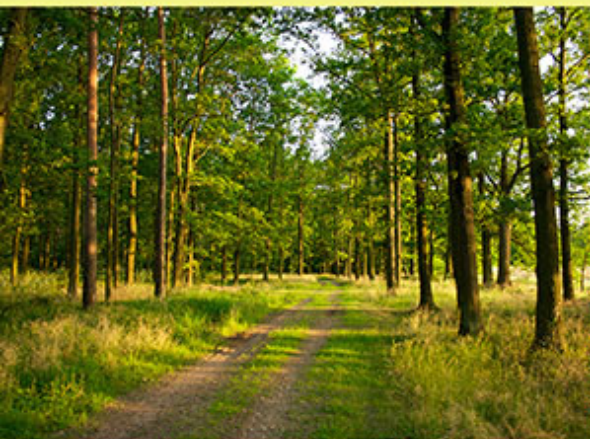


LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

**ANGLES**

**Tripoli**

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## ANGLES

**By Tripoli**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# ANGLES

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## Photo Description

A Jeep Rubicon sits parked under the trees in a muddy clearing in a cedar forest. A fine drizzle fills the air. On top of the hood, a good-looking, unshaven man in blue jeans and a work shirt lies back against the windshield, legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles. One hand rests on his thigh, and he tips his face to the sky with his eyes closed. He exudes weariness.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*Why is this guy sitting on the hood of his Jeep in the pouring rain? To my eye, he seems tired and a little sad, but you may feel differently. How did he get here and how does he get to his happily-ever-after? What will it take for him to come in out of the rain?*

No specific requests for a story but I love a little sweetness and a tiny droplet of angst. If the conflict wasn't focused on the gayness, that would be a bonus, not a requirement.

*Sincerely,*

*Jae*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** Belgium, public activity, Russian MCs, theatre, PTSD

**Content Warnings:** past sexual assault

**Word Count:** 16,757

*Acknowledgements*

Thank you Jae Moran for the lovely atmospheric prompt. We hope we got the angst levels right for you. Thank you Vivian Archer for beta-reading, cheerleading, and leading us gently by the hand toward the alcohol as we stumbled around. Thank you to our awesome editor Jaime for her excellent suggestions. Thank you to the mods and all the volunteers who make this such a wonderful event.

# ANGLES

**By Tripoli**

The dark-suited host grabbed Dima's hand, pushing a handful of condoms into his palm. "Safety first!"

"Oh, no, I'm not—"

Isolde nudged him with her elbow, dipping her own hand into the bowl filled with small foil packets. Dima rolled his eyes and thrust the condoms into his jacket pocket. He hadn't needed that many condoms in the last five years.

Isolde handed their phones to a uniformed concierge, taking a pink plastic token in return. When Dima opened his mouth to protest, Isolde silenced him with a glare. "No photos," she whispered. "It's a safe space."

Inside the club proper, the lights flashed in time with the deep thrum of the music, revealing glimpses of undulating bodies on the dance floor. Red lights reflected off the dark leather seats and bathed the club in a warm glow that softened the harsh lines of the tables edging the room. The floor was free from tacky substances and the place smelled faintly of lube and alcohol, but lacked the scent of salty-stale semen that permeated the back booths of the sex shop on the Rue des Riches Claires. It was... nice. Not at all what he'd expected.

Dima's fitted black trousers and V-neck T-shirt were not the most conservative attire in the club. He was surprised at the lack of nudity, even a little disappointed. He'd expected to be slightly titillated and properly horrified, to go home certain that whatever his flaws, he wasn't like these people. But everyone looked... ordinary. Happy. Like they could be shop assistants and cab drivers and tax accountants he wouldn't look at twice on the street. Well, presumably some of them were.

A riot of colour caught his eye. At a table to his left a woman sat drinking straw-coloured wine, her entire torso painted in an abstract vision of reds, purples, and blues, the vivid shades tangled over her shoulders and breasts. When he finally looked up and caught her eyes, the woman's sharp gaze told Dima how long he'd been staring. Shit. His face heated, and he brought one hand up to wrap around the back of his neck. Isolde grabbed his free hand, pulling him to an open booth on the other side of the dance floor.



“I told you not to stare. It’s incredibly rude. You don’t even like breasts!”

“I’m sorry! I was only wondering who the artist was. My apartment is so bland: a piece like that would look amazing when the sunset light comes in the front windows. The colours would practically vibrate.”

Isolde raised a hand to signal a passing waiter. “You are the only man I know who would come to a sex club and think about interior design.”

“Am I the only gay man you know?”

“And that is an offensive stereotype. What do you want to drink?”

“Whiskey.”

Isolde pouted. “You know if you have whiskey you can’t play, right?”

It was sweet, how she thought anyone would be attracted enough to Dima to want to spend time with him, even if only for enough time to exchange bodily fluids and go on their way.

“Whiskey. The fact you got me here at all is a miracle.”

The club was busy, the stools at the bar full, with more couples arriving through the entrance hall every couple of minutes. “I thought you said midnight was early?” Apparently, the night was only starting for the kink portion of Brussels. Usually he’d be tucked up asleep by this time on a Friday, his bedtime book lying open on the pillow where it fell from his hand. Fiction made the best sleeping partner; words couldn’t be disappointed in the man who read them.

Dima had limited experience with clubs, but this seemed more theatrical than most. And more diverse. A tall, lithe woman with an Adam’s apple and a narrow, flushed face danced with a short portly man dressed in black latex. Two women in steampunk cosplay huddled close to each other at the bar, exchanging kisses in a gleam of bronze metal and rich, red brocade. A mixed-gender couple ground against each other on a small platform in the centre of the dance floor, looking like they’d just stepped off a catwalk. Dima’s face heated, and he stared down at the shiny plastic laminate of the tabletop. He didn’t belong here.

The waiter dropped their drinks off, and Dima took advantage of having a glass in his hand to shuffle back in his seat, finding the deepest shadow in their booth. He liked being able to see but not be seen. Not that anyone would be looking.

“Get that sour look off your face. We’re broadening your horizons, getting you out of the twenty-year rut you’ve been in.”

Dima gritted his teeth. It wasn't a rut. When you spent your first thirty years desperately trying not to look, not to be noticed, not to let other people see what you were inside... that didn't go away easy. As a fifteen-year-old, he'd never imagined a place like a sex club could exist. Keeping to himself had just become... ingrained. He didn't know how to flirt, didn't have any small-talk skills, and god knew he wasn't the best-looking guy. Shit, no wonder Isolde was annoyed with him.

"What about him?" Isolde shouted over the pulse of "Another You," the beat of the music almost drowning out her words. She nodded in the direction of a sloe-eyed, olive-skinned guy leaning against the wall, wearing nothing more than a glow-in-the-dark jockstrap. If he was in here legally Dima would be highly surprised.

Oh, shit. Isolde wasn't here for a casual night out at a new club: she'd dragged Dima here to hook him up. His groan was lost in the thumping bass. "I prefer my men to have been alive before the political system of my birth country was overhauled, thank you very much. Besides, my horizons are sufficiently broad! Just the other day, I bought bubblegum-flavoured lube!"

Isolde turned back to the crowd—probably looking for her next conquest—before responding. "So your hand doesn't get turned off by the unflavoured kind? Besides, Markus might be here. You've got to see him. He's been coming into the cafe after his workouts and always orders the triple-berry protein smoothie. I swear I have never seen a finer man. I caught a glimpse of his stomach the other week; the man has abs like a trilobite. I might have overheard him mention the name of this place to a friend. Accidentally. While finishing my coffee. Next to his table. For over thirty minutes."

"This just isn't... this isn't how I want to meet someone."

"You forget, I've seen your Pinterest boards. Dreams of writing sci-fi in secluded cottages in Swedish island forests also require dream guys to fill those tasteful Swedish waxed-pine beds." Isolde gripped his arm, bringing her hand to his cheek and forcing him to meet her eye. "Listen. You're a good man. You deserve someone. But a partner won't just drop into your lap. You have to get out there and find one."

"In a sex club?" Dima snorted.

"It's a start."

Isolde's face lit up and Dima shuddered. The last time he had seen that smile it had meant a fourteen-hour drive to Bilbao after a Basque jazz musician

slipped Isolde his number and told her to call him if she was ever in town. “Two o’clock. Mountain with short brown hair, wearing leather trousers and a grey T-shirt that should be in fear of its life.”

“He’s hot. You should go for it.” No wonder the muscled man was coming over to them. Isolde was eye-catching with her jet eyes, tattooed arms, and the abstract daub of freckles across her face. On the other hand, when Dima had turned thirty, somehow he’d transitioned straight from baby fat to worn and tired.

“I think he’s interested in *you*,” said Isolde.

“Him?” Dima coughed to cover the squeak his voice gave at the end of the word. The man’s biceps stretched the knit fabric of his T-shirt taut. He looked like he could pick Dima up with one hand. “He’s out of my league. Are you kidding? He’s out of my *universe*.”

“I’m serious. I saw him checking out your ass before we sat down.” Isolde stood and picked up her glass. “I’m going to get another round.”

“I’ve hardly touched mine.”

Isolde picked up Dima’s drink and slugged back the scant inch of amber liquid.

“There. Now you need another. I’ll be back. Not soon.” She bent and spoke into his ear. “Promise to at least try, okay?” She walked off towards the bar carrying Dima’s glass, a swing in her stride.

“Is the lady coming back, or may I join you?” The man’s voice purred in Dima’s ears, deep and silky. Dima tipped his head back to look up at the man. Sculpted cheekbones offset crystalline grey-blue eyes. Dima glanced to his side. Nope, it was still just him.

“Um. Sure.” He gestured at the seat beside him. “She’s not my girlfriend.” Oh my god, kill him now. This was not what Isolde had in mind by ‘try.’

“I’d ask you to dance, but I get the feeling you’d rather be on the outside looking in.”

Dima snorted, twisting his fingers in his lap. Trust Isolde to not even leave him with a drink to fiddle with.

“If I’m wrong, I’d love you to join me on the floor.” The man held his hand out.

“No.”

The man lowered his arm, the line of his smile flattening out. Dima rushed out before he blew it completely, “I mean, you’re not wrong. Maybe later? I’d rather... I’d rather sit. For now. But pl-please join me.”

“I’m Mikhail.”

“Dima.”

“So you like to watch, Dima?”

“You make that sound filthy.”

“It can be.” Mikhail’s eyes scanned the crowd briefly before he nodded slightly and turned back to Dima. “It’s still early. Things heat up more in the private areas.” Dima shook his head, and Mikhail continued. “There’s a dungeon downstairs, a couples-only area upstairs, and orgy rooms over there.” Mikhail tilted his head to the back corner of the club, towards a wide entrance blocked by heavy, red-velvet curtains—and two blocky men.

“You seem to know this place pretty well. I thought the club had just opened.”

“I like to get the lay of the land, so to speak. Let me show you around?”

“Look, I’m really not into—” Dima spread his hands wide, “—into all this.”

“And what *are* you into, then?” Mikhail folded his arms across his chest. Great. And now he’d blown it. He might as well be brutally honest, then.

“I’m into *bande dessinee* and scooter rides. I’m into reading Russian dystopian novels on my lunch break. I’m into stopping by the Jardin du Petit Sablon on my way home and giving belly rubs to the sealpoint Siamese who lives next door. I’m into acting like I don’t speak English when American tourists ask for directions to the Manneken Pis. I’m into buying Thai food on Saturdays and taking it to the Bois de la Cambre and sitting on the grass and pretending someone’s going to come and eat it with me.” Dima sucked in a breath. “That’s what I’m into.”

Wow, where had that come from? He was just so tired of being taken at face value. Boring, quiet, nondescript Dima. At least the pounding music covered the awkward silence between them. Surely Isolde could see he needed rescuing. What if he just left, right now? Dima patted his pockets. Dammit, Isolde had the token for his phone.

“*Metro 2033*?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Did you like *Metro 2033*? Or is Anna Starobinets more your thing?”

Dima opened and closed his mouth like a fish. He didn't miss the way Mikhail's eyes flicked down to his lips before rising back to meet his gaze. Dima's face heated, and he dropped his eyes. “Y-yes. Either. Both.”

“I thought Glukhovsky was dead wrong in his portrayal of women. Two thousand women served as snipers in the Red Army in World War II, even when red tape tried to keep them out of combat roles. Half a million fought in the land forces at any one time. Why does he think so little of our sisters that he made them cower in fear after his apocalypse?”

Dima scanned Mikhail's leather pants and tight shirt, sculpted by muscles and sheer masculinity. A man like *this* read? Dima cleared his throat and turned to face Mikhail, sitting up straighter in his seat. “There are two hundred million of us; you can't hang us all!”

Mikhail laughed. “Yes! Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya! My hero. If I ever have a daughter, I want to name her Zoya.”

Mikhail reached forwards and placed his hand on Dima's thigh, running his fingertips lightly up the inseam. “I'm afraid I see someone I have to go and talk to, Dima who is into *bande dessinee* and Thai food. I am glad to have met you.”

And this was where Dima should find something to say, something sparkling and bright, that would entrance this man and bring him back to his side from wherever he was about to disappear to. But there was nothing, only the solid certainty that he would never speak to anyone as physically attractive as Mikhail for as long as he lived.

Mikhail's hand tightened on his leg, and Dima's cock hardened inside his trousers. And then the seat beside Dima lay empty, Mikhail stalking across the now-crowded dance floor to where a young woman with a shaved head and a beribboned corset held the leash of a grey-haired man in a spiked collar. Mikhail leant over and kissed the woman on the cheek, ruffling the hair of her pet where he curled up at her feet. Mikhail slid into the empty space on the couch beside them and raised his hand to summon a waiter.

Dima couldn't stay here. Not now, not when Mikhail would see Dima spend the rest of the evening alone, more out of place than a fly in honey. It was good thing, Mikhail leaving. Dima didn't have the kind of life conducive to a relationship, and he didn't want a quick fuck in a bathroom. Not anymore. Dima stood and wound his way through the press of people, looking for Isolde.

She was deep in conversation with a tall Viking-type at the bar, the man wearing a black kilt and nothing else. As Dima watched, Isolde ran her hand across the six-pack on his belly. Ah. This would be Markus, then. Dima didn't miss the way the Viking looked him up and down as he approached and then let his gaze slide away to the dancing figures, as if Dima wasn't worth anyone's attention. Well, he was right, of course.

Dima tapped Isolde on the shoulder and shouted into her ear over the hubbub of voice and music. "I'm going to head out. You stay here. Have a good time. I'll see you Monday."

Isolde turned away from her Viking, a frown on her face. "We only just got here. You can't go yet. I didn't even bring your drink back over to you."

"You drink it. Or give it to your man there."

She grinned and held her hand up to hide her mouth from the big man beside her as he nuzzled into Isolde's hair and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Oh my god, right? Isn't he amazing?"

Dima smiled at her. "He is. He *is* amazing. And you deserve someone too. Have a good night. Bring my phone to work with you on Monday." It wasn't like anyone would actually call him on it over the weekend. He had a spare alarm clock he could use to wake up with.

Dima kissed Isolde on the cheek. Isolde grasped Dima's wrist, like she was going to pull him back to the bar, but her Viking buried his face in her shoulder, kissing her, then licked up the side of her neck, and Isolde giggled and squirmed in his grip, releasing Dima's arm. Dima sketched her a wave and fought his way back to the entrance. With luck it was early enough the buses would still be running.

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Dima sighed and pushed his chair back from his desk. He closed his eyes and rubbed them with the heels of his hands. "That's it. I'm done."

"Go home, Mr. Communications Director," said Isolde. "God knows you haven't gotten out of here any time before nine all week. You've done enough for today. What's left, anyway?"

Dima picked up the scrawled list from under his mountain of paperwork. "Seating charts, order of the reception line for the Chancellor to meet the actors—and flowers to present to her—courier out press accreditation passes, chase up the last of the RSVP list..." He turned the page over, then groaned at

the long list on the other side. Dima threw the paper onto the top of his desk. Fatigue filled his bones.

“It can all wait,” said Izzy. “You do this every season. You’re good at it. Start again tomorrow.”

Dima nodded. Living in Brussels was great. The city was peaceful and LGBTQ friendly. The people loved and supported the theatre. His job was interesting, and he got to meet more than his share of visiting VIPs. But it was wearying, always arranging things for other people, making sure their lives went smoothly, with never enough time to carve one of his own. He stood up from his chair, looking at Isolde. “What about you?”

Isolde groaned and thunked her head down on the keyboard of her PC, keys clattering at the impact. “Can’t.” She tilted her head back and peered up at Dima from beneath her hair. “I have to fulfil the security request for records on all our food and beverage staff. And the ushers.” She groaned and thumped her head back down again. “Why does the goddamn Chancellor want to visit the theatre anyway? Germans hate Ibsen. You know they insisted on an alternate ending for *A Doll’s House* where Nora stays in her loveless marriage for the sake of the children?”

Dima shook his head. “It’s been a hundred and thirty-six years, Izzy; let it go. At least all the security gets me off the hook for any more school tours this month.”

“Go.” Isolde waved Dima towards the door. “Escape. Let me live vicariously through you.”

Dima cut through the park and just made the bus on Rue Royale. He had to stand, crowded against a schoolboy wearing oversized headphones. When did technology get big again? When he got off the bus, Dima debated heading straight home, but the park looked as peaceful and green as ever and much more appealing in the spring heat than his cramped fourth floor apartment. He strolled in through the south-western gate and ambled along the path towards the fountain. The tulips had finished blooming weeks ago, and there were fewer tourists now. Once again, Dima could pretend it was his private garden, not a park. The setting sun strobed through the trees lining the wrought iron fence. Dima headed for his favourite seat, underneath the statue of the leather worker holding a belt.

Great, someone was already sitting there, crouched over and wiggling his fingers at the cat sitting in the flower bed eight feet away. At the crunch of

Dima's shoes on the path, the person looked up, the white of his shirt bright against his dark suit.

It was the guy from the sex club. Mikhail.

"I did hope you might come eventually," said Mikhail. "Won't you join me?"

"Wha-what are you—"

"After the terribly boring conversation with my business contact at the club on Friday, I went back to your table, but you had already gone. All I could do was berate myself because I never got your number. Or full name."

Hardly believing that this was happening, Dima sank hesitantly onto the park bench beside Mikhail.

"You mentioned you stopped by here after work. You weren't here Monday or Tuesday, so I've been hoping you didn't work night shifts."

Now that Mikhail wasn't paying her any attention, the cat wandered over.

"How many... have you been here every night?"

Mikhail smiled at him. "Only way to be sure I could catch you."

No. No, this wasn't happening. Dima pulled his messenger bag off his shoulder and pulled out the tin of tuna he'd brought from home. He pulled the lid off and set it down on the ground for her. Keep moving. Keep concentrating on anything else that wasn't this impossibly gorgeous man beside him. The cat stuck her dark face into the can and picked the pale flakes out with her sharp white teeth.

"Don't try and tell me she's a stray. Look at the belly on her!" Mikhail shifted slightly in his seat, and their thighs touched.

The warmth sank into Dima's body right through his own suit. "No, not a stray. She belongs to a very nice couple two doors down. But I'm not allowed a cat in my apartment, and I like to pretend she loves me." Spending time with the cat was the only contact he had with another living thing he didn't work with, or buy products from. Although, maybe the tuna was a kind of payment. That was a fairly dismal thought.

"You were right about the garden," said Mikhail. "It's lovely."

The park wasn't much more than pocket-sized, the fountain at the back drawing you forwards as you entered. Dima had found it by accident, exploring



the neighbourhood around his apartment. Everyone went to the tourist stores and antique shops across the street, or the imposing church next door, but this was more on a human scale.

“So, may I have it now?”

“Sorry, have what?”

“Your number.”

This wasn't possible. There was nothing about him intriguing enough to have a man trying to track him down. What did he do here? He'd never flirted. There'd been sex, of the furtive or painful kind, sure. But the kind of slow circling dance he'd seen hetero couples engage in... how did you even do that?

“Here,” said Mikhail, passing his phone to Dima.

Dima took it, staring down at the phone like he was looking for directions spelled out in the keys. The screen was open to ‘New Contacts.’ Dima glanced up at Mikhail.

“So you can put your number in.”

“Why?”

“So I can phone you and ask you out.”

No. Dima pushed the phone back at Mikhail and stood. “Look, what do you want from me? You want a fuck; fine. My apartment's two blocks over. I've got condoms and lube. Let's go.” Better to get this over, to make it easy for Mikhail to have him and move on. Stretching out the torture—the possibility that someone was interested in him—was only going to make the end harder.

Mikhail wrapped his hand around the phone and Dima's hand both. “I'd like that too, but let's start with your number, okay?”

It was like hearing an echo when you'd missed the original sound. Dima keyed in his number. Mikhail pried his phone from Dima's fingers and slipped it into his pocket.

“So what's with the statues?” asked Mikhail, nodding across the garden at the bronze statues high atop their ornate pillars.

Okay, this was easier. Facts he could do. It was only emotions that were beyond his understanding. “They were designed by Xavier Mellery and installed in 1890. There's forty-eight of them, representing traditional occupations.”

“Then who’s the guy with the stick and the basket down at the gate?”

“Um, he represents woodturners, basketweavers, and thatchers.”

“Basket-weaving. That must have been a bugger.”

“Sorry, what?”

“Your dad makes wicker baskets, you grow up and learn to make wicker baskets, and one day someone comes along and says, ‘Look, plastic!’ and suddenly no one wants your baskets any more.”

Dima shrugged. “Isn’t that the same for all jobs? One day the world changes, and you’re not required any more. Except doctors, I suppose.”

“And policemen. And shit shovellers.” Mikhail huffed out a laugh. “Although I think those last two are the same, most of the time.”

“You don’t think we can eventually get to where we don’t need armies or cops any more?”

“There’s always got to be someone to do the things no one else wants to do. Someone to carry out the decisions the system makes.” Mikhail pushed himself to his feet. “I *will* call you, Dima.”

Dima stared after him as Mikhail strolled towards the park entrance. The Siamese jumped up on the seat beside him and rubbed her head across Dima’s hand, still lying open on the seat. He stroked his fingers down her lean body, her rumbling purr sinking into his skin.

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When Dima’s phone rang on Thursday afternoon, his pulse pounded in his ears. He didn’t get personal calls. He never gave out his own cell number for work. He only kept a phone at all so he could read on the Kindle app on the bus, or call for a taxi once in a while, when the rain was incessant and he’d gone further than he intended on his weekend rambles. What if it was Mikhail? Getting involved, when it would only end in disappointment and loss? That was a bad idea.

When the phone rang on Friday morning he almost answered, but his fingers shook as he picked up the phone, and it slipped from his hand. It bounced once and slid under his filing cabinet. By the time he fished it out, the ringing had stopped. He stared at the unknown number on the screen; then he thrust his phone back in his pocket. It was for the best. And he didn’t spend the morning on tenterhooks in case it rang again. Not at all.

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Dima startled, his knee knocking the table and almost upsetting their midmorning coffee when a firm grip fell on his shoulder. “Wha—” His voice cut off when he turned his head. His eyes widened as they trailed up the broad arm to Mikhail’s face. How was it already so familiar? Mikhail smiled, his eyes crinkling in the corners. His other hand was wrapped around a steaming takeaway cup.

“I thought that might be you. I saw—I’m sorry, what’s your name? I don’t think we met the other night.” He removed his hand, holding it out to Isolde, who took it in a firm grasp.

“Isolde.”

“I’m Mikhail. Mind if I...?” He looked to Dima for permission.

“Actually, we were just leav—”

“By all means,” said Isolde. She waved her hand in a flourish. Dima glowered at her as Mikhail pulled out his chair.

Mikhail turned to Dima. “You didn’t pick up when I phoned. I’m glad I ran into you.”

Dima opened his mouth, searching for something to say. His brain always failed him at the most inopportune moments. “Um. Sorry. It’s a bad time at work right now. We’ve got a lot on.”

Mikhail shrugged. “Don’t be sorry. Just tell me you’ll let me take you out for lunch next week.” He took a sip of his coffee.

Dima stared at the lines of Mikhail’s throat, moving as he swallowed, his mouth dry and filled with excuses. Isolde kicked him under the table.

“Do you work around here?” she said.

Mikhail dragged his eyes from Dima and leaned back in his seat. “Kind of. I have a shoot around the block.” He raised his drink as if in toast. “Just grabbing something to help me get through the day. Best decision I’ve made all day.” He smiled at Dima, his eyes warm pools of golden brown.

“A shoot?” said Isolde.

“I’m a photographer. Been taking shots of the local architecture for a travel magazine.” He looked down at his watch and frowned. “And I’m about to be late back.”

Dima stood and faced Isolde. “We’re going to be late too. We should head out. We’ve got that briefing.” Heat rose to his cheeks.

Mikhail laid a hand on Dima's arm, the grip gentle, tentative. "If I call you again, will you answer? Please?"

Dima nodded without conscious thought, some part of him he'd thought long gone stretching out its fingertips for this single chance.

Mikhail stood too. "Isolde, it was a pleasure to meet you." He shook her hand again, then faced Dima. "So I'll talk to you soon?"

Dima stared at Mikhail as the man walked away, admiring the vee of his back that disappeared into his jeans, which framed a tight, firm ass. Isolde elbowed him in his ribs.

"What the hell? He phoned you, and you blew him off?" Isolde threw up her hands exasperated, then turned and stalked out of the cafe.

Dima didn't catch up with her until they were on the street, pedestrians heading to the park for their lunch hour brushing past him. And now Izzy knew he'd seen him again. He rubbed the centre of his forehead, trying to erase the dull thud of pain.

"Why are you doing this?" Isolde hissed as she hurried down the street. "Sabotaging yourself? He was literally begging you to go out with him. You didn't even tell me you'd given him your number."

"Oh. I didn't. I mean—not at the club. I saw him last week. He asked for my number."

"Oh my god. Seriously, Dima; he's gorgeous. What's wrong with you? If I left it up to you, you'd be humping nothing but your hand for the rest of your life. It astonishes me how abysmal you are at flirting. Now hurry. We're going to be late for the briefing."

Two cars from the Parliament Security and Protection team were already in the reserved police parking spots right outside the theatre. Great; being late always made such a good impression. Dima quickened his pace, stopping to hold the front door open for Isolde.

When she reached the door to the backstage and administration areas, Isolde patted her pocket. "Dammit, I've left my swipe card on my desk again. This is ridiculous. If it weren't for this visit, we wouldn't have needed to install this stuff in the first place."

Dima pulled his card from his pocket and swiped them both through. "I guess. Times change, though, right? There are terrorist threats. Disgruntled ex-employees. People with insufficient mental health support."

“It’s still stupid. When did anyone ever commit an act of terrorism in a theatre?”

“I’m sure Lincoln’s friends said exactly that to him.”

The security contingent was waiting in the anteroom, the personal assistant hovering, offering their terrible filter coffee and supermarket cookies. Dima sighed. He hated meetings.

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The security team insisted on touring the entire theatre, from the loading dock to the flies, via all the dressing rooms and the access hatch for the goods lift. Dima was exhausted by the time Isolde took them back to the office to discuss Director of Operations matters, leaving him to lock up the green room and the wardrobe department. The dark, narrow corridors held the faint traces of greasepaint and ambition. You could be anyone here: walk in with your everyday identity and become whatever you wanted, whomever you could dream up. And the next day you could be someone else entirely.

Dima climbed the steep staircase that led backstage. When his cell phone rang, he didn’t second-guess himself, just pulled it out of his pocket and pressed the call button. “Hello?”

“I’ve got you out of breath already. I thought I would have to try harder.” Mikhail’s voice, rich and husky, filled the line.

“Oh. Um, hi.” Dima leant against the wall, legs slightly unsteady. “Wow, that was fast.”

“I was worried if I gave you a chance to think about it you might change your number. So I thought, maybe I could come by after I wrap up my shoot. I’ll be done around three—perhaps you could sneak out this afternoon? We could wander around, grab a bite to eat? I have to fly out tonight on a last-minute business trip, but I’d love to see you before I go.” His voice deepened. “I’d hate to have to go the full week without seeing you again.

Dima pressed one of his hands to his face, trying to cool his flaming cheeks. He thought of his calendar, then the four-inch stack of paperwork on his desk. Screw it. He could reschedule and make up the rest later in the week. “Sure. I mean, I’d like that. Very much.” Isolde would be proud of him.

“All right, then. I have to run, but I’ll see you later. Don’t eat lunch. I’m bringing food. I’ll pick you up outside at three fifteen.”

It wasn't even a question: just a statement of how things were going to be. "I'll see you then." Dima whispered, but Mikhail had already disconnected.

Dima was fidgety as he waited on Rue de la Loi. This was a mistake, but just to have someone want him, fuck, it was so intoxicating. Mikhail pulled up in a sleek Lexus. Was it a rental, or were photographers making more than Dima expected? Mikhail leaned over and pushed the passenger side door open. "Hi."

They headed south, and Dima sank back into the lush leather seats and took the opportunity to look beyond Mikhail's muscles while he had to keep his eyes on the road. His face was etched with fine lines, like he'd spent a lifetime outdoors. His hair was almost short enough for the military. He drove like a man ready for a toddler on crack to run out in front of the car at any second, his eyes constantly darting to each side of the road, then checking in the rear vision mirror. He looked very in control.

When the car finally pulled to a stop, Dima saw nothing but trees and a few scattered cars in the parking lot. He turned back to Mikhail and crossed his arms. "You promised me food."

Mikhail grabbed a rucksack from the backseat of his car and grabbed Dima's hand. He led him down the dirt path leading deeper into the forest. The tall, thin beech trees rose as slender silver towers before them.

Mikhail's hand came up to cup the back of Dima's neck, warm and comforting, his thumb gently brushing the skin at the edge of Dima's hair line. He nudged Dima with his hip. "You can wait ten minutes."

Dima looked down at his slacks and then his shoes, gleaming black in the bright sunlight, and sighed. "I don't think I'm dressed for this."

Mikhail's hand moved down to his shoulder, gripping lightly. "Don't worry about it. If anything gets ruined, I'll replace it. I should have planned this better; I was just—I wanted the chance to talk, to get to know you, free from distractions."

Or free from witnesses, Dima thought, looking at the thick, wooded forest before them, noting the utter lack of people nearby. The trees were stark columns in the darkening gloom of the afternoon. The other parked cars suggested there were more people around, but would anyone hear a scream from deep in the woods?

Mikhail's hand slipped down his arm and grasped his hand. His thumb gently traced the side of Dima's as Mikhail led him along the dirt trail, and

Dima shook off his thoughts, relaxing into Mikhail's touch. He had been nothing but sweet since they met, and while it was tempting to assign ulterior motives to the man, he doubted someone with nefarious intentions would make no attempt to cover his own tracks. He flushed at his own stupidity and pushed the thought to the back of his mind.

They fell into a comfortable silence as they walked the trail, the only sounds the whisper of leaves brushing in the wind and the occasional soft call of a nuthatch. Dima followed Mikhail's lead, lost in his own thoughts and the warmth of Mikhail's hand in his as the soft breeze kissed his face and toyed with his hair. They had walked for just over fifteen minutes when Dima stopped and gasped, his hand slipping from Mikhail's.

Dima raised his hand and pinched his arm, his mouth agape.

Mikhail had stopped and turned back to Dima, a small smile playing at his lips. "It's real."

Dima nodded absently and slowly turned in a circle, absorbing the view. The dense fog from the morning had faded into mist and tall, thin beech trees now ash-brown stripes painted on a silver backdrop. A sea of bluebells swayed gently in the breeze, a rolling carpet of periwinkle framed by the vibrant green of budding leaves. The rare beam of sunlight escaped through the canopy of the trees in what seemed a mystical spotlight.

"It's beautiful," Dima said, returning his eyes to Mikhail's.

"It is." Mikhail said, his voice now serious, his eyes intense on Dima's.

Dima flushed and looked away.

Mikhail was silent a moment more, then approached Dima, took his hand again, and lead him off the path. "Watch your step." He warned. "There are stray branches you can't see under the flowers. I don't want you to hurt yourself." He picked his way through the woods, away from the path, and said "I found this place the first time I came to Brussels. I asked the hotel clerk for a good place to hike and he suggested I try Hallerbos."

"Hallerbos?"

Mikhail gestured around them with his free hand as they continued to walk deeper into the forest. "The forest. The bluebells have always been here, but they had to replant the forest after the Second World War." Mikhail paused, gathering his thoughts. "You've never been here before?"

Dima shook his head.

“I’m glad. I wanted to bring you somewhere unique. I couldn’t think of anyplace more special than an enchanted forest.”

Mikhail paused at the edge of a clearing. He let go of Dima’s hand, set his pack on the ground and rummaged through it. He pulled out a blanket and spread it on the ground, then turned back to the pack to retrieve paper plates and utensils.

Dima watched, eyes wide, as Mikhail pulled a veritable feast from his pack: a crusty loaf of French bread, several varieties of cheese, grapes, apple wedges, and an orange, followed by a bottle of Chardonnay. “A picnic?”

Mikhail looked up, cheeks pink. “I told you I wanted you to myself. This was the best way I knew how.”

“It... this is great.” Dima said. He sat on the blanket and reached over to grab a handful grapes, popping one into his mouth before continuing. “I can’t remember the last time I had a picnic. When I was young, I suppose. My mum took me on a day trip on the train to Ural-Tau. I mean, it’s a crummy two-bit town, but the trip there? I’d never seen a forest before. Trees, sure, but this mass of wild green, of life that didn’t exist within boundary fences and cement curbs... I didn’t even know it could exist.”

Mikhail sliced a wedge of brie and placed it on a cracker, passing it over to Dima. Being looked after was delicious. When had anyone ever done this for him?

Dima brushed the cracker crumbs from his shirt and leaned back against a tree trunk. “You ever been to Magnitogorsk?”

Mikhail shook his head as he carved himself a slice of blue cheese and added a pickle.

“Imagine a whole mountain of iron and a city made to do nothing more than dig it out of the ground, refine it, and ship it off to be made into frigates and missile casings and machine parts. We weren’t people; we were cogs. There was a 2007 report that said only one per cent of all the children in Magnitogorsk were healthy. I’m never going back.”

“So, you’re going to stay in Belgium for the rest of your life.”

Dima leaned back. Somewhere to his right a woodpecker tapped. “A cottage in the woods. A view of the ocean—or a lake, I’m not fussy. Sweden, maybe. Norway would be good too. A laptop.”



Mikhail passed him a glass of wine, and he took a mouthful.

“I wrote a story.” God, how had he even opened his mouth about this? He hadn’t told anyone, not even Izzy. “Sci-fi. An agent liked it. She’s shopping it around. Wants me to write another.” He shrugged. “It might be nothing, but if I never try, it definitely won’t happen.”

“So why are you still here?” said Mikhail.

“Never found the courage to make the last leap, I guess. Too afraid of what could go wrong.”

Mikhail sprawled against him, loose-limbed and warm where his arm touched Dima’s. Heady from the fresh air and alcohol, Dima boldly leaned over and kissed him.

Mikhail drew in a slow breath and then he was kissing Dima back with an intensity that swamped Dima’s senses. But after a moment, Mikhail broke the kiss and leaned back. He put a hand on the back of Dima’s neck and looked into Dima’s eyes for a long moment. “I like your dream, Dima.”

The sun-soaked meadow was warmer than under the thick cover of the trees, and Dima, lulled by the heat of the wine buzzing through him, fell asleep to the whisper of the wind among the leaves and the caress of Mikhail’s hand in his hair.

Dima blinked his eyes open, a mechanical buzzing sound pulling him from a light doze. He felt beneath his head, hand touching the rough canvas of Mikhail’s bag instead of the soft brush of denim. He sat up, blinking, then squinted. “What is that?” A blur flew across the sky, a black smear against the afternoon sun.

The object dived down as Mikhail turned, startled, remote in hand. He gave a small smile and said, “A hobby drone. I modified it. Added a camera. I thought it might be able to take pictures I couldn’t get to.” He frowned. “It’s too loud right now, scares the wildlife away. I’m working on a silent version. Maybe a few more tweaks once that’s done.”

Dima stood. “A man of many talents; I’m impressed.”

Mikhail shrugged and turned back to his remote. The drone rose from the deep green and blues of the meadow once again. Dima approached, mesmerised by Mikhail’s broad, capable hands as they worked the controls. “Can I try?”

Mikhail wordlessly handed him the remote.

And Dima promptly crashed the little drone into a tree. “Oh! Sorry!”

“Nah.” Mikhail laughed, going over and picking the drone out of the leaf litter. He dusted it off casually with one hand. “I built it to be hardy. It’s just as well that gets tested too.”

Mikhail set the drone on the ground, then pulled Dima against his chest. Mikhail rested his chin on Dima’s shoulder, their hands brushing as he pointed out the controls.

“This works the propellers and will make it rise. This knob here controls the direction of flight, and this controls the tilt of the drone. If you don’t control the axis, it will crash like before.” His hands fell to Dima’s waist, cradling his hips, and his breath was hot against his ear. “Try again.”

Dima’s second attempt was much more successful, even with the distraction of Mikhail’s body pressed to his back. They took turns throughout the remainder of the afternoon, and as the sun was setting, Mikhail took the controls, guiding the drone into barrel rolls and steep dives. When the drone settled once again, Dima took Mikhail’s hand, pulling him in, and lit soft, wet kisses on Mikhail’s lips. Mikhail’s arm came up to circle his waist, tightening for a second, before he gently released Dima and stepped back. “I cannot believe I’m saying this, but I need to make a flight tonight. If we keep kissing, you’ll never get rid of me.”

“Oh, uh sure.” Dima didn’t know what to think. Was it an excuse because Mikhail didn’t want to fuck him?

“Hey.” Mikhail’s hand on Dima’s neck tightened. “I want to see you again. I’m only away for a couple of days, meeting with publishers.”

“All right.” Dima told himself it didn’t matter. If Mikhail called when he got back, great. If he didn’t, well, better to find out now before he got in deeper.

Mikhail put his forehead against Dima’s. “You’re pretty transparent. I’m not making an excuse to blow you off. I wish I could stay and show you, but I’ll be at your doorstep in a day. Two at most.”

“I’m gonna have to trust you, huh?”

“Have I given you any reason not to?” Mikhail countered.

“No,” Dima conceded. “And now I’ve wasted our remaining time doubting you. Let’s go. I’ll be waiting for you to come back.”

The entire drive back Dima's fingers itched to broach the space between them, to reach out and touch Mikhail like he wanted to be touched in return. The car seemed too big, too impersonal, for him to initiate such an intimate act.

Dima directed Mikhail through the cobbled streets to his apartment building on the Rue van Moer. He pulled over to the side of the street to let the traffic behind him pass and left the car idling. Dima unbuckled his seatbelt and then paused, his hand on the door handle. He wanted to see Mikhail again. He wanted more kisses like the ones they'd shared in the forest. He wanted more of everything.

"So, I'd ask you to come up, but I guess you've got the flight to catch."

Mikhail glanced at his watch. "I could..." His voice was deep, rough. "I could come up. For a little while. I don't have to be at the airport till ten. I was going to run home, first, but... I would rather spend the time with you."

A quiet shiver ran through Dima's body.

"If you wanted to," said Mikhail.

God knew where the courage came from, but Dima reached over and ran his hand up the inside of Mikhail's leg. "I want to. Please?"

"Do you have a resident's parking pass?"

"Sorry. Never had a car."

"Where's the nearest public parking?"

"Left at the end of the street, three blocks down." Dima turned in his seat to watch Mikhail as he drove. Mikhail kept glancing at him, his eyes lingering on Dima's lips. Dima had barely closed the passenger door before Mikhail pressed him against the car, forcing their mouths together and pressing his tongue between Dima's lips. Mikhail's hardness pushed against Dima's belly, the sweetness of his need filling Dima's with fluttery anticipation, like he was fifteen again, kissing the boy from his *technikum* in the trees behind the college.

Dima nipped Mikhail's lower lip, then slipped under his arm and backed away from the car towards the pedestrian entrance. "I thought you wanted to fuck."

"I never said that," said Mikhail.

"Please. Everyone knows what it means if I ask you if you want to come up."

Mikhail grinned, then jogged after him. As they walked the three blocks home, Dima had never been so aware of another human being. If only he had the courage to reach out, to take Mikhail's hand like he'd seen other men do in Belgium or France. But in Russia, that would get you beaten up, or worse. Old habits died hard.

They climbed the four flights of stairs to Dima's tiny apartment. Mikhail pushed him against the wall the second they were inside, slamming the door closed with his foot. "I can't wait to see you around my cock," he breathed into Dima's ear. His big hands gripped Dima's ass, kneading it with his fingers. Mikhail's stubble brushed across Dima's skin as he licked down Dima's neck, nibbling and sucking against the skin until Dima hoped he left marks. Dima pressed his face against Mikhail's shoulder, breathing in the scent of him, so rich he could taste it on his tongue. Shit, he was so hard he was going to come before he even got Mikhail's trousers off.

Dima groaned and grabbed Mikhail's hand, leading him to the low double bed under the window. God, he needed it, wanted it, wanted just one night with Mikhail, even if that was all there would be. Mikhail pushed him backwards onto the mattress, then knelt over him and unfastened the buttons of Dima's shirt. With frantic fingers Dima returned the favour; he needed to see Mikhail, to feel him, that he was real. He pushed Mikhail's shirt off his shoulders, then ran his fingers up Mikhail's back to tangle in his coarse hair.

Mikhail pulled Dima's shoes and socks off, then unfastened Dima's trousers and tugged them off, throwing them across the room. He leant forwards and softly bit Dima's earlobe. "Condom?"

Condoms? Shit, he hadn't bought any in years. Oh, wait; his brain wasn't working: the ones from the club. Dima pointed towards his nightstand. "Top drawer." That's where he'd thrown them when he got home from the club, knowing he'd never use them, but reluctant to just throw them away.

Mikhail leaned over and yanked it open, his force pulling the drawer completely out. It dropped to the floor, scattering dozens of square foil packets and a half-empty bottle of lube across the room. Mikhail laughed. "You're well prepared."

Dima threw his arm over his eyes. "Kill me now."

"Oh no, not before I screw you," said Mikhail.

He moved off Dima, and the sound of a metal belt buckle and zipper filled the room before Dima heard the soft flump of Mikhail's trousers landing on the

floor. Dima tilted his head up. Mikhail's cock was thick and hard and red, moisture already beading at the tip. He ripped open the condom and rolled it on.

A vein of need ran straight through Dima, lighting him up from the inside. He wriggled backwards on the bed until his feet were off the floor, and Mikhail crawled up on top of him.

"How—" Dima cleared his throat. "How do you want me?" He didn't want foreplay, didn't want soft and slow. Dima wanted to be told, wanted to be made, and taken; paradoxically, he wanted to be safe at the same time. Mikhail had that edge on him, like he could force Dima to do whatever he wanted, but from the way he kissed—that soft, tentative touch of mouths in the wood—surely he never would.

"I want you to look at me," said Mikhail. "I want to watch your face while I fuck you."

Dima's eyes drank in Mikhail's form: his bronzed, heavily muscled chest, the trail of hair leading down to the thick thatch at the base of his cock. Dima reached for Mikhail's hips, needing to feel his flesh under his fingers. A thread of affection wormed through him, and Dima quashed it. This wasn't a fairy tale.

Mikhail crawled onto the bed and pulled Dima's ankles up and over his shoulders. Mikhail could see him, see his hole, exposed and open. Dima's cock throbbed at the thought, and his eyes flickered closed for a second, but he needed to look, needed to watch Mikhail watching him. He had to store this moment and keep it close.

Mikhail flicked the bottle of lube open and drizzled it over his fingertips, then smeared it around Dima's entrance, dipping the tips of his fingers into Dima's hole. He tilted his head to one side. "More?"

Dima shook his head. He played with his vibrator most nights. He could take Mikhail now. Wanted him.

The blunt head of Mikhail's thick cock pressed against his entrance, his hands gripping Dima's upper arms. God, the weight of him, pressing Dima against the bed. Dima bucked his hips against Mikhail's cock and pushed the tip inside him, gasping at the burn.

"Stop that." Mikhail gave him a little shake. "Take what you're given."

Dima tried to squirm, half-heartedly, not for a second wanting to get loose. "Make me take it, then." Dima arched his back as Mikhail pressed his girth inside him. The pain-pressure seeped through his body, white-hot and liquid.

Grunts of pleasure spilled from Mikhail's mouth, and he pushed his full length inside Dima's hole. Mikhail's balls slapped against Dima's ass; then he withdrew until he was barely inside Dima, rocking his pelvis slowly.

"Oh, goddamn you, more. Faster."

"Say please," said Mikhail, pulling his cock in and out in tiny, nearly imperceptible movements.

Dima shivered with need. "Please. Please, Mikhail. I need... I need something. Anything."

"You need me."

Mikhail thrust into Dima, and Dima's mouth fell open, and he licked his lips and tilted his head back, biting his lower lip as he tried to relax and allow the welcome intrusion. Oh, the realness of him, the smell of sweat, the dark shadow across his chin, the rasp of his wiry pubic hair against Dima's taint. Dima moved his hips in time with Mikhail's rhythm, welcoming Mikhail's cock as it dragged across his flesh, bringing all his concentration to bear on a tiny patch of skin and tissue and nerves and—fuck, yes there. Mikhail snapped his hips and pounded into him, brushing across Dima's prostate with each stroke.

"Oh, yeah, you feel it now, don't you," said Mikhail. "Fuck, yeah, you're so beautiful like this. Shit, your *mouth*."

Dima laughed, it was so ridiculous. He was the furthest thing from beautiful, and this man was here, with him, anyway. Mikhail leaned forwards and kissed him, their mouths barely meeting as he thrust into Dima, his pace fast, forceful, right on the edge of brutal, and perfect. Dima's chest ached.

Mikhail's cock dragged over that spot inside him over and over, and Dima saw white, Mikhail's panting breath ringing hollowly in his ears. Dima didn't want to come. This should last longer; he could do this for hours. He was on the edge, surfing the pleasure that shuddered through him. A drop of sweat trickled down Mikhail's chest and fell to Dima's belly. Their chests rose and fell in unison.

Mikhail's rhythm faltered, and he grunted through his thrusts. "You close?"

"Yeah. Can you—" Dima bit his lip to keep the words in. That wasn't how this worked. Mikhail told him not to ask, to take what he was given.

"What? Tell me."

"Can you... touch me?"

Mikhail grabbed Dima's shaft, pumping him a few times; then Mikhail pulled the foreskin back from the head and rubbed his thumb over Dima's slit as he rutted into him. Pleasure lit Dima from inside, and he clenched his ass, trying to hold Mikhail's thick length inside him. He moaned as the cum burst from his cock, spilling across his belly and the sparse hair of his chest. Mikhail gave a few more thrusts and then stuttered through his own orgasm as his cock pulsed deep inside Dima.

Mikhail fell limp, sprawling across Dima's body and pressing him into the mattress. The shadows of his orgasm chased across Dima's skin. His body throbbed. Mikhail rolled to the side, trailing his hand across Dima's torso and leaving it resting on his thigh. Dima tried to catch his breath, hyperaware of the warmth of the man next to him and the stickiness of cooling cum.

"Hey, the 'take what you're given' thing." Mikhail nudged Dima. "I wasn't serious. You have to tell me what you want too, all right? Always."

There'd be an always? This was strange territory, and Dima was without a map. But for now? "Okay."

Mikhail shifted, and Dima waited for him to get out of bed to dress and leave. But he only turned and rolled closer, wrapping one arm around Dima. This was weird. What did other people do, people who had regular sex lives and boyfriends?

"I'm going to take a shower," Dima mumbled. Mikhail pressed a kiss to Dima's shoulder blade. Dima clambered towards the edge of the bed and slipped off the edge of the mattress. Mikhail smacked his ass with his big hand, the sound echoing around the high-ceilinged room.

Dima searched on the floor for his underwear, then laughed at himself. What was the point? Mikhail had seen him already. And Mikhail was the one who should be getting dressed.

The water was piping hot, the jet from the shower head firm. It's the only thing Dima had insisted on when he was looking for an apartment. He could deal with tiny rooms, and having no elevator wasn't a problem, but he needed lots of hot water, whenever he wanted it.

The thrum of the water was so forceful Dima didn't hear Mikhail climbing into the shower, didn't register him at all until his hands were on Dima's shoulders, his muscled frame pressing him into the shiny white tiles.

Hands. Hands and boots and cocks, and water everywhere, running down his gullet, choking him. Dima wrapped his hands around his head and crouched, quaking, in the bottom of the shower stall. Don't resist, just endure...

"Dima?"

...it would pass, they always got bored in the end...

"Dima, I'm turning the water off, okay?"

...as long as he didn't try to fight back.

"I'm here. You're okay. Take your time."

Slowly the bathroom came back into focus: his toiletries on the shelves, the tiny transistor radio on the windowsill. Brussels. His apartment. St Petersburg was in the past. He wasn't a foot soldier any more.

Mikhail tucked a blanket around Dima's shoulders. "You wanna talk about it?"

Breaking down in front of the man you brought home to fuck was pretty much as bad a nightmare as they came. He'd already proven himself entirely too screwed up for Mikhail. But it was the fact it was an offer, not a demand, that sent the words tumbling from Dima's tongue. "Wine is going to be a necessity for this topic."

Mikhail slipped back into the bedroom, and Dima heard him open his tiny bar fridge. He came back wrapped in another blanket, holding a bottle and two wine glasses. He handed one glass to Dima, who took it with a shaking hand. Mikhail filled up both glasses, then sat down on the other side of the bathroom, letting their toes touch in the middle of the floor. Dima finished his wine in two swallows and held his glass up for more.

"My father served. Both Chechen wars. He wasn't so lucky the second time. Lost a leg. Sat around at home, drinking vodka, full of the glory of war. I reported for conscription as soon as I turned eighteen." He shook his head. "God, I was a fucking idiot. Young and dumb and... I wanted him to be proud of me, even if I was bookish, and quiet, and... gay. It was brutal. *Dedovschina*." Dima huffed out a bitter laugh. "Rule of the Grandfathers. More like rule of the sadists." Dima paused and gulped another mouthful. Mikhail shuffled over until he was sitting beside Dima, and he wrapped his hand around the back of Dima's head, stroking his hair.

"My best mate didn't make it; he was sent to Grozny. He killed himself three months in. I was fine for the first few months. I couldn't understand why



he—then they transferred me to St Petersburg.” Mikhail’s hand stopped its movement, and Dima pushed into Mikhail’s palm, seeking comfort.

“They didn’t like me. I was weak. It started with stupid things, waking me up to do their chores in the middle of the night. By the time they found out... that I liked... men, they used me. I was the barracks’ comfort stop. Sometimes they wanted me to blow them. Sometimes they just wanted to knock me around a little. The showers were the worst. Two years we served, back then. And every day of it I was a hole for someone, just a thing for them to use.

“When we got to the end of our two year service, we were out celebrating. I thought it was over. We drank a lot. Enough not to remember. I woke up in a pool of my own blood. Thrown out like trash in an alley. I could barely move—every part of me hurt. I didn’t go home. I never went back. Couldn’t. Couldn’t talk to my mother, don’t think my Dad will ever speak to me again—I just... left. I... I was terrified they’d know, that someone would tell them.

“My mum had family in what had been East Germany. They helped me. Sent me to friends who got me a job in Brussels. I’ve got good language skills; in a political town, that’s worth something. I cried when I realised I made it out. But you know what they say: you can take the boy out of the army...”

Mikhail leaned forwards, curling over Dima, his body a question mark against the starlight glinting through the bathroom window. He paused, his lips an inch from Dima’s. “I’m glad you survived,” he whispered and closed the gap, his kiss a soft apology. “I don’t think I realised until now how lucky I was to miss out.”

“You didn’t do your service?”

Mikhail shook his head. “I wanted to. Desperately. My mum was killed in the Buynakskby bombing in ’99.”

“Your dad?”

Mikhail shrugged. “Never met him. He worked on oil tankers back when my mum was working as the port manager in Kaspiysk. So it was just me. Couldn’t wait to be old enough to serve. I stalked my letterbox for weeks around my birthday, waiting for my conscription papers. And then it turned out my eyesight wasn’t up to scratch. There was me, desperate to defend my motherland, and they wouldn’t even take me.” He huffed out a breath.

“You didn’t think about going into the police? Coast guard? A photographer seems a big jump.”

Mikhail stiffened, his voice strained. “I guess nothing else appealed. Now the camera is my eye. The public is my squad.”

“Sorry for prying. Thanks for looking after me. You must be close to missing your flight.”

“I guess... yeah.” Mikhail looked at his watch. “I should be going. But I don’t like to leave you like this.”

“I’ll be fine. You must think the worst of me.”

Mikhail wrapped Dima in his big arms and pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Never. I do have to go, though. You sure you’ll be all right?”

Dima pushed against Mikhail’s chest. “Go. Get out of here. Thanks for a great night. Sorry I ruined it.”

Mikhail gathered his things and dressed. He paused at the doorway where Dima held the blanket around himself like a cape. “I got to spend the night with you: nothing you did could ever ruin that.” Mikhail pressed a kiss to Dima’s lips, filled with the warmth of spring flowers and sunshine. “I *will* call you.”

No, he wouldn’t. But that was okay. Dima leant over the edge of the balustrade and watched Mikhail jog down the stairs, then waited till he heard the bang of the lobby door before he turned to go back to bed. This had been more than he’d dreamed of. It would hold him for the next forty years.

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The next week rehearsals started: the stage alive and bright each day, the corridors bustling and filled with the murmur of fittings and gossip and half-remembered lines interspersed with incessant bitching about all the extra security measures. The cast hated having to swipe in and then show ID to the security officer at the new stage door reception desk.

The theatre was happy though, the old wood and plaster settling, giving up the spring groaning and creaking. It missed people between productions; it needed actors and actresses, dancers and musicians. They were the blood in its veins and without them it was only an empty mask hanging on a wall. It almost made Dima more lonely. He wasn’t a part of this world, would never declaim a soliloquy or paint a set. He was a visitor, no better than the audiences who booked a year’s tickets in advance when Dima released each season’s programme.

Well, summer was coming. Maybe when the official visit was over, he could rent a car, drive north. In twelve hours, with breaks, he could be in

Copenhagen, catch a ferry into the Baltic sea. How many islands were there? How long would it take to visit every one of them? Maybe find a place that felt like an unexpected home, rent a tiny cottage, fall asleep each night to the sound of rolling waves and gulls. If he chucked all this in, how long would his money last?

A dream was always nice to have. You just had to remember that, like a play, it wasn't reality.

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"You're getting off work early. I've got tickets."

"Mikhail?" The line echoed, full of static. How far away in the world was he?

"I missed you. My flight lands at three. I'll pick you up at half past four."

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

"Telling. I already cleared it with your boss."

Dima glared at Isolde across the office. She waved back at him with a cheerful smile and mouthed at him, "He emailed me yesterday." How did he know where Dima worked? How had he even known where to pick Dima up last time?

Mikhail was perfectly on time, dressed casually in jeans, a grey T-shirt, and a well-loved black leather jacket. He carried a huge grey overcoat.

"Is it cold out or something?"

"Nope," said Mikhail. "Let's go."

It was an easy ten minute walk to the Rue des Sables. As they rounded the corner by the cafe, a familiar two-story building came into sight, the ornate ironwork reflecting off the broad plate-glass windows.

"The Comics Centre?" Dima glanced up at Mikhail's face.

"You said you liked *bande dessinée*." He shrugged. "I don't really know anything about it. I was hoping you could teach me."

The museum was nearly empty at that time of day. Mikhail wouldn't check his overcoat in the cloakroom but gripped Dima's hand and led him into the Herge area.

"So, tell me, why's this guy such a big deal?"

“Well, you see this panel?”

Dima paused in front of the panel mounted on the wall. Mikhail wrapped his arms around him and pulled Dima in, tight against his body, the overcoat draped in front of them. Dima let himself lean back.

“It’s a very famous panel, from *Red Rackham’s Treasure*. It’s perfect economy in visual storytelling. This is the panel Herge said—”

Beneath the overcoat, Mikhail slid his hand down the front of Dima’s trousers, flicking the elastic waistband of his boxers. Dima froze.

“What are you doing?”

“Keep talking,” said Mikhail.

“Herge said... he said...”

Mikhail’s fingers unfastened the button on Dima’s pants, and then his hand dipped back into his briefs, pushing lower, brushing over Dima’s cock.

Mikhail spoke into Dima’s ear, his words tickling against Dima’s hair. “I’m listening. You’re interesting.”

Dima gulped. “That this panel was what h-he was most proud of in all his career.”

“Keep going,” said Mikhail. “Tell me more.”

Dima closed his eyes, trying to catch his breath. “People—people can see.”

“There’s no one here.”

“There’re cameras.”

Mikhail kissed Dima’s neck. “We’re not doing anything wrong. You’re educating me.” Mikhail flicked his thumb over the head of Dima’s cock, pressing against the slit. His fingers were slippery and cool; when the hell had Mikhail done that? Dima’s cock stiffened, pushing against the front of his briefs like it was seeking Mikhail’s touch.

“It’s j-just one image and yet—” Breathe in, god, keep breathing. “—and yet it tells us that the ship *Sirius* arrived at the island, it lowered...” Mikhail’s hand curled around Dima’s balls, tugging lightly with the tips of his fingers at the short hairs. Dima’s cock was weeping precum in tiny pulses. He tipped his head back and rested it against Mikhail’s broad chest as Mikhail’s hand maintained its rhythm.

“It lowered its anchor. Then Thompson and Thomson and Tintin and the Captain got into—” Mikhail squeezed his hand, capturing Dima’s balls, his other hand resting on Dima’s waist, pulling him back into Mikhail’s grasp. “—the longboat and rowed ashore—”

Footsteps echoed in the big room, and a young couple walked through the door, holding hands. Dima froze, and felt his face fill with blood. This was the opposite of keeping a low profile. Why was he letting Mikhail draw attention to them? He was bright red, he knew it, telegraphing to everyone exactly what they were doing, and they’d know what Mikhail was doing *to* him, and Dima would be arrested and—

“*Shhh*, it’s all right.” Mikhail whispered in his ear. “Everything’s fine. Just stand there. Let me touch you. I love touching you.”

Dima could move, any time. He could step away, and this would be over. He *could*. If only he wanted to. The couple strolled back out of the room. Dima sucked in a breath, only then aware of how scared he’d been.

“So... what were you saying?” said Mikhail. He gripped Dima’s thick length and pumped him gently, Dima firming again at his touch.

“And now—”

Mikhail bent his neck and touched his lips to Dima’s neck, sucking a bruise into the pale skin.

“And now Tintin and the detectives are pulling the boat higher onto the sand while—god, uh—while the Captain strides up the beach, rifle at the ready for any dangers they encounter.” Dima shivered. He wanted more, wanted Mikhail’s hands on him. He was floating and lost, and Mikhail anchored him. “Plus the action is moving from the left—oh, ahh, yes, god, like that—the left side of the panel to the right. This means—” Mikhail sped up his strokes, and Dima could faintly hear the *schlick, schlick* of Mikhail’s hand moving against Dima’s length, oh, fuck, yes. “M-means the characters are making progress. When they face a... a... setback Herge draws the movement going from right to left.”

“You know what? I bet the whole security team is watching us on camera, right now.”

Dima whimpered. That shouldn’t turn him on, it fucking *shouldn’t*. The idea of being on display, someone watching, *people* watching; god, that must have been hardwired into him at some point. Dima was hard, impossibly so, and he felt his balls draw up towards his body—

“Which is the same shot framing we see in contemporary films.”

“They’re watching you act like a little whore. You just take what I do to you. So good for me.” Mikhail kissed Dima’s neck, licking lightly over the love bite that still stung.

Oh, fuck. Dima shot, the orgasm rolling through him. Mikhail held him tight as he shivered through it, like Dima was something precious. Something worth taking care of. When Dima stopped shaking, Mikhail pulled his hand out of Dima’s pants and stepped backwards, transferring a pale blue cotton handkerchief from his other hand and wiping Dima’s spend from his fingertips. Dima hurriedly fastened his trousers. God, what had he let be done to him? What if security were coming, right now? He’d lose his job.

“I want to get out of here. We have to get out of here.”

Mikhail threw his coat over his right forearm, and wrapped his left arm around Dima. “Nope. You have to show me the rest of the exhibition.” He bent and pressed a kiss to the top of Dima’s head. “And then maybe you can take me home again and we’ll see what else you like.”

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Mikhail slept over. When he dropped Dima off at work the next morning, he pulled the car into the tiny car park outside the theatre and switched off the ignition. “Think you could give me a tour?”

“Of the theatre?”

“It must be interesting, right? How old is it?”

The answer burst from Dima, the product of five years of press releases. “The original theatre was finished in 1783 but wasn’t expanded to its current size until 1933. And I can’t believe you’re seriously interested in it.”

“Why not? I’d love to do a photographic spread of the interior. Come on, show me around, please?”

Dima swiped them through into backstage. “I’ll just drop my bag off in my office.”

Isolde raised her eyebrows at Dima, and he rolled his eyes at her. Now that she knew Mikhail had stayed over, she’d force Dima to go for coffee and pester him for details.

Izzy gave Mikhail a gracious smile and a handshake. “It’s so nice to see you again.”

Mikhail perched on the edge of her desk. “Dima offered to show me around. I hope that’s okay?”

She shrugged. “Sure. We don’t actually have snipers trained on the building until next week.”

Dima glared at her.

“Kidding, I’m kidding! Go on!”

Dima led Mikhail up the stairs. “You wanna start at the top? The tours usually do.”

“Sounds good.”

They climbed to the fourth floor, and Dima went into his spiel, the words tripping off his tongue without conscious thought. “The attic used to be dressing rooms for the chorus. Very inconvenient. Cold in winter, boiling hot in summer, and four flights of stairs to run up and down. Worse for the pot boys; they had to carry the full chamber pots down to empty them.”

Mikhail stepped in close behind Dima and pressed a kiss to his neck, wrapping his arms around him.

Dima smiled and turned. “Do you really want the tour, or do you just want to molest me some more?”

“I’d like to molest you all the time, but I really do want the tour.”

Dima took him all over, from the dressing rooms, to the VIP box, with its plushly upholstered antique chairs. Mikhail ran his hands over Dima’s body at every opportunity, but never attempted to dip beneath his clothes. Finally, Dima led him into the highest circle for the view of the huge chandelier directly above and the immense red velvet curtains across the stage below.

“It’s gorgeous,” said Mikhail. “You’re a lucky man to work here.”

“Me? What about you, traveling all over, taking photographs? How’d you get into that?”

Mikhail leant back against the polished wooden balcony rail. He caught Dima’s shirt in his fist and pulled him into his embrace. “After my mum died I didn’t have to go into an orphanage. She had brothers and sisters. They took turns looking after me. But they were busy, with families of their own, and another kid was expensive. No one kept me for long.”

Dima buried his face into Mikhail’s neck. “That must have been tough.”

Mikhail shrugged and pressed a kiss to the top of Dima's head. "It was okay. I had everything I needed: clothes, books, shoes, food. I was grateful. But it was the small things, you know? The inside jokes. The family traditions. I missed that, always being on the outside, looking in. I won a digital camera in a regional science contest and started taking photographs. The lens lets other people see familiar things like they're strangers too. With a camera everything becomes about perspective. Change the lighting and laughter lines become the weight of the world written on someone's face. Change the angles and the story changes."

"So, where's home?"

Mikhail laughed. "Everywhere. Nowhere."

"You don't have a base?" Mikhail's warmth soaked through his jacket into Dima, and his big arms tightened around him.

"Never seemed worth it when I'm on the move so much, zigzagging all over Europe, Asia, the Americas."

"You're still always on the outside. You never wanted a place to belong?"

"Never had any reason to. Or anyone to want one with. Not till now."

Dima flushed, then pulled back, brushing the wrinkles out of his shirt and keeping his eyes fixed on the floor. "Hey, maybe you want to come to the play we're rehearsing now? Opening night is next week. That's booked out, but I can still get you tickets before the end of the run."

"I'd like that. I'll check my calendar." Mikhail stole a kiss. "Should I get out of here and let you get back to work?"

"Yeah." This reluctance to say goodbye was a new thing. Dima wanted nothing more than to tell Isolde he had an emergency and play hooky for the rest of the day. The week. His life. He kissed Mikhail goodbye through his car window, feeling like a 50s housewife. This was crazy, but he liked the bounce in his step as he walked across the street to get two takeaway coffees. He kept that happy feeling right up until he realised he'd left his swipe card with his bag. Dima sighed and phoned Izzy, balancing the tray with two cups as he tried to dial one handed.

"It's my turn this time. I left my card in there. Please, can you come and let me in?"

"Your penance is to divulge all."



“I know. I already bought the coffee.”

“Fine, then.”

A few seconds later the door buzzed, and Dima bumped it open with his hip. He handed a latte to Isolde and rummaged through his bag for his card.

“Pin it to yourself this time,” said Izzy. “I already got growled at twice last week by the head of security for forgetting mine, and it’s not worth it, trust me.”

Dima frowned. “I don’t have it. I guess I left it at home.”

“Just borrow mine if you need it,” said Isolde. “Now sit down and spill.”

Dima sipped his macchiato. Moments like these, he wished he had whiskey in his filing cabinet. Isolde settled herself in her chair and leant forwards, ready to catch every word.

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Mikhail picked him up from work that evening too, holding up a small bag of groceries and a DVD. “I thought we could eat in.”

The sex was quiet, peaceful. When they had both rocked themselves to completion, they lay together amongst the rumpled sheets and ate hot macadamia-nut sponge pudding and watched giant robots battle sea monsters.

That night, in the dark, when Dima woke, Mikhail was holding him like he was a wild bird: as if Dima would be crushed if he pulled him too close, but if he opened his hands, he’d fly away. In the faint yellow sodium light of the street lamps far below, moisture glistened in Mikhail’s eyes. Dima sat up and cupped Mikhail’s head in his palms and kissed him until the lines in Mikhail’s face smoothed out and the tension in his shoulders melted away. In daylight, Dima hadn’t wanted to be clingy, didn’t want to frighten Mikhail away with his loneliness and longing. But maybe, as long as it was without words, it was okay for them both to rely on each other, their mutual need a shadow that, perversely, only showed up in the dark.

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The cafe was packed the next day at lunch. Dima stuck his fork into the open-face sandwich and frowned. This was supposed to be chicken breast, but it sounded wrong under his knife and felt wrong when he cut into it, the texture plastic and uncomfortably crisp; like something reconstituted, moulded into the shape of the real thing.

A figure slid into the seat opposite him. Dima glanced up and felt his features fall slack at the sight of the familiar face. He bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself from saying any of the words that leapt to his tongue. He lowered his knife and fork to the plate and nodded politely. "Oborin."

"I've come to do you a favour."

Dima waited. He'd had a lot of practice. Never give anything anyway; that was the rule.

"You seem to be getting along well with your new friend."

Dima stiffened. Please don't let it show in his face. Don't let them get inside.

"Saw you at the Comics Centre the other day. Felt like old times, seeing you get off in public like that." Under the table, Oborin pressed his foot, inside its military boot, down on top of Dima's soft business shoe.

Dima picked up his knife again and cut into his sandwich, sawing back and forth, severing the flesh into bite sized pieces.

"He's SVR. Just so you know."

Dima dropped his knife with a clatter. Shit. *Sluzhba vneshney razvedki?* Dima placed his hands in his lap and clenched his fists. Of course he was. Because Dima was a fucking fool to ever believe someone could just want *him*, just for himself. What did the Russian secret service want in Brussels?

"It wasn't a freebie," said Oborin. "I'm going to excuse myself and go to the men's room. You're going to wait five minutes and follow me in. It's been more than a couple of years since I saw you last. I'm expecting you've learned a few new tricks. Don't keep me waiting."

Dima waited until the men's room door closed, then grabbed his messenger bag and ducked out the door of the cafe.

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Dima walked back to the theatre on automatic, eyes unseeing, the echo of Mikhail's voice whispering in his head.

*Think you could give me a tour?*

And, god, his missing badge right after he'd shown Mikhail around the theatre. Goddamit. He was so fucking stupid. He should have known the first time Mikhail approached him; men like that didn't pursue Dima.

Dima paused in front of the theatre, taking in the rich cream exterior, the boxy columns. He sighed and used Isolde's badge to let himself in for the last time. He was done. Done with the half-lived life in the city, greeting ignorant tourists and wealthy art patrons, and catering to spoiled actors who wanted things just this way. Done with half-built dreams, waiting for someone who shared them. Done with believing it was possible someone wanted him.

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Dima balled up his hamburger wrapper and threw it into the garbage bag on the passenger seat, then eased out of the car. His joints cracked and muscles ached, his body protesting being stuck behind the wheel for so long. It had taken nearly seven hours to drive this far, after a pile-up on the E37. If he pushed on he'd be in Rostock in a couple more hours. No point stopping in Hamburg, then.

Dima walked around the big Jeep, shaking the feeling back into his extremities. Luneburger Heath was beautiful enough to match his dream, but it just wasn't far enough away. He yearned for the safety of a stretch of open water between him and his old life. Something substantial enough he couldn't just turn tail and run back to safety.

Dima climbed up onto the hood of the Jeep and leaned back against the windshield. He tipped his face up to meet the incessant drizzle. The once gold and green light of the forest faded to ash in the dimming light, like the taste in his mouth. Isolde had protested as he thrust his resignation towards her. But this was better. He'd never wanted that life anyway. The Jeep had been an impulse purchase, but somewhere north, across the Baltic, in old-growth forest by the sea, there would be a cottage waiting for him, accessed by a tiny rutted track. A plot of land where he could dig his fingers into the soil, feel the ache of physical labour, and watch as his efforts flourished in green vibrant life. Perhaps he'd even get some sheep, a dog to watch over the house and share peaceful nights curled up by the fire. Animals wouldn't lie to you; wouldn't betray you. He was ready for that new life. Ready to start building something he wanted, not just what would keep him afloat. Even if that life would be one spent alone.

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The Öland Bridge rose like an unfurled ribbon above the wide blue Baltic, undulating gently until the broad expanse of green forests spread out on either side of the car. Dima just kept driving, past open meadows and through

scattered townships, until he met the sea's edge again. The guesthouse was old but well kept, the paint fresh and the parking lot more than half-full.

"I'm looking for a room."

"Sure," said the barkeep. "Plenty of vacancies. Is it just you by yourself?"

He swung his duffel to his other shoulder and sighed. "Just me."

The key was an actual metal key attached to a huge hunk of brass with the numeral two engraved on it. When he reached his room, he wasn't any less perturbed; it was a mortise lock that even a twelve year old could pick with his mum's hair clip.

The door needed a firm nudge to open, sticking in the damp frame. Dima slid into the room. The air was close, stuffy. Great, no air conditioning. God, he needed sleep. Needed to forget everything. Dammit, no minibar. He grabbed his wallet and jacket and headed back outside. The *Systembolaget* was three blocks along, and the bottle of whiskey cost him the price of a weekend away in France. What sort of country only let the government sell alcohol?

When he returned to his room, Dima set the bottle on the floor, threw his bag on the bed, and sat down to toe off his shoes.

Only when the figure in the chair by the window moved, did he realise he wasn't alone.

"Jesus!"

"I was never supposed to love you."

Mikhail. Mikhail, here? No. This wasn't happening. "I don't... I don't understand. What are you—how are you *here*?"

"I'm sorry. I liked you before I realised where you worked. It was too perfect. I was supposed to use you to get access to the theatre." Mikhail's voice was rough, as if he hadn't slept in days. "It was the easiest way, lowest risk."

"How did you even find me?"

"Tracker. In your bag," said Mikhail. "Standard procedure." He reached over and flicked on the table lamp, the dim light chasing the gloom from the shabby room. "I didn't do the job. I walked away from it."

"It was the Chancellor, right?"

Mikhail nodded. "I fitted a pistol to the drone. Would have launched it off the top circle and taken her out in the VIP box."

“What would that even achieve?”

“That’s not my problem. I’m only the tool. Just the shit shoveller. I go where I’m pointed.”

“I didn’t tell anyone,” said Dima.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m out. I can’t ever go back. I don’t want to. I could have kept doing the dirty jobs forever, but then I met you. And you changed everything.”

“I don’t underst—I don’t know what you want me to say.”

Mikhail stood and walked over to the bed. “Say that you feel it too. That it’s not just me. Tell me you want to try.”

Dima choked out a laugh. “You’re on the run, now, right?” He rubbed a hand over his face, pushing his sweat-damp hair back off his brow. “I’m a paper pusher. How do I hold down a job in white-collar administration while on the lam with an ex-SVR agent?” It was ridiculous, but Dima was hard, the scent of Mikhail, his nearness, when he thought—*knew*—that he was a fool who would never see Mikhail again, and now...

“Money isn’t an issue. I have more than enough for both of us. I have ID’s—good ones. But I don’t have you.” He paused, searching Dima’s eyes. “Do I?”

“This is insane, you know that?”

“What’s insane is that you didn’t turn me in. You knew I took your swipe card. Got the layout of the theatre. What held you back?”

Dima shook his head, unsure of the answer. Unwilling to admit it. “I don’t know. I just... couldn’t.” Dima shrugged. “I told them I lost my badge. It would have been inactivated. Perhaps it wasn’t enough, but... I couldn’t handle another betrayal, even if it was one I orchestrated.”

“I’m sorry. You know that, right?”

“Why did you follow me?”

Mikhail sat on the bed, tentative, reaching for Dima’s hand before he paused and dropped it in the space between them.

“How could I not?”

God, how Dima wanted to believe. He closed his eyes, the whisper of Mikhail’s touch on his skin a ghost of a memory. And why not? He could

choose to believe, choose to give in. What motive could Mikhail have at this point?

Dima could reject Mikhail, *should* reject him, reject a relationship built on lies and half-truths. That would be the strong thing to do, right? The right thing? The easy thing, for sure. The lonely thing.

“Now what?” Dima asked.

Mikhail didn't respond, just leaned closer until his lips were a hair's breadth away from Dima's, a thousand questions in the small distance between them. Dima hesitated; then he closed the distance with a soft brush against Mikhail's lips. Fuck it. He would take what he wanted and figure the rest out later.

The kiss started gentle, a question, a promise, then quickly evolved into something frantic, desperate as they caught the taste of each other. The taste that Dima had thought was lost. Their teeth clacked, lips bruising, almost punishing, as Dima sought to bury himself in Mikhail, to immerse himself in the scent, flavour, and feel of the man.

He pushed Mikhail back onto the bed and climbed over him, straddling his waist, never breaking the kiss. He ground against Mikhail through their clothes, the friction half-pain, half-pleasure.

Mikhail tugged at his shirt, trying to pull it over Dima's head, unable to break the kiss. Dima wrenched himself away and tore his shirt off, then tugged at Mikhail's. He pushed him down again and plastered their bodies together. The silky heat of skin on skin was intoxicating. Dima attacked Mikhail's mouth, licking into it before pulling back and gently biting Mikhail's lower lip, then sucking it into his mouth, as Mikhail groaned beneath him. Mikhail's fingers dug into Dima's hips, and he grabbed Mikhail's wrists, pulling his hands over his head and pressing them against the comforter.

“I'm in charge,” growled Dima.

Mikhail relaxed his hands and nodded, the flush in his cheeks creeping down his neck into his chest.

Dima leaned over, nipping sharply at the skin where Mikhail's neck met his shoulder, raising a pinprick bruise, and hopped off the bed. He shucked his pants and underwear and then Mikhail's.

Mikhail's cock was hard and purple, leaking drops of clear liquid that drizzled onto his belly. Dima bent over and licked a broad stripe up the thick length. Mikhail trembled under his touch. Shit, being able to do this to Mikhail,

to pull that reaction from him? It was heady and rich, like mulled wine at Christmas.

Mikhail raised his hips, then tipped his head to the side and groaned. “Fuck.”

“Sorry, let me fix that,” said Dima, before grasping Mikhail’s cock in a firm grip. He pumped his hand down the length of him. The stark contrast of his own pale flesh against the blood-flushed skin of Mikhail’s cock was jarring. Dima would never get enough. Another bead of precum rose to the head, and Dima leaned over and touched his tongue to it, savouring the sweet-salty flavour. He engulfed the head and sucked. Dima hollowed his cheeks as he pulled back. Mikhail’s hips jolted, driving him deeper into Dima’s mouth. Dima sat up and braced his hands on Mikhail’s hips, holding him down. “None of that. Tonight I run things. One second.” Dima vaulted off the bed and opened his bag, pulling out a condom from beside his toothbrush. No lube though, dammit. He hadn’t brought anything with him, hadn’t thought he’d need it. He looked in the bathroom, returning with a small bottle of lube from the complementary toiletries.

Dima held the bottle up so Mikhail could see. “There’re advantages to being in Sweden, I guess.” Mikhail smiled at him, his face relaxed, eyes red-rimmed and dark circled but sparkling now with satisfaction and pleasure. Oh, and god, how he wanted Mikhail’s cock in him. Now.

Dima tore open the condom and rolled it onto Mikhail’s cock, then poured a little lube into his palm and rubbed his hands together, warming the liquid before circling Mikhail’s cock with both hands. He slicked himself up quickly, perfunctorily, before rising above Mikhail and sinking down onto him, welcoming the sharp burn of the swift entry.

“Fuck!” Mikhail said, his back arching off the bed, his hands once again finding Dima’s hips, bruising in their grip.

Dima rose and fell rapidly, angling back slightly, each thrust downward a bright-white heat in the core of him. He braced his hands on Mikhail’s chest, leaning forwards to kiss the other man, their lips and tongues speaking voiceless words they could not say aloud.

Mikhail wrapped one hand around Dima’s cock, and he brushed it away. “Not yet.”

Mikhail’s hips faltered, and he grabbed at Dima, rolling them until Dima lay on his back between Mikhail’s spread legs. Each thrust was strong, purposeful, as he drove into Dima.

“Fuck, you’re so tight, so hot. Gonna be my bottom slut? Gonna let me fuck you until you can no longer think? Until you’re screaming my name?”

Dima nodded, panting, then met Mikhail’s lips again, rolling his hips up into Mikhail, feeling him like a hot brand within. Mikhail hooked his arms under Dima’s knees, pulling them up higher, as he thrust harder, faster, into Dima. “One day soon, I’m going to turn you over and fuck you over the table of our cottage. Fill you up with my cum; watch it drip out of you.”

Dima could only whimper as his balls drew up. Mikhail set a bruising pace, pounding into Dima again and again; then he reached over and grasped Dima’s cock in his hand, stripping him quickly. Dima tensed, groaning as his orgasm pulsed through him. Mikhail’s hips stuttered, and he pushed in hard, deep, frozen in place as his own orgasm overtook him.

Mikhail collapsed over Dima, his weight a heavy, welcome presence, real and solid. Mikhail wanted him, had *pursued* him. Maybe all his dreams were coming true. After a moment, Mikhail rolled to the side, then turned, resting his head over Dima’s heart and entwining his leg between Dima’s. Mikhail’s hand tangled in Dima’s sparse chest hair.

“Now what?” Mikhail asked. It was the first time Dima had heard the thread of uncertainty in his voice, as if he was afraid this was goodbye.

“Now? Now we find our cottage. I’ve got my heart set on an island.” Suddenly the impossible felt real. He had this man here, with him, didn’t he?

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Dima turned his head to watch Mikhail catch his breath, his eyes pleasure blown and half-lidded. “Sweden has over two hundred thousand islands, you know.”

“We going to road-test them all?”

“Every one,” said Dima, and he reached out a hand and grasped Mikhail’s fingers in his own.

“Together?” Mikhail asked.

“Together.”

**The End**



## **Author Bio**

*Tripoli is a collaboration by three avid readers of male-male romance. Mild-mannered professionals by day, dub-con fiction enthusiasts by night, here they tried for consensual and sweet with a hint of angst.*

## **Contact & Media Info**

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