out above the top of the waistband of his jeans courtesy of a car bomb. Vadim had crossed two countries to be at his side.

“A sample. Where. Your surgery?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You don't have to. All I need is a physiological reaction.” She did look at him then. Did she remember the scars Vadim had carried when he came back to Moscow to heal up? Maybe wondering how he and Vadim looked together. How his dark skin matched Vadim's near permanent sunburn? She disappeared into the bathroom, muttering something about preparing herself with Vaseline. Gave him time to prepare as well. As businesslike as in a brothel.

Dan didn't look at her when she left, wouldn't look at anything at all. He lay on the futon, on his back. No way could he close his eyes; his life had taught him that blindness equated to vulnerability. He stared at the ceiling instead.

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

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

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

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

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

Like himself. *Her* cunt. He glanced at her briefly.

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

Accepting the burden of having to do all the work, not making it easier, not making it more difficult, merely going through the mechanics of sex. She was obviously cynical enough to do it, use a body like any other tool, holding him tight, giving him what friction she could. He doubted she'd come, it wasn't required.

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

Her eyes opened, gazing into his face. She seemed a touch surprised, possibly had been just too confident in herself and how she thought things worked. Vadim obviously hadn't given her this kind of trouble.

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

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

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

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

She looked as if she was a hair's breadth away from calling it all off; her lips close to uttering - let's forget about it, sorry, no way, haha, how embarrassing. Kneel like an animal? She left his body, jaw tense again, eyes like blue glass. Pride, resistance, even revulsion. It had taken much to get that far.

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

Dan turned, knelt behind her, paid no attention to her resistance or facial expression. They had a deal, he'd fulfil it. No matter how.

He fucked her, just like that. It was brutal but not personal. He was goddamned strong, just like Vadim, but unlike the other, nothing would ever hold

him back. Not with this woman. He was fucking a hole and a body with the aggression of hatred and the violence of abuse. His own. Not hers. Even though it was her body that was being penetrated.

He didn't touch her except for his hands digging into her hips, holding her steady for his thrusts. Didn't look at her, except for a blurred gaze of her back, stared right through her, remembered lines of scars across and down a broad back, a word that had changed its meaning. Didn't try not to hurt her, didn't give a shit. He fucked her body with mechanical precision, silent, except for sharp breaths.

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

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

She moved away as soon as it was over, visibly shaken, her hips bruised, reddening, her strength had resisted him, but she was no match.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He waited till she left the room before looking for the bathroom and the promised towel. He couldn't bear the thought of getting back into his clothes unwashed, sticky with her, smelling of her, any memory of her unbearable. It took him precisely three minutes to wash her scent off his hair and body. He was still damp when he emerged, towel wrapped around his waist.

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

He nodded, just went back into the bedroom that still smelled of sweat and sex, to get into his clothes. Sex? He'd never have sex with Vadim again, nor feel the lust that was so much more than mere fucking.

He hurt, but at least the pain couldn't get any worse, she'd hammered the dagger home, finished him off. Nothing more than a dog on the ground, kicked and beaten. He'd never thought he could get that low.

Fully clothed, boots laced, Dan came back into the kitchen to collect his jacket, looking through the pockets for the message he'd prepared. "Here." He put it down onto the table. "It's typed. It's a 'fable'. Make sure it is told exactly in this way."

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

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

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

*Lapushka*. Fucking 'little paw'.

\* \* \*

His taxi pulled up at precisely 0700 hrs the next morning. Still dark. Dan glanced up at the building, then pushed the main door open. Taking the stairs, one at a time, a steady pace despite the burning wish to turn back and leave and never see the bitch again.

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

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

Left hand in his jeans pocket again, he rang the door bell and waited.

Listening for sounds inside.

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

Dan almost jumped backwards, managed to control himself with one sharp intake of breath. Fuck. A mirror, just younger, so much younger, and female. Vadim. Fuck. Fuck! How was he supposed to pull through with the last task of his fucking part of a motherfucking deal? He'd been raw inside for longer than he could remember, and the last day had torn him up. And now...that girl was a grenade exploding in his face.

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

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

Vadim's daughter turned, and he followed her into the kitchen, where she sat in front of a bowl of muesli. Fresh fruit, yogurt, oat flakes. Breakfast of champions. She was reading something, a sheet of paper that had been folded up. The fable. Her brow darkened, and she looked up. "And? How does the story end? This is yours, isn't it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When Katya emerged, she remained in the doorway, glancing from one to the other, her mouth twisted, seeming to consider whether to explain who the stranger was, or the daughter, or leave it. In the end, all she said was, “Go downstairs, darling, Szandor will take you to school.”

In Russian.

Again dark resentment, sullen hostility like only a teenager could feel it. “I’m *eating*, Mom.”

“I can see that. You go downstairs.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He turned his head, found the kitchen window, stared out of it. It would be another sunny day. The sky began to lighten as dawn approached. He didn't want to talk, just get it over with. "Solitary confinement. Beatings. Sleep deprivation." His gaze never strayed away from the window, but he could see her out of the corner of his eye.

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

She shook her head, as if remembering Vadim, but refusing to link his actions to the man in front of her. “He knew about the consequences, and still acted the way he did. And I believe that is how he will die. He’ll see it, and he’ll still accept it, somehow, I don’t know how, but I believe, I know, Vadim will never flinch from what he did. He always had good reasons for everything, and not a guilty moment in his life. That’s why I loved him.”

Dan had nothing to say. The anguish, the way Vadim's eyes turned the color of the sea. Knew every little thing, each detail. Yes, Vadim would die, but he’d die broken. “He signed a confession,” he finally replied. “Admitted to something he’s never done.” Just lust, then love. Addiction all the way through. “They broke him.” He paused, his hand shook while he brushed a strand of hair out of his face before he buried the hand once more. His eyes returned to the approaching dawn outside.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dan went to the bathroom without another word, and remained behind the locked door for over half an hour, longer than he'd expected. He flushed the loo several times before he opened the door again. He left without acknowledgement, leaving no trace except for the sample container that stood sealed and correctly packaged, inserted in the transportation kit. She had twenty-four hours before his sperm would have lost its mobility, and forty-eight before it was useless.

He'd be back in Dubai before then.

### **1990—Moscow, between 9<sup>th</sup> January and 7<sup>th</sup> February**

After the trial, Vadim had a visitor. His father. He looked aged and worn, and his hands shook with agitation. Vadim sat there, studying that familiar face. After a long silence, his father told him news of the family. No words such as 'how are you', no niceties; his father was an intelligent man, he didn't make things look better than they were. They did not speak about the execution. Vadim was too tired to tell his father to go home, instead he endured his presence like anything else, knowing it would end, like any other pain.

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

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

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

*But there were hunters, and they said lions and tigers are not supposed to be friends, and that they were not themselves anymore. The lion had forgotten how to be a lion, and the tiger had betrayed his stripes.*

*On one of their hunts together, the lion fell into a trap. The tiger tried to free his friend, but he had no hands to reach down inside the pit and help him out. The hunters couldn't trap the tiger, try as they might, and the tiger still roams their old hunting grounds, remembering the gift of love and friendship.*

*Lions may die, but friendship doesn't.*

“Who is the tiger, Vadim?”

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

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

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

Tiger. The tiger can't lose his stripes. Two predators in the mountains. Friendship. Try as they might. Dan. This was Dan's story. His past lover. And that was proof Dan was alive. No sniper. And he had come to believe what the interrogator had said.

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

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

### **1990—Dubai, 7<sup>th</sup> February**

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

Dan sat on the edge of his bed, opposite the wall and its relentless clock, the black hands moving ever forward. Hours, minutes. Second after second. Moving. Finality, measured by the unyielding tick-tick-tick. No other sounds, the building was as silent as a tomb, staff tiptoeing across the hall and whispering in the corridors. The room's grave walls were closing in on him, and only one constant: the clock. The movement of its hands. Cruel and uncaring.

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

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

Dan's hands were damp, he didn't feel the airconditioner blasting icy air into the dusky room. Sitting motionless, eyes transfixed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

They would be standing behind Vadim now. Pistol drawn, muzzle against the back of his neck. Blue eyes bound, blind.

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

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

Vadim. Would he think of him at the end?

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

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

It was over.

Vadim was dead.

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

"Dan?" The voice behind the door belonged to the Baroness. Another knock. "Dan? I need to talk to you. Please."

Perhaps it was her voice that made him move, and the fact she was his boss, or maybe he simply walked to the door and opened it because there was nothing else to do. He stared at her: his unwavering constant. Same pearls, same twin set, same petite figure and grey coiffed hair.

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"I'm sorry, Dan, I didn't wish to have anyone or anything disturb you, but..." He was startled when she fumbled for words, hesitation was not her manner. "...but I have received information from Moscow I cannot keep from you. You would not wish me to."

He stepped aside when she entered the room, closing the door behind her. "Moscow." His voice flat, no inflexion. Uncomprehending, but then nothing made sense anymore.

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

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

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

"My contact, the most reliable one I have," she emphasised the point. "Called me about ten minutes ago. Dan...", again the uncharacteristic hesitation. "Vadim Krasnorada is not dead. He was *not* executed. There will be a re-trial instead."

He stared at her in complete disbelief. "What?"

"It was a mock execution, Dan. It was a lie. The re-trial had been ordered some weeks ago, under pressure from the political and diplomatic channels we used, but most of all because of interior forces. We read the situation correctly, the Soviet Union is crumbling rapidly, especially with recent developments in Azerbaijan that shifted the power balance in Moscow significantly. The KGB is losing power to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Ministry is aggressively gaining ground. My contacts indicate the Ministry will not let the KGB execute Vadim. It's an old inter-Soviet power struggle. The pressure is great enough that not even the KGB could go through with the execution, although they orchestrated a mock execution to keep face. He is not dead, Dan, Vadim Krasnorada is still alive."

"You're lying." Dan refused to believe her. The sense of hope that was trying to steal inside his mind was too cruel to ponder. "That's bullshit."

"No, Dan." She shook her head. "You have to believe me. My contact's informants are infallible."

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

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

"No!" Dan yelled. "He is dead. Don't you get it? Done, dead, fucking over. Everything, just over and done with. Dead, dead, dead! Fucking dead!" He was shaking his head wildly as he spoke, his eyes dry and burning with pain-fuelled

rage. “Don’t do this to me, don’t you fucking tell me he is alive. Don’t you fucking lie to me unless you give me proof. You hear me? Give me *proof!*”

The Baroness’ voice turned even calmer. “I will get you proof.” She took a step closer, placing her hand on Dan’s shoulder. “But you have to believe me, Vadim is alive.”

“No fucking way!” He pushed her hand away, and she almost lost her balance as he lunged forward, as if he were about to attack. He flinched when she shrank back from him, for the first time ever since they’d met. His rage had no boundaries. Neither did his pain, forgetting all but the knowledge everything was over, and Vadim was dead. The unbearable agony finally had time and space to settle and eat him alive.

“You’re fucking lying, everyone’s lying. You said you would help him, and nothing! You did *nothing*, no one did, no one in this goddamnedmotherfucking country did anything. No one cared, because what did he have to offer? Just one measly life, and a stupid arse lover who’d devoted his life to this fucking country. Just doing what we were told and what thanks did we get? Nothing!” He took a breath and yelled at the top of his lungs, “Fuck you! Fuck all of you! Fuck Britain, fuck this country, and fucking fuck the whole damned fucking lot of you!”

Dan stood there shaking, completely out of his mind, dimly ashamed of his lack of control, while the Baroness retreated towards the exit. He didn't glance over when the door closed behind her. He had no notion of anything but the fury and pain inside. Turning, he slammed his fist into the nearest thing to him, the stereo, smashing the front panel, crashing the whole thing onto the floor. He swept his arm across the table, every object on it scattering through the room. He kicked the television, again and again until the screen broke and a flame shot out of its back. Then he picked up the chair, banged it against the wall, broken legs slashing into the blinds, its remains hammering against the window. Destroy! Hurt and kill and not feel this pain. The hopelessness, the fear, the things he’d done and said and dreamed of. The memories, and now—the damned lies.

Dead! Dead! Dead!

Dan tore the whole room apart, until nothing was in its place, and he ended curled up on the floor, amidst the debris, cradling his bloodied hands and torn knuckles. At long last, he finally cried.

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

She stood and smoothed her skirt, all the while staring at him. "I will be in my private study. Whenever you feel like it. Just take your time."

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

\* \* \*

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

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

"Do you feel any better, Dan?"

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

"I know." Unspoken forgiveness.

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

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

He stared down at his battered hands that held the folded fax sheet. “Can I pay by instalments for the damage? If...if you want me to leave the embassy, I understand.”

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

She was still smiling. Shit. Suddenly Dan didn’t know what he should feel more thankful for. Her understanding or her forgiveness? “Thank you, Ma’am.”

“You are welcome.”

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

\* \* \*

The following day, Dan was called into Her Excellency’s office. “Ma’am? What is this?” Dan looked down at the envelope she was pushing towards him.

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

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

“Because you need a break, Dan.”

“Do you want me out of here?”

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

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

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

Chastised, he broke eye contact and shook his head. He was still mentally exhausted, all he could do was murmur, “no, Ma’am, never.” He snorted and found

a spark of his old self inside. He looked up and smirked. “Unless you’re doing small talk.”

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

“It’s the other end of the world.”

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

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

She leaned forward. “Dan, Dan, take a breath. If any developments take place, any at all, I will let you know immediately. But trust me when I tell you, right now there is nothing you can do. The KGB has left itself open for negotiations, and the fact the execution was not carried out is proof they are willing to make a deal. This is *my* game now, at last, and I will play it well.”

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

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

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

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

“You are very welcome, my friend.”

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

“Thank you for everything. Ma’am.”

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

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

“Aye, Ma’am, we will.”