



LAURA S. FOX

FIST
— to —
**THE
HEART**

Fist To The Heart

By

Laura S. Fox

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M/M Erotic Romance

Intended for Mature Audiences Only

This book contains graphic depictions of sexual intercourse, strong language, graphic description of violence, minor character death, and it is not meant for readers who are less than 18 years of age.

Chapter One – I Always Win

He walked through the crowd of shouting men, focused on the task ahead. That was something he chose to ignore, every time - the stench of those places. It was a rubbery smell mixed with male sweat and the excitement rising for the bloody fight ahead. If he were to inhale too much, he was bound to get dizzy. Maybe overcome with rage.

In a way, he was doing this to himself, if he were fair. But Johnny Bryne was not known to be fair, the least of all people to himself. That was maybe the reason why he was fighting these matches made in hell. Or perhaps he just loved to win against all the odds.

In the cage, he was the one in control. His opponents lacked something important, something they didn't know they needed. Some underwent grueling training; others tried to fix the matches in their favors.

But no one dared to approach him and offer him a bribe in exchange for dropping to the floor and pretending to be broken enough not to get up before the count was done. Seeing how rigged and unlawful these fights were, it was a wonder he was allowed to have his fun like that.

Maybe they could sense it, the darkness that walked with him. They were clever men. They knew not to bet a losing hand against someone with a loose screw. Because he always won and that was not going to change. Ever.

He jumped into the ring and followed through the motions of what was expected from someone like him. At least, no one could blame him of being unable to throw a good show. There was no fun for the audience to see a man sent to the floor with just one punch.

Legal fights were not like this. But he wasn't interested in walking the straight and narrow. He knew well on which side of the tracks he had been born.

Johnny Bryne had earned a proper nickname for himself. He knew how to dance around his prey, fooling the other into believing that there was an opening, only to dash his hopes in a quick, execution-style, move, not meant to take the opponent out just yet, but enough to make him aware of the simple fact that he could not win.

The announcer walked forward, grabbing the mike, and roaring the names of the opponents for the tonight match.

“Snake! Snake! Snake!” the audience chanted as they had done from the first moment he had walked through the door.

Johnny saluted, raising one gloved hand.

“You know the rules,” the referee shouted at them, as he touched fists with his opponent.

“No hit below the belt, no hit when the opponent’s down.”

No shit, Johnny wanted to say back. Everyone was paying to see these fights because they were dirty, without rules. It wasn’t even a sport. They wore gloves only because hand fractures took too long to heal, and no one wanted to risk a good fighter over a thing like that. It made some frustrated.

They weren’t regular boxing gloves, either. That had become a rule when some thought themselves clever enough to push metal plates into the lining, and not even the bloodthirsty audience had found it funny when too many fighters began leaving the ring looking like not even their moms could love them anymore. Rigged matches were one thing. Cheating in the ring with dirty tactics like that was also sanctioned by the lowlifes attending the games, no matter how hell-bent on throwing their month’s wages on a bet.

So hand wraps and simple, tight fitting, fingerless leather gloves were the only hand wear permitted. Johnny examined his opponent, as the audience continued to chant his name. No one was betting against him because they knew the outcome. But the bookies were resourceful people. They knew how to make people bet. On how long the Snake’s opponent was going to last, or how many times the unfortunate victim was going to try to get up from the floor for yet another minute in the ring. Whether Snake was going to be sent to the floor at least once. Johnny didn’t bother himself with details. The money was good, and that was all that mattered to him.

Tonight’s opponent was a super heavyweight. Well, maybe they had the costs for a new ring floor covered because he would make a dent after being dropped a few times.

The whistle caught him in a mid-air jump. The opponent’s jowls trembled when Johnny sent his first punch straight into his bovine-like face.

Ruslan was trying to get comfortably seated, but it appeared that ergonomics was not precisely the type of thing the organizers of this kind of event were known for. By all means, the entire audience seemed to prefer standing up to sitting. The collective roar from the men in the building was making the air crackle with electricity.

Ah, but this was something he terribly enjoyed. He could almost taste the testosterone exuded by the male bodies aroused with the promise of blood and victory. Maybe tonight he was going to grab some random guy and show him a good time. Although these weren’t his usual hunting grounds, he hoped the hook up he chose would not hold it against him that he had a dick between his legs. He had his means to be persuasive, such as a lean body that looked good naked, a wicked tongue, and, when his pleasing physical appearance was not enough, a fat wad of bills usually did the trick. Usually. He was not the kind to fight losing battles.

But, of course, tonight was all about business, and he needed to focus. Maybe later, he was going to call Yanis, see if he was back in town, and summon him for a quick fuck since it wasn't exactly a good time to go cruising.

"Who is this Snake?" he leaned toward the other, as the audience was chanting around him a single syllable. He had to scream the words in the loud noise so that his companion could hear him.

"Our guy," the old man replied. "We must make him sign with us. Rumor has it he's unbeatable."

"Really?" Ruslan quirked an eyebrow. "How come we've never heard of him? And, more importantly, how come he's not already ours?"

"Apparently, he prefers to waste his time in this dump," the old man replied, pulling his coat closer to his body as if he didn't want to touch the worn seat too much.

Just like Ruslan, he could not seem to find a way to sit comfortably.

"No wonder he's unbeatable," Ruslan commented. "If all his adversaries are small-time thugs, it's no surprise that the cleverest of the bunch manages to get on top. That still doesn't qualify him for our attention. So, come on, spill it. What's the deal with him?"

"Just watch," the old man pointed with his chin toward the ring.

Ruslan took in the man already in the ring. He looked strong like a bull and probably weighed well over 275 pounds, and, unfortunately for him, most of those pounds were lard, not muscles. Yeah, he had cardiac arrest written all over him. But he did have a brute's attitude, the way he was hunching forward, and he was tall enough to be considered a giant in his own right. Most probably he was dominating his adversaries by being a moving mass of such magnitude that no one could stand in his way.

"I don't see why they would call him Snake," Ruslan thought out loud. "Is that an inside joke?"

"That's not Snake," the old man snorted. "That's Snake," he pointed at the second man making his way into the ring.

Ruslan leaned forward to stare at the other combatant for the tonight's match. Someone hurried to take the man's robe, and he jumped a few times up and down, flexing both arms in the process, and then raising one to salute the audience.

Unlike the first one to get into the cage, this one was packing nothing but muscles. Ruslan had a trained eye. There was quite a critical weight difference between the two. This one probably weighed somewhere around 200 pounds or a bit less, but at his height, somewhere at 6.3, or 6.4, that was not a problem.

Definitely not a problem at all, Ruslan thought again, as he took in the man's strong, anatomically perfect muscles. He licked his lips. Their target was eliciting his interest all right. From the first row, where he was seated, Ruslan could see the man's face, although he would have liked to look a bit more closely.

Unlike his opponent's brutish appearance, this one deserved his nickname. There was grace in the way he moved, and Ruslan could almost feel a familiar prickle in his fingers to touch those perfect muscles, and another sensation, equally familiar, in his groin.

Hmm, there had been some time since he had felt stirred by merely looking at someone. The man made a full round of the ring so that the crowd could see him and cheer him on a bit more. Funny thing, he didn't seem a poser. His tanned skin seemed marred of few fading scars, save for several long, angry-looking, scars on his back. He wasn't tattooed, like other practitioners of the so-called sport. Ruslan wondered; what kind of man was Snake?

His hair was shaved closely at the back of his head, but a few loose black strands in the front were almost getting into his eyes. With a casual, unstudied move, Snake pushed the hair away from his forehead. His dark eyes, shadowed by thick, furrowed eyebrows, scanned the crowd one more time, and Ruslan, without being able to look at them properly, somehow knew they were filled with apprehension. Anyone could say all they wanted that Snake was relaxed, waiting to score another win on his personal board, but Ruslan saw something else.

His face was probably far from what could be considered a classic masculine beauty. His mouth was large, with firm, yet full lips, and it was clear his nose had been rearranged on his face a few times, at least, one of the consequences of too many battles. Yet, that didn't detract from his animal magnetism.

Ruslan sighed. If the old man was going to send him to negotiate with Snake, he wanted to get into that man's sports shorts. He only hoped Snake was at least a bit into dudes; with that kind of raw, fascinating masculinity, he didn't look like someone who had trouble getting laid. Seeing that he was unbeatable, probably he had enough money, too. That was a tough call, Ruslan knew. He could convince a lot of horny guys to fuck him into oblivion, but usually, he picked men against which he could have a bit of leverage, be it his money or their horniness and inability to get a warm body to fuck somewhere else at that exact moment.

The referee barely blew his whistle, and Snake proved in a single powerful jump how he had come to get that nickname. Ruslan didn't wince when the opponent's fat jowls trembled under the direct hit. He was enthralled.

Were they trying to insult him? The fatso was so easy to hit that it was getting on his nerves. Maybe they had chosen him based on his endurance. By all means, any other opponent should have been on the floor, squirming in pain.

Hmm, maybe this was a new strategy, Johnny thought. To tire him out. He grinned, making the other man's pig-like eyes flash with an understanding that this fight would be a loss for him. Johnny thought that he probably looked like a maniac. He counted on that.

Maybe it was the right moment to fake one of his so-called suicide moves. He intentionally made a clumsy move, to leave his opponent a small opening. Was the mass of lard in front of him capable of understanding what was offered on a silver platter?

Apparently, on the third attempt, the opponent seemed to see the only chance he had for a moment of careless triumph. Johnny pretended to gasp for air like he was too tired already.

Bingo. The opponent finally moved and sent Johnny to the floor with a heavy kick. Great. It was the perfect opportunity to rest a little, indeed. This kind of game wasn't played in rounds. So, the combatants had to grab at any chance they had for a reprieve.

He remained on the floor, to make the fight a bit less boring than what it had been so far. Also, it was a good opportunity to steal a glance at the audience and gauge their level of interest.

His eyes fell on someone seated on the front row. Seated? While attending one of his matches? That wasn't a good sign. The man was inspecting him with keen eyes, and, for a second, he lost himself in seas of blue.

Wow, he was a looker, Johnny thought. He was also apparently looking at him with unhidden interest. Somewhere, far away, he could hear the referee counting.

Well, there was enough time to indulge in admiring the male specimen in the front row. What was someone so well dressed, in what looked like a designer suit, matched with a coat most probably from the same collection, in a dump like that?

He was a perfect blond, and Johnny had a perfect soft spot for blonds. Of all the tasty morsels he had had in his life, the blond variety had been his favorite. And the stranger looked like royalty, with high cheekbones, perfect symmetric features, and deep blue eyes.

Johnny was dying to see more. The blue eyes blinked, and then their owner began showing him something. Johnny smirked when he understood that the pretty man was tapping his wrist, pointing at his watch. He winked and sent him a small kiss from the tip of his lips.

"Nine!" the referee's voice boomed.

The entire room was shouting at him, delirious. Johnny pushed himself up. Playtime was over. He didn't even need to look to realize where his opponent was. The asshole was already celebrating his victory against the unbeatable Snake.

"Hey!" he yelled. "I'm here!"

He opened his arms wide, fooling his opponent into another opening. When the bag of lard began marching toward him like a battery ram, Johnny jumped and caught the man into the chin with a perfect roundhouse kick. His opponent remained standing for two seconds, making everyone in the room hold their breath. The silence broke when he hit the floor like a sack of potatoes. The audience exploded. And this time, he remained there until the referee finished counting.

Johnny turned around, searching for the pretty man in the front row. But he was not paying him any attention at the moment. Instead, he seemed to lend his ear to someone next to him, some old dude dressed up to snuff just like him.

Ah, damn. Rich man's toy boy. He should have known better. Well, he wasn't one to cry over spilled milk. He was going to find a warm and willing body tonight that he could fuck until he could feel his legs no more while thinking of the perfect blond in the front row.

The couple didn't look interested in other fights, as, when Johnny looked again, in the hope of catching another glimpse of that delicious stranger, they were already gone.

"I'm leaving this to you," the old man put on his gloves, and looked around with scrutinizing eyes.

"Sure thing. I have this one in the bag," Ruslan smiled.

It was his lucky night all right. Snake had blown a kiss at him and winked, so, in the universal language of flirting, that meant that he was interested in Ruslan. This was going to be both easy and pleasant. Seeing that he typically hated complications, things were going just as he wanted.

"Russy." The old man patted his arm to draw his attention. "Snake deserves his nickname. He's sly and slippery. Plus, he doesn't like being owned. So, be careful, okay?"

"Sure thing, papa." Ruslan leaned to kiss the man's cheek.

"I mean it," the old man added, caressing Ruslan's hair with affection. "Play safe."

Ruslan smiled. The old man had nothing to worry about. By the look in those dark eyes, Snake was probably hungry, and also in the mood to celebrate his victory, without a doubt. Ruslan just had the perfect tasty morsel to lure him in and then score the deal. Plus, this would surely be pleasant.

One thing about being the star of that dump was that he had a room with a shower, all his own. The short cold shower he took had calmed some of the battle rage and frustrated arousal over the pretty toy boy from earlier, but he still needed to go out and cruise for a piece of ass.

He stopped in the door of the bathroom, as he noticed there was someone in his room, seemingly fascinated with the displayed photos on the small bookshelf. So the owner of that dump had thought about letting the visitor in. That meant he was important enough to warrant such a thing. Usually, Johnny wasn't crazy about visitors. He had nothing worth stealing, either. Not there, in that dingy room, anyway.

"Can I help you with something?" he asked roughly.

The visitor turned around, and Johnny made eye contact with the good-looking man from before.

"Are you lost, blue eyes?" he drawled and leaned against the door frame, crossing his arms over his chest.

He was only wearing a towel around his waist, and he was still wet from the shower. The visitor was eyeing him with interest. Excellent. Maybe he still had a chance with Mr. luxury toy.

"Care to share a shower with me?" he added, seeing that the other was too busy devouring him head to toes with his eyes to speak.

That seemed to bring his visitor back to reality. "A shower? It looks like you just had one."

"Well, I don't mean now. Later, after I'm done making you scream my name at least a dozen times," Johnny began walking toward his different kind of prey for the night.

The stranger laughed. "Snake, right? Smooth, man, smooth, what can I say? Actually, I'm here to offer you a deal."

"A deal?" Johnny frowned.

"It's a fantastic deal," his visitor began jabbering. "You fight for us; we pay you royally."

"Who is we?" Johnny asked roughly, all thoughts of getting busy between the sheets with the man in front of him gone from his mind.

"Efige. We run the casinos on the west side of the river. We also offer a wide array of entertainment ..."

"No deal," Johnny said brusquely. "And since when is Efige getting into this kind of dirty business? You know what? I don't need to know. See yourself to the door."

His visitor opened his mouth, hesitated for a second, then his beautiful lips stretched into a wide smile. "I can make it worth your while," he batted his eyelashes, cocking his head to the side.

"You guys have nothing I want," Johnny replied harshly, now bent on getting close to the other just so that he could throw him out the door.

"Not we. I," the man pointed at himself, "want to offer you something extra."

"Like what?" Johnny questioned, looking the other into his deep blue eyes.

From up close, he looked even more delicious. He smelled great, of expensive cologne, but also of something else that must have been his natural scent. Johnny dug his nails into his palms. He wasn't getting swayed so quickly now, was he?

"A blowjob," the stranger smiled and said casually, "from yours truly."

Johnny leaned in, now so close that his mouth was just inches away from perfect lips. The stranger was just a bit shorter, and, most probably, lean under that long coat. Just the right size, Johnny thought. Just how he liked his men.

"Nah." He shook his head, and leaned in more, making the other force his head back, to keep eye contact. "Aren't you that man's toy boy?"

"What man?" Blue eyes blinked in confusion.

"The old dude buying you these nice clothes and the expensive cologne," Johnny said.

A small laugh was the answer. "You could not be further from the truth. Now, that you know I'm not a toy boy, would you like that blowjob or not?"

"Add your skinny ass to that offer, and I might consider it," Johnny grabbed him by the waist and pulled him close.

"Skinny ass?" His visitor seemed revolted by that commentary, and not by the indecent proposal.

Johnny felt the slender waist with both hands. "You seem a bit underfed."

"I can assure you I'm not," the other said crossly. "Now, now, play nice, I mean it about that blowjob. Let's sit on the bed. I wouldn't want to give you the satisfaction of kneeling in front of you just yet. There will be time for that later after you win a few matches for us."

Johnny had to give it to the guy. He was sure of himself. Also, he knew how to push buttons, speaking so casually about blowing a prospective employee.

“Is this how you treat everyone at the Efige kennels? I guess I understand now why they all act like they found God and joined some cult once they start working for you. They’re all crazy about your sweet mouth and skinny ass.”

“Again with that.” The blond man rolled his eyes, but didn’t push Johnny away, and he didn’t seem insulted, either. “And I can assure you I am selective in my dealings. Only the ones who do an outstanding job receive special attention from me,” he added with a small chuckle as if he had just said a joke.

“That’s good motivation, Mr. boss,” Johnny grinned. “I assume you’re some kind of boss, right?”

“Some kind, yeah,” the other replied, his lips twitching in amusement. “So, are you ready to take me up on my offer?”

“Oh, I sure am ready to take you,” Johnny grinned, and without one second thought, he leaned in and kissed him.

He seemed surprised for a second, but he relaxed and opened his mouth, not too much, to be considered an easy victory, but enough to allow Johnny to have a taste. Oh, yes, the man tasted good, so good that Johnny instantly wondered how other parts of him would taste like. And he also knew how to be a little tease. The best kind.

It seemed that he liked to play around, because, after the initial surrender, he closed his mouth and pushed Johnny away firmly.

“Do we have a deal?”

“I told you. I’ll consider it if your skinny ass is on the table.”

This time, the guy pushed him away for real. With precise moves, a bit brusque, he took out his coat.

“Hold this for me?” he asked.

With a grin, Johnny took his coat and then unceremoniously threw it toward an undefined direction, directly on the floor. The beautiful eyes flickered with a tinge of annoyance, and he huffed, but Johnny could tell he was not put off by that. Instead of saying anything, he took out the jacket of his three-piece suit and this time, placed the garment on the back of the single chair in the room.

“Now,” he said, “take a look at this and say ‘skinny’ one more time.”

Johnny watched as the beautiful man turned and put both hands on his ass. All right, so he wasn't skinny, and his ass filled the designer pants nicely. His ass was pert and firm, by what anyone looking could tell. But Johnny was now in the mood to play.

"I don't know, man. You might have some padding or something underneath those pants."

The stranger looked over his shoulder, and this time, Johnny knew he was well aware that he was being played. The question stood: was he willing to play along?

"Just look at what you make me do," he said, as he began unbuckling his belt.

Oh, this was going to be good, Johnny thought, as he got rid of the towel he was wearing and began touching his cock. The guy pushed the pants and briefs right down and held his crisp white shirt with one hand so that Johnny could get a good look at his ass.

"Do you see it now?"

"I sure do," Johnny got closer and placed one hand on a pert buttock, kneading it.

"Did I give you permission to do that?" An annoyed huff followed.

"Well, you're the one who wants something from me," Johnny grabbed him by the waist with the other hand.

It was damn nice to fondle that firm ass. By all means, his visitor was enjoying the attention, as he bit his bottom lip and threw Johnny a look full of dirty promises.

"Now, I know a few things about asses," Johnny said, "so I must test something else. Look at what you make me do," he mimicked the other's words from earlier, as he let go of the plump ass, only to push the middle finger into his mouth and give it a good lick.

The other was now looking at him with hooded eyes, and his breath was growing deeper. With all the act, one would have thought the visitor to be the master of making things happen his way. However, it was clear as day that he was fascinated with everything Johnny did.

He didn't protest in the slightest when Johnny pushed his wet finger through the tight ring of his backdoor. He only hissed and closed his eyes, and Johnny took his finger out to add more spit.

Johnny wanted him panting and begging to be fucked, so he was willing to take longer than usual with the preparations. Plus, this was a prissy prince from the good side of the tracks lost in the woods and now face to face with the big bad wolf. So, he deserved all the attention and patience Johnny was capable of.

"Hmm, I wonder," he whispered and bit one nicely shaped ear playfully. "You talk big, but the reason you're only offering blowjobs is that your backdoor is tiny, right?"

“Oh, please,” his visitor moaned shamelessly, as Johnny continued to finger him unhurriedly. “I get fucked plenty.”

“I don’t believe you,” Johnny used his other hand to unbutton his vest, then shirt, so he could feel the lean chest, too.

By the small gasp he heard, Johnny was sure he was dealing with someone who liked fucking. Anywhere he touched, he reacted. It was like his whole body was sensitive.

“Well, I have a reputation,” he turned his head slightly so he could face Johnny, “to be not that easy to satisfy.”

“Oh, really? I barely touched you, and you’re ready,” Johnny grinned.

This pretty man was so full of it. “Oh, I’m no cold fish, I can assure you,” he smiled. “But many leave my bed satisfied, while they leave me, well, partially satisfied, at best.”

“You sure know how to make a man interested,” Johnny pinched one nipple and turned the finger inside that tight ass into a hook. “So, does it take you ages to come or something?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” a whisper was the answer.

Oh, sure thing he wanted to know, now more than anything, Johnny thought and released him, only to make him walk to the bed. He pushed his visitor on all fours, the pants still wrapped around his thighs. Johnny decided he would start with an appetizer, so he knelt behind him and placed his hands on the round buttocks to part them and take a good look at what they hid so well.

Hmm, just the kind he liked best, perfectly smooth, tight and of a pale pink that was making his mouth water. First, he attacked the tight opening with his tongue, pushing hard inside, so that the other could feel how serious he was about this. The man’s breathing was now becoming labored, peppered prettily with small moans and gasps. Johnny decided that it was not fair to neglect other body parts that were now begging for attention. So he dropped lower, making small circles on the taint with his tongue, slowly reaching the hairless balls, which he took in his mouth, one, then the other, making sure to lavish them with the attention they deserved.

“Oh, fuck, would you hurry already?” the stranger demanded.

“Hurry where?” Johnny asked.

“To fuck me,” he replied, obviously aroused and a bit frustrated.

“Hmm, maybe if you ask for it nicely? Say it. Please, Snake, fuck me good, with the cherry on top.”

“You can’t be serious,” the stranger whispered.

“I’m dead serious. C’mon, what’s a little begging, when you’re this hard?” Johnny laughed, and grabbed the guy’s cock in one quick move, and made it bounce by letting it go abruptly.

He was average in that respect, but it was just like Johnny liked his men, especially those lean and so willing to bottom. At the same time, his cock was hard as steel, and weeping helplessly, which told Johnny plenty of how much the guy wanted it.

“Okay,” the man huffed. “Please.”

“Oh, what was that?” Johnny pretended to have trouble hearing the other.

“Please fuck me, Snake. Don’t make me say that other bull crap.”

“Good enough,” Johnny swatted the pert ass playfully. “Just wait for me to get the rubber.”

Ruslan could not believe the nerve on the guy, but he was willing to let him have his fun. After all, he was going to walk out of that small room with a gentlemen’s agreement and, if he was lucky, and Snake was just as handy with his cock, as well as with his tongue, also with a well fucked behind.

He arched his ass to allow Snake to penetrate him with lubed fingers and sighed in contentment. He had expected a guy like Snake to be rough and impatient in bed, but so far, he had been the embodiment of a master of seduction. His rimming technique was at least on par with his ability to send his opponents to the floor in the ring.

“Ready for me?” he heard Snake asking.

Snake could play cool all he wanted, but his voice was strained right now.

“Hurry and do it,” Ruslan said over his shoulder.

“Don’t mind me if I do, pretty.” The other’s chuckle was low and dangerous.

Ruslan gasped and grabbed the sheets with needy fingers, as he felt Snake moving and going straight for the kill. Great thing that he had taken his time with the preparations because he was definitely big. Well, size wasn’t everything. Snake moved behind him and drove back into Ruslan’s ass with every bit of intention to prove his point.

“Motherfucker,” Ruslan protested, but he was pretty sure his voice sounded pleading at this point.

“All good?” Snake laughed and repeated his move, making Ruslan shake with all his body.

This announced to be good. Better to make the best of the situation; Ruslan hurried to grab his cock and began to rub it. His moves had a desperate quality to them, mostly because Ruslan had had his fair share of unskilled lovers in the past. Many were too excited to last long, those who did last tended to be a bore and knew only one way of fucking, like sort of a rut, not to mention the egoists who thought their pleasure was all that mattered.

And none had ever seemed to give him what he truly wanted.

Of course, there was a solid exception to the rule, as were a very few lucky encounters. But Yanis, the only guy who knew how to take care of Ruslan's appetite, had a woman at home to satisfy, and, as much as Ruslan wanted to think Yanis still liked his friend's ass more, he was well aware that he was losing that competition.

Now Snake was going to be categorized and placed neatly in the league that he was most deserving of, as far as Ruslan's sex escapades went. The beginning had been more than promising. The way Snake was grabbing and ramming into him was above average, too.

Still, he needed to be fast, and get at least one orgasm out of this. There was always the novelty factor to enjoy, as much as the guy's attitude that had made Ruslan's inner pervert and sucker for being put down a little, quiver with excitement.

"Damn fine ass," Snake praised him. "I wouldn't trade it for all the blowjobs in the world."

"Thanks," Ruslan threw over his shoulder. "Now don't come too fast," he demanded, as he continued to rub his cock.

"Are you kidding me?" Snake laughed. "I always take my time to enjoy a fine piece of ass like this one right here."

Snake's thumbs dug deep into the dimples above Ruslan's buttocks, kneading. He was doing a good job of keeping his partner in place, and Ruslan enjoyed feeling Snake's strength, and willingness to dominate and use.

The fighter moved fluidly now, his thrusts well timed, sending wave after wave of pleasure up Ruslan's spine. Seeing that he was good at what he was doing, Ruslan would have liked to last a little more, but, burying his face into the sheets, he began coming, voicing his pleasure in a low soft moan.

The ripples of release shook his body and made him slack.

"Wow, you came?" Snake asked, slowing down. "I knew you were talking shit."

"One time is never enough," Ruslan mumbled, still too wrecked by his climax to protest too much.

“All right then, challenge accepted,” Snake said joyously. “Let’s see how many rounds you last.”

By all means, that should have sounded boastful and entirely void of substance, but Snake’s cock was pulsing inside his ass, so Ruslan didn’t need another proof of the man’s promised prowess. He was also moving very slowly now, his cock halfway out, giving Ruslan time to recover.

“Good to go again?” Snake asked.

“Get your rocks off,” Ruslan replied, arching his ass, to let the other know, through body language, that he was more than ready for deep penetration once more.

“Gladly,” Snake said, and Ruslan could say that he was damn sure of his resilience. “So, am I the biggest you’ve ever had?”

“Not sure,” Ruslan said lightly but choked on his words as he could feel Snake driving that thick spear down to the hilt into his ass. “But I’m certain I’ve had no one with an ego this big.”

Snake chuckled. “I’ll take that. Now let’s see how you do.”

Ruslan would have had something to say, given that verbal sparring was something he enjoyed, but Snake was now working his ass with languorous moves, knowing when and how to angle his cock to brush over Ruslan’s most sensitive spot.

“Oh, fuck, yes, right there,” Ruslan moaned.

“I’m on it,” Snake confirmed and continued to apply his skillful technique.

Ruslan was quick to recover, and the constant stimulation to his inner pleasure bud was making his arousal soar once more. “Yes, yes, yes,” he chanted, as he moved his ass to meet the other’s thrusts.

“Faster, now?” Snake asked.

Ruslan confirmed with a loud moan instead of words. He was sure he was rubbing his cock raw, but this was way too good to pass. Snake knew how to fuck. And Ruslan had a lot of appreciation for guys who were good at that. With a bit of luck, maybe Snake was willing to repeat the experience after tonight’s rendezvous.

He had no time for making plans at the moment, though, as both his body and mind started to get flooded with endorphins, and the second orgasm shot through him, most probably making a mess on the guy’s sheets.

“Two?” Snake asked, reducing his pace again.

“Yeah,” Ruslan breathed out.

“Nice,” Snake said with satisfied pride. “Now turn,” he urged Ruslan, while he withdrew. “I need to see the third one to believe it.”

Ruslan was not exactly a fan of the position that involved him on his back, as the doggy style was the only guaranteed to work without fail for him. But seeing that he had already come twice, he was willing to acquiesce to the demand.

He was pulled roughly toward the edge of the bed, and he winced at the thought that all the sperm he had sprayed on the sheets was probably going to leave some hard to explain spots on his waistcoat and shirt, which he still had on. Who was he kidding? He would be a mess anyway. Snake was quick to undress the bottom part of his body, and Ruslan took a moment to admire him. He definitely looked in top shape. Ruslan was going to drag this one to the Efige’s rings if need be. His eyes fell lower, and he smirked. Snake had, indeed, a nice big cock, too. Wrapped in the thin latex foil of the condom at the moment, but big and ready for action.

“Oh, wow,” he managed as Snake pulled his hips off the bed, and practically dragged his ass into the said cock.

Snake was looking straight at him, and his dark eyes made Ruslan shiver.

“You’re using me,” Ruslan said with a small smile. “Like a fuck toy.”

The dark eyes became darker. “Says the guy who just came twice. And I know your type. You love being used.”

Ruslan turned his head slightly. Of course. Snake must have had plenty of bed partners. Nothing surprising there.

Your type. Ruslan knew his type well enough. To some degree, he knew he was twisted inside. He wasn’t doing relationships for that matter. Yanis and casual encounters were sufficient for him.

He allowed Snake to take him, making his body slack and turning off his sensations. Or at least trying to. He closed his eyes tightly and sensed the other stop.

There was no time to protest as rough hands caught him, one cradling his head, the other busy to turn his chin, as equally rough lips closed over his. The rocking of the bed resumed, as did the ramming of a stiff hot rod into Ruslan’s ass.

The tongue in his mouth was firm and determined. Ruslan thought it would have been better not to moan like the slut he was while being handled like that, but it was too damn good. And he didn’t care anyway.

“I like your type the best,” Snake said, as he let go of Ruslan’s mouth.

The dark eyes were honest, and Ruslan smiled. This guy was a keeper.

“Let’s see about that third time, shall we?” Snake cooed, and Ruslan was happy to nod.

He didn’t have to do anything, either. Snake was quick to wrap one of his hands around Ruslan’s cock. He was skilled in more ways than one. His hand was calloused, but the way Snake moved it, making sure that Ruslan was getting impossibly hard again, was everything to write home about.

He resumed his moans, using his free hands to pinch and pull at his nipples.

“Man, you’re so freaking hot,” Snake praised him. “Now let me hear you call my name.”

He could barely keep his eyes open, and he could feel them moist from too much stimulation. At least, he hoped Snake understood that his bed partner was glaring at him.

“C’mon, it can’t be that hard,” Snake reduced the rhythm on both his hand and the movement of his hips. “Say it.”

Ruslan licked his lips. This sounded a bit silly, but, well, Snake was giving him a good fuck to last him for a few days, at least, so he could act a bit silly for the man’s sake.

“Snake,” he whispered.

Even to his ears, that sounded ... sexy. His voice was low, ragged, filled with the expectation of the third orgasm.

“More.” Snake began to speed up again.

“Snake,” Ruslan moaned.

It was kind of strange, but hearing himself like that was making him feel the arousal growing higher. Soon enough, he was chanting the guy’s name, just like the audience at the ring.

“And here comes your third reward,” Snake joked and moved faster.

Ruslan felt delirious, as he was moving his head to hide his face, voicing his climax once more.

“No way.” Snake reached for him and turned his face so they could stare at each other. “Tell me who’s ever screwed you the best.”

He grabbed Ruslan’s jaw and caressed his bottom lip with one rough thumb.

“You,” Ruslan admitted, and the next second, he felt his eyes rolling in his head, as the hand on his cock brought him to completion.

The pretty man was quick to respond to stimulation, Johnny thought with satisfaction. But now that he had gotten him where he wanted, it was time to focus a little on himself. So he let the other's head drop back on the sheets, and he began to pump his cock into the tight ass with renewed strength. Nothing made him hornier than seeing his partner come first.

The stranger was a beautiful mess, sprawled on the bed, his smooth chest and abs covered in sweat and cum, his nipples erect and a bit darker than before from too much abuse exerted by no other than their owner, his lips moist, and almost bitten through, and his face shining with happiness in the aftermath.

That was the best thing for him. Nothing else mattered. He could feel his cock twitching, growing harder, to the point that the rubber was probably going to pop. He withdrew hurriedly and took out the condom in one fell swoop.

Grabbing his cock, he directed the white stream to the other's balls, still pulled and tight after the last release. That was also something he liked. To come all over the other guy's cock and balls.

He growled as he pushed his cock and body to the limit and squeezed down to the last drop. With a long, satisfied groan, he rubbed his cock against the stranger's balls, spreading his jizz all over.

"Oh-ho," he shouted, feeling even more victorious that moment than earlier in the ring.

He dropped on the bed, next to his bed partner, and looked at the closed eyelids, took in the way he was breathing. "So, ever had anyone make you come three times?" he asked.

The pretty man opened his eyes and stared at him. "Yeah," he replied.

Hmm, and Johnny thought that he had just set a personal record.

"What about four times?" he questioned, now the satisfaction over his performance waning a little.

"Yes," the reply came again.

Johnny frowned. "All right, now you're just pulling my leg. I'm talking about the times you came in the same round, not a whole week."

"I know what you mean," the other smiled. "And I'm telling the truth."

Johnny grimaced. "Four times, huh? Now that's a man I'd like to meet. Or how many guys are we talking about here?"

"One," the other replied. "And to save you from tormenting yourself more than it's necessary, four is the record. And it only happened twice."

“Still,” Johnny said, a bit miffed. “It’s clear. We need to fuck again,” he threw one arm over the lean body next to him.

“Oh, not tonight. I still have a business to run,” the other said, although he made no move to push Johnny’s hand away. “But, of course, now that you’re signing with Efige, we’ll see plenty of each other.”

Johnny removed his hand on his own volition. “I’m not signing anything.”

“What?” the pretty man pushed himself up on his elbows. “Didn’t you give your word or something?”

“I remember clearly that I said that I would consider it,” Johnny said with a small grin.

Now the stranger pushed himself up on his ass. “And? Did you consider it? I doubt you had time for that,” he said, and by all means, he seemed pissed.

“Oh, I had plenty. Sorry, your ass is gorgeous, and you’re sexy as fuck, but no’s still no.”

“Fuck.” The stranger looked down, his shoulders hunched. “What a fucking waste of time,” he added, but he seemed to be speaking to himself now.

“What can I tell you, man? You can put a leash on a dog, but you can’t collar a snake,” Johnny said. “And, really, a waste of time? You look like you enjoyed yourself. Three times, man,” he emphasized his words by showing three fingers, his pinkie curled underneath the thumb.

“Ah, well,” the other shrugged and pushed himself up to his feet and began fishing his clothes from the floor, completely ignoring Johnny now.

Hmm, so he was earnest about Snake signing with that casino across the river. Johnny hadn’t even thought about it, because that was what he did; he never signed with anyone. He was no one’s monkey or lap dog. And he had hoped the pretty man had just used that as an excuse to get his rocks off and enjoy Johnny’s horizontal sparring techniques.

“Hey, what’s your name?” he asked, realizing that he didn’t know how the sexy man was called.

“Suck my dick,” the stranger flipped the bird at him and grabbed his coat from the floor.

“Next time, I will,” Johnny promised, as he stood up from the bed.

He caught the other with the hand on the door handle. He now reeked of sweat and sex, and that was almost making Johnny feel his spent cock stir again. He placed one hand over the other’s and pushed down the handle, but used that small distraction to turn his head and kiss him again.

“You know where to find me if you want to get fucked good again,” he said with a smirk.

The stranger still looked pissed, but there was the ghost of a smile right there, on his lips, as he walked away, and Johnny ceremoniously held the door.

Chapter Two - It's A Deal

Ruslan knew he was in terrible need of a shower, but he could not afford a detour to take one at home. He checked his phone and tsked in displeasure. The message was clear enough.

“Let’s just go sort up some mess,” he murmured to himself.

The reason why he preferred cabs, when he was alone, although the old man had told him to have a driver and a car to wait on him at all times, was that he didn’t want to draw unnecessary attention. To anyone looking, he was just a guy stumbling out some booze joint, a little too early, but every bit messed up to need a ride home.

Ruslan hailed the cab passing by, and the driver pulled the car close to the sidewalk. Ah, he was going to regret his earlier encounter a bit, he winced as he sat on the back seat and felt right away a small stab of discomfort. He gave the driver the address for the Efige’s headquarters, and, as the car began rolling, and the engine started humming, he let his mind wander to the evening’s events.

All right, so he had been reckless. He hadn’t thought of making things clear with Snake first hand. Apparently, he had been too cocky and sure of his charms, to consider working out the kinks first.

Ruslan shifted in his place. It wasn’t like this was his first time getting thoroughly fucked, but it had been a while. Yanis was away on some business, and they hadn’t even spoken in weeks. By now, the guy must have returned. The fact that he had been back home probably for days now and hadn’t called was making Ruslan feel a bit odd. Not pissed, not sad, because he was no hopeless romantic, and he wasn’t nurturing any dreams related to his longtime friend anyway. But definitely odd. Like he had misplaced his favorite shirt and couldn’t find it, although he had plenty of other shirts to wear.

His fingers hovered over the phone, as he scrolled through the numbers. Typically, on any other night, Ruslan would have just called and asked Yanis if he was around. But the truth was he didn’t need Yanis, which was rather peculiar. Yanis almost never refused him, and there had been times when Ruslan had hooked up with strangers who had left him unsatisfied, and, on those occasions, when summoned, his friend had come to finish the job. But this time, there was no need for him to call Yanis. None at all.

Yanis was great at putting his restlessness at ease. He had the perfect cock and the ideal technique. But it wasn’t only that. Yanis knew Ruslan well. They had known each other all their lives. And that put Yanis in a league of his own, as far as Ruslan’s sex partners went.

Only that, right now, Ruslan felt that there was a contender in the cards. Yanis wasn’t needed to come to finish the job, indeed. Chuckling to himself, he selected Yanis’s number. What was he? Stupid now? Three orgasms given by that bawdy fighter were not going to tell him what to do.

Ruslan had a pet peeve about being forced to do what he didn't want. And right now, the logical thing to want was to call Yanis.

"Hey," his friend's voice came through, a bit breathily.

"Hey," he said back. "You around? Back in town?"

"Yeah, I returned, like, two days ago," Yanis replied.

Two days ago? Ruslan frowned. That wasn't the worse part, though. He knew his friend well, down to the minutest speech mannerisms. Yanis was lying. He had been back for more than two days. What the hell was going on? He heard Yanis murmur something, and it was clear he was talking to someone on his end.

"It looks like I'm intruding," Ruslan said brusquely. "Give me a call when you want to hang out for drinks."

"Yeah, sure," Yanis replied. "Is everything all right? You sound a bit off."

"Everything's peachy," Ruslan said wryly.

"Oh, is that so? Because you sound like something just crawled up your ass," Yanis sounded pissed now.

Ruslan could feel his lips twitch, and he was dying to give a scathing retort as a reply, but he knew better. He had no claims over Yanis, and they had been clear about it when that talk had taken place between them. They were fuck buddies of sorts. Yanis had a woman, and he didn't do relationships with guys. Ruslan had shrugged at the time at the implications; Yanis was telling him off because he wasn't gay.

What Ruslan was, that was just his business, and Yanis was not going to get into that kind of funny business. Yanis came from time to time, and, when they weren't talking things involving money, he was screwing Ruslan's brains out. In return, Ruslan had given Yanis plenty of work when he was strapped for cash. And quite on the regular. Yanis had been adamant about not taking money for free. Or for screwing Ruslan, for that matter. And Ruslan could respect that.

"My ass is none of your concern, all right?" he said in a low voice. "Anyways," he quickly cut the other's possibly rude reply, "if you're back in town, just give me a call so we can meet and don't be an asshole."

He cut the conversation. Truth be told, he was in no mood to get into a fight with Yanis. No, it was not his MO to act like a bitch.

His phone rang, and he answered.

"All right, I'm coming over," Yanis said directly. "Where are you? Home or at the office?"

Now Ruslan could distinctively hear a high pitched voice in the background.

“I’m heading over to the office. I could use a bit of help. Just someone who needs a bit of straightening,” he explained in as few words as he could.

“I’m on my way,” Yanis replied, while the hysterical screams could still be heard.

Ruslan would have lied to say he felt satisfaction at what seemed like domestic trouble on Yanis’s end. He didn’t feel remorse, either. And that woman had to understand already that she had won. Ruslan was not after stealing Yanis from her. Everyone who knew him was also aware that he was stubborn as a mule. Yanis only did things his way, and that was why he was now getting up from his woman’s arms to break some bones for Ruslan.

And he could barely wait to finish dealing with that so that he could go back home, take a shower and go to sleep. After letting Yanis get rid of the situation and paying him, he would see if his presence on the ground was still needed or not.

“So, the question is simple: where is the money?” he asked, as he leaned against the wall.

One of the employees tending the door during such delicate interrogations had offered him a chair, but he had refused. His ass was in plenty of pain right now, no matter how considerate his partner for the night had tried to be. It was almost making him laugh. How the hell could he be so sex-crazed when his body was clearly not taking it well? But after each night spent getting fucked by whoever, the next day, the crave returned with such an intensity that he almost wanted to lock himself inside the house and stay away from all men living and breathing. Of course, that was seldom an option. So, in other words, he just had to suck it.

The man tied to the chair grinned, showing ugly teeth. Ruslan winced in disgust.

“I didn’t steal any,” the man replied. “It’s mine.”

“I’m afraid that is not correct. Now don’t make a fool of yourself. There is more at stake than what you may think it is,” Ruslan said.

“Whatcha gonna do?” the thief licked his teeth.

“I’m not the one who’s going to do anything to you.”

“I thought this was a respectable establishment,” the man stared at him defiantly.

Of course, he thought that they were just trying to scare him and nothing else. The small-time thief really thought he would walk in one piece, and with the money he had stolen from the casino’s patrons who weren’t careful enough with their belongings, which he had managed to drop somewhere outside before being caught by the bouncers and brought in for questioning.

“Even respectable establishments must take out the trash,” Ruslan said matter-of-factly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Ruslan feigned boredom as he took a look at his watch.

“My associate’s about to arrive.”

“Your bouncers didn’t kick my ass,” the thief pointed out. “They know they can’t do that. Why don’t you call the police already so I can walk?”

“Of course they didn’t kick your ass. As you said it yourself, this is a respectable establishment. But, you see, the police have the bad habit of being rather slow. Plus, they often think they’re entitled to things for free when they come around. So, seeing that I’m a busy man, and people like you tend to take too much of my time, I have a quick solution at hand. I’m outsourcing certain services.”

“You’re nothing but talk,” the man spat.

There was a short knock on the door, and Ruslan gestured for his employee to open it. He grimaced at Yanis’s choice for headwear. What the hell was that? A chopped off sock?

“I leave things to you,” he told his friend. “I’ll just go order some refreshments so come to see me in my office once you’re done here.”

“Who the fuck is this guy?” the man tied to the chair squealed.

“None of your business,” Ruslan threw over his shoulder and walked away.

The small thud made by a fist connecting to a jawline, followed by a scream, suddenly became nothing but muffled noise as the door closed behind him. The lively music from the casino was making him feel that he was trespassing from one world to another, an entirely different one.

He caught one of the servers and told her what he needed to be delivered to his office. The girl nodded shortly and scurried away. Well, at least, a dry Martini was going to take the edge off this weird evening. And, in a way, he had also called Yanis over for drinks. He needed to respect that part of the bargain, and also pay the man. That shower would have to wait a little while longer. It was best just to take it at home and then hit the bed.

Apparently, the perpetrator had been quick to confess this time because he didn’t need to wait for Yanis to knock on his door for too long. He had taken out that horrible headwear, at least, when he walked in. But he was still using it to wipe off a few splotches of blood from his knuckles.

“Really, where did you find that horrible thing? So childish,” he said, as he made a gesture for his friend to take a seat.

Yanis looked good. But when didn't he? He had that rough appeal of a thug, and his dark complexion, as well as his thin lips and the ever-present frown, were making him look like he was always brooding over something. And, of course, it scared shitless anyone who dared to stand in his path.

He was letting his hair grow a bit too long. Too bad, Ruslan thought. It was only making him look like a greaser. The shirt with a floral pattern and the loose pants didn't exactly make him look like a gangster, either. Only the leather jacket was somehow fitting to his real persona. Otherwise, he was no different from the many tourists spending their time in the casino each night. Maybe that was what Yanis thought to be good cover. And perhaps it was.

"Well, you took me by surprise. I had to improvise." Yanis sat down and threw the dirty rag on Ruslan's desk.

Ruslan grabbed it with two fingers, pulled a plastic bag from a drawer, dropped the offending thing in it and then the bag into the trashcan.

"Have a drink, and let me sort out the pay." Ruslan got to his feet and went to the adjoining room where his safe was.

He had always thought that was a bit too much, but the old man had insisted that he should keep the money he needed for any shady business in there. It made payments faster, also.

He got back with the money and placed it on the tray brought by the server, next to Yanis's vodka and soda. Yanis took the drink first and clucked his tongue satisfied, after a sip. Unhurriedly, he took the money, too, without counting. He didn't address any thanks, either. That was how things worked between them. Ruslan didn't have to ask to know that his bouncers were already retrieving the stolen money and other valuables the shady guy from earlier had pilfered from patrons. Yanis was good at convincing people to give up their secrets. And all this time, Ruslan could keep his hands clean.

"Buy your woman something nice," he said. "She sounded pissed tonight."

Yanis looked at him, and his eyes turned into narrow slits. Ah, well, that was pissing him off. But Ruslan could not care less. They weren't doing the politeness dance between them. Not after growing up in the same orphanage and ending up on the streets at the same time, left to fend off for themselves the best way they could. Given the circumstances, they had done pretty well for themselves.

"You sounded pissed, too. Should I buy you something nice?" Yanis shot back, looking at Ruslan through his eyelashes, as his usual frown deepened.

"No need." Ruslan waved. "So, are we going to make some idle talk, or are you ready to head back to the missus?"

“You’re pissed about her? For real?” Yanis took another sip from his drink.

Ruslan shook his head. “No. But I’m pissed that you got back, and you didn’t care to call. Did you just stumble upon some lost treasure and you don’t need the extra work? And since when we’re not friends anymore?” Ruslan questioned. “I have nothing against any of that. But it would be nice of you to let me know. A man good at what you do is hard to find.”

“Ah, and you’re talking about this,” Yanis put up his fists, “or this?” he asked, this time making an obscene gesture of grabbing his cock through his pants.

Ruslan sighed. “Really, are we going to bicker like an old couple? I’m talking about straightening up idiots who misbehave. As for the other thing, I wasn’t calling you for that.”

Yanis took a few seconds to examine Ruslan over the desk and then suddenly got to his feet. In an effortless move, he leaned in and grabbed Ruslan by the front of his shirt. Ruslan didn’t oppose. For an outsider, that would have looked pretty weird. But, between them, it was totally normal.

Yanis sniffed him. “You got fucked,” he said quietly, and let go of Ruslan’s shirt to sit back in his chair and savor his drink again.

Ruslan nodded.

“Was it good?” Yanis asked, his interest only a glint in his dark green eyes.

Ruslan smiled widely.

“Hmm, so you don’t need me to finish tonight?” Yanis wiped his lips with his thumb, without losing sight one moment of his lifetime buddy.

Ruslan shook his head, continuing to smile.

Yanis’s eyes grew wide. “Really? Who’s the guy?”

“You don’t know him,” Ruslan waved.

“So that’s it? You found a replacement for me?” Yanis asked his questions like the round of bullets from a machine gun.

“How can you say that?” Ruslan sighed. “You know there’s no way I could replace you.”

“Oh, yeah? Then let’s get it on.” The man slammed the empty glass on the tray and got to his feet.

Ruslan put up one hand. “Seriously, Yanis, I’m broken, man. Rain check?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Yanis sat down again.

He wasn't upset. He just couldn't believe it that Ruslan was refusing him. That had never happened before, and Ruslan was always the one to propose that kind of stuff, anyway.

"What can I say?" Ruslan leaned against his chair and took a sip from his Martini, while, for a second, his eyes became unfocused, and his mind wandered off to the guy who had given it to him so good tonight. "I'm wrecked. I can barely wait to get home and take a shower."

"Well, at least, you got to finish," Yanis commented, and this time he sounded a little pissed.

Ruslan knew the guy wasn't pissed at him, though.

"Trouble in paradise?" he asked airily.

Yanis shrugged. "I was halfway when you called. I'm not sure I'm getting any when I get back. So, what can I say? Thanks for the cockblock, bro," he added, but now he was smiling.

Ruslan chuckled and shook his head. "I'd offer to blow you, but, one, I'm not keen on tasting pussy off the cocks I suck, and two, I'm afraid I'm going to fall asleep with your dick in my mouth."

Yanis burst into laughter and slammed his palms against his thighs. "No hard feelings, man. And, yeah, I'll have to buy her something nice. So, we're cool here?" he asked.

"Sure thing. I need to crash at my place. Don't be a fucking stranger, okay?" he looked at his friend.

"Okay." Yanis stood up, this time with the intention to leave. "Anya, she just doesn't get it. How we are."

Ruslan put up both hands, palms facing forward. "No need to explain, really. Maybe I'd be pissed and jealous in her place, too. But I don't have the same thing she has between her legs, so ..." he trailed off, shrugging.

"Yeah, that's the only thing that's bad about you," Yanis joked. "Should you have had a pussy, I would have taken you home and kept you under lock and key."

Ruslan grimaced like the perspective was completely undesirable. "It's a good thing then. Staying at home, eating bonbons all day long, sounds pretty fucking boring. Plus, if I had been a woman, we would have never met. So be glad, you ungrateful bastard. I'm still your best client for your side gigs, am I not?"

Yanis grinned. "Sure thing you are. Should we share a cab?"

"Nah, I'm good," Ruslan said. "I'll have someone drive me home. And I can ask for a car for you, too. On the house."

“Nah, it’s better to keep things clean,” Yanis said, and Ruslan nodded in admission. “No one should know I work for you once in a while. And especially what kind of work I do.”

“Good thinking,” Ruslan replied. “See you around, man. Good to have you back home.”

“It’s good to be back.” Yanis shook hands with him before leaving.

He didn’t care for Yanis’s dealings, as he didn’t care about the fact that he had a girlfriend. In return, Yanis wasn’t nosy, either. Very few people knew of the connection between them, and that was all for the better.

Johnny was a tiny bit pissed. It was clear as day that he needed to round his income from external sources, and if there was one thing he hated was having to deal with the other world, the one that existed beyond his. He thrived in that environment, even if it involved illegal fights, and cheaters, and bribers, and rigged matches. On the other hand, he hated the world of those who claimed to be respectable.

He knew well that they were nothing but. After all, it was one of those freaks keeping him by the balls and squeezing almost everything from him. Soon, he was going to break even. He just needed a little push; that was all. And, after that, he was going to turn and bite fast. That shit for brains was not going to know what hit him. All his life was dedicated to the revenge that was to come. He just needed to bid his time, and pay his debts. And survive.

His thoughts traveled to the pretty man who had come to offer him an honest job at Efige. Dressed up to snuff, looking like fucking royalty, but wishing for nothing else but a hard dick up his ass. Not that he was holding that against him. That night had been awesome. He was still jerking off to that. But he had a problem with people who had the nerve to claim they were respectable and did the same old dirty business under the table. As much as he had appreciated the man’s lovely round behind, and his ability to take what he was given, he cared squat about his employer.

He didn’t know who ran Efige. He didn’t care about stuff like that. But now, that he had to take on some more fights, he felt that he was taken for a fool. That meant he needed another source of money.

So, he had heard of some amateur night, on the other side of the river. Apparently clean. Not his world, not his people, but it could mean money. Plus, it wasn’t like he would sign off his ass. He would just make an honest buck. No big deal.

“Hey,” he called for another fighter who was getting busy at one of the manikins used for practice. “What do you know about that amateur night? How much is the prize?”

“The big one’s ten grand,” the man replied, as he continued his routine of punches and kicks.

Johnny whistled. “Oh-ho. Who’s throwing that kind of money on some amateurs?”

“Efige,” the man answered.

Johnny grimaced. Of course they were. They ran the biggest damn entertainment venue in the entire valley. They were the ones with that kind of money. Ah, well, that was just a clear case of ends justifying means, so he would take it.

Plus, there was a chance that he would meet the guy with the lovely ass, whose name he didn’t know.

He threw the bait in the water. “I heard they were scouting. Even around here.”

The man was starting to sweat, as his breath hitched and his kicks continued to pelt the manikin. He was just wasting too much energy, and he was leaving himself open too much, Johnny thought. Well, it wasn’t his business. He wasn’t going to train others to be as deadly as he was.

“Yeah,” the man confirmed.

“Who was? Do you know?” Johnny asked as he continued his strength training routine, too.

“The old man who runs Efige, Kent is the name,” the man replied, as his breath became more labored. “And his son, the guy who’s keeping his books, Ruslan.”

Ruslan? Johnny grinned, pleased to learn the sexy man’s name.

“I think I saw them that night. How come that’s the guy’s son? They don’t seem related, and the old man more looks like his grandpa,” he said.

The guy shrugged. “I don’t know, man. But they have the same family name, and everyone says so.”

“Thanks.” Johnny patted the man on the back on his way out.

He stopped for a second to show the guy a bit what he was doing wrong. Well, he was done training for the day. There was more to getting prepared for a match than practice. Plus, he needed to register for that particular event. Seeing that he wasn’t a professional, the door had to be open for someone like him.

It was easy to get around the place, once he was inside. He had registered without any fuss, and now there was something else on his mind. Or, better said, someone else. So, he just grabbed the first guy he saw in the Efige server uniform and asked him about the whereabouts of the person he wanted to see.

“An appointment is usually required,” the employee had said, looking Johnny up and down.

Johnny shrugged. “I don’t have one. But he’ll want to see me. Can you point me to his office?”

So the pretty man hadn’t been lying. He wasn’t just some sort of boss; he was running the joint. Of course, being the big kahuna’s son helped. But it looked like the guy was earning his keep.

“I just got registered for amateur night, and I know Mr. Kent is currently searching for new fighters. I just have some questions. Also, he searched for me where I work, but I wasn’t in that night, so our paths didn’t cross,” he lied through his teeth.

It was quite evident that the server wasn’t buying any of that. A bouncer came closer and stared at him with what he probably thought it was an intimidating stare. Johnny had seen worse. Much, much worse.

“What seems to be the problem?” the bouncer asked.

“He wants to see Mr. Kent. The young one,” the server explained. “He doesn’t have an appointment.”

“Just tell Mr. Kent that Snake wants to see him. He’ll know,” Johnny said with a broad grin.

The bouncer seemed to react to his nickname. “Let me see what I can do,” he said and walked away, talking to someone into his walkie-talkie.

“Nice place,” Johnny grinned, as he looked around the casino.

The server nodded politely. “May I offer you something to drink? Maybe you’re interested in a seat at the slot machines while you’re waiting?”

Johnny felt a bit insulted. Of course, he looked nothing like a high roller. He was wearing a tracksuit, and even if it was the good quality stuff, it was clear that the guys and gals rounding up the Black Jack tables were into a different type of dress code.

“Follow me, please,” the bouncer said as he appeared next to him. “Mr. Kent will see you now.”

If the waiter was surprised, he didn’t show it. But Johnny threw him a satisfied grin as he followed the bouncer.

“Hey, nice place,” he said, the moment he was inside Ruslan’s office.

Mahogany desk, small but probably expensive paintings on the walls, and a frigging gold pen on the desk ... yeah, this type of office suited the guy.

But, of course, the piece of resistance was seated behind the desk. Ruslan looked every bit as delicious as Johnny remembered, still wearing a black waistcoat and a crisp white shirt just like that night.

“Thank you,” Ruslan replied, and pointed a chair in front of the desk.

Johnny shook his head and proceeded to take in his surroundings. The moment he had started thinking that he would see the pretty man again, he had felt a surge of energy. He would beat the crap out of everyone at the amateur night. Now, with still a few days left until the event, he could afford a little escapade. And it involved the guy at the desk and his willingness to put his lovely ass up again.

“Have you changed your mind? I can have someone draw the papers right away,” Ruslan said, and Johnny made his round of the office, only to stop close, forcing him to push back his lavish leather chair and turn to face him.

“Nah, I’m not here for that. I’m fighting in your amateur event,” Johnny replied and grinned.

He sat on the desk and looked at Ruslan. He was looking at him, too, with his azure eyes. His face was frigging flawless.

“It is a good test for anyone’s abilities, but not yours,” Ruslan said, seemingly not intimidated by the familiar way in which Johnny was behaving. “We know what a hell of a fighter you are.”

Johnny grinned. “Thanks. The prize’s pretty nice.”

Ruslan waved. “That’s peanuts. We can pay you much more if you become a regular.”

Johnny shook his head. “No way, man. You know you can’t put a leash on me.”

Ruslan seemed to ponder for a few seconds. “Have you registered for all the amateur nights? For the tournament?” he asked, after a while.

“Not yet, but I will. I want to win this thing. Show you who I am.”

Ruslan smiled, and for a second, Johnny wondered why the hell he was grinning like he knew something Johnny didn’t.

“Make sure you sign,” Ruslan said.

Johnny was about to comment on what the hell Ruslan was so satisfied with when he noticed his eyes going lower and remaining set on the bulge in his pants.

“Missed this?” he asked, grabbing his package.

Ruslan licked his lips. “Of course I did,” he replied quietly.

“Then tell that guy at the door or whoever that we’re in some important meeting because I’m here to give it to you.”

He was expecting at least a bit of resistance from Ruslan, the usual push and pull kind of play, but, instead, he took the walkie-talkie on his desk and obediently recited exactly what Johnny had said.

“Done.” Ruslan beamed at him, clearly pleased with the prospect.

For as much as he looked like frigging royalty, Ruslan wasn’t prissy at all, Johnny thought. That was great. He didn’t like guys who were always complaining about putting out, or trying to squeeze more money. Ruslan wasn’t in it for the money, but for the pleasure. And that, Johnny, had tons to give.

“I remember I promised you something the last time.” He moved and knelt at Ruslan’s feet so that he could go straight for the belt.

“Wait.” Ruslan placed one hand over his. “If you’re talking about giving me head, sorry, but I’d rather you put all your energy into fucking my ass.”

“No way, a promise’s a promise.” Johnny pushed the guy’s hands away. “I want to taste your cock. And I want you to taste mine.”

“Okay, have it your way.” Ruslan surrendered, but Johnny could sense the disappointment in his voice.

Johnny straightened up and pulled him to his feet.

“That’s rather uncomfortable for oral. I’d rather sit,” Ruslan mumbled.

“Yeah, but it’s not uncomfortable for this.” Johnny pulled him into a kiss.

Ruslan Kent had the sweetest mouth. The way he was kissing back, twirling his tongue around, was making Johnny think that he wouldn’t regret asking for a blowjob this time around. So he placed one hand on his ass, causing their bodies to clash together and rub against each other.

“Okay, you convinced me.” Ruslan was panting when Johnny finally let go of his sweet mouth.

“All right, go bend over the desk,” Johnny said with a smile.

“But I thought ...” Ruslan looked at him, a bit confused.

“That’s just a position I think it would work well for a bottom like you.”

Ruslan shrugged and smiled, then quickly obeyed the order. “Like this?” he asked, swaying his hips.

“Perfect. Just one thing. Drop your pants,” Johnny said and noticed with satisfaction how Ruslan knew how to make a little show of revealing his ass slowly while looking over one shoulder and biting his bottom lip.

He grabbed the man’s ass with his hands, feeling a bit too excited and decided not to rush in. Leaning in, he took advantage of his position to press Ruslan against the desk, and nuzzle one ear. The other responded with a small gasp and then turned so they could kiss.

“You can change your mind about the butt sex, you know,” Ruslan said, staring into Johnny’s eyes. “I won’t hold it against you.”

“I gave my word.” Johnny grinned and kissed Ruslan quickly once more.

He crouched behind him, taking hold of the round buttocks with firm hands. Ah, he loved licking and sucking that pink hole. It was so easy to lick underneath the balls, too. But he knew Ruslan would like more stimulation than just a tongue in his ass, no matter how skillful. So he pushed two well spit-lubed fingers into the tight hole, decided to work it good. He used his other hand to pull the slim hard cock back and put his mouth on it without too much preamble.

As expected, Ruslan moaned and pushed back his ass, allowing Johnny more leeway for playing around with his cock. Johnny knew he was good at this. Even the most convinced bottom was crazy about the way he gave head.

Not a moment left to waste; he was sucking the guy’s cock deep, forcing it back, making the pert buttocks rise higher. From time to time he was giving the other a break, but he was moving his mouth from the swollen cock to the balls and even back to the fingerbanged hole, just to prolong Ruslan’s pleasure, and postpone it a bit.

“One is not enough, right?” he asked, and pushed Ruslan’s cock inside his mouth again, sucking it like he would a lollipop.

“Right,” Ruslan whispered from above, and it was clear that he wished for nothing more than for that one time to happen already.

He put all his sucking strength into making that nice elegant cock come. With the force of a vacuum cleaner, he sucked in the hard shaft and kept it deep into his mouth, while he used the fingers to penetrate Ruslan’s ass and stimulate the most sensitive spot inside, milking it for what was worth.

He could not properly taste Ruslan’s cum, but it wasn’t a loss. It was clear that they would do it more than once, and even more after today, so Johnny thought it was practical for him just to swallow the load this time around.

Ruslan was making the most erotic sounds as he came, bucking his hips and almost making Johnny lose his balance. He let go of the spent cock only after he was sure that Ruslan's last shudder of pleasure died down.

"So, do you still think I should have just fucked your ass?" he asked, as he got to his feet.

To his surprise, Ruslan nodded.

"Seriously?" Johnny licked his lips. "I'd say that was a pretty fine load."

"Yeah, I know, but in five minutes, I'll be horny as fuck," Ruslan answered. "I'm not going to bore you with my life's story now, but it's only when I get properly wrecked that I feel completely satisfied."

Johnny laughed. "You're a challenge, Mr. Kent."

Ruslan's eyes grew wide, and his face relaxed into a broad smile.

"Just call me Ruslan; it's just so strange to hear people calling me that."

Johnny had a mind to ask why, but his brain was too busy with planning Ruslan's next orgasm. It was like a badge of honor to make him come undone. And now, even though Johnny would have liked to fuck him, too, he was curious about making him come multiple times in other ways.

He turned Ruslan to face him. "How about another bj? This time from the front?"

"You're bent on this, aren't you? Do you have a thing for sucking dick? Usually strong men like you just like being sucked off and having their balls licked by others."

"I think I have a thing for sucking your dick," Johnny replied. "It's fucking delicious. Come on; I want another taste. And don't tell me it doesn't make you horny to see a strong guy like me on his knees in front of you."

Ruslan seemed surprised but didn't protest, when Johnny sank to his knees again so that he could lavish with attention his dick. The member was still soft, but it began to grow as Johnny used his tongue and plenty of suction to make it hard again.

It was uncanny how fast Ruslan's rebound was. But it was all for the better. Johnny liked a guy who enjoyed sex as much as he did. A lot of people liked sex, and there was no shortage of bed partners for him. But only a few had been, so far, as sexy and hot as this one. Who was he kidding? He had never had one like Ruslan Kent, a guy who, for some reason, didn't like being called Mr. Kent.

His fingers returned dutifully at Ruslan's tight backdoor, and the man parted his legs to allow access. This one really enjoyed being penetrated; that was almost making Johnny wonder if he could fit more fingers in there without causing unnecessary discomfort.

Tentatively, he decided to add a third. The ring of muscles was clamping around his fingers, and he didn't have as much room to play, but, by the way Ruslan was moaning and placing one hand over his mouth to muffle the sounds, it looked like he appreciated being stretched a little.

If they would make this a regular thing, Johnny would make Ruslan show him how he could play with some toys and what he could stuff in there. It was clear that he was enjoying a bit of abuse. And that was something Johnny had always found kinky and arousing in a bed partner.

He wasn't one to waste time on fancy techniques. He was making the hard cock disappear into his mouth to the hilt, and he was using both pressure and speed, while his fingers were busily scissoring the tight entrance.

Although it took him longer this time, Ruslan came, and by the desperate gasps and moans accompanying his orgasm, he was enjoying the second one just as much as his first.

Johnny made sure to withdraw a bit so that some of the jizz could end on his tongue. By how desperate Ruslan sounded, there was a bit too much overstimulation from how Johnny was moving his tongue on the still pulsing cock.

Ruslan was breathing hard when Johnny finally let him go. The fighter decided that it was as good a moment as any to share a sloppy kiss with him. Ruslan didn't protest, as Johnny covered his slack mouth with his and shared the load this time around. The mingle of jizz with the sweet taste of Ruslan's mouth was almost making him dizzy.

"Fuck, suck me, too," he demanded, and almost pushed Ruslan to his knees.

His moves were feverish as his hands were busy pulling down Johnny's tracksuit pants, to reach inside. Johnny's cock jutted out, and he was almost ready to make a joke about Ruslan being careful not to get his teeth knocked out when a hot mouth engulfing his cock shut him up. They would see each other again, and there was enough time to prove Ruslan that he had a sense of humor, too.

Ruslan was as efficient at sucking dick as he was at making guys horny with just a look. He knew how to deepthroat, and he was a master of sexy, fancy moves. He was also looking up once in a while, his beautiful blue eyes moist with having come twice, most probably, but also shadowed with a veil of arousal.

"You can rub your dick, too," he whispered, as he caressed the blond head slowly, resting his hand on the back of Ruslan's neck.

Ruslan let go of Johnny's cock only so that he could speak. "Fuck my mouth hard," he demanded.

That was not precisely on Johnny's list of kinks, but he was willing to do it since the pretty man at his feet was asking. He noticed how Ruslan was assuming a position, with one knee bent

slightly, and his legs parted so that he could grab his cock and rub it in synch with the deepthroat he was performing.

He grabbed Ruslan's nape firmly and pushed his cock forward, a bit hesitantly.

"C'mon, Snake," Ruslan complained, letting the cock in his mouth slide away. "You can be ruthless in the ring; I'm only asking you to be ruthless with me, too."

"All right," he said, and this time Ruslan gasped when Johnny took his cock and shoved it deep.

The way Ruslan's throat was pulsing around his cock was making him want only to push more in. Ah, fuck, how come this guy was not taken and held under lock and key by some pervert? It was clear that Ruslan loved being used, and that was how he liked getting off.

It didn't matter. Johnny knew that was just his luck, so he began to pump Ruslan's throat, taking note of how he was an expert at breathing hard through his nose, while his hands were getting busy between his legs, too.

"Oh, fuck, this is too good," he managed to say, as he unloaded in Ruslan's throat.

He was still bucking his hips slightly, even with the last drop of jizz squeezed from him. He leaned against the wall, and looked at the other, as he was frantically rubbing his cock. Ruslan's hair was disheveled, his mouth was red from too much sucking, and there were even streaks of tears on his cheeks. But he was apparently in heaven, by the sounds he was making, and how his lovely eyes were rolling in his head.

Yet, it looked like he couldn't get much higher. Johnny moved closer, took his still half hard dick in his hand and used it to slap Ruslan lazily over his lips. "Like this? Do you like this?"

There was no reply, but his soft moans grew ragged. Johnny grabbed a handful of blond strands and forced Ruslan's head back. He rested his dick on Ruslan's beautiful mouth.

"You look amazing like this, with a cock on your face," he said, and the soft tone of his voice took even him by surprise.

Apparently, that was all Ruslan needed so that he could come. At the same time, he opened his mouth and wrapped his tongue around Johnny's shaft, as he let go. Johnny could feel the familiar shudder of arousal, but he was just too spent to get it up again so quickly.

They were both laughing when Ruslan finally got to his feet and began to push his cock back inside his underwear.

"Are you always this hot?" Johnny asked as he arranged his cock inside his pants with a small wince.

Ruslan shook his head. “Well, I don’t know what the right answer to that would be. But if you’re asking if I’m always horny, yeah, that pretty much sums up how I am.”

“Excellent!” Johnny grinned. “So, any boyfriends?”

Ruslan quirked an eyebrow but burst into laughter right away. “Did you just assume that I would have more than one?”

Johnny fished for information. “Well, with such an appetite, I suppose you keep them scheduled.” Why the hell was he interested if Ruslan had any official lovers? It wasn’t like he wanted to ask for his hand in marriage. Well, for starters, Johnny didn’t like to be a third wheel. This wasn’t just a hook-up. The thought, just as the tone of his voice, before, took him by surprise. He had every intention to fuck the pretty man on a regular basis, so he needed to know if he would be part of some weird harem like situation.

“No, no boyfriends,” Ruslan said. “Frankly, I’m not the kind to do relationships, if that’s what you’re asking. Don’t tell me you’re interested. You don’t look like the kind who does relationships, either.”

Johnny nodded. “I don’t. But I’m usually not interested in guys who are taken. If you’re up for some fun, I’m in. But don’t drag me into some soap opera melodrama, or I’ll kick your ass. Not for real, but I’d be pissed.”

Ruslan smiled. “Fair enough. So, see you at the amateur’s night?”

“Is there a special prize included for the winner?” Johnny pulled Ruslan close.

“Hmm, I’d say that the financial rewards are decent for the participants that will do well. Of course, to win the big prize, you need to get onto the tournament.”

“You’re really bent on making me do this tournament stuff,” Johnny remarked.

“Of course I am,” Ruslan replied, but offered no extra explanation.

“I’m all for the tournament if, after each time I win, I’ll find you here, ready for action,” Johnny said.

Ruslan seemed surprised. “It looks like I already rewarded you. Damn, I guess I lost my chance to motivate you to win.”

“I don’t need any motivation to win,” Johnny said. “I like winning. But I want to fuck you again, and I won’t do that while I’m training hard. Only as a celebration. You know, like a cookie.”

“I’m your cookie?” Ruslan laughed, throwing his head back.

Johnny could not resist. He leaned in and licked Ruslan’s sweaty neck.

“You’re delicious like a fancy cake, actually,” Johnny commented. “So, it’s a deal? I can promise you to make you come at least three times. Every time.”

“I wouldn’t make such promises if I were you,” Ruslan teased. “I’m the kind of guy who gets bored easily.”

“And I’m a guy who knows what he’s doing, and I’ll make sure you’ll crave my cock and my hands on you as you’ve never craved anything in your life.”

“Wow, big words,” Ruslan commented.

“Of course, that’s me,” Johnny said with a smirk. “And I’ll make sure that you’re satisfied enough to last you a week each time.”

“Now you’re really talking big,” Ruslan patted his cheek and pushed him gently away.

“We’ll see about that.” Johnny grinned widely and copped a feel, touching Ruslan’s ass. “Don’t fool around in between; I want you horny and ready to beg.”

“Ha, no deal.” Ruslan pushed his hand away from his ass. “You really expect me to have sex once a week?”

Johnny nodded, full of himself.

Ruslan smiled. “You’re a bit, ahem, out of your league here, Snake.”

“Look what I’m saying,” Johnny said. “If I don’t leave you wrecked like you want to be wrecked after each time, you’re free to fool around. What do you say?”

“I’ll think about it,” Ruslan replied.

Johnny was quick to catch him in his arms again. “Think quickly. Don’t let me wait,” he said and pressed his lips against the other’s for another long, satisfying kiss.

Ruslan reluctantly let go “Now, now, I really have other things to do. I’m afraid we’ll never finish if we keep up like this.”

“Good to know. See? You’re already addicted to Snake.” Johnny chuckled and pointed at himself.

Ruslan rolled his eyes. “Oh, damn, good thing your cock is as big as your mouth and your ego. C’mon, out, out, grown-ups still have work to do.”

Johnny had a mind to kiss him again, but Ruslan was right. They would never finish if they held onto each other like that.

“See ya.” He sauntered toward the door and turned only to wink at Ruslan and send him a kiss.

Ruslan smiled, and Johnny knew, when he walked out the door, that he was victorious.

He was going insane; it was damn official. Snake was a great lay, but still, Ruslan had to know better than to spend too much time with the same guy. Yeah, Snake thought it was cool that Ruslan was insatiable in bed now, but he wouldn't think the same thing, once the novelty was going to wear off.

Well, at least they would have a hell of a fighter for their line-up, once the tournament was going to pass, and Snake would be the absolute winner if his instincts served him right. Of course, Snake didn't look like he knew that the ultimate prize came with a contract to fight officially for Efige. But, seeing how smart Johnny thought he was, and how he really needed to be brought down a peg or two, that would serve him as a good lesson. Even someone like Snake had to be careful what he was getting himself into and what he was signing. The contract offered as a reward was common knowledge, after all.

Of course, Ruslan wasn't entirely comfortable with playing him like that. And, in the end, if Snake were to refuse, no one would cry. Also, by that time, he was pretty sure that whatever crazy sex they would have, it would just fizzle and die out.

Chapter Three – My Main Squeeze

“Who’s that over there?”

Johnny turned to see who the hell was running his mouth while they should all be focused on training their butts off. He was busy scouting the other guys in the room, wondering who he was going to go against for his first bout.

He had a philosophy. Always fight his own way, without trying to adapt to his opponent’s style. It served to be efficient like he was, and that was one of his secrets. Too many guys around him were talking techniques, bragging about knowing this or that, as if fights in the ring were some frigging math test.

And now they were also in for some gossip, it seemed.

“That’s the guy in charge. He’s the guy’s son, actually,” another replied to the first man’s question.

This time, Johnny turned so fast that his neck made a funny noise. Leaning against the entrance, Ruslan was examining the room full of fighters, with what looked like detachment, if he was reading the man’s body language right.

Great, Johnny thought. Distraction had arrived. He was pretty sure the rest of the guys were going to ogle Ruslan for as long as the pretty man stood there. And he didn’t like it.

“I heard he likes it up the ass,” the first guy said again. “That he’s sucking everyone off around here, even the drivers and bouncers.”

Johnny focused his entire attention on the speaker. The guy was a bit taller than him and sported an ugly unibrow. The scar that followed his misshapen nose down to his upper lip didn’t make him prettier, either.

“I don’t know, man,” the other shrugged. “Not my business. I’m only here to fight.”

The unibrow guy ignored his pal’s reply and moved to the punching bag closest to the door. Johnny followed him with his eyes. Pretending he needed to get some water, he walked toward the door, too, after precisely two beats.

“So, you’re the boss?” Unibrow asked Ruslan directly.

Ruslan’s eyes hovered to Johnny for a second. He was smiling, seemingly pleased with seeing him.

“Hey, I’m talking to you,” Unibrow intervened, seeing that he was ignored.

Ruslan cocked his head to one side and measured him up and down.

“Seeing that you are fighting in one of the events I’m organizing personally, I would have expected you to be a little more informed.”

Johnny grabbed a bottle of water from the table and took a sip. This would be fun, he grinned.

“Informed? I’m informed that you’re a cocksucker.”

Johnny felt his smile freezing on his face. In auto mode, he took a step toward the asshole, but Ruslan was quick to step up and practically block his way. Johnny stopped.

“And? What of it?” Ruslan asked, as he slowly moved one hand to his back to touch Johnny in passing.

“I want you to suck my dick,” Unibrow grinned.

“What makes you think you’re qualified for that?” Ruslan questioned.

“I have a dick,” the man made an obscene gesture to grab his junk, as he moved closer.

Johnny could feel his blood starting to boil. But Ruslan’s hand searched for his and grabbed it quickly. With all the frustration he felt, he decided to let him play this one as he wanted. For now.

“I hear you get on your knees for anyone,” the man added, with an ugly smile, not paying a smidge of attention to Johnny.

“Well, sorry to disappoint you,” Ruslan said airily, “but that is incorrect. And while you might have self-esteem issues, and like to think of yourself as ‘anyone’, I don’t have such personality problems.”

“Are you making fun of me?” Unibrow moved even closer now, to tower over Ruslan.

“No. Are you?” Ruslan stood his ground. “I must remind you that here, you’re a guest in my house. I hope I’m not asking for too much if I demand a bit of common courtesy.”

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?” the man asked, with a scowl on his ugly face.

“It means,” Ruslan said in the same even, calm voice, “that if you prefer to be this rude, I can ask the bouncers to come and invite you out.”

“No way, I have to train,” the other said, now a bit unsure of himself.

“You would also be eliminated from the event,” Ruslan explained as if he was dealing with a hard-headed child.

Unibrow's face turned into something even uglier, as its owner was now clearly tormented with making a choice. Johnny was ready to push Ruslan aside and take care of the asshole when the guy backed down.

"You're not worth it anyway," he faked disinterest as he walked away. "Fucking homo," he hissed through his teeth.

Johnny took one step forward, but Ruslan turned quickly and grabbed him.

"Come with me," Ruslan said shortly, and Johnny followed without a word.

They were out in the hallway when Ruslan began speaking.

"I don't need anyone to step up for me. I can take care of myself. Okay?"

Johnny nodded and grinned. Ruslan was touching him, his hands on the shoulders, and Johnny was pretty damn sure, by how slowly the long, elegant fingers were moving, that their owner was impatient to feel the muscles underneath.

"I mean it," Ruslan stared him in the eyes. "I'm no damsel in distress. Plus, I don't want to find myself forced to eliminate you from the tournament for misconduct outside the ring."

"Misconduct?" Johnny snorted. "That guy's asking for a kicking."

"No fighting outside the ring. Ugh, I'm certain you didn't bother reading the rules," Ruslan pursed his lips in frustration.

"I'm all for you reading them to me," Johnny said and pulled Ruslan close with one arm.

"Seriously? That would be so boring," Ruslan grinned, too, and made himself busy with straightening an invisible crush on Johnny's tank top.

"No, it won't," Johnny replied. "Because you will read them to me while I'm fucking your brains out."

Ruslan laughed. "That would be counter-productive. One, you wouldn't pay attention, and two, it would be too late for explanations, seeing that the sex should follow at least your first victory in the ring. I'm your cookie, remember?"

"How could I forget?" Johnny teased and angled his head so that he could kiss Ruslan.

Ruslan's fingers flexed on his shoulders. And then gently, he pushed Johnny away.

"Hey, I barely had a taste," he protested.

"You need to focus on your game," Ruslan replied, placing both hands on Johnny's chest, and looking up.

“I won’t be able to. You keep popping in the room where I’m supposed to train,” Johnny pretended to complain.

“That’s true,” Ruslan admitted with a small frown. “I will stay away from now on.”

Johnny hurried to encourage him. “Good, do that.”

Ruslan looked at him and blinked a few times. Johnny sustained the intent gaze, without showing the slightest sign of weakness.

“I usually visit to gauge the fighters’ condition, but, seeing that there is some hostility going on, I will make myself scarce for now,” Ruslan said.

“Um-hmm,” Johnny confirmed again, busy now with leaning in for another kiss.

Ruslan kissed him quickly and patted his cheek playfully. “Fight well, and the reward will wait for you, as promised,” he said fondly. “Now just go train. I’m putting all my hopes in you.”

Johnny knew Ruslan was right. And it made his chest swell hearing him saying that he was counting on him. Also, if they were to kiss for real, they would end up having sex in the hallway, like two horny rabbits. Maybe Ruslan wasn’t bothered that his reputation was making some hotheads think they had a chance with him, but Johnny needed him as far away from the other fighters as possible.

Johnny swatted Ruslan’s perky ass. “C’mon, go.”

He could not resist, so he copped a feel. Ruslan was dressed impeccably in a casual suit, but the pants still hugged his gorgeous ass tightly. Johnny moved his hand slowly to follow the seam of the pants between the legs.

“Seriously, Snake.” Ruslan pushed his hand away, but he was grinning like he was seeing the Christmas lights for the first time in his life or something.

“Call me Johnny,” he said as he pulled Ruslan close to him again.

“Really? I thought you liked being called Snake.”

Johnny smiled. “Nah, that’s for strangers. You’re the inner circle now.”

Reluctantly, Ruslan moved away. But not without throwing a few all-knowing looks over his shoulder. Johnny waved and kept his relaxed stance until Ruslan disappeared behind a corner. The next second, his face was pulled so tight his jaw hurt. He needed to straighten up someone, and right now.

He entered the gym by slamming the door open. Everyone in the room stopped to look at him. Without looking at anyone else, he went straight to the unibrow guy.

“Listen to me carefully, ‘cause I ain’t gonna say it twice,” he said roughly, as he pointed the finger at him. “Address Mr. Kent respectfully, or you’re gonna have a problem with me.”

Unibrow gawked at him, seemingly at a loss for words. He regained his shitty confidence fast, though. “Why? What’s that homo to you?” he asked, pushing his chin up and taking a step forward.

“What’s he to me?” Johnny smirked. “He’s my main squeeze, that’s what he is.”

It was clear as day that the guy wasn’t expecting something like that. He gaped like a fish. “You a homo, too?” he asked, with an expression of confusion mixed with disgust on his face.

“Just pray that you don’t get to meet me in the ring,” Johnny said, and moved at his training station, starting right away to hit the bag.

“Oh yeah? You pray! I’ll destroy you!” Unibrow shouted.

“Guys, cut it out, or no one’s going to destroy anyone. We’ll all get thrown out,” another intervened in an anxious voice.

Johnny didn’t have to look to know the others were staring at him. But no one dared to tell him a thing. Apparently, his reputation from the other side of the river was following him here, too.

“Hello, papa.” Ruslan kissed the old man’s cheek and sat across from him, at the restaurant table.

“I took the liberty to order something for you, as well,” the older Mr. Kent said affectionately. “You’ll get dessert, too, of course.”

“S’mores and hot fudge?” Ruslan asked, his eyes shining.

The old man nodded. “God knows what you see in that stuff,” Mr. Kent shook his head with mirth. “But it’s your favorite, and seeing how you’re all bones, I’ll allow it.”

Ruslan laughed. The old man knew how to pull his leg. Also, asking for him to meet in the city, at a restaurant that didn’t belong to their chain, meant the old man wanted to talk something serious. And personal.

“So, what’s cooking?” he asked, as he took a glass from the table and sipped a bit of water slowly.

“I heard some rumors.” The old man looked at him, quirked both eyebrows and looking at Ruslan like a protective mother hawk.

Ruslan blinked a few times. “What rumors?”

He knew what the old man didn't condone. Mr. Kent had no issues with Ruslan being gay, but he did have a problem with something else.

"That you were treated rather rudely in the gym the other day," the old man said promptly.

Ruslan huffed in annoyance. "Really? Do you have ears everywhere?"

"You know I do," the man he called his father said matter-of-factly.

Ruslan glared. "I'm a grown-up. I'm twenty-four."

"And you're still eating s'mores and hot fudge," the old man said with a smile. "Russy, stop giving me the evil eye. It doesn't become your handsome face."

Ruslan relaxed and eased into his chair. "You sure know how to treat me like a kid."

"And what do you know about that?" the old man said, his eyes warm.

"Point taken," Ruslan admitted.

He always indulged the old man in these bouts of overly protective behavior. It was just a game between the two of them. When Mr. Kent had picked two rather scrawny sixteen-year olds from the streets, given them food and shelter, Ruslan had also been taught humility. Yanis had called the old man a creep and a weirdo and had eventually run away.

But Ruslan had stayed. And if the old man wanted to treat him like he was five, or twelve, or fourteen, that be it. That had been how Mr. Kent had taught Ruslan what love, real love, was. And he was grateful for every second of it.

"But enough about you trying to change the subject." The old man wagged the finger at him. "If anyone tries to pull something funny with you, I have to know."

Ruslan waved, pretending to be bored already with that topic of conversation. "Don't worry, papa, I can fight my own battles."

"Especially when you have a well-trained guard dog to do that for you, right?" The old man's eyes were scrutinizing now. "Or should I say ... a snake?"

Ruslan opened his mouth to protest, but then closed it fast. And he clenched his teeth. That guy. "What did he do?" he pretended to be interested in an invisible spot on the rim of his glass, getting busy to scratch it away with the blunt nail of an index finger.

The old man chuckled. "Nothing bad so far, apparently. Russy, you know how much I want you to stop running wild. You're such a good kid otherwise."

“You want me to settle down? Buy a house? Raise a family?” Ruslan looked over his glass at the other.

The old man frowned. “Don’t be a smartass.”

The waiter interrupted their little argument, placing the filet mignon dishes in front of them and filling their wine glasses. Ruslan made a face. “I don’t like this,” he murmured, as he slowly grabbed his fork and knife, and took a sad look at his plate.

“For someone raised in an orphanage, you sure are fussy,” the old man commented. “Well, if you want your s’mores, you’ll eat everything else first.”

Ruslan liked that about the old man. He never sugarcoated the truth. He never pretended that everyone had to walk on eggshells around the subject of how Ruslan had lived before ending up on the streets with Yanis. Or what he had done at the time to survive. And Ruslan appreciated that. The old man hadn’t requested to be called ‘father’ or ‘dad’, either. But he had given Ruslan his name, and Ruslan had decided to call him ‘papa’ after his first French lesson. Amused, Mr. Kent had agreed that sounded slightly amusing and very much like something Ruslan would say.

“Now, eat your food, and listen to me scolding you,” Mr. Kent added.

“Do I really have to?” Ruslan mumbled, but he was acting like a kid on purpose.

The old man liked that. “Yes, you have to. I was glad to see Yanis getting himself someone else to bother. Although I do know that you two are still sneaking around. But,” the old man put both his palms up, “he’s your buddy, your best pal, or whatever you youngsters call friends today. So I understand. But this good for nothing fighter? He’s talented. I must give it to him. Strong like a bull, quick like a snake. And I want him in my ring. But in your bed? Russy, I have big plans for you.”

“Seriously.” Ruslan exhaled and looked at the large portion of the filet mignon, still uneaten. “It’s not like we’re going steady. We barely did it once,” he lied on purpose.

“Twice,” the old man corrected him right away.

Of course, he knew. That was no surprise, and Ruslan wasn’t bothered. “We never did it in my bed,” he pointed out.

“I assume it’s only a matter of time,” the old man replied, and his eyes never left Ruslan as he ate, with slow, studied gestures.

“Don’t let yourself bothered by insignificant things,” Ruslan said. “And Snake is certainly not one to be worried about. We’re just ... you know.”

He had learned quite quickly not to use cuss words when talking to the man. If there was one thing he could not stand, that was to disappoint his adoptive father. Except for the times when, well, he did feel the need to run wild, as the old man had said. He could not exactly help that. Without it, he was guaranteed to go slightly insane. He knew. He had tried it.

“He claimed you loud and proud.” The old man looked at him pointedly as he took a sip from his glass of wine.

Ruslan froze. He knew his hearing was perfectly fine, but, right now, he hoped that was not the case. “What?” he stammered and reached for his glass, too.

“You mean, except for the fact that he promised the guy who insulted you a good thrashing in the ring if they get to meet there? Well, he called you, let me see if I can remember correctly what I was told,” the old man stared at the ceiling for a second, “his main squeeze.”

Ruslan tried to swallow the wine in his mouth and ended up sputtering and coughing. Quickly regaining his breathing and posture, he patted his lips with a napkin.

“So you didn’t know?” the old man laughed.

“How could I know such a thing?” Ruslan glared again. “I don’t have ears everywhere, as you do.”

“Well, Snake seems to be pretty serious about you,” the old man said and he turned his attention on the food in front of him. “It looks to me like you’ll have to fend for yourself.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Ruslan said quickly.

“Russy, that man is nothing but trouble,” the old man insisted.

Ruslan shrugged. “I love trouble.”

“I have plans for you. At the right moment, I will present you with some excellent prospects.”

“Prospects? For what?” Ruslan looked at the old man, now very much confused. “Are you interested in branching out? Seek other venues? I like it here.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not sending you away. I had you homeschooled, only so that I don’t lose you out of my sight,” the old man said. “I’m talking about prospects, as in some very dashing young men that I hope you will consider.”

Ruslan placed the fork neatly on the napkin. “Oh, god,” he managed with some difficulty. “Am I looking at an arranged marriage in the near future?” He leaned over the table to take a better look at his father, and see if the old man was suddenly in the mood for jokes.

He wasn’t.

“Not a marriage in a traditional sense,” the old man explained. “But a lucrative partnership. Plus, these ambitious young men –“

“I thought they were dashing,” Ruslan interrupted.

“Strapping even,” the old man added with a smile.

Ruslan rolled his eyes. “You were saying ...?”

“These handsome young men would very much like to make your acquaintance.”

“I don’t know them, and they don’t know me,” Ruslan pointed out.

“They are very entrepreneurial and industrious. While they might see you as an asset at first, given your position, I’m sure they will be smitten with you,” the old man said. “For all the reasons young men like you do feel so inclined,” he added with a vague gesture.

“So they’re gay?” Ruslan whispered.

“As a daisy in May,” the old man said with a small smile.

“That was a little trite,” Ruslan remarked but smiled, too, while playing along.

The old man’s smile broadened. “Hmm.”

“All right.” Ruslan sighed, a bit too theatrically to have that taken at face value. “I will meet these strapping and dashing and ambitious young men. But I can’t guarantee that I will like them. Wait, do I have to sleep with them? Is that a requirement?”

The old man shook his head and smiled with mirth. “Of course it is not a requirement. But I’d rather you deal with people who won’t judge you rather than some shmucks who think that calling you names somehow makes them men. You know I won’t tolerate having anyone throw such words in your face. Or behind your back.”

“Papa, you cannot prevent the entire world from being, you know, what it is,” Ruslan replied with a shrug.

He wasn’t as bothered as the old man. Unlike his adoptive father, he knew that guys too busy spouting homophobic shit were the most likely to be so deep in the closet that they had no idea what was really happening to them. The truly straight guys he had met, interacted with, and even been friends or friendly with, usually didn’t have a problem with him being gay.

Of course, that didn’t mean that assholes like the one at the gym weren’t dangerous. Tempted to act like cornered animals, the moment they felt their position threatened, they could be unpredictable and vicious.

And that was the kind of complication he wasn't in the mood for. Guys who were ready and at least half-tempted to test their sexuality by screwing around were total game. Homophobes who wanted nothing more than to fuck a guy because that was their deepest, most secret wish, were not at all on his list.

"Well, I can at least try," the old man said, interrupting the train of his thoughts.

Ruslan beamed at him. If there was someone who meant the world to him, that was the old man. At first, he had thought that the man was interested in him, as a toy, the kind rich men liked to entertain themselves with. Snake's remark from that first time hadn't taken him by surprise.

But even when he had bluntly offered, the old man had said a simple 'no'. Not even Yanis could believe that. His longtime friend had been adamant about not paying for the old man's kindness with his ass.

That had proved not to be necessary.

"Russy," the old man said with affection. "You know I only want what's best for you. Keep Snake as side entertainment. I don't mind. But be aware of what and who he truly is. These violent men have a tendency of behaving in their personal life just like in the ring. And already he thinks he is entitled to claim you."

Ruslan waved, pretending that the old man's words were not making him a bit hot. Clearly, he had it a little bad for that uncouth fighter, just like, apparently, Snake had it for him.

"We're just fooling around," he said. "One of us is bound to get bored, sooner rather than later."

"You may sound sure of yourself, but all I can sense is trouble," the old man insisted. "Cut him loose now, instead of later."

"After the tournament, when he signs with us," Ruslan promised. "You still want him, right? This is just my way of hitting two birds with the same stone. Business mixed with pleasure."

"You sound plenty certain that he'll win," his adoptive father replied.

"I saw him, remember?" Ruslan said with conviction. "He has the mold of a champion. I'm sure he won't let us down. And you could use a new name up in lights," he added.

The old man huffed but added nothing more. The waiter brought the dessert and placed it neatly in front of Ruslan, while his father settled for nothing but a coffee, black.

Ruslan sighed contently this time as he dug into his favorite sweet delight.

"If you ever get into trouble, just tell me," the old man said, sipping his coffee slowly. "If you care about the mutt, let him know what could happen to him, should he decide to play rough. Understood?"

Ruslan knew when the old man meant business. “Sure,” he replied. “But, really, papa, I can handle Snake. And I just find it ludicrous to think that he would try to hurt me, physically.”

“It’s not that I’m worried about,” his father replied.

“Oh, it’s not? Because I thought you were worried about his violent nature.”

“Yes. Not because I think he would try to hit you or anything like that. But I’ve lived a lot, and men like this one think they could shoot for the stars and not pay what’s due. He could get possessive, jealous. I bet you won’t find him as fun as you do now, once he starts thinking you’re truly, well, his main squeeze,” the old man concluded.

Ruslan grimaced. “I’m sure he was just saying it to brag.”

Damn, only the mention that Snake was claiming him so shamelessly, and in such a macho environment, was making Ruslan feel like there was a small fire burning in his veins. He could barely wait until Saturday when Snake was going to win, and then Ruslan had to offer him the promised reward.

The old man shook his head. “You’re giddy like a schoolgirl over this bad boy.”

Ruslan stared at his plate. Was he really that transparent? Maybe only when the old man looked at him. But yeah, he was behaving like a teenager with stars in his eyes. And why? Over a good fuck? All right, he really needed to take control of the situation.

“Ah, I think you’re right.” He sighed, and this time the deep exhale was not some mise-en-scene.

So, tonight he would grab someone, anyone, and screw until morning. No matter what Snake was saying, they weren’t an item. And the best way to put a stop to silly delusions was to get laid.

Who to pick? Ruslan looked, a bit bored, over the men at the bar. Okay, so two were severely smashed, one didn’t look half interesting, and ... Ah, the one playing with his wedding ring. He had to do.

He should have just gone to a gay club or bar, but, for some reason, Ruslan was not one for the scene. The music was too loud, everybody there had already fucked everybody, and there was no thrill of the hunt.

Ruslan was all down for other things, like choosing a guy and convincing him to have a good time together. Places like this, where out-of-towners chose to chill or have a drink between flights or rides, were preferable. Not that he didn’t settle for locals when there was no one new who was interested in getting down and dirty with him. The fewer complications, the better.

But, save for very few exceptions, he preferred his trysts to be with guys he had no chance of stumbling upon the next week while shopping for groceries. Or worse, at his workplace.

Funny thing, he thought. He usually didn't fool around with fighters, although there were plenty of them everywhere he looked. With bouncers, either. Until Snake, he had not had anyone like that in his bed. You don't piss where you eat, or something like that. Yet, that fighter, that day, at the gym, had known a little too much about how Ruslan liked cock on his menu. Word flew around, it seemed.

All right, if he were to start thinking of crap like that, he wouldn't get laid tonight. So gulping down his drink, he moved on to the stool next to the guy with the wedding ring. The man had a slightly haggard look on his face, but he was handsome enough to suit Ruslan's tastes.

Somewhere in his mid-forties, he seemed like the perfect candidate for a mid-life crisis. By the way he was playing with his wedding ring as if he was debating whether he should take it out or not, he looked like he was up for a little adventure. If that adventure was going to involve some horizontal play with a stranger, a male on top of it all, was something that Ruslan was keen on finding out.

"Hey, man," Ruslan greeted him. "Can I buy you a drink?"

The stranger looked into his glass, took one last sip, and then turned to look at Ruslan, apparently a bit taken by surprise to be approached like this.

"Sure, why not?" he shrugged.

"Where are you from?" Ruslan asked as he gestured for the bartender.

The man didn't seem interested in making conversation. That was fine by Ruslan. It was, after all, just a boring interlude to hopefully one at least half-decent sexscapade.

"Troubles with the missus?" he pointed at the man's wedding ring.

The stranger took a look at the golden band as if there were some crucial secrets to be found just by inspecting it. He grunted noncommittally instead of a reply.

"Tonight it's rather slow," Ruslan commented. "If you were hoping to meet some ladies, I'm afraid you're out of luck."

The stranger turned again to look at Ruslan, and this time his nostrils flared a little. So what was going to be? Either the guy was catching on the innuendo and went along, or he was going to flip Ruslan off, and that was it. He would just call it an unlucky night.

Maybe he would call Yanis, after all. Nah, the thought didn't seem that appealing. He wasn't one to get too much on Anya's nerves, by calling Yanis over for a fuck right now since the need was not that great, and all.

"Not that out of luck," the stranger said gruffly. "You bought me a drink," he added, raising his glass. "Much needed if you ask me."

"Glad to be of help." Ruslan moved closer. "Anything else I could do for you?"

Now it was the time to see if this was going to sink or swim. Boldly, he placed one hand on the man's knee. The stranger didn't move and didn't seem bothered by it, either. He continued to drink, his grim expression fading a little.

They stumbled toward the man's hotel room. For two minutes, the stranger struggled to find his key card. Ruslan was starting to get a little impatient. This wasn't like him. Like he could barely wait to have this over with. Usually, he looked forward to bedding some new guy. But not right now.

Right now, he felt like it was a much better idea to turn on his heels and go home to sleep. But he had gotten the other's hopes high, and his, too.

"Allow me." He took the key card from the man's shaky hands and finally opened the door.

The room was nothing out of the ordinary. But it wasn't dingy, either. His host went straight for the mini bar to get another drink.

"Hey." Ruslan moved to grab the small bottle from the guy's hand. "Don't you think you have enough liquid courage in you?"

The man started laughing. Not like a drunkard, but as someone who felt dejected and desperate a little. He flopped down on the couch, his shoulders slumped. A bit hesitantly, Ruslan took a seat next to him.

"So." He was the first to speak, seeing that the other was not talking. "What would you like to do?"

"Maybe not cheat on my wife," the stranger finally replied.

Ruslan sighed. Oh, great. "Come on, man, it's not like anyone will know."

His own words rang hollow in his ears. What the hell was wrong with him?

"I'll know. That's enough," the stranger said. "I bet you think I'm some loser."

“No,” Ruslan protested right away.

He was not in the business of judging people. God knew he had plenty to be judged for. So he didn't do that kind of dance.

And the night was bust, he thought, looking at the guy's hunched shoulders. He patted him on the back. The man turned and looked at him, his eyes red and tired.

“Maybe you should just go to sleep, and call your wife in the morning,” Ruslan suggested.

The stranger nodded, looking a bit relieved.

“Sorry about ...” he gestured, finding his words with difficulty. “I don't usually pick up strangers in bars. I have no idea what came over me. Although you're a very attractive young man,” he added quickly. “And I would have ... You know. But I can't.”

Ruslan laughed. “No sweat, man. And if it's any consolation, I picked you up, not the other way around.”

“I noticed you, the moment you walked in. And a little how you looked around, at the others. You wouldn't have been my first guy, you know,” the stranger babbled.

“I thought you weren't cheating on your wife,” Ruslan commented.

“I'm not,” the man replied. “But I did my part of fooling around when I was young. I may be too old for that, though. Your attention flattered me. So that you know.”

Ruslan sighed.

“I guess we all get there sooner or later,” the man continued.

“Where, exactly?” Ruslan questioned, a bit intrigued.

“You know, settled down, having to deal with all that crap that comes with that. Yeah, you're right. I should call my wife. Sorry, man,” he offered again.

“No problem.” Ruslan raised his hands, feeling strangely relieved. “I wish you to have a good talk with the lady. And, you know, maybe ask her to peg you. Just so that you don't have to live with regrets,” he joked.

The stranger laughed. “That's good advice.”

“I should get going,” Ruslan stood up.

The man wished him a safe trip. He probably thought Ruslan was in passing, just like him. Ruslan almost sprinted out of the room.

And he still had no idea why he felt so relieved.

A bouncer stopped him on his way to his office. “Sir, I was asked to give you this.”

A bit intrigued, he took the piece of paper from the man’s hand. Before he had the chance to ask for more information, the man had already left, seemingly his presence needed to solve some situation on the floor.

He could not stop a chuckle when he saw the scribbled numbers and letters. Snake’s writing was bulky, nervous like there was no time even to sit down and write a damn phone number. Of course, they hadn’t changed details, despite having sex twice. He didn’t usually do that with his casual sex partners, so this was a first in its right.

Taking out his phone, he pushed open the door to his office and plopped down on the comfy chair. With one hand, he pulled at his tie.

“Hey,” the fighter’s energetic voice came through. “Whatcha doing?” The next words were drawled, in a transparent attempt to be seductive and playful.

Ruslan rolled his eyes. “How could you tell it was me?” he asked, as he threw his tie on the desk.

Johnny laughed. “Simple. You’re already in my address book, under Sexy AF. And it was easy to steal one of your business cards from your desk. And to hope that was your personal phone, too.”

Ruslan tried to will the corners of his mouth against going up. What was the old man running his mouth about? Snake was as sweet and harmless as a little lamb.

“Ah, really? How come I’m not listed as your ... Main squeeze?” he paused for a second, for dramatic effect.

Snake snickered. “You heard about that, huh?”

“Well, words travel fast around here,” Ruslan stated, now busy opening the first buttons of his shirt.

“Great. That saves me some time,” Johnny said with satisfaction.

“Time? What do you mean?” Ruslan asked.

“To ask you. If you’d like that.”

Ruslan rubbed his forehead, trying again not to smile. “What’s next? Are we going to move in together?” he asked, without hiding his amusement.

Johnny played along, chuckling. “Not until I get a nice place. I need to make myself a situation if I’m to bring you home. You know, have enough to make cash rain on your ass.”

Ruslan snorted. “Oh, no, you think I’m a stripper or something. FYI, I have plenty of cash. That’s no issue.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Johnny replied, but he didn’t seem impressed with that. “So, you didn’t answer my question. What are you doing right now?”

“Really? That’s the only reason you called?” Ruslan put his feet up on the desk.

“Not the only one,” Johnny said back. “I want to know if you kept your promise.”

“What promise?” Ruslan grabbed a file from his desk and began browsing through it, just to pretend he wasn’t affected like a teenager that he was talking to his crush over the phone.

“To keep away from dudes until we meet again,” Johnny said promptly.

“Seriously? I don’t recall such a promise,” Ruslan replied.

“Recall it,” Johnny said.

“Are you serious about this?” Ruslan paused his perusing of the document in his hand.

“One hundred and ten percent,” Johnny replied.

“Okay,” Ruslan sighed. “Only a couple of days until the first bouts. I suppose I can deal with a bit of abstinence for your sake. But if you lose ... Have you been training properly? Eaten right? Slept well? How about hydration?”

Johnny’s smug laugh on the other end irked him a little. “See? You’re already bugging me like we’ve been married for ten years,” Johnny joked.

“Oh, don’t flatter yourself. You’re soon to become an investment. I should see to you. Plus, I’m not going to keep up with that silly promise after this weekend. Okay?”

“Hmm, nah, I can’t take such a condition. I told you. Your ass will know me enough. This weekend, after I win, I’ll be with you until Sunday night. I’ll make sure that you’ll barely manage to get out of the bed by Wednesday. Let’s say that you’ll fully recover on Thursday and Friday. And then it’s Saturday again. And then I win again. Rinse and repeat, sweet lips,” Johnny concluded with unhidden satisfaction.

“Wow, you really talk big,” Ruslan murmured, feeling his cheeks getting warm.

Johnny snickered. “That’s not the only big thing about me.”

“I should know,” Ruslan said with a small smile of his own.

“Yeah,” the other boasted shamelessly.

“All right, Snake, we have a deal. But if you’re a bore and I’m still horny after you leave on Sunday night --”

“Let’s make it Monday morning,” Johnny intervened. “And call me Johnny. I told you. You’re my inner circle now.”

“Hmm, strange choice of words. Are you trying to tell me I’m your whole inner circle? Or just part of it?”

“I’m a loner, pretty,” Johnny replied. “There’s no one in my inner circle.”

“Yet, we just met, and I’m it,” Ruslan pointed out.

“What can I say, sexy. You’re under my skin.”

“Oh please. Don’t you think you’re trying a bit too hard?” Ruslan laughed.

“You’ve seen nothing. Trust me,” Johnny said with conviction.

“All right, then. Go wreck them, tiger, and we’ll see how much you live up to your boastful promises.”

“Deal. Don’t go screwing around, okay? I’ll take care of you.”

“Sure,” Ruslan said, and he would have liked to say that the short word sounded ironic.

It was really not like that. Not like that at all. Ah, well, he had to let things run their course. And the flame he had kindled by getting busy with this bad boy, as the old man had hurried to label Snake, would burn bright, then die, like any other before.

Johnny grinned, as he threw the phone on the bed. The good doctor had just given him the green line. He was healthy as a bull. With satisfaction, he took a look at the papers the man had handed to him when he had left the doctor’s office, the day before. Yeah, he had green line, and not only for smashing heads in the ring. He would fuck that pretty man six ways from Sunday.

Chapter Four - Fools Play By The Rules

Johnny was damned pleased with himself. He had that pretty boy in his pocket, and he would pick up a nice paycheck while at it. The playful banter between them was almost making him think there was more there than it truly was.

The thing was Ruslan was frigging beautiful. A hot thing in bed, too. Plus, he could go at it, by what he had said, and what Johnny had seen with his own two eyes, for enough time to satisfy both of them.

Guys he knew and fucked loved to be taken hard. They had no issue with being used. But no one had been as hungry for cock as this pretty man. Nor as beautiful. Only thinking about those blue eyes, burning with lust, was making him hard as a rock.

It had been nothing but an impulse to stake a claim on Ruslan Kent in front of the others. No one messed with his toys. He wasn't protective, or possessive. Whoever dared to piss on his turf was bound to end up with a broken nose or worse, though. It was all about respect.

Yeah, he took one look in the mirror, as he flexed his arms a few times, to work out some kinks from his shoulders. A satisfying pop on each shoulder and he was good. Pretty boy Ruslan Kent could have anyone. So the fact that he chose some low life fighter from the wrong side of the tracks like him had to stand for something.

Johnny was not one to fool himself. He knew what he was and where he was coming from. There was no pedigree dangling around his neck. Nor was he rich. One look in the mirror could tell him he didn't exactly have a face that made sexy guys drool over him.

But he was rough and tough. And some, even pretty men like Ruslan Kent, liked that. Forget about being nothing but a mutt. He knew how to fight, and he knew how to fuck.

And it seemed that those two skills he had honed to perfection were the only needed to nail someone like Efige's boss's son and nail him hard.

He wasn't going blindly into this. There was money to make; that was true. There was a sexy ass to fuck and came attached to a lean body and a frigging beautiful face. At least for the duration of the tournament, he would have the time of his life.

Of course, sweet lips knew that, too. Ruslan wasn't buying into his bullshit. But it was a game both liked, so it was all 'kay.

No one would buy some picket fences crib in the suburbs. But, boy, Johnny grinned in the mirror, Ruslan would get fucked all these weeks to last him a decade. And Johnny would fuck his fill, too, because an opportunity to get freaky with a guy of that caliber was sure to come once every ten years.

Wasn't that just some stupid luck? Johnny grinned when he saw his opponent jumping in the ring. The man's ugly scar seemed darker under the hot neon lights, drawing Johnny's attention to it. With a little luck, he would give him another tonight. Or just split the one he had right open.

Yeah, Unibrow would bleed, Johnny nodded to himself. He eyed his enemy and, in turn, the other grinned at him, showing misshapen teeth.

Johnny hoped Ruslan was watching this. Right now, he needed to focus on destroying the scumbag in front of him. That was some dumb twist of fate, right there, to have in the arena, ready to go against him, the idiot he wanted to fuck up.

Unless, of course, it had all been arranged for him to meet the asshole who had dared to insult Ruslan in front of him. That was even better. It meant that Ruslan wanted to see him at work. Evaluate him. See if he was fit, after all, and if he only talked bullshit.

He didn't. And he would prove it, by sending the scumbag to the floor within the first minute of the match.

Ruslan watched in shock as Johnny's opponent hit the floor with a thud.

"What the hell?" He turned toward the old man. "How come Snake is fighting this dude of all the fighters available for this round?"

His father shrugged, but Ruslan could smell a lie from out campus, even when it was his papa doing the lying.

"C'mon, why?" he complained. "Do you really want to see him out of the picture? He'll do something stupid. I thought you wanted him."

"Not as much as I want him away from you," the old man replied.

They watched the match from a private booth, partially obscured from the ring.

"You can't be serious," Ruslan mumbled. "I won't give up on fucking him just because you say so."

"Ruslan, aren't you a bit too old to have a rebellious phase?" the old man scolded him.

His father was calling him by his name, and not the endearing alternative when he wanted to show his disapproval.

“Seriously, don’t you have a bit of trust in me? What do you think will happen? I told you. He won’t hurt me,” Ruslan said stubbornly.

The old man said nothing for a while, as he continued to watch the game. “A good fighter is not the one who can throw the heaviest punches, or move the quickest. Consider this a test. If Snake fights like a stray, with no care for rules, I don’t need him in my ring.”

“Weren’t you the one going after him? Since when do you change your mind overnight?” Ruslan asked, feeling his irritation growing.

In the ring below, Snake was sending his opponent to the floor for the second time.

“Since you’re making an obsession for him. Should it have been just one time, I would have had nothing against it.”

“Obsession? Aren’t you exaggerating a bit?”

“Ruslan, he called you his,” the old man said sternly. “That’s unacceptable.”

“Why? It’s only a frigging joke! He doesn’t mean anything by it! How dumb do you think I am? If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re like one of those doting fathers who never let their daughters marry because no guy is ever good enough for their little princess!”

The old man threw him an odd look. Ruslan could feel his eyes bulging out of their sockets.

“Oh, no, you are,” he said, but the words came out of his mouth hesitantly. He could not believe this. “Seriously?” he exclaimed, seeing that the man didn’t deny it. “I survived the orphanage. I survived the streets. It’s not like I’m some Red Riding Hood in peril of being devoured by the big bad wolf!”

The old man chuckled and shook his head. “I know you’re not, Russy. But you’re in my care now. C’mon, after Snake messes up his debut, let’s go somewhere you like. There’s a new club opening. And it caters to gentlemen of a certain persuasion, such as you. You’ll love it.”

“Oh, damn, you want to cruise the gay clubs with me now?” Ruslan sneered.

He had no idea why he was getting so worked up about. It wasn’t like the old man ever wished him any harm. But being treated like he was twelve now felt like a boot crushing his windpipe. Strangely enough, his father’s overbearing care and attention hadn’t bothered him before.

Yanis had called the old man a freak. And Ruslan wasn’t blind. Maybe his obsession with protecting Ruslan wasn’t exactly healthy. But they were nothing like that. The old man had never asked for any sexual favors; he had demanded respect. And so far, with minor mishaps, Ruslan had shown respect. Affection, too, although that hadn’t been explicitly asked.

Still, at the moment, he felt revolted at being pulled back by the old man's short leash. It wasn't even because he wanted Snake that badly, although he did. It was a matter of doing what he wanted; and for that reason, he did feel, indeed, rebellious.

The old man sighed. "Snake will show his true colors. You cannot think he's serious about you now, can you?"

"I told you," Ruslan said through his teeth, well aware that he sounded like a fifteen-year-old whose parents didn't want to let him hang out with his friends at some after dark party. "It's bullshit. He brags I'm his boyfriend, and I don't care about it. We both know it's not true. We're just screwing around. C'mon, stop pestering me. I only look to get laid, that's all."

"I only have your best interest in mind, Russy. Snake might have ulterior motives."

"Like what? Marrying me and inheriting your big ass fortune? Give me a break." Ruslan threw his hands down. "You know that's not the case. It's not like I'd ever get married, anyway. And I don't want to inherit anything. Leave everything to your relatives. What you're giving me now is more than enough."

"Ruslan!" the old man boomed.

Ruslan made himself little in his chair. He shouldn't have spoken so casually about what would happen after the man died. "Sorry, papa," he said meekly.

A paper like hand rested on top of his. "You can do better than Snake, Russy," the old man said, appeased now. "And you will inherit my fortune. I don't care what the entire world says about it."

"But won't that invite trouble?" Ruslan said, moving his hand enough to grab the other's. "I know those vultures. Tell them they'll get everything. At least they'll leave you alone."

"It will be a cold day in hell when I'll let that happen." The old man set his chin high. "They deserve nothing. All they ever wanted from me was money."

"I want money, too," Ruslan joked, to ease the atmosphere. The old man's relatives were a sore point.

His father caressed his cheek tenderly. "You're bringing me joy in my old years, Russy," he said. "That's all that matters."

"Joy, really? Because it looks like I only give you headaches. Okay, papa, if Snake makes a fool of himself in the ring, I won't have anything to do with him. But at least give him the benefit of the doubt. You gave me a chance. Who wouldn't you give him one, too?"

"Fine," the old man admitted. "You're right. Let's see how he's faring now."

Damn scumbag was built like a brick shithouse, even if he didn't look like it. Johnny had already sent the asshole to the floor three times, but he was still getting up. It wasn't that he would lose, but it didn't seem to be as easy as he would have liked. Ruslan would think him soft if he didn't sort this fast.

He circled his opponent, trying to gauge his weaknesses. The man had no style. He was throwing punches and kicks as if he was in a street fight, not a ring. Johnny knew the kind. The type of animal you have to squash under your heel so that he never gets up again to bite you.

An opening presented itself when Unibrow put down his guard, hoping to get him to act recklessly. But Johnny was now strategizing. He jabbed, making his opponent's head jerk back. The scumbag put his guard back up.

It was time to let the idiot think he had a chance. Dancing around him, Johnny feigned a grimace and worked his shoulder. Hmm, strange, he thought. Unibrow wasn't taking the bait. What the fuck was going on there? Could it be that the monkey brain had smelled the setup?

Johnny hadn't earned his nickname only because of his quick attacks with the pinpoint accuracy of a neurosurgeon's knife. The difference between him and the rest of the losers was that he knew how to use his head.

And that kind of play smelled fishy to him. He tried again, this time making it more visible.

Still, there was no response from the other. Instead, the scumbag was trying to bait him, too.

Johnny's mind was now frantically searching for an answer. What the fuck was this idiot trying to pull? He needed to finish this match. And he had thought the rings at Efige were clean. Not so squeaky it seemed.

The way he saw things, there was only one way of solving this. He had an inkling what his opponent was trying to bait him into doing.

But only fools played by the rules. And he didn't mean only the rules in the ring. Johnny wasn't a survivor well worthy of being called Snake because he just saw what was right in front of his eyes. He was still standing because he knew how to trick others into thinking they could read him.

There was no such thing. He wasn't some book in some damned library.

He steeled himself and focused. For what he had in mind, he needed to be fast. His opponent danced around him, baiting him again.

One, Johnny thought and unleashed the attack. His fist connected with the other's jaw.

He doubled.

Tripled on it.

Two.

Man down.

That was all he needed — the time between two beats.

The blood pounded in his temples, covering everything else. The referee was on him, pushing him aside and yelling at him. Apparently, he was still towering over the fallen man, ready to kick him before he got up.

He grinned and spat the mouthpiece covering his teeth. Fuck them all. He had broken no rules. That was something he knew he needed to be careful about. Turning his back, he began to walk away.

But the referee caught him by the elbow and dragged him in the middle of the ring. By the time his fist was in the air, claiming his victory, the cheers had broken the blood barrier in his ears, subduing the pounding of his heart.

Like a man who had just escaped drowning, his senses were coming back to him. His ears made a small pop, and his hearing was back.

He stood victorious.

So Ruslan had decided to play him a little, Johnny thought. He let the hot stream pelt his face, as his well-trained mind worked toward disentangling that particular puzzle. Ruslan wanted Johnny. He had made it clear on both occasions they fucked. Ruslan Kent hadn't acted like a prized lay.

Just like a man who knew what he wanted without playing games. So why the hell now? Why try baiting him in the ring, of all places? To see if he could keep his wits about him?

By all means, he should have felt pissed. But Johnny knew that kind of emotion you kept it for the cage, not outside it. There had been a time, when he had been reckless and stupid, and paid for that kind of shit.

Not anymore. He was frigging twenty-eight years old, and no one could treat him like a kid anymore. A kid with a mean fist. He welcomed that particular memory with a snort.

Ruslan Kent, he thought again, washing the grime of the fight off his body. Could it be that pretty boy decided not to play? It wasn't like they knew each other from Adam. All he knew

about him was that he had a tight ass and a sweet mouth. Otherwise, they were nothing but strangers.

Well, there was no point in dwelling on it. So Ruslan's gorgeous ass was off the table. Not that big a deal, he thought, soaping his balls. His dick was not entirely in agreement with him. Giving it a harsh rub to behave, he turned his back to feel the hot water on his tight muscles.

"Fuck him," he said to no one in particular.

"Who?"

Johnny blinked. What the heck? He was supposed to be the last in there. Through the haze of steam, he made out a silhouette leaning against the wall. Fully dressed. He had been so lost in his thoughts he hadn't noticed someone walking in.

Ruslan moved slowly, with measured steps, his eyes set on Johnny.

"Good game," the pretty man said.

Johnny shook his head and turned. He wouldn't walk into that trap. Whatever blue eyes wanted, he could piss off and get it somewhere else.

The hands wrapping his chest and the clothed body gluing to his from behind took him by surprise, nonetheless.

"You're going to get your nice clothes wet, darling," he drawled the words.

"I don't care," Ruslan whispered into his ear, making a short and intense chill travel his spine, like an almost unbearable tickle.

"I thought you wanted me out. Paying that asshole to bait me?" Johnny said roughly but didn't push the man away. "I thought you better than that. Hell, I thought it would be a clean fight."

"Ugh, that wasn't me," Ruslan replied with a small huff. "How could you tell, though?"

His hands traveled over Johnny's chest, mapping his pecs, and then slowly his abs. Johnny grabbed them before getting lower.

"So who was it?" he asked, just as roughly.

No pretty boy was going to play him like this. Even if he knew his cock was rock hard and asking for the blond man to offer one of his hot holes right that moment.

"Papa," Ruslan offered, annoyance clear in his voice. "He thinks he can tell me who to fuck."

Johnny turned. Ruslan's clothes were soaked through now, and his pretty blond hair was hanging in loose strands, now darker, heavy with water. He pushed them away from the pretty face, to

look into his eyes. Innocent enough. He wouldn't say 'no'; it wasn't like he had been abandoned at the altar or anything.

Grinning, he made his point known. "You here for dick then?" he said roughly.

Ruslan nodded, quite enthusiastically.

"Then get on your knees and suck me," Johnny said.

Ruslan was ready to drop into position, but Johnny thought better of it.

"Wait." He caught Ruslan right on time. "Come here first."

Ruslan's plump lips tasted a bit of chlorine and hot water, but Johnny didn't care. That mouth was his. That lean body, draped in designer's clothes, was his. So he reached deeper with his tongue, making Ruslan gasp and turn to putty into his arms.

"Fucking tasty," he commented, and this time around, he was the one to push Ruslan to his knees. "Now get to work."

Ruslan didn't look like he needed a special invitation for that. His elegant long fingers were digging deep into Johnny's hips, as he swallowed the hard cock with the practiced ease of someone who knew how to pleasure a guy.

Johnny brought Ruslan's hair into a wet bun at the back of his head. If the pretty man ever wanted to be less pretty, he needed to cut his hair. Nah, who was he kidding? Ruslan Kent was sex on two legs, and Johnny was fucking lucky to nail that fine piece of ass, long hair or not.

Not just a fine piece of ass, he let his mind be blown to smithereens as Ruslan worked his pole like he had been starved for weeks. Lucky him; there was a warm meal coming his way quicker than Johnny had managed to finish his opponent just earlier.

Ruslan was using one hand to help himself steady the cock he was treating like a delicious lollipop. His tongue was doing swirls and wraps, caressing and attacking the gland with extra pressure, just enough to make the head grow in his mouth to an impossible size.

It wasn't like he didn't want to enjoy Ruslan's cock polishing technique, but Johnny wanted him in a bed, and as soon as possible. He was round the clock much more than Ruslan. Until Monday morning. That was his deadline.

And just letting the pretty man enjoy a serving of hot jizz didn't serve that particular purpose.

"Here it comes," he said, trying to joke, but failing.

He came with a loud growl, keeping Ruslan's mouth stuffed with cock, by holding him by the back of his neck. The tight throat was moving around his hard pole forcing itself to stretch, making the release freakishly intense.

"Ah, fuck," he murmured contently, as he let go slowly.

Ruslan coughed discreetly as if he didn't want to ruin the moment. Johnny didn't miss his chance. He pulled Ruslan up and kissed him hungrily. It looked like he had swallowed everything. There was a faint taste lingering on Ruslan's tongue, and Johnny chased it, as the physical proof of the fact that this rich boy had sucked him dry without making a fuss.

"Fuck, you're a mess." He chuckled, as soon as he released Ruslan from his hold.

"Don't you worry about that. I'll go change. You get ready and meet me in the front."

"Where're we going?"

"You promised me this weekend, and Saturday's almost over. So I'm taking you to my place," Ruslan said as he reluctantly pulled himself away from Johnny. "I have everything prepared. To keep your energy up and everything."

"I don't do drugs," Johnny said roughly.

Not anymore.

Ruslan patted his chest and smiled.

"Who said anything about that? I'm talking about protein in delicious and healthy sizes and shapes. You must keep these guns," he chirped, feeling Johnny's biceps.

"Ah, so no aphrodisiacs? Champagne and the like?" Johnny joked, a bit relieved.

"You're not supposed to drink." Ruslan wagged the finger at him. "All right, a bit of wine, but that's all. Your body is a temple, mister," he joked, and this time, Johnny caught his hand and playfully bit the wagging finger.

"Hurry," he pushed Ruslan away and patted his ass after turning him around. "I want to be inside your ass before Saturday ends."

"And after that?" Ruslan asked over one shoulder.

"I'll fuck you until you cannot walk no more," Johnny promised with a cocksure smile.

So, in the end, the pretty boy hadn't lied. And it dawned on Johnny. If there was one opponent he had to be aware of, he wouldn't meet him in the ring. The guy's old man. Who would have thought? Although Ruslan fit the image of a daddy's boy to a tee. But why did the old man have

it bad for Johnny? Maybe he didn't agree with his son fucking dudes. Funny thing, Ruslan didn't seem to hide. So what was the deal, anyway?

Whatever, he shrugged. The only deal he had, he had with Ruslan, not with his old man. And if the pretty man wanted a fucking, Johnny was happy to give it to him. And he had plans. He checked his backpack. He would show the pretty boy something tonight. It was all there.

The cab pulled in front of a nice looking house, a bit remote from the main road. So that was how the rich lived. Go figure, Johnny thought. He wasn't going to act like he was impressed. If there was one top dog around, that was him, and Ruslan would understand that pretty quickly.

It tickled him the wrong way, the whole thing. Not rub him the wrong way. That was not it. Johnny knew better than this, but still he couldn't help it. Maybe it was just the promise of that tight ass after a win. After that, he couldn't tell.

Or maybe he was still damn stupid and thought he could raise the bar for himself and score higher. He was reading too much into everything. On the way to Ruslan's crib, in the cab, they had been silent. Both of them. But if papa was paying for all this, how could Ruslan go against his old man like that? Wasn't he afraid to be disowned or something? A pretty boy like him probably had not lifted a finger to do any hard work all his life. Although, if what people said was true, that Ruslan was keeping his old man's books, it meant the pretty man was more than just pretty. He was smart, too.

He stole a glance at Ruslan as soon as they were inside. Ruslan leaned into him, asking, without words. Johnny grabbed him quickly, lifting him by his ass, and almost slammed him against the wall.

Their lips were busy, his hands were claspings hard on the tight buttocks, and he wanted nothing more than to have Ruslan naked, under him, and soon.

"Show me to your bedroom," he said, as he planted the other back on his feet, but without removing his hands from the still clothed ass.

With a smile, Ruslan dragged him after him by one hand. Johnny barely noted his surroundings, his attention fully trained on his host. The pretty man was not going to walk on Monday morning. It was no longer just a way of boasting. It started to be a necessity.

Johnny could not remember being so hard for a guy. Ruslan Kent was something that wasn't supposed to be on his plate. He was used to eating at the diner across the street. And this kind of meal came straight from a five-star restaurant or something.

But he had no table manners, he smirked at the thought. When they were finally in a nicely lit room that had to be the bedroom by the size of the bed in the middle, flush against the wall, he was as sure of that as of him being called Snake.

“Quite a big bed for someone sleeping alone,” he noticed.

“It’s for sleepovers.” Ruslan shrugged, as he began undressing with the speed of light, throwing his clothes all over the place.

“Do you have many people sleeping over then?” Johnny asked gruffly.

Was he stupid now? Ruslan had made no secret of liking to sleep around. That was how he had gotten here, anyway. So why was he bothered? For now, for the weeks of the tournament, he was going to be the one to sleep over. And not some other, faceless dudes.

“Not really,” Ruslan surprised him with his reply.

He jumped into his arms, almost making him lose balance. Johnny turned the tables and pinned him to the bed.

“I wanna do you raw,” he said quietly, making the other stop cold in his arms.

Ruslan shook his head. “Nah, no way. I don’t go bareback with anyone. Ever.”

“Yeah, I thought you’d be like that. Your old man taught you good, right?” Johnny chuckled.

“Right,” Ruslan said, a tad hesitantly.

“Good, that’s good.” Johnny caressed the man’s cheeks slowly and leaned in for a kiss.

For the first time since he had met Johnny aka Snake, Ruslan felt a tinge of fear. He was refusing him point blank, and they both knew Snake had the strength required to force Ruslan if that was what he wanted.

Against himself, he panicked. The weight crushing him into the bed wasn’t helping, either. He needed to calm down. And certainly, ignore how softly Johnny was kissing him.

They needed ground rules. He tried to push the other away. To his surprise, the fighter didn’t fight him back. Instead, he stood up and sauntered to a corner of the room where he crouched over his knapsack.

“Johnny,” Ruslan said, hoping his voice was stern enough to draw the others’ attention, “I don’t do it raw.”

Johnny seemed to ignore him, whistling a happy tune, as he turned back and threw some papers held together by a metal clip. Intrigued, Ruslan straightened up, pulling his legs under him.

“It’s your bill of health?” he wondered out loud.

Johnny was busy shedding off his clothes. “Bet your sweet ass it is. I always keep myself in shape. Healthy. But this time, I asked for more tests. You know, just so that I can pop the question to you.”

Ruslan examined the papers. They were up to date all right.

“It wasn’t really a question,” he mumbled. “So you did this ... for me?”

The fighter was standing now by the foot of the bed, in all his naked glory. “What do you think? Of course. I don’t come across a fine piece of tail like you that often. So, what do you say?” Johnny jumped on the bed, grabbed the papers from Ruslan’s hand and threw them away, obviously impatient.

Their mouths clashed again, and the room tilted, making Ruslan see the ceiling in an instant. They were rubbing against each other like animals in heat. Ruslan grabbed the man’s hair, forcing him away one inch. “You’re a bit crazy! Don’t you think you should ask if I’m clean?”

Johnny smirked. “Papa’s precious boy, kept on a tight leash? I’d say I’m safe,” he joked, and this time, when he kissed Ruslan, he no longer budged.

Clearly, Johnny was done making conversation. The slurping sounds of their tongues together filled the room.

Ruslan felt a bit dizzy. But Johnny had gone the extra length to proposition him like this. And it wasn’t like he didn’t want it. For how long had he done it only with the rubber? Ever since the old man had saved him and Yanis from that hell hole they had ended up in, him selling ass, Yanis fast to become a small-time thief and most probably a dead one, had Mr. Kent not intervened to free their sorry asses and take them both into his care. Maybe he was lucky that he was clean. But keeping himself that way had nothing to do with luck.

So it was a leap of faith. He surely needed to think about it. Johnny slid from his arms, dragging him by the edge of the bed. A hot tongue in his ass and he was sold. He bit his hand to stop from moaning like a slut. Johnny was eating his ass and wasn’t shy to make a meal out of it.

“Don’t keep your voice down,” Johnny ordered breathily. “It’s not like we shouldn’t wake the neighbors or something, right?”

Ruslan mumbled a reply. He was sure he sounded like a bitch in heat, but he couldn’t help it anymore. Johnny’s hand was rough on his cock and balls, introducing those into his menu, too.

“Stay right here,” Johnny said and stood up again to fiddle with his knapsack again.

Like he could have gone anywhere. His bones were all jelly, and he couldn't move if there were a fire. His eyes grew wide as he noticed what Johnny held in one tight fist.

“What's that?” he asked warily.

“Some of my hand wraps, sweet lips. I need to prove myself, right? So, here's the deal. Four times, you said? I'm all for breaking the record. The question is: are you?”

Ruslan watched the strips of cloth as Johnny was wrapping them around one fist. Slowly, he nodded.

Chapter Five – Old Mistakes

It felt surreal to let himself manhandled like that. By the looks of it, Johnny knew what he was doing. The man wrapped with expert precision and pulled the strips of cloth over Ruslan's arms pressed together at the back.

“So you into bondage?” he asked, skipping a beat and a word, dizzy with the promise of what was to come.

He was famished. Johnny the fighter was promising him he wouldn't be, at least for a while. As if he could believe in promises of the kind.

Johnny stopped for a second to kiss him. Ruslan was starting to love his mouth something extreme. Far from being some classic beauty, Johnny was an example of raw masculinity that Ruslan craved like water in the desert.

“Do you have a thing for bad boys?” the memory from a few years back came unbound.

“They're the only ones who don't care,” Ruslan had shrugged the question at the time, preferring a cookie cutter, Psychology Today inspired, answer.

The old man had shaken his head.

“Just promise me you'll be safe. If not for your sake, for mine.”

He had had a mind to protest. But the old man was his lifeline, always had been since he had pulled Yanis and Ruslan from that terrible place.

“Of course, papa,” he had promised and meant it.

At that time, yes, he had made the promise and believed in it. Yet, right now, he was surrendering to the whims of a man who looked able to snap him in two like a twig, should he have fancied that.

Johnny checked the ties, pulling Ruslan's elbows just a bit apart. “On your back,” he ordered.

It was a bit uncomfortable, with his arms bent from the elbows and tied together like that. He was flexible. He would live, Ruslan thought, his mind already going places.

“Wait,” Johnny frowned for a second and pulled one of the fluffy pillows to stuff it under Ruslan's back. “Better?”

It was strange to see a smile on that rough face. Ruslan felt he was being treated differently. This wasn't Johnny's usual MO. He probably always fucked hard. Ruslan craved that, too.

But he seemed set on doing this his way, and Ruslan wouldn't protest. A calloused hand caressed Ruslan's cheek and a rough thumb brushed over his mouth. He wanted to laugh. "Please don't treat me like I'm made of glass," he said.

His voice was different, deeper, waiting, on the point of an exhale that was kept from coming. Did he forget how to breathe? How much of this was what he wanted?

Johnny met his faint protest with a small chuckle. "Don't be afraid, sweet lips," he said gently.

"Afraid? What could I be afraid of?" Ruslan faked bravado.

"Indeed," Johnny's dark eyes flashed with deeper understanding.

This was a dangerous game. Was it only dangerous for him? He shook his head. How many men had he bedded in his life? Too many to keep track, right? He wouldn't break from being treated too gently.

The calloused hand resumed the caress. It was dropping lower, and Ruslan knew, although he could not see, that his chest was rising and falling with it. The tension broke when Johnny teased his belly button, making him snicker and jerk away. He was ticklish.

"Ah, you do have a sweet spot." Johnny laughed and leaned in to give Ruslan another breath of fresh air, straight from his lips. "C'mon, legs up."

Ruslan grunted more in surprise than anything else as Johnny bent his knee and began tying his legs, one, then the other, in the same fashion. It was tight, but not too tight.

"You should see yourself right now," Johnny's lips twitched. "Have you ever thought of modeling for skin magazines and the like? You'd make a fortune."

"Well, I like being an accountant," Ruslan said wryly.

It was more than keeping books what he was doing for the old man, but that didn't make as a good conversation topic at the moment. Especially since a practiced hand was now wrapping around his cock, waking it back to life.

Between getting tied up and having his belly button tickled, he had somewhat lost track of what they were there for. He shivered as Johnny knelt in front of him, threw him a brief look, and then took his hard cock in his mouth.

"I thought this type of position was all about me acting subservient for the rest of the night," Ruslan said.

Johnny stopped for a second. "It is."

It was true. He was all tied up, and couldn't protest. But he was handled with care as if he was a china doll.

Ruslan needed to take control of the situation. That wasn't his MO, either. Yet, right now, the delicious feeling of surrender was making him melt on the inside. A single point in his entire body was anything but.

Johnny was taking him deep, giving his cock swipe after swipe with his tongue, squeezing it at the back of his throat. It was like any moment he would come. Ruslan groaned, moving his hips slightly.

Strong fingers dug deep into his thighs to keep him in place. So he wasn't the one in charge, after all. "I need to come," he complained.

"Why didn't you say so?" Johnny laughed, pulling his expert throat and mouth away from Ruslan's cock. "But you'll do it while taking me raw."

Ruslan trembled with both apprehension and excitement. For so much time, he had been a vessel for men to pour their desire, frustration, and even anger. What was this all about? He could not think anymore; and it didn't matter, like come hell or high water, because the way Johnny was now gently reaching inside him with his slick finger was making this train of thought stop cold, and he couldn't, he couldn't ...

"Hard or gentle?" Johnny asked, and Ruslan searched his midnight eyes.

"I thought I was the toy." Ruslan pretended to pout, but his lips twitched, giving him away.

"Hmm, so gentle it is," Johnny teased and grinned.

"Ah, you got me." Ruslan giggled, and licked his lips, to hide his frustration.

"I got you," Johnny said, and it no longer sounded like a joke.

Johnny reached for his neck, caressing it lightly. Ruslan swallowed hard. They were walking on a thin rope, and so far, the acrobats they pretended to be seemed steady on their feet. The night was young. No one could tell if, by morning, one or both players would fall or not.

Ruslan counted on his safety net. So he closed his eyes, and shivered, as Johnny pushed inside, stretching him, making him open wide, and now he could focus on the physical sensation which was, after all, everything he craved.

Their breathing fell in sync. He could count the beating of his heart by the pace Johnny's ragged breaths followed. Johnny was taking him in short, shallow at first, deeper later, thrusts, making Ruslan's entire body shake.

Ruslan adjusted his position just slightly. There had to be a way to show the other he wanted it harder without using words. And Johnny understood.

How could it be? This pretty man loved it both hard and gentle, and Johnny hadn't asked just for the sake of it. The way Ruslan was squeezing him with that perfect hole was fucking amazing. He still expected the other shoe to drop. No idea what he meant by that, either.

Ruslan was way out of his league. Johnny liked to think he wasn't impressed by the huge ass house, the monogrammed cufflinks, or how Ruslan's slightly tilted voice seemed like he was just out of some boarding school in Switzerland or something like that.

But the truth was he was damn fucking impressed. It wasn't like he hadn't fucked prissy princes before. He knew how that went. In the morning, he was usually ushered with the hush-hush advice to keep his mouth shut, plus with some money in his pocket, payment for what he had done.

It hadn't been his speed to be used as a prostitute by high-class assholes who wanted a good pounding once in a blue moon. So he had expected to have learned his lesson. Who the fuck was he kidding? The moment Ruslan Kent had fluttered his pretty curly eyelashes at him, he had wanted to fuck the guy into the mattress.

Tonight was real. They were real. So, next or Monday morning, hell could come, and he couldn't care less.

"I'm gonna care for you." Johnny leaned over Ruslan, and those angel eyes stared at him from below, as if they belonged to a drowning man. "Yeah, I'm gonna take care of you," he reinforced the promise.

The bondage play was all a ruse. Not that Ruslan didn't look great tied up like that. Johnny just wanted to be the top dog in this. At least for the time before he would get thrown out the door like a stray dog.

He pushed inside deeper. Damn, it felt good to have Ruslan like that, without the rubber. That tight ass was a living thing around his cock. The pretty man knew how to milk a hard dick, and he was doing a fine job.

He grinned at Ruslan. "Ready for the first round?"

"Fuck, just rub it for me." Ruslan hurried him, and Johnny's hand rushed over his trembling cock.

"Nice." Johnny chuckled and began moving to the rhythm.

“Fuck, yes, fuck, fuck.” Ruslan encouraged him, and he was all up for granting this pretty man’s desire.

“I’m so fucking filling your ass,” he said each word through his teeth, as he pumped the other’s ass hard.

Squirt after squirt, Ruslan’s cock spurted, making Johnny feel, in the weirdest way, that it was like he was shooting the wave after wave of jizz filling his ass. Damn. Coming together? That was pretty frigging awesome.

He felt the beautiful ass as he pulled back. Moving the ass cheeks a little, he noticed with satisfaction his wad coming out. Now that was a sight to behold. “Filled to the brim,” he said.

Ruslan looked at him, and his beautiful lips dropped in a pout.

“Don’t tell me that’s it,” Ruslan said. “I thought you promised something.”

“Hmm, do you think it’s okay to make demands?” Johnny pulled playfully at one nicely tied leg.

“Ah, don’t tell me you tricked me into tying me up so that you could go to sleep,” Ruslan half-joked.

“Hey, if you thought this was some SM play, well, it isn’t,” Johnny said back, playing slowly with Ruslan’s slick hole. “So I’m not gonna punish you like that. I just had a full set of balls and needed to empty them. From now on, it’s getting real,” he added with a smirk.

He pushed his half hard dick inside the other. It would grow fully hard again. All it needed was the perfect stimulation, and Ruslan was making an effort to squeeze him. Yeah, that was all that was required for him to get it up again.

Ruslan had to admit that he was at least a little bit surprised with Johnny’s bounce-back abilities. For all that he had been partially disappointed to feel him coming, he was now rethinking what his first evaluation of Johnny the fighter, aka Snake, had been.

Plus, the sense of satisfaction to have his ass filled with no condom in the way was almost enough to forgive Johnny. The way he was now playing with a slowly hardening cock in his ass was also making up for it. If he was in it for the long haul, Ruslan wouldn’t say ‘no’.

He adjusted his position to feel Johnny better and used the control he had over his ass muscles to make him feel him. They were two in this game, and maybe he was the one tied up, but that didn’t mean that he would stay there, like a cold fish.

“Gimme some of that sugar,” Johnny asked roughly, and, for a second, Ruslan wondered what that meant.

Ah, Johnny loved to kiss. It was so counterintuitive to think that this rough boy had it bad for kisses. Ruslan didn't mind. Johnny was a great kisser, knowing how to tease, and give, and pull away. They were making a certain kind of obscene noise as they were feeding off each other's mouths.

Ruslan enjoyed it, too. Johnny was moving his tongue into his mouth, like a different way of penetration. It was a two-way, and there wasn't anything dirty or wrong about it. Ruslan began sucking on his tongue.

"Out," Johnny demanded, pulling away a little more.

"Um, what?" Ruslan mumbled, taken by surprise.

"Put your tongue out. Let's play like this."

Ruslan felt a bit odd to kiss like that, and he was pretty damn sure he didn't like it too much, but that until Johnny licked his tongue playfully. Ah, cool, he wanted that. He did the same, and soon enough they were fighting in the open, each one keeping to his side of the field, but unafraid of sending jabs over the net.

And then they began sucking each other's tongues, and Ruslan felt a pleasant sensation starting to spread from the center of his chest. Their bodies connected, and they were as close to making love as Ruslan could remember.

He hadn't had much of that over the years. At first, clients had just fucked him, praised him for his looks, giving him extra cash and small gifts, yes. But in the end, they were only paying for a service.

Yanis had been a different thing. They had done it, in the beginning, out of boredom, and sometimes like a necessity. It wasn't a service, but it wasn't lovemaking either. And any trysts Ruslan had had through the years had been nothing but straight up fucking, and nothing else.

So this was new. He had no idea if he was supposed to quench the new sensation. Was he kidding himself now? They were just having fun. At best, he had to enjoy it while it lasted.

And it looked like it lasted, he groaned, as Johnny began pumping his cock again, making him come messily, all over the place. This time, Johnny didn't come and didn't pull out. He continued to fuck Ruslan raw, without letting him have a break like before.

Not even he could be back on track so quickly. Johnny was using his ass, and he was quivering with the fading waves of his release. The extra stimulation was only making him feel like it was almost too much.

Almost. That was the keyword. Because Ruslan could not care less that he was being used. A few rebellious strands of hair over his eyes, murmuring sinful words, Johnny was fucking him on

his own pace. Ruslan could almost tell that Johnny's cock was growing harder and larger in his ass if that was possible.

It damn was, because Johnny was now driving his cock deep and staying there while praising Ruslan's tight ass and using the most shameless repertoire he had ever heard in his life.

Seeing where he was coming from, he had heard plenty. "Two for two?" he smiled.

Johnny crashed over him, nuzzling his neck.

"Do you think you can take me out of this nice and fitting get up so that we can shower and grab something to eat?"

"Hmm," Johnny purred into his ear. "So you want to wash away both loads I shot in you tonight?"

Ruslan giggled. "I could try. Although I think you shot deep enough. I don't think just one shower will make it all disappear."

Johnny bit his ear playfully. "Good."

He moved and proceeded to remove Ruslan's ties.

"It was a nice touch," Ruslan said while massaging his arms to make the blood come back.

Johnny kicked his hands away and began to do that himself. "It was nice that you let me," he smiled. "I was expecting you to throw a hissy fit."

"Oh. And why is that?" Ruslan quirked an eyebrow.

It felt nice to have those rough hands on him, touching him everywhere.

"You know. I'm not blind. You'll kick me out. After you got your fill," Johnny said.

Ruslan frowned. "Why would I do that?"

"Hey, I might have taken enough kicks to the head, but I'm not stupid," Johnny said roughly. "You're high class. No way you're in my league."

Ruslan burst into laughter. "All right, I wasn't expecting that," he commented.

Johnny looked at him, eyes at half-mast. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Ruslan shook his head. "I'll tell you when we'll know each other better. Wait, don't tell me you want to fuck me because I'm some kind of high class? Rich and everything?"

Johnny grinned. "No way. I'd fuck you in rags, pretty."

Ruslan sighed. “Ah. Somehow I don’t believe you,” he teased.

“Believe it, or you’ll get round number three in your ass before you get that shower.”

Ruslan pushed Johnny away playfully and rushed to the bathroom, with the other after him.

Pretty men with big ass houses liked to be liked for themselves. That was no surprise there. And Johnny had been totally honest when he said that he would fuck Ruslan if he were in rags. But it kind of annoyed him that such spoiled brats pretended to know how it would be if they didn’t have daddy’s money.

He had a weird feeling, though, that Ruslan had been on the point of saying something, and stopped right before continuing.

Whatever. He liked Ruslan Kent as he was. Pretty, rich, spoilt. It was fine. Even if he were sent out the door with a boot in his ass, it would still be totally worth it.

They fit in bed, like two guys from different worlds weren’t supposed to. And no matter if Ruslan decided that it was not worth it to fool around with someone beneath him, the pretty man would remember this weekend for a long time.

Ruslan took him by surprise as he began to send splashes everywhere, jumping around in the in-ground bath, slowly filling with water.

“I thought you said a shower,” Johnny jumped into the water, grabbing him.

Ruslan laughed. “I like chilling in the bathtub, what can I say?”

“Chilling, huh? I see you splashing around, like a kid, that’s what I see,” Johnny said, and slid his fingers through the firm butt cheeks, satisfied with what he found there.

He took Ruslan into his arms, forcing him to lift his legs and put them around his waist. “You’re so much like a kid, you make me want to ground you.” He laughed, as he dropped them both into the warm water.

“Oh, really?” Ruslan said, keeping his arms wrapped tightly around Johnny’s neck. “And what would this ‘ground’ thing mean?”

“Hmm, you’d not be allowed to leave the house. Or the bed. I wouldn’t let you play with other kids. There would be no TV. I would confiscate your phone. I would make sure you eat everything. Especially your daily dose of jizz on both ends.”

Ruslan began laughing so hard that Johnny wondered if he might choke or something.

“That would be bad parenting,” Ruslan eventually managed to say.

“Who says I want to be your dad?” Johnny snorted.

“What do you want to be?” Ruslan pushed his head back, and then straightened up enough to stare Johnny into his eyes.

Johnny chose to remain ambiguous. “Hmm.”

He could smell a trap from a mile away.

“And I thought you wanted me to be your main squeeze.” Ruslan drew invisible lines with one finger on Johnny’s wet shoulder, intentionally guarding his gaze.

Johnny feigned disinterest. “I wonder how come you know everything that’s going on around your place.”

“It was just hear-say. I hoped to get real confirmation from you while looking me in the eye,” Ruslan teased, and this time he stared at Johnny.

Ah, damn, the pretty man liked the idea. Nah, that couldn’t be. He was just fooling around.

Johnny shrugged. “I was just going for the shock value. You know, they weren’t expecting me to say that.”

Ruslan laughed. “I thought so. Hey, how about you wash my back and I wash yours?”

“I’d say you need it more than me.” Johnny manipulated Ruslan in such a manner that the guy landed with his back at him. “I told you I’d take care of you.”

Ruslan said nothing, but purred in delight, as Johnny began working some kinks in his shoulders.

No one was washing his back. Or scratching his back. Or having his back. In this world, Johnny knew that strength came from no other place but yourself. There was no point in depending on others, and he was no fool, no matter how pretty Ruslan Kent was.

Or how much, for a very short moment, Johnny had wished to hear him that he wanted them to be more than just bed partners for a night or two.

Nothing ever went under the radar with him. Johnny had evaded all of Ruslan’s attempts to reciprocate in the bathtub. Not that he hadn’t enjoyed being caressed, kissed, washed, and massaged everywhere.

Who knew Johnny the fighter, a man who went by the name of Snake in the ring, had some pet peeves of his own? It wasn't just curiosity nagging him now. Ruslan felt like he was entitled to know a thing or two about someone who was so casually rocking his sex life right now.

After being taken from behind and made to come two more times, and had an ass filled again to prove how much Johnny enjoyed their little get together, he was in the mood to learn a little more about the man presently sharing his bed.

Johnny was lying on his belly, trying hard to regain his breath, so Ruslan grabbed the opportunity. He moved one hand leisurely over his back, tracing the scars with the tips of his fingers. What could have caused such disfiguration of skin? The jagged lines could come from a whip, an instrument used clearly for torture and not bedroom play. But there was something even more there, something that was making Ruslan's skin crawl with the implication of what it might mean. The skin had been broken irregularly in places and had overgrown in rough edges, thickened, to compensate. A simple whip could not have left those, by his limited knowledge of scar anatomy.

Johnny didn't flinch as Ruslan touched him, but his breath became hitched, cautious.

"What happened here?"

A non-committal shrug was the only answer.

"Many would use tattoos to cover such marks," Ruslan pressed, despite a small internal voice telling him that wasn't a good idea.

"I wouldn't," Johnny's answer came, but it didn't look like he was mad or embarrassed with Ruslan's interest in his old scars.

"Why?"

"Why?" Johnny echoed. "It wouldn't do anyone any good. It won't do me any good. I'd know they're there, tattoos or not."

"Do they still hurt?" Ruslan's voice grew low.

He was just asking stupid questions right now.

"No. But they're there for a reason."

"What reason?"

"Old mistakes," Johnny said, and for a brief second, his voice was bitter. "One must live with them. I do."

Ruslan felt briefly ashamed and pulled away his hand. It wasn't his business. They weren't at the point of recounting their lives' history. Maybe they weren't going there at all.

So there was no point in talking about himself, either. What could it lead to? Emotional release? He wasn't in the mood for that. Hell, he was never in the mood for that. And he could take all the release he wanted from men like Johnny, in bed, on his back, or on his fours. It didn't matter.

Johnny pushed himself to one side and stared at Ruslan.

"Do they gross you out?" Johnny made a vague gesture over his shoulder.

Ruslan felt tempted to recoil from the accusation. But he had been the one to start the conversation. And Johnny's question was fair. He shook his head slowly. "No. You lived through such a thing --"

"If I want anyone's pity, I believe there're plenty of churches around," Johnny brusquely interrupted him.

"Pity?" Ruslan snorted.

It was his turn to feel a little annoyed. Maybe Johnny thought he didn't need it. Yanis was like this, too. But Ruslan had taken the old man's pity and fed himself with it. It had helped him survived, not physically, but deep inside, and tough guys like Snake and his longtime friend couldn't understand that.

"I have none to give, don't worry," he added and made a move to get out of the bed.

Johnny stopped him. "Where do you think you're going? I think I told you about some record that needs breaking."

Ruslan smiled as he turned toward him. Yes, it was nothing but a game, and there was no room for memories and talks of old scars and mistakes in the kind of game they were playing.

Chapter Six – For You, Always Johnny

His entire body was thrumming with delight. They were spooning, laying on one side and Johnny was moving in and out of his ass while nuzzling his neck slowly. Ruslan could barely believe it. First thing in the morning and they were like this. Johnny had great stamina and bottomless desire, as it seemed.

Ruslan could get used to this. Hell, he could get addicted to this. To this man, if he truly wanted to be precise. He moaned softly as that was the only way to signal his bed partner that he was very much awake and very much enjoying the ministrations.

The weirdest thing of all if he was to think about was that the passion, the usual craving consuming him, seemed subdued, almost no longer there. It had just turned into satisfying languor, and everything felt softer, gentler now.

He bucked his hips only slightly.

“Want me to pick up the pace?” Johnny asked, his voice a bit hoarse from sleeping. “Want a fresh load fed to you, pretty? Your ass is so hungry. Damn, so hungry for my cock,” he whispered, making Ruslan tremble with desire.

So long, satisfying languor. He was waking up, and his body was already there, all his senses ready to be taken by this man who knew precisely the buttons to push to make Ruslan come undone.

“Yes, please,” he whispered back.

Johnny said nothing but wrapped one strong arm over Ruslan’s waist as the other dug into the plump flesh. Ruslan loved having his ass squeezed like that. Johnny intended to keep him in place.

Internally, he rejoiced. Was he finally going to feel how it was to be taken hard by this man?

“You know, it wouldn’t sit well with your bad boy attitude if you only made sweet and gentle love to me,” he snickered as Johnny continued fucking him slowly.

“Bad boy, huh? Funny, I thought I’d earned my place to be called a man.”

“Hmm, yeah, but 'bad man' doesn’t exactly sound right,” Ruslan joked.

He was effortlessly turned on his belly, and this time, his bed partner seemed to get the cue. When Johnny pushed himself, all length and growing girth inside him, Ruslan gasped. The only lubrication he still had there was from the last times Johnny had come in his ass the previous night. He had come plenty. So Ruslan’s ass was well enough lubricated for this.

“Oh, fuck,” he murmured.

“You know, you might not like it,” Johnny said. “I don’t think you can come, just rubbing your dick against the bed.”

“Let that be my worry, bad boy,” Ruslan said over one shoulder.

Johnny pressed Ruslan’s head down, into the pillows, firm, but not rough. Ruslan could feel the familiar excitement growing. It was not like him to come forward and admit it, at least not so plainly, not as honest as his body, how much he craved being used.

The bed was rattling now, but the short, sharp noises he made could almost cover that. Or they just created the effect of an orchestra, or better yet, a rough tune that sounded lewd and wanting. He had never had the guts to let himself broken, truly broken. It was something akin to a perversion, always to tread on edge, but with no express wish to walk over the line.

His ass was feeling it. Hell, he would feel this for days, especially since he was so sensitive. Even that idle thought was giving him satisfaction. Careless of his wellbeing, he pushed his ass up and back into Johnny’s thrusting hips.

“You like this?” Johnny’s voice was strained and touched by an ounce of doubt. “Want me to fuck you like a used street whore?”

Ruslan tensed. His throat tightened. It was almost like he couldn’t breathe.

It’s all in your head, it’s all in your head ... The mantra kept repeating. But no matter what his mind was fighting to achieve, his automatic nervous system denied.

His body jerked uncontrollably. A strength he didn’t possess pushed him up and almost sent Johnny flying out of bed.

“What the fuck?” Johnny exclaimed.

He was shaking now, the effect of the adrenaline release. Johnny grabbed him.

“Fuck, are you okay, man?”

He could hear the other’s words as if his head was under water. Johnny turned his head and looked him in the eyes. And then, strong hands wrapped him in a tight embrace and kept him there, kept him warm, until the last tremble subsided.

It took him minutes to feel Johnny’s rough fingers drawing slow circles on his shoulder blades. He could not remember a bed partner comforting him before. This was also new.

“Should I go get something?” Johnny asked. “Do you need the hospital?”

“No, don’t worry.” Ruslan fought to regain his composure while straightening up and slipping from the assuring embrace. “I just get this crazy ... My blood sugar drops.”

“Sugar?” Johnny stared at him, shaking his head slightly as if an annoying winged bug was trying to get inside his ear. “Okay. Shouldn’t you have medicine for this stuff?”

Ruslan wanted nothing but to run away from the inquisitive eyes. He stood his ground. “I’m fine,” he said, forcing himself to smile.

Johnny’s reciprocating smile was a tad crooked. He wasn’t buying it, but it wasn’t his business.

The pretty man had had quite the scare, Johnny watched Ruslan, as still slightly trembling fingers were grabbing the blanket which he had hurried to drape over his shoulders. But what could have scared him?

Ruslan had riled him up a little. Of course, that wasn’t exactly a reason for him to take the bait. Ruslan could run his mouth all he wanted; he wasn’t into rough play. Not even rough acting. A few words were enough to set him off like that.

Okay, so no one ever had dared to call the pretty man a used whore. Johnny was stupid to have used those words. That was what he was: stupid. Prissy princes were not particular about being called names. They liked the danger, being treated roughly a little, but that was all. Some had asked him in the past, point blank, to call them names. But the boot he had gotten the next day was telling him everything he needed to know about that.

Princes could not be treated like whores. Not even when they asked for it. No matter what they said. No matter how much they thought that they wanted that. And, case in hand, Ruslan hadn’t asked for this fucked up shit.

Yeah, he should have known better. Johnny rubbed his forehead. “Do you want me to get the hell out?” He pointed with one thumb over his shoulder, to the door, hand curled into a tight fist.

The blue eyes stared at him as if Ruslan didn’t get the question. “Do you want to leave?” the pretty man’s voice croaked.

Damn, did he? Not really. Ruslan didn’t look well, his pale face even paler, his skin flushed in places. No, he didn’t.

He shook his head. “No.”

“Okay,” Ruslan mumbled. “Sorry about that. Really, you shouldn’t worry about me. I’m fine.”

“Is it because what I said?” Johnny asked bluntly.

He wasn’t one to beat around the bush.

The blue eyes widened. “No,” Ruslan answered quickly, looking away.

Yeah, he was stupid, Johnny concluded. He shouldn't have let his true colors show. That wasn't the kind of talk a pretty guy like this one could take. It was all about how he grew up or something. With a silver spoon in his mouth and all that. Yeah, no one talked like that to guys like Ruslan Kent.

Now he felt like he needed to take a hike. But that meant running. And Johnny didn't do running. Not anymore.

"I'm sorry, okay? Just got carried away, you know?" Johnny said gruffly, looking at his hands, covered in fading scars and new scabs from training too hard. "Didn't mean anything by that. You're nothing like that."

"Stop," the sharp word shut him up.

"Then I should get going," he replied.

"I told you I'm fine," Ruslan said again. "Can't you get it through your thick head?"

Johnny frowned. All right, so he had fucked up royally. But that didn't mean Ruslan could call him stupid. That was all on him and no one else.

"Watch it." He snarled as he pushed himself up. "I'm in no mood for your hissy fits. But here's my advice, pretty. Next time when you're with a man, and you want something, you better tell him straight up what you want. The likes of me can't guess what goes through the pretty heads of the likes of you."

He had wanted to apologize, and now he was just making it worse. Great. Well, it wasn't supposed to last, anyway.

"Ah, so you figured me out? Is that what you're trying to say?" Ruslan stood up, too, letting the blanket fall from his shoulders.

"Nah, I'm not all sophisticated like you. But thanks for the night and the tight ass. It was cool."

Ruslan's fingers dug into his arm, and, although he didn't have enough strength to keep him in place, Johnny stopped. The blue eyes showed hurt. Johnny sucked at saying sorry. So there was nothing he could do about those pretty eyes and whatever was they were telling him.

He watched Ruslan moving his lips, giving him the address so he could call himself a cab.

Ruslan listened to the entrance door closing. It was better this way. Johnny had nothing to apologize for. Not that he could explain it, especially not to a stranger; not to anyone, if he was to think about it.

He was starting to feel a little better. Drawing himself a bath was the right thing to do. Then, he would just rest. There was no point to overthink things. Johnny was out the door, and out of his life, most probably. So what? It wasn't like they knew each other since forever. And it was just what it was. Like Johnny had said. Cool.

He shivered and mostly pulled himself toward the bathroom. Nothing like a hot bath to put things in order, at least for the moment.

Hours later, his phone ringing woke him up from his slumber. "Hey," he answered, rubbing his eyes.

"Sleeping so late, Russy? You're young, but these bad habits will get the better of you," the old man's paternal voice came through.

"I just had ... an interesting night," Ruslan replied.

He stretched and yawned. The pain in his backside, a bit remote, but not quite fading, stopped him. Nothing a couple of Tylenols couldn't solve. Johnny had been much gentler than Ruslan could have ever expected. And even that first time, he had taken his time, making sure his bed partner felt everything, except for pain.

It was all his body's fault he felt like that. He never let go. Not completely. Maybe he was lying to himself that resisting a little made it all right, even with the risk of hurting afterward and not only physically.

He had messed up this time. But he couldn't keep Johnny if he wanted. Did he want Johnny? By how well they had fit together the previous night, they were much compatible. Ruslan could hardly remember feeling so thoroughly satisfied. Except for Yanis.

Well, he still had Yanis. To think that he had refused his friend over Snake. But, to his defense, at that point, that had felt like the right thing to do.

"Russy." The old man's warm voice brought him back to reality. "Should I come over?"

"Papa, don't treat me like I'm an invalid," he protested right away.

"I know who you spent your night with. And I also know he left the premises several hours ago. You know I won't intrude. Let me take you someplace nice. You seem down. Have you been --"

"All right," Ruslan said a bit too brightly.

The old man didn't need to know everything, all the time. His care was a bit overbearing. Maybe it was because the old man had no children of his own. Seeing how much he showered Ruslan with his attention was making him wonder why he had never had kids. Had he ever been married? He realized he knew little about Douglas Kent.

“Have you ever thought about adopting? You know, before me.” He pushed two pills at the back of his throat and swallowed them quickly with a mouthful of water.

“Adopting?” Douglas’s voice was a bit surprised.

“Yeah, you know, kids. I bet that splitting your affection between multiple charges would have made things easier for all of them,” he joked.

“Do you think I’m suffocating you, Russy?” the old man said with tenderness.

Ruslan laughed. “I’m not really complaining. But you do like to treat me like I’m twelve. Why not take a twelve-year-old under your wing? Or more? Two or three maybe?”

“I could not care enough for one,” Douglas said wistfully.

Ruslan stopped. Ah, so there was some painful history there. He wouldn’t pry. If the old man thought him worthy of sharing such delicate family business with him, he would let him know.

“Sometimes I don’t like it that you’re all alone in that big house,” he said.

Douglas chuckled. “I should say the same thing. And why do you say I’m all alone? I have Martin.”

“Who is your butler or something. Employees don’t count,” Russy replied. “And you gave me this house so that I could be independent and all.”

“Yes, and I’m afraid I was too hasty in doing so,” Douglas said with mirth. “And Martin is not a simple employee. He is a friend.”

“Yeah, I sort of noticed,” Ruslan joked, feeling a little up to mischief. “But most people don’t let their friends have the door when someone’s ringing the bell.”

The old man always let him get away with most things, and Ruslan liked to test boundaries once in a while. Not because he wanted to be rude. But he wanted to know more about the person who was still an enigma to him, and that was the only way he could afford doing that.

For some reason, he was afraid to ask straight questions. Or maybe he feared the answers.

“Martin doesn’t mind,” Douglas replied. “He tells me that having nothing to do all day would drive him slightly mad. Plus, if he were to do nothing, we would have to hire another butler. And three would be a crowd.”

Ruslan sat comfortably, fluffing the pillow. “You two behave like you’ve been married for fifty years, I swear. Wait, do you two ... Nah, impossible.” He shook his head.

“I have no idea what your childish reasoning is trying to tell me here,” the old man said in a tone Ruslan knew too well that it meant that his papa was willing to indulge him.

“Well, you know. You two act like you’re more than just employer and employee. Seriously, if one didn’t know, they’d say you two are lovers or something. Damn, I just imagined you and Martin having sex. I think I need to cleanse that with a bunch of raunchy porn.”

Douglas laughed at the other end. “I must say that I’m a tad offended, Russy. Do you think old people don’t have sex? Or that we’ve never been young? Or is it simply imagining our old wrinkled bodies engaged in intercourse that puts you off?”

Ruslan giggled. “No, that’s not it. I hope I get to look as good as you when I grow old. Seriously, papa, I saw you two guys sparring. Are you two planning to compete for the hottest granddads of the century? None of you shows his real age. But I do imagine sex between you and Martin being awfully polite. You would even address each other properly. Something like ... *May I put it inside, sir? I should have ordered the premium lubricant, not this thing that only commoners would use. By all means, Martin, you should have placed that order. Do you think that we should postpone the intercourse, sir? Seeing that the conditions are not met, I do think so, Martin. How about next week? Next week would be perfect, sir. Should I write the date down? Certainly. And please don’t forget the premium lubricant next time.*”

Douglas laughed wholeheartedly. “That is why I only want to have you as my protégé, Russy. You always make me laugh. But, just as a curiosity. What makes you think Martin would be the active participant and not the other way around?”

Ruslan shrugged. “I don’t know. You seem the kind to be serviced. Martin is ready to do anything for you. Except for putting out, though. He almost always looks like he has just swallowed a broomstick. That said, he seems too stiff to be a bottom. With all his eagerness to please, you would still not be able to tap that ass.”

Douglas laughed again. “I will let him know you said that.”

“Ah, don’t you dare!” Ruslan protested. “He’ll slip some arsenic into my tea, I’m sure!”

“Martin loves you to death, Russy,” Douglas said.

“Yeah, exactly,” Ruslan said while grinning. “But, seriously, are you two ... you know, humping each other? I won’t judge if you are.”

“That, my boy, is a silly question.”

Of course it was silly. What was he thinking? Sometimes, he couldn’t understand how the old man was letting him get away with everything like that.

“So, where do you plan to take me out?” he asked, feeling giddy like a kid.

His papa liked to surprise him. And it was quite a strange thing, but seeing him so happy for making him happy was just ... making him feel whole. They both craved something they hadn't gotten in their lives until they had met each other.

Ruslan knew why he hadn't. He had been just an orphan for as long as he could remember, with just one friend to rely on at that time. Yanis was one hell of a friend, but otherwise, he was all alone in the world. The old man behaved as he had never truly been able to make someone happy in his life. And seeing how long Douglas had lived, that said something.

Yes, he had Martin. But they were employer and employee after all. His family was a joke. Ruslan hadn't heard one mention of a wife. And everyone around him was only waiting for Douglas Kent to die so that they could pounce on his fortune like a pack of hyenas.

Not a too cheerful perspective. And if for some reason, Douglas enjoyed treating Ruslan like his own kid, it was all that mattered.

He smiled as Douglas began talking excitedly, in his usual, subdued, dignified way, of course, about the new club where he wanted to take Ruslan. The Tylenols were starting to work. He would be all peachy for the evening out.

Johnny almost sent the speed bag flying off his hinges, as he rained his frustration over it. How the hell could he be so damn stupid? He had the chance to score, more than just once, with a guy who was everything he wanted in his life.

Hell, he was stupid. He put all his power behind the last punch and then headed for the exit. Since when he was star struck like some teenager? He had fucked the pretty man. That was enough. Should have been.

But he felt something like an itch he couldn't scratch. It was as if he could not find a place to sit or stay. Like his mind couldn't think of anything else but Ruslan Kent. Why the fuck was he worked up like that?

A hole was a hole. A body was a body. A mouth was a mouth. But, fuck, if he could take those damn blue eyes out of his head. He knew why, somewhat. Guys like Ruslan Kent were everything he wasn't and so damned out of touch. But damn, if he was one to settle for what the entire world told him he deserved. He had made a way for himself, as little as it was, with his two fists. And, for what it was, for what he was doing, it was still more honest that whatever the rich men of the world did to build their big ass fortunes.

He needed himself straightened up and fast. He had something to do. First Monday of the month. For as long as he could. Only for that, it didn't matter what he could do. It wasn't up to him. But he wasn't one to keep a grudge with the Big Guy. Not that he was a believer or anything like

that. For all the things he had no control over, there were others. Karma and shit. Most probably. Who the fuck knew?

“How’s she?” he asked gruffly, as he signed into the guest book.

The nurse pursed her wrinkled lips. “There are no changes. She’s in and out of it, like usual.”

Johnny just nodded and headed down the hallway. It felt like his shadow was taking something of the cleanliness of the place. His heavy steps broke the revered silence. Well, it was not like he wanted to be there. It was his duty.

He stopped in the door. She looked so peaceful, as she looked out the window. Her grey hair was pinned at the back with an ebonite clasp. At least, they were taking good care of her here. Washed her, dressed her, combed her hair, gave her food.

It was more than she had ever had in her life. She wasn’t even that old. But she was sitting in a wheelchair, not because she couldn’t walk, but mostly because she was so unaware of herself and everything surrounding her that she just didn’t.

“Hey, Ma,” he said, and his throat felt dry like sandpaper, each word fighting on its way upward.

The woman in the wheelchair didn’t reply. Johnny took a few timid steps inside, like his large body was clumsy and threatening to break something in the small room. Then, decided, he placed himself in front of her.

“Is school out already?” The woman looked at him now with her wistful glossy eyes that saw only what her illness chose. “Johnny, not in trouble again, are you?”

He knelt in front of her and took one of her hands into his. She didn’t object, but her hand remained limp.

“You must learn,” she continued. “Go to school, make something out of yourself. You don’t want to end up like your father,” she said sternly, but the tone of her voice didn’t come with any change in her relaxed features.

It was like she was rehearsing for a play. What the hell pills were they giving her in here? It was the best place he could afford. It was clean. Humane. That was a word Johnny didn’t know exactly what it meant. But his mom didn’t look like she was hurting. That was good, right?

For that, he was willing to pour down to the last dime into this small room where his mom could live her last years, for as long as they were going to go. Without him fearing all the time for her. That they might find her.

Somewhat, he was blaming his old man, like she was. But he wasn't even sure she was really doing that. She was stuck in some weird loop from years ago. They were from a place where if trouble didn't find you, it meant that you were just one lucky bastard.

So he had taken everything in stride, the men who had kept knocking down their door, asking about his old man, the street fights, the thieving, the means to survive.

Of course, it hadn't taken long for him to end up in some stupid mess. But he had paid for it and then walked away. Now, it was all about picking a paycheck. And the means he had chosen was as close to being honest as they could be.

But still, he couldn't stomach the kind of people that had messed up his dad and ruined his mom's life. Rich people who were rich and fat because they fed on the lives of the poor people.

That was the way the world was built. And the fact that Johnny had gotten all hot and bothered over some piece of ass wasn't going to change that.

Yeah, he was stupid. But he was his kind of stupid. He played by his rules and his rules only.

It wasn't like him to feel out of sorts for so long. Ruslan could not believe he was bothered so much. He couldn't dwell on that. His thoughts were a mess. That only meant that something had to be done.

For two days now, Snake hadn't been at the gym. He was either training at his old place, or he planned on quitting or had already quit. Ruslan's bets were all on the latter.

The cab dropped him by the place. Giving the driver a generous tip, he told the man to wait. The industrial building where Johnny's quarters were looked good enough to be dismantled and scrapped for materials. The cab driver was frowning, throwing cautious looks around. He was probably wondering what the hell a well-off man like his passenger could search for in a place like that.

Ruslan knew precisely what, or, more accurately, who. He inhaled deeply and stepped inside. From that night, he had had an idea about the outline of the place, so he didn't need a guide. There was no one tending the door, so no one to ask.

He stopped in the door to the gym, taking in the few fighters training at that hour. Johnny was grunting, hitting a heavy bag over and over.

Ruslan could have taken more time to admire him. That impressive body would look good on the posters. He had told the truth that night. Those old scars weren't grossing him out. They were part of Johnny's personal history, and they had made him who he was. This snake hadn't needed to shed his old skin to be born anew. He had just toughened.

Ignoring the few glances the other men in the room threw at him, he walked purposefully toward Johnny's stand.

"I would say you're in top shape," he commented.

Johnny turned fast on his heels. His face was all granite as he stared at Ruslan.

"You're a bit far away from home," he said and grabbed a towel to throw it over his shoulder.

Ruslan walked with him, as Johnny marched out of the room. "I'm here to ask you if our gym was not to your satisfaction," he asked.

"For real?" Johnny asked, staring Ruslan down, or better said, trying.

Ruslan sustained the angry stare. "Despite our little misunderstanding, I still think you should train at our gym," he explained.

For a second, it looked like Johnny would say something inevitably unpleasant. Ruslan was ready for that. Instead, he turned again, resuming his walk toward his room. "Is Efige so generous that lets people off the street train there?"

Ruslan sighed. "Ah. So you don't plan on coming back? I thought you needed the money."

He gasped when Johnny grabbed him and pressed him into the wall. But he didn't back away from the naked hurt in the dark eyes.

"Not everyone was born with a silver spoon in his damn mouth, like you," Johnny hissed. "And don't you worry about what I need. I can take care of myself."

Ruslan felt like laughing. So Johnny thought him to be some rich trust fund kid. Not that he needed much confirmation for that. The old man had worked hard to force the streets out of him. He dressed nicely, he talked correctly, and he behaved as he belonged by Douglas Kent's side.

But that didn't change who he was. How he had been born, probably. How he had been living until sixteen. What he had done to survive. And there was still one thing the old man could not un-teach him. Or, otherwise, he wouldn't be here.

"You're one hell of a fighter, Johnny," he said softly. "You can make a name for yourself. We would just offer you the ladder. You would be the one to climb it. No one's taking your hard work away from you."

Johnny started laughing. "Wow, you do have a way with words. It looks like your sweet lips are good at more than just one thing."

So Johnny was trying to rile him up now. Make him walk away. But this time, Ruslan was prepared.

“It’s the truth,” he said, in the same even tone. “Of course, it is your choice.”

“Nah, you don’t come with the package. So, not that much of a choice.” Johnny leaned in and then brusquely pushed himself back.

“If it’s that important, I’m still part of the deal.” Ruslan hurried after him again.

Johnny snorted. “No shit, pretty. Sorry, you’re good, but I’m not some pity fuck. Go screw guys in your own league. What’s the matter? Can’t they get it up enough? Not even for a pretty man like you? Or it’s you who can’t get off unless you get fucked by some low life like me?”

Johnny was maybe not so off the mark. This time, a small laugh escaped his lips.

“What? Did I say something funny?” the fighter looked crossly at him, as Ruslan had managed to fall in step with him.

“Not really, no. You just got some things wrong. Not all, but some.”

“Like how? You’re just a prissy prince who wants a hard dick but cannot commit to what that means. Get off your high horse, rich boy. The world might not look pretty from down here, but at least it’s real.”

Ruslan wanted to add something, but Johnny walked quickly into his room and unceremoniously shut the door in his face. All right, he wouldn’t beg. He needed to regroup and rethink. If he wanted Snake in his papa’s ring and his bed, he needed to be smarter than this.

Johnny half expected the pretty man to insist and knock on his door. But the shadow outside, interrupting the thin light line between the door and the floor, just moved away.

Great. Just as he was working the asshole out of his system, he had to come here and flaunt in front of Johnny what he couldn’t get. Not for real.

He had to keep telling himself he was not that stupid. For a second there, he had thought about dragging Ruslan inside and giving him a hard cold fuck. But no, that wouldn’t have been right.

If the pretty man wanted to show Johnny where they stood, he had made his point. No use to rile him up again. No matter how much Ruslan Kent deserved to be nailed to the bed, taken hard and then kicked out with an ass full of jizz.

Damn, they had been so damn hot together. Johnny stepped into the cramped shower. No Ritz here. No bathtub the size of the shitty bathroom. That was his world.

And Ruslan Kent better stay away, he thought, as the lukewarm water began slushing down his body. Better stay away, or he would get it real bad.

Plus, Ruslan had plenty of other guys to screw around with. A body like that? A face like that? And daddy's money? He could hire the top shelf type of escort every night.

Yet, he had come for Snake, the low life fighter. He had come even after they had fallen out. Just because his papa wanted Snake in his ring?

Nah, he was getting stupid again. Did he want that much for a rich boy like Ruslan to like him? Like really like him?

No way that could be. Ruslan was just pissed over Snake telling him 'no'.

And Johnny was pissed for not having said 'yes' to whatever Ruslan was offering.

He wouldn't walk away, he decided. No, even if he was shooting for the stars, it was his right to fly high, break his wings, and then fall and break his back, too. But hell if he wasn't going to fight for what he wanted.

Ruslan Kent better not fuck some other dude. Johnny 'Snake' Bryne was still in the cards, and he was all in, until the final round.

The anger from earlier was leaving his body with the suds of soap, down the drain. It had to be the right decision. He could not care less if Ruslan only wanted to play around.

"Why the fuck are you this pissed?" Yanis looked at him as he took some folders from his desk drawer and slammed them on the shiny lacquered surface. "I thought you were now getting enough on the regular."

"Don't remind me," Ruslan rolled his eyes.

His efforts of putting Snake out of his mind had proven useless. Apparently, he was that much of a whore, after all. He stopped from fiddling with the papers. The solution was right in front of him.

"How about we go together somewhere we can relax?" he said, giving up on finding the file that seemed to have magically disappeared.

Yanis grinned at him. "Which one you want? Stiff drink? Stiff dick? Or both?" His friend wiggled his eyebrows at him.

"I think both," Ruslan replied.

That's what he liked about him and Yanis. They didn't need that many words between them. They found the same convenience and assurance in each other as they have always had. And there were no strings attached.

“No plans with the missus tonight?” Ruslan asked.

Yanis waved one hand like he was fed up with everything.

“C’mon, man, Anya’s good for you. Maybe too good,” he added with a small laugh.

“I thought you wanted to fuck tonight. It looks to me like you better see me out the door.”

“Let’s just get smashed then. We’ll see where we go from there.”

Yanis stood up and came behind the desk, next to him.

“Are you going to make doe eyes at me?” Ruslan joked.

“Nah, I’m just trying to figure out if you’re lying. Because, man, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this pissed.”

Ruslan pretended to laugh. “It looks to me like you don’t know me that well.”

“Yeah, maybe. Who the hell knows what happens in other people’s heads?” Yanis shrugged.

“Damn, Anya’s really giving you a run for your money.” It was Ruslan’s turn to snicker. “What did she do that you’re suddenly so philosophical about humankind?”

Yanis grimaced and frowned. “She wants a ring, man.”

“So, what’s the problem? Only I give you enough money each month for you to care naught about putting food on the table. Not to count your side gigs. You don’t gamble, and you don’t do other stupid shit, as far as I know. So I assume you have enough money for a ring.”

Yanis made a face that Ruslan couldn’t stop from laughing in his face.

“Do you still want my dick?” Yanis grinned, too, a sign that he didn’t take to heart all that teasing over his domestic problems. “Because running your mouth about me getting hitched will only make me limp.”

Ruslan waved. “All right, all right. I’m just saying. You should take her up on the offer.”

“Seriously?” Yanis eyed him carefully. “And where would that leave you?”

Ruslan opened his mouth and closed it. That was a question he hadn’t expected.

The door to Ruslan’s office was not kept by some secretary, but by a huge ass bouncer, and Johnny knew that well. So he entered the hallway moving quickly on his feet and with a worried expression on his face.

“Hey, man,” he said to the bouncer, “there’s some shit going on in the roulette room, or something. It looks like they need more hands on deck.”

The overpaid gorilla looked at him, and his face must have been pretty convincing because the man walked away almost running. It was probably because the guy had seen him before, so he was perhaps not a threat to the boss’s son.

He didn’t even knock. This wasn’t, after all, about playing nice. And Ruslan Kent had to get that through his pretty head once and for all.

“What the fuck?”

Those words weren’t exactly his idea for a welcome, and the fact that there was someone else there to say them, not Ruslan, was even more of a nasty surprise. He was already in the middle of the room, and what he saw was pissing him off.

Some low life character was all over the pretty man. It hadn’t taken Ruslan much to find some willing dick. Not that he was surprised at that. But he wouldn’t back down, so he pushed the door behind him, making it rattle in its hinges.

“Snake, man,” Ruslan said. “How did you get inside? I --”

“We have to talk,” Johnny said, gesturing with one hand. “Just you and me,” he added, looking at the other guest.

He hoped his eyes were telling the other to piss off more than any words could.

“Rain check?” Ruslan patted the guest’s shoulder with familiarity Johnny didn’t like.

“Seriously? For this guy?” the other said roughly and moved aside just so that he could show off a little.

Okay, so the fucker wasn’t some skinny asshole. He packed some heat under that ugly as shit flowery shirt. Where could have Ruslan picked up this dude? He looked rough, with his one-day stubble and eyes shining like a devil’s.

“Yeah, sorry.” Ruslan grabbed the guy by one shoulder and made him look at him. “Talk to you later. You don’t have plans to go out of town this week, do you?”

The asshole grinned. “I might buy a ring.”

Johnny frowned. What kind of fucking joke was that? What did a ring have to do with anything? To piss him even more, Ruslan laughed, and the other embraced him.

“Let me know if you do.” Ruslan embraced the man back. “We would really have to celebrate.”

“Sure thing,” the guest replied and made Ruslan bend awkwardly in a tango-like pose, making him laugh almost hysterically.

The asshole raised his eyes to look at Johnny and grinned. Then, just like that, he kissed Ruslan loudly. This time, though, the pretty man pushed him away.

“Seriously, Yanis,” Ruslan wagged the finger.

“Hmm-hmm,” was the only reply. “See you, love,” Yanis added and began marching toward the door.

And didn’t stop from brushing against Johnny’s shoulder on his way out. Johnny wouldn’t let that slide, so he grabbed the asshole by his shirt. He would meet either the door or a wall with his ugly mug.

“C’mon,” Yanis challenged him, “let me see what you got.”

The hands wrapping around his wrists were callous and strong. So he thought himself some big shot. He was in for some rude awakening because Johnny always won.

“Guys, guys.” Ruslan reached them in two steps and pushed them away from one another. “This is not the place or time for some pissing contest.”

Despite Ruslan’s efforts, Johnny still had his hands on his shirt, and it didn’t look like the asshole wanted to let go, either. All right, so he would be a gentleman this time around. He pushed Yanis away, and the grip on his wrists eased and dropped altogether.

Ruslan exhaled. “Thank you. Come on, Yanis, go.”

Yanis pointed at Johnny. “Are you sure? This asshole looks like he’s looking for trouble.”

“No, he’s not.”

Ruslan had said the words so fast he hadn’t had the time to give the little shit a piece of his mind. He was about to when Ruslan put a hand on his chest and rested the other on his shoulder. Pretty blue eyes stared up at him. He didn’t need any words to know what was happening.

Johnny could have played the stupid ape part. Pretend he didn’t get it. But Ruslan begged too nicely with those eyes.

“Ah, man, so he’s allowed to make doe eyes at you?” Yanis complained.

“Who the fuck is making doe eyes?” Johnny asked gruffly.

He was getting fucking soft and all because of a pair of beautiful blue eyes and a tight ass hungry as fuck for his low life fighter's cock. Eh, he would let this one pass. He and the other guy? They would meet again. And then Johnny would show the asshole who was top dog.

"Yes, he is allowed," Ruslan replied and let go of Johnny so that he could push the asshole out the door.

The bouncer was on the other side, breathing heavily like he had been running.

"Boss, did someone interrupt your meeting?" the man asked.

"It's okay." Ruslan waved, blocking the view as much as he could.

It was clear as day that the bouncer was looking for him with his eyes. They found him, and he wanted to say something, but Ruslan managed somehow to push both the guest and his bodyguard out and close the door.

"So," Ruslan's eyes squared in him, and this time, they weren't begging, "you barge in here, somehow you manage to get rid of the man in front of my door, and basically cockblock me. This better be good."

Johnny took in Ruslan's perfect clothes. He had good taste. The money, too. But Johnny knew that taste was not something money could always buy. That much he knew. His mom had had something to do with that, teaching him a lot of things and wanting to see him more than just an asshole beating the crap out of other assholes.

But he wasn't there to think about his mom. "I came to tell you that I want that deal."

"Hmm." Ruslan began moving. "Are you serious this time? Because you don't look like you are. I thought your position was clear."

Johnny followed him, just one step behind.

"I wanted to say sorry. I'm sorry, okay? I'm not good at this. But I'm damned sorry."

His voice sounded nothing like he was apologizing, but, hell, he needed to say it. And, also, to show this pretty man how serious he was about this.

"What exactly are you sorry for, Snake?" Ruslan asked and turned to face him.

"For saying those stupid words. I'm stupid, okay?"

Ruslan sighed. "Okay. You're back on the tournament. You weren't away enough to cause a disruption. Feel free to train where you wish. Anything else you want?"

Johnny frowned. What the fuck? He had said the words. Admitted to how stupid he was. And Ruslan still thought it was because of that stupid tournament?

“Yeah,” he said and backed Ruslan into the wall behind him. “You.”

Ruslan did a good job pretending he wasn't impressed by Johnny's clearly superior strength. But his breath was deepening, coming in short. Yeah, sweet lips could run his mouth all he wanted. He was after the same thing.

“What about me?” The words came out as a sexy drawl.

Johnny leaned in. Damn, the pretty man smelled nice. Their noses touched, and Ruslan snickered. All right, it was time to shut him up. The soft lips opened wide from the first attack and Johnny pushed his tongue deep. Ruslan was sucking on it, making all kinds of noises, using his own tongue to push into Johnny's mouth, too.

Without even looking, Johnny maneuvered him until they stopped against the desk. It took him just one sweep of the hand to make all the papers fly and land on the floor. Other stuff that was there followed.

He bet the pretty man had a maid to clean that up. Hiking him up by his hips, he helped him with his ass on the desk. At the same time, he began pulling at Ruslan's waistcoat. That was the easy part. The shirt was a different thing. His fingers caught in a stubborn button and, with a low growl, he tore the fabric.

“Wow,” Ruslan commented, but he was busy, too, pushing Johnny's t-shirt up, and feeling up the muscles underneath.

He could not believe himself sometimes. It was enough for this man to put his hands on him, and he was going down like that. He was a whore, that much he knew, but never before had he folded and laid himself, legs open, like that.

Usually, he was in control. This situation was making him vulnerable, and it was pretty strange that Snake, of all people, some good for nothing fighter, as the old man had labeled him, was making him squirm and ask for it like that.

It was impossible to think, nonetheless. The tongue in his mouth was short-circuiting his brain, and the hands searching and probing him anywhere were igniting his desire as pure fuel poured over a fire.

If Snake tore his pants, too, he would be pissed. So he got busy himself to undress the bottom part of his body, which, in itself, proved difficult, with those impatient hands all over him, now sneaking between his legs and reaching for the prize.

Ruslan almost banged his head against the desk, as Snake pushed him back, and wrapped one hand around his cock, while quick fingers reached for his backdoor. The hand getting busy with his ass stopped for a second, and the next, he heard Johnny spit.

He shivered. So it would be a bit rough. He didn't mind. His breath stopped for a second, as Johnny moved around, and there was soon the pleasant sensation of a tongue in his ass.

"Hold your legs like this," Johnny ordered quickly, "'cause I need to eat this hole."

His usual trysts weren't particular about rimming him, and Ruslan, for the lack of it, loved it. He bit into one hand to stop himself from moaning like a bitch in heat, as Johnny worked his hole nicely. He had a way to eat ass that had to be written in books or something. After a few minutes, Ruslan was a quivering mess, and he needed something more. Bigger. Longer. Thicker.

"Fuck, you really like this," he whispered. "Are you going to fuck me already?"

"Already," Johnny said amused and stood up.

Ruslan eyed with a not so familiar tad of unease, the angry looking cock directed straight at him. Johnny used more of his saliva to make himself slick and pushed his cock at the right angle.

All his nerve endings tingled as Johnny's cock tip touched his entrance. There was no way he was stretched enough, and hell, it would hurt, but, just the same, he would lose himself in the sensation, and live with it, because that was what he wanted, he truly, truly wanted.

"Ah, damn, so fucking tight," Johnny commended him, postponing the penetration, and just teasing the sensitive skin.

Ruslan scowled. "How can you tell? You're not even inside."

"Shut up, pretty. You don't know what you need."

"Seriously? I don't?" Ruslan pushed himself on his elbows, to stare at him.

He loved Johnny's eyes, he noted, not because they were dark like sin, and tempting just as much, but because the guy was looking at him, really looking at him. Like Johnny wanted to reach inside his soul.

"What?" he asked, unnerved by the silence, and the way Johnny was still using his cock to draw small circles around the waiting orifice, without going in.

His throat was dry. Was this a good idea, after all? A small push and Johnny stopped, their eyes still connected.

"I'll take you easy," Johnny said. "I'm big, and your hole is tight as fuck."

“Oh, please,” Ruslan rolled his eyes. “I can handle it. You know I can.”

Johnny shook his head and grabbed one of Ruslan’s legs. He sank his teeth in the sensitive flesh of the inside thigh, making Ruslan gasp.

“What the hell, dude?” Ruslan protested. “You’re going to leave a mark.”

“Counting on it.” Johnny grinned and pushed slowly again.

“Ah, damn.” Ruslan let his head down, with a resigned sigh. “This is going to take all day. FYI, I should leave work in about one hour or so.”

“That’s plenty of time,” Johnny said.

Another fraction of an inch. Johnny was going to drive him nuts. His cock twitched in sympathy with his frustration.

“How can this be what I need?” Ruslan complained. “Just give me your big fat cock already. Here.” He moved so he could reach one of Johnny’s hips with one hand, to make his intentions known.

Johnny grabbed his hand and, as he pushed it away, he leaned over Ruslan, his breath hot. Ruslan made a small annoyed sound as his wrist was held tightly and pressed into the desk. But he had no time to protest again, because Johnny kissed him, and with that, most of his dick pushed inside.

He squirmed, the stretching almost unbearable. Johnny deftly reached for his other hand, and now he was held wrists above the head, utterly powerless, while the hot spear in his ass was moving, giving him now what he truly wanted.

Ruslan wanted to groan and moan like an animal, fed up with keeping it in, as the sensation in his ass grew in intensity. Johnny knew how to move, how to fuck, an expert indeed in giving a bottom like Ruslan what he wanted. Johnny was still kissing him, coming to him like a wall of muscles, keeping him in place while Ruslan could feel his insides turning to mush.

Johnny’s tight abs were rubbing his dick in passing, and it wasn’t enough, so he tried to pull at least one hand free. Johnny pushed himself up, finally releasing him, and, with desperation, Ruslan grabbed his cock to pump it hard.

“Look at me, pretty,” Johnny said. “C’mon, bite your lips, show me how much you want my cock.”

“Fuck, Snake,” Ruslan murmured.

Usually, he would have found the sex talk a bit awkward. But, somehow, Johnny was making everything right.

“No, not Snake. Johnny. For you, always Johnny,” he said, and Ruslan threw his head back.

Johnny was increasing the rhythm now, pounding him hard, and when he came, he had to swear that he could not remember to have come with that kind of intensity in a long time. It compared, maybe, with his other times with Johnny, but, still, there was something else there, and he kept himself there, chasing that feeling, that sensation, as his body jerked shortly, a few more times.

“Only one time now, sugar,” Johnny cooed, “’cause I’m a man, too.”

Ruslan didn’t mind. Hell, he had no idea whether he could be ready again, which was strange. Johnny was working his ass hard now, in short, powerful thrusts, and he would have wanted to get hard, but he couldn’t, and it was just so totally fine, that he couldn’t care less.

His ass twitched as Johnny came. When he pulled out, Ruslan felt the jizz gushing out. He reached his asshole with one hand, playing with it.

“Wow, someone was locked and loaded,” he joked.

Johnny grinned and played with Ruslan’s drying semen. “No shit.”

He helped him off the desk, and Ruslan winced and rubbed his lower back.

“Doing it on a table must be so overrated,” he said with mirth.

Johnny pulled him close. “So, we have a deal?”

“What was it, again?” Ruslan asked.

“Don’t tell me I really fucked your brains out,” Johnny joked.

Ruslan punched against Johnny’s chest weakly. “All right. My ass is yours while the tournament happens,” he said, burying his head into Johnny’s sweaty chest. “On weekends,” he added.

“Nah, not just on weekends,” Johnny said. “You’re my main squeeze, remember?”

Ruslan laughed. “Ah, damn, you’re a riot.”

“Laugh all you want. I won’t let you run around. Especially not with that kind of asshole.”

“Yanis?” Ruslan asked although he had witnessed enough to know those two men were going to have a hard time liking each other. Yanis could be such an ass when he wanted. He had riled up Johnny, knowing well what that meant.

“Whatever the asshole’s name is,” Johnny replied. “I don’t want you near him. Especially near his dick. I don’t know what he told you, but I bet he has a tiny dick.”

Ruslan laughed. “Gosh, you sound like papa. Yanis is an old friend. Don’t get worked up over him. He just loves to get on people’s nerves, that’s all.”

“Friend? How can you have that kind of friends? I bet your old man doesn’t like it.”

Ruslan shrugged. “That’s okay. He doesn’t have to. I can deal with papa, and, I can deal with you,” he said as he pushed one finger against Johnny’s chest.

“Okay, but don’t go fucking your friends around,” Johnny said gruffly.

“With all the action from your cock? I suppose I can keep from doing that,” Ruslan teased.

Rough fingers caught his chin and made Ruslan look up. The dark eyes were serious now. “I’ll screw you. I’ll give you what you need, okay?”

“Wow, we’ve only met, and you’re so full of yourself.” Ruslan tried to shake off the hypnotic gaze. “You really think you know what I want.”

“I do,” Johnny said solemnly. “You want to be treated right. Fucked into the next day, but treated right. And I’ll do that. I’ll keep you damn satisfied. If you get horny at two o’clock in the morning, call me. I’ll come and make sure you call in sick the next day.”

“Wow, that doesn’t exactly sound like gentle loving,” Ruslan said.

“Ah, pretty, you won’t call in sick ‘cause I ruined your ass. You’ll do that because you won’t want to leave the bed. You’d just be wanting another round, that’s all.”

Ruslan rolled his eyes. “Oh, seriously.”

Johnny kissed him, keeping his head with one hand, and brushing his lips over him, just like in the frigging movies. Ruslan hoped he wasn’t lifting one foot, like some heroine from a fifties movie.

Chapter Seven – My Favorite Fighter

Ruslan was watching, barely hiding his excitement and satisfaction. Johnny was a beast in the cage, and he knew how to throw a good show, too. From the corner of his eyes, he tried to gauge the old man's reactions, as well. For some reason now, he really wanted his papa to accept Snake. Never before had he cared for the man who had taken him under his protective wing to like the men he took to bed. Most of them, the old man hadn't known. But right now, he wanted so much for Douglas Kent to be impressed with Johnny 'Snake' Bryne, to the point that he wouldn't be against his adoptive son being together with the guy.

Was that really what they were? Together? The word sounded nice. But Ruslan was not the kind to believe in fairytales. Except for that time when Douglas had saved him and Yanis, he had a hard time believing in miracles. And since one had already happened, he wasn't expecting a second one. No, he and Johnny were nothing but fantastic bedfellows, nothing more. And it wouldn't last.

Despite all that, he wanted his papa to like Snake, and that was something he could not get out of his head. No longer in the mood to wait for the verdict, he started talking. "What do you think?" he asked.

Douglas moved his eyes from the ring below to him. "He has talent, without a doubt. And strength. Still, he likes dragging matches a bit too much."

Ruslan frowned. "I think it's good that he knows how to put on a good show. That makes people come. It sells tickets, right? I thought we were looking at ways to make a profit, here."

His papa chuckled softly. "Did I trespass, by saying something is not oh-so-amazing about this man you seem to like so much?" he asked. "I'm only trying to say that it wouldn't hurt for him to get a proper trainer."

"Ah." Ruslan eased back into his upholstered chair. Funny how tense he was. "But not right now. It wouldn't be fair to the others if we lent a helping hand, favoring one of them."

Douglas nodded. "Of course," he said. "But I thought you wanted him to win."

"By himself," Ruslan replied. "I'm sure he wouldn't have it any other way, either."

"And I'm glad to see that you have a strong sense of justice. Could it be that you're not that blinded by this love affair, after all?" the old man questioned.

"Love affair?" Ruslan snorted, trying to ignore the small fire kindled in his chest by those words. "I told you, it's just plain old ... you know."

Douglas laughed. "I know. By the way, I told Martin you find him too stiff. He says that he will try to be, well, less stiff. But he also begs you to have patience with an old butler who is maybe a bit too set in his ways."

Ruslan's eyes grew wide, and, for a second, they left Johnny. His lover was slicing his way through another victory and his opponent alike in the cage below, with jabs and mean hooks.

"I can't believe you told Martin that!" he protested. "I hope you didn't tell him everything!" His eyes thinned as he looked at his papa.

"By everything, do you mean your theories concerning a certain kind of interactions between Martin and me?"

"Yeah, that is what I mean!" Ruslan replied

A new collective cheer from the audience drew his attention.

This time, he got up and sat close to the large window, setting his eyes on Johnny. Damn, just looking at that strong chest, glistening with sweat, was making him weak at the knees. From the day when Johnny had taken him over the desk in his office, they had only talked on the phone. And he knew enough not to ask for Johnny to get together when important fights were ahead. He could not be that selfish.

Plus, when Snake signed with them, there would be plenty of time for them to screw around. Until they burned to the bone or got bored with one another. He wanted neither to happen. What he wanted was to feel Johnny's skin against his, his hard cock against his ass, ready for action.

He was wide-eyed dreaming.

"Russy," Douglas called for him. "I must say that I'm impressed with Snake. Since my golden boy is ready to go out the door with such a troublesome guy, I must ask. What's so special about him?"

"Everything," Ruslan said, a bit too dramatically to be taken seriously, and then he started laughing. "C'mon, papa, you really want me to say it? I'm young. I'm horny. And Snake's the same. Does it really surprise you that we fit so well?"

The old man sighed, but Ruslan knew his papa wasn't that upset over him being so much taken with that bawdy fighter.

"I know it must be more than that. I just told you the most outrageous truth about Martin and me, and you didn't bat an eye. You were too busy watching your lover scoring another win. For you."

Ruslan turned. "What outrageous truth?"

He still kept his hands on the glass, like a kid in front of his favorite toy store. A small shiver, like pleasure and pain combined, coursed down his spine at hearing his papa calling Snake his lover.

Douglas chuckled. “Well, you missed your chance to hear it. I’m at peace with my conscience. Now you should know everything.”

Ruslan hurried by Douglas’s chair, with excitement written all over his face. “No way! You two really are lovers!” he exclaimed.

His papa stared at him and pursed his lips. “You haven’t heard a word I said.”

“I don’t have to hear anything.” Ruslan’s smile grew wide. “I just know.”

“And here is how your imagination is running away with you again. I said nothing of the kind.” Douglas began caressing Ruslan’s head.

Ruslan pouted. “You’re playing with me. Now I’m sure you didn’t say anything.”

“Do I have the habit to lie to you, Russy?”

He pondered a little. “You don’t? That’s what you’re trying to say? Then why me?”

“Why you?” The old man looked at him with kind eyes. “What do you mean?”

Ruslan knelt by the chair, pushing his head into the warm hand to be caressed a little more, like a kitten. “You saved me. From that place, that time. Why me?”

“I took both you and Yanis out of that place,” Douglas pointed out. “Not just you. And what makes you think I have never saved, as you say, other people?”

“You’re dodging the question.” Ruslan glared and stopped pushing his head into the old man’s hand. “You always do that. I think you do that so that you can say you never lie.”

Douglas laughed again, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes growing deeper for a few seconds. Ruslan placed one hand on his papa’s face and caressed it reverently.

“When I will have all the correct answers to all your questions, I will not hesitate to share them with you. In the meantime, just know this, Russy. I love you as much as I would have if you had been blood of my blood.”

Ruslan brushed the tip of his nose and stood up, walking toward the window again. He didn’t want to show the old man how much he was affected by words like those. And his adoptive father was always getting troubled if he saw Ruslan affected by something. The least he could do was to show the courtesy of not bothering him with trifle things.

Yet, he felt compelled to say, as he rested his forehead against the cool glass. "I love you just the same, papa."

And this time, his eyes were no longer searching for the man in the ring. He could not have seen anything if you wanted to. So he blinked, and blinked, until the moisture went away, letting him see clearly ahead once again.

"I should go grab Johnny," he said quickly. "I'm taking him home with me so that you know."

Douglas gestured for him to get close. "Give me a kiss, first."

He kissed his papa on both cheeks and held him close a little. All right, so he needed to rein in his emotions a bit more. No point in making Douglas worry over him. "I'll be fine, papa. With Johnny and everything. I know how to take care of myself."

"I trust you, Russy. It's the other guys I don't trust," Douglas said, smiling, and caressing Ruslan's cheek gently. "One of them will want to snatch you away from me one day."

Ruslan giggled. "You worry too much. No one's snatching me. You'll always be my papa."

"Promise?" Douglas insisted.

Ruslan eyed him with a bit of unease. "Of course I promise. And what's with you, so emotional tonight?"

He was actually the one who was emotional, but it was easy to blame it on his papa. Way easier.

"Go have fun, Russy. Don't forget to call me tomorrow. If you don't, I will," the old man wagged the finger at him. "And you know how I hate to interrupt you when you're having fun with other men. No matter how jealous that makes me feel," he joked.

Ruslan laughed out loud, this time around. The old man was funny like that sometimes. Almost a little too possessive. But not like a lover. That was not it. Probably like a parent with an only child. Ruslan couldn't know such a thing since he had never known his parents. But he knew that Douglas was trying to fill that void left by the two unknown people from whose union in flesh and blood he had been brought into the world.

"Hey, you know I could have gone down with that for you. Even offered. But you said 'no'."

Anyone overhearing them talking like that would have been quick to judge. It was the kind of joke only the two of them could share.

"How could I have said 'yes' to a boy still wet behind the ears?" Douglas Kent shook his head. "Seeing that I have been married for the last thirty-five years or so to Martin. You know, a man my age, who knows well his way around," he added, as his lips twitched in amusement.

Was it a tinge of longing in Douglas's eyes right now? Ruslan wondered. No, he just liked to joke. Maybe a little too much when they were together. Ruslan could not always tell when Douglas was serious and when he wasn't. Like right now.

Johnny barely managed to walk around the corner when someone almost crashed into him. He was about to grab the guy and straighten him up when he noticed who it was. With a grin, he eased against the wall, allowing the other to attack him.

Ruslan's lips were hot on his. He seemed not to care squat about being seen assaulting another man in the hallway. Johnny grabbed a handful of Ruslan's golden hair, enjoying how soft it felt, and how easy it was to wrap his fingers through. Damn, he was a sex bomb. They were practically dry humping for all the world to see.

He took his time, nonetheless, to explore Ruslan's mouth with his tongue, and allowed the other to do the same. Everything was sweet and spicy about him. Especially his tongue which he knew well how to use. Johnny could stand there forever and drink from his mouth. He was getting hard, so he pulled Ruslan closer, groaning into their kiss.

It was nice to rub his hard cock directly into another tented crotch. Yeah, he was hard, too. Ruslan was a tad shorter than him but had long legs so that their erections could duel through their clothes.

But the hallway was not exactly the best place to get freaky. So, with all the regret of leaving along that sweet mouth, for now, he needed to put a stop to their kiss. "I need to shower," he mumbled, as his thumbs mapped Ruslan's jawline slowly. "Then I'm all yours, pretty."

"Don't shower," Ruslan said hotly and nipped at Johnny's lips as if he wanted to snack on them. "I want to feel your smell when we fuck."

"You sure?" Johnny laughed. "I won't stop once I start. If I'm inside you, nothing can, and you should know by now. Not even if you beg me to let you 'cause I smell like an animal."

"Stop underestimating me," Ruslan whispered and sneaked both hands under Johnny's t-shirt.

And inhaled deeply, pushing his nose into the crook of Johnny's shoulder.

"Ah, damn." Ruslan threw his head back a little, with a seductive look in his eyes. "I feel like I want to lick you all over."

Johnny laughed. "Hey, that's my line. Come on, pretty. Let's go to that crib of yours, and I'll do as you want."

"Promise?" Ruslan's smile widened.

“Scout’s honor,” Johnny replied, faking seriousness, despite his lips stretching into a smile, too.

Ruslan guffawed. “Don’t tell me you were. A boy scout, I mean. You don’t seem like the type.”

“Good. ‘Cause I’ve never been a goody two shoes, and I’m not going to start now.”

“Aww, so you want to be a bad boy?” Ruslan pressed his fingers against Johnny’s cheeks, ready to pinch them.

“You can bet your sweet ass that’s what I am.” Johnny shook away the touch and pulled Ruslan close again.

“And I’m counting on it.” Ruslan stuck out his tongue and licked Johnny’s lips playfully.

“Enough or I’ll end up pounding your ass right here. I have a feeling your old man is not going to like it. And then, who knows? He might want to ground you.”

“Ha, ha,” Ruslan said dryly. “Why does everyone think I’m a kid?”

“A kid? Nah.” Johnny shook his head. “But you know. You do look like you need to be protected. Precious, you know?”

Ruslan snorted. “I’m twenty-four years old. Not some ingénue in need of rescuing and protecting. And told you, I have been plenty around the block.”

“So? How does any of that say that you don’t need protection?”

“I thought it was self-explanatory. Now let’s go. I want to get you into bed and show you why I’m not that ... precious,” Ruslan said with a small laugh.

Johnny laughed, too. “Ah, man, and I wanted to cuddle.”

“We’ll cuddle. After,” Ruslan said shortly and began dragging Johnny away. “Don’t tell me you’re tired?” He threw a flirtatious smile over his shoulder along with that question.

Johnny let himself carried away like that. He knew he could stop Ruslan at any point, just by deciding to pull him into his arms. But he wouldn’t do that, or they would end up fucking in the hallway. And he wanted Ruslan in a bed, not like that.

Despite anything Ruslan was running his mouth about, he was precious. And Johnny had no troubles with that. If anything, he wanted to spoil him rotten, too. He kind of got Ruslan’s old man. Ruslan must have been such a beautiful kid, with those deep blue eyes, and golden hair. The kind to make all the parents who had seen him wish to have a baby just like him.

He must have looked like his mother. What a woman that had to be, Johnny thought. Probably so stunning that she could turn heads everywhere she went. Some supermodel. Ruslan's old man looked like he had the dough to buy a beauty like that for a trophy wife.

"Hey," he called. "I looked up to see you and you were gone from that window. You know, after I won. Were you sure I was going to win or were you afraid to look?" he snickered at his own joke.

Ruslan threw him a bit of an odd look. "I was just talking to papa. And I did see you win. Sorry, I didn't watch you boast. But you can boast all night long if you want."

"Once I'm in your bed, I won't do anything except nail you hard. I won't have time to boast."

"Great," Ruslan grinned happily. "Now let me whisk you away to my lair."

Johnny wouldn't say 'no' to that. And he would show Ruslan just how precious he truly was.

"Ah, hmm." Ruslan hummed in pleasure as Johnny went deep, pushing his legs apart.

Damn, Snake's technique was flawless. It was driving him mad. Usually, taking such length and girth was making Ruslan feel uncomfortable, and that was an understatement. As much as he loved big dicks, his body was not exactly quick to adjust.

But Johnny knew what to do with his big cock. First, he had taken his time, sucking Ruslan's balls, then making love to his ass, and then engulfing the hard cock in his mouth, and pleasuring his bed partner like that until Ruslan couldn't take it anymore and came.

Now, Ruslan was safely pinned to the bed, with a hot and hard rod in his ass. And Johnny was moving slowly, giving him enough time to accommodate and open. Ruslan loved how their bodies were moving in synch, and the fact that they were close in height helped. Johnny was definitely larger in frame, hovering over him, but they fit like two halves of the same whole.

Ruslan wrapped his legs around him. He shuddered as Snake reached his prostate with pinpoint accuracy, helped by the angle of penetration. As he moaned his pleasure, Ruslan moved his head around, settling for keeping it to one side. And then, he sank his teeth into one of Johnny's shoulders and licked the salty skin to make it all better.

Johnny had listened to him and hadn't showered. So now Ruslan could bask into his natural scent. He was not particular to his bed partners' smell, and he preferred them freshly washed if possible, but Johnny was different. They were compatible as far as their scents were concerned. Johnny had said as much as he had licked Ruslan's fresh sweat off his neck while going through the exertion of stretching his bed partner on his hot pole.

They were going at it so slowly it didn't hurt at all. Johnny was moving his hips and kissed him every once in a while. He had expected a bit of rough, with Johnny's excitement over his latest win, but it looked like he had no troubles reining in his emotions. He was quite good at taking Ruslan slowly, letting him grow accustomed to how their bodies melded, so perfectly.

He would have been a liar to say that he didn't like it. His sexual trysts weren't, usually, so thoughtful. Even when he was with Yanis. Ruslan pushed the thought away. He wouldn't think of his best friend while being so carefully and thoroughly fucked into the mattress by another.

No, made love to. That was, indeed, the right word. There hadn't been much lovemaking in his personal history. He cared about fucking, and this was so different from his expectations, and his experiences, that he had no idea where to put it.

Johnny 'Snake' Bryne was in a league of his own. Ruslan was happy to put him on his personal map like that. He hoped he would enjoy his muscular body, skillful lovemaking, and dizzying smell for a while, at least.

So he was enjoying everything he was given to the max.

"Damn, pretty, you squeeze me so good," Johnny whispered and bit Ruslan's bottom lip, enough to make his bed partner shiver. "Can I retire in your ass? 'Cause I don't want to be anywhere else."

"Aren't you a bit too young to retire?" Ruslan gasped, and moaned, as Johnny was beginning to pick up the speed now.

"I could be convinced to throw in the towel," Johnny joked.

"Let no one know you just said that." Ruslan bit Johnny's lips in turn, and snickered.

"I won't," Johnny promised.

Ruslan pulled Johnny so close he was almost crushing him. But he loved that sensation of being full where he felt empty. It wasn't about a physical reaction. Not anymore. The thought was almost scaring him. Almost. He was ready to welcome that, just like the small shiver making goosebumps rise all over his skin when his papa called Snake his lover.

Lover. Johnny knew how to make love. It was such an odd thing to think about. But it felt right. Johnny was making love, not only to him but for him. And the realization hit him right into the solar plexus like a punch well aimed.

Maybe it was only because his bed partners were never this considerate, this passionate. By how rough Johnny was, he had expected to be taken fast and hard. But over and over again, Johnny was just proving him wrong.

What was with him? The endorphins flooding his brain, climax after climax, with each encounter with this man, were making a mess out of him. He pushed his legs up more, wanting more of Johnny inside him. It was nothing but pleasure.

Ruslan was famished for it. If he could, he would keep Johnny forever there, screwed deep inside his body, and lose himself. "So good," he let out breathily, as Johnny began moving faster and faster.

"Down from three, pretty?" Johnny whispered into his ear.

"What?" he mumbled.

Johnny caressed his ear with his lips. "Let's go together, I feel so damn close."

Johnny surely deserved his nickname. Not only because of the explosiveness of his attacks in the cage. But because he was the embodiment of temptation for Ruslan right now, and he was more than willing to take a full bite out of that apple. "Three?" he said, a bit unsure, but focusing on the sensations threatening to overcome him.

Johnny pushed so hard and fast inside him that he almost came.

"Two," he said with more determination, voicing the reverse countdown.

By how frantic Johnny moved inside him, they would both become mad if they tried to last longer than that.

"One!" He shouted and threw his head back into the pillows.

His gasps and moans mingled with Johnny's grunts, as they both reached the finish line.

Johnny's head dropped heavy on Ruslan's shoulder. Too busy breathing, he forgot what he was thinking about. He wasn't one for big words. But Johnny was giving him earth shattering orgasms.

He chuckled to himself. "Earthquake," he whispered.

"Hmm?" Johnny rubbed his head against the crook of Ruslan's shoulder.

"Nothing. I was just thinking of a more befitting nickname for my favorite fighter," Ruslan said.

Johnny pushed himself up just to look at him. "Who's that?" he asked.

Ruslan pursed his lips to stop himself from laughing. Johnny was throwing him a lopsided grin. He just loved to hear Ruslan's admission that he liked him.

Ruslan shrugged and played along while caressing Johnny's shoulders slowly. "Just a guy."

“Hmm, Earthquake, you say? So the guy must be massive,” Johnny seemed to ponder. “Like a super heavyweight or something. What do you like about him anyway? I bet he’s counting on nothing but his strength. No art in him whatsoever.”

“Oh, he has plenty of that, I can assure you,” Ruslan teased. “He is quite capable. Good with his hands. He knows how to use his legs, too. Plenty of bodywork in his technique, I assure you,” he continued, dragging one finger over Johnny’s shoulder.

“Hmm. He better not come around when I’m here, though. Earthquake or not, I’ll kick his ass out the door.”

Ruslan snickered. “Oh, so you plan on leaving early?”

Johnny pushed his fingers through Ruslan’s hair and looked him straight in the eye. “Say it, pretty,” he whispered.

Ruslan exhaled slowly. He could feel Johnny’s body, so heavy on top of him. So good. “You’re my favorite fighter, Johnny,” he said and pulled him closer for a long, deep kiss.

You’re my favorite, too, Johnny wanted to say. But Ruslan was keen on kissing him, and he wouldn’t let that pass for the sake of conversation. Funny thing, he wasn’t one for talking much in bed. Truth be told, he hadn’t spent that much time fucking in one session, either or in the same bed. So he was ready for all these firsts with Ruslan.

“How ready are you?” he asked as Ruslan reluctantly let go of his lips.

He let one hand wander over the smooth chest, reaching for Ruslan’s nipples and squeezing them in passing.

“On a scale of one to ten?” Ruslan smiled, and biting bit bottom lip seductively.

“Yeah, if that’s what you want,” Johnny replied, with a small shrug.

“Getting there,” Ruslan whispered and angled his head so they could kiss again.

He wanted to get drunk on Ruslan. Get high on him. It had been so long since he had felt a rush like this. There was no point denying it. Ruslan Kent was addictive. And Johnny knew a thing or two about addiction.

One of them was that it never led to anything good. He hoped this wasn’t it. He lied to himself. But he was not one to dwell on what would come tomorrow. Right now, he had a man in his arms that fit him like a glove. And for all that mattered, he wouldn’t let dark thoughts ruin his fun.

“Do you want me from behind?” Ruslan asked sweetly.

Johnny smirked. “Yeah, I kind of like that view.”

Ruslan threw him a look filled with promises. “It would help if you let me turn.”

“Sure thing, pretty.” Johnny moved away just so that the other could roll over and then nicely put himself on all fours.

Johnny caressed the curve of that elegant back. He had fucked plenty of men in his life. Some rough and tough; like him. Some smooth, like Ruslan. But no one had been this good. Ruslan had more than looks going on about him. He knew how to give in and make men happy in bed.

He pushed himself up and stood behind. Pushing the round buttocks apart, he admired his work. There was anything hardly as empowering than seeing his own jizz come off a guy’s ass like that.

Fucking was, usually, a game of dominance. Some guys went for it for all kinds of fucked up reasons. Others just enjoyed themselves, without making much of it.

Only that, right now, Johnny wanted to make much of it. He wanted all that crazy fucking to mean something, for Ruslan to find Johnny worthy beyond his skills in the ring or between the sheets.

Because there was no way in hell he would walk away from this without putting up a fight. In his own way. Not that he thought of hurting the guy or anything like that. He was nothing like that. But if he could make Ruslan crave for him with his dick, just the same that he was craving Ruslan, he would do it.

He sank into the tight heat with a small curse. It was nice to see the pink hole stretching, gripping him tightly. He was sliding in easily, Ruslan’s ass well prepared with lube and cum.

Johnny wanted so much to praise him some more. But Ruslan was pushing back, imposing his own rhythm, and Johnny could feel losing himself a little. In a way, Ruslan was more dangerous than any opponent he had ever met in the cage, or anyone in his life, for that matter.

If Ruslan wanted, he could wrap Johnny around his pinky, no questions asked. So Johnny needed to be careful. That was how guys were losing their heads most often than not. Pretty women were usually their downfall. In his case, it could be a pretty man. Otherwise, there was little difference.

The downfall, when it happened, always meant the same thing.

So, yeah. He needed to be careful.

He pulled at Ruslan's hair, to keep him in place. Then steadied one of his hips with the other. Now, he could impose his own rhythm because that was him, being boss and everything. Ruslan was pretty, but he wouldn't lead. Not even when they were fucking.

To his surprise, Ruslan didn't protest, but softened, pushing his ass a bit higher, leaning on his elbows, in the best way to surrender possible. And that was something Johnny couldn't resist. In this world, where every victory was about fighting until he could breathe no more, this man surrendered.

"Damn," he cursed breathily.

Temptation was a weird thing. Sometimes you had no idea you craved it until it was buried under your skin. So there was no way for him to win this time. He could only hope he could keep his wits about him outside the bed.

Right now, it was all about that, about filling Ruslan's ass with cum again, about sensing him tremble and shiver and shout under him. Ruslan never kept that to himself. And man, he knew how to make Johnny throw all caution to the wind, with that sweet voice of his.

Ruslan shifted in his sleep and mumbled something, then turned on the other side. Johnny smiled to himself. Let the pretty man get his beauty sleep. He could not oversleep if he wanted. Maybe he could wake up Ruslan and take it back from the top. But somehow, laying like that, on his back, his eyes on the ceiling, listening to the steady soft rhythm of the other's breathing, while dawn was breaking out outside, made him feel relaxed.

For a while, he did nothing but that. He put one hand over Ruslan's protruding hip, caressing it lightly. Then pulled the blanket over him.

Could it be that Ruslan had some workout room in that big ass house? He was lean, but his muscles were well defined. Maybe he was into CrossFit or some shit like that. Still, that could mean that there were some facilities on the ground. He could not see Ruslan Kent go train at the gym with other sweaty men.

Plus, he hated that idea. Ruslan was not to be ogled by others. Funny thing, again. He could not remember feeling this possessive. There were upsides to fucking guys, and one of them was that no one bothered with stuff like that. But just like that asshole he had met over at Ruslan's office, other guys getting within a hair's breadth from the pretty man were pissing him off, all of a sudden. Hell, if they were within the arm's length from Ruslan, they were pissing him off.

He was sure Ruslan wouldn't get upset over him exploring the place a little. Probably there were plenty of things worth stealing around. But Ruslan showed that he trusted Johnny by bringing him over and sleeping so soundly next to him. So, all in all, he could roam around.

Also, staying this close to him would lead to only one thing, and that was Johnny jumping his bones again. And he didn't want to wake Ruslan up just yet. They had an entire Sunday to fool around, and Johnny wanted his lover well rested.

Eventually, he had found the gym. Nothing too heavy or challenging concerning equipment, but Johnny had gotten a bit of light exercise. Others used rest days. He did it, too. But it was never Sunday, and he didn't want to slack off, no matter how amazing Ruslan was and how much that warm bed beckoned him.

He felt strangely at home, walking around like that. He took a long, satisfying shower, and headed for the kitchen. The previous night, Ruslan had treated him to more than just sex, and the catering service that was bringing the food was doing a pretty swell job. He bet he could whip out some light breakfast before Ruslan woke up.

Then Johnny would drag him out of his bed and then push him back there a little later. It sounded like the perfect plan.

He was busy inspecting the contents of the two-door refrigerator when his well-trained hearing picked up something. Slowly, he straightened up. By all means, the source of the sound seemed to come from the front door. So that couldn't be Ruslan waking up and getting down for breakfast.

With steady hands, he grabbed a carton of milk. It didn't qualify as a weapon, but if that was an intruder, that motherfucker was going to have a big surprise. Like a carton of milk straight to the face.

Maybe he was paranoid, and maybe it was just someone like Ruslan's old man coming around. Someone with a key. But Johnny came from a world where if someone walked into a home like he was trying not to make a sound, that was bound to mean trouble.

He could feel the newcomer approaching. He slammed the refrigerator door fast and raised his arm, ready.

His eyes met a pair of mean greens. He knew those eyes.

"Wow," the intruder said, putting his hands up high. "Are you going to throw that at me? I'm unarmed, dude."

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Johnny said gruffly and put the carton of milk on the counter.

Not an intruder after all. The fact that this fucker had a key to Ruslan's home didn't sit well with him. But he seemed to be Ruslan's close friend.

“That should be my line.” The fucker snorted and went straight to the fridge.

He took out a casserole, and then searched for a fork. With satisfaction, he plopped himself down on a chair at the kitchen table and stuck the fork into the chicken salad. Ah, great, exactly what Johnny wanted to go for.

“What?” the other asked. “Do you want some?” he gestured with the fork at the casserole.

Johnny inhaled and exhaled slowly. Now wasn't the time to get pissed.

“C'mon, we can share,” the other teased some more.

Johnny made a disgusted face. “Like I'd want to eat from the same trough as you.”

The man's grin was ugly like Satan's ass. Johnny knew he wasn't fair. The fucker was a looker, the kind to make panties drop. Eyes green like a witch's soul and the attitude of a punk. Like he couldn't care less and took everything he wanted.

“We're already sharing Ruslan,” the guy pointed out. “How bad this can be?” He gestured at the casserole.

Johnny could feel a vein throbbing at his temple. Sharing? Was this guy just pulling his leg? He had a deal with Ruslan. He could not believe he had crossed him so quickly. No, he didn't want to believe that.

But maybe it was a good moment to shake off all those rosy dreams from the night before. Pink wasn't a color to suit him. Ruslan fucked whoever he wanted. Including this low-class playboy.

“No shit.” Johnny stood his ground. “You better think about that sharing stuff. 'Cause I'm not sharing.”

“Seriously?” The guy chewed with satisfaction. “I know your type. You come and go. I stay.”

“Not here, as far as I can see,” Johnny said with satisfaction and went for the carton of milk, eventually.

He needed something to clean the bad taste in his mouth this so-called guest was giving him. No better alternative than a healthy drink.

“How do you know?” The other's eyes glinted. “It looks like I got in without knocking. What does that tell you?”

“That you're a douchebag and you don't know to call ahead. You know, to see if Ruslan is busy.”

“Funny.” The man pushed away the barely touched meal and looked at Johnny, his eyes at half-mast. “You’re some kind of record breaker.”

“No shit.” Johnny gulped down his healthy drink.

“Aren’t you curious what I mean by that?”

Johnny shrugged. “Not really. But it looks like you like yapping your mouth. I’m not going to stop you.”

“Ruslan doesn’t usually bring his hookups home. Too many complications. Also, he rarely lets random guys fuck him more than once or twice.”

“Ah, well, that’s your problem.” Johnny wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I’m not some random guy.”

The visitor frowned. “Really? What do you want with Ruslan?”

“That’s none of your fucking business.” Johnny grinned, pleased with the other’s evident dissatisfaction.

“You sure? ‘Cause it’s totally my business.” The reply was said gruffly.

“Why? Are you like his dad or something? He has one of those.”

“I’m more than his dad, asshole.” The words were spoken with passion, taking Johnny a bit by surprise.

Until that moment, the fucker had only seemed bent on stepping on his toes. Now he was serious. But Johnny wouldn’t let himself easily impressed.

“Don’t tell me you’re his husband.” Johnny showed teeth. “Because if you are, you’re doing a shitty job keeping your better half happy. Do you have a tiny dick or something?”

“That’s it, asshole.” The other jumped to his feet.

Johnny put up his fists by pure impulse.

“Why are you making so much noise first thing in the morning?” Ruslan’s sleepy voice interrupted their, so far, only verbal sparring.

The owner of the house was rubbing his eyes, as he entered the kitchen. He yawned and stretched and went directly to Johnny. To say he didn’t feel smug when Ruslan embraced him would have been a lie. He smiled as Ruslan kissed him shortly, the minty smell of toothpaste fresh on him.

He was grinning and looking at the other, challenging him with his eyes. But his smile turned crooked, when Ruslan left his arms and went to embrace the other, too. Now that wasn't the kind of situation he liked. He was never down for threesomes unless two bottom boys were fighting over his dick. The fucker with mean green eyes looked nothing like a bottom boy. And he didn't want his dick close within ten feet from the fucker.

"What were you two fighting about anyway?" Ruslan asked, throwing Johnny one brief look, and then heading for the fridge, too.

With a small purse of his lips, he shut the fridge door, without taking anything.

"I'm waiting." Ruslan leaned against the counter, at a safe distance from both.

"This fucker thinks he owns you or something," Johnny said first.

It felt like they had just had a fight in the schoolyard and some teacher was trying to get the culprit out. Johnny was never a snitch, but this was different from some schoolyard scuffle.

"And this asshole thinks he can wag his shlong all over the place," the other replied, without backing down.

Ruslan rolled his eyes, looked at the ceiling for about two seconds, and then shrugged. "I think I'm going to make myself an omelet. Any of you want some? Fucker? Asshole?" he asked while looking at his friend first, and then at Johnny.

"I'm not hungry," Johnny replied, pissed with Ruslan's indifference.

"I'm not either," the other said.

"Okay, I'm making for everyone," Ruslan continued as if he wasn't even listening, and this time, took out an egg carton out of the fridge.

He watched in silence as Ruslan grabbed some utensils and ham and cheese for the filling. He was a little hungry, actually. But his pride wouldn't let him take back what he said.

"I'm going back to the bedroom," he said.

Ruslan hurried to grab his arm. "No, I'm making an omelet, and then we will all sit down and eat. And, after that, I will clear the air so that no one thinks anyone's pissing on the other's turf. Is that clear enough?"

Johnny looked into the big blue eyes and felt his resolve melting. "Sure, as long as the fucker doesn't get on my nerves."

"Just let the asshole go, Ruslan," the other chimed in.

All right, he wouldn't back down. He would savor that omelet, right into the fucker's face.

Ruslan turned back to making the omelet, and he sat at the table, across from the guest. They eyed each other, without saying a word.

Minutes later, Ruslan placed the steaming plates in front of them and then took a seat, too. He stood up just one more time to return with some orange juice bottle which he used to fill up three glasses.

"Bon appétit," he said with a smile.

Johnny stuck his fork into his omelet, his eyes never leaving the intruder. From across the table, the green-eyed motherfucker did the same.

"You two are not going to ruin breakfast, I hope," Ruslan said sternly. "We're not in kindergarten. See about your food, and I will introduce you properly to one another. Don't tell me I'm asking for too much."

Johnny looked down at his plate, feeling a little chastised. Yeah, it wasn't like him to behave like some kid. Let the other know he still had manners even if Ruslan was way out of his league. The fucker didn't look like he belonged there, either.

Ruslan stood up and took their plates to the sink. As he cleaned the plates, only the running water filling the silence, Johnny realized what was striking him as odd. Someone like Ruslan wasn't supposed to wash the dishes. Maybe the maid didn't come on Sunday.

"So," Ruslan returned to the table and sat down again. "This guy right here," he put one hand on that fucker's shoulder, "is my long life childhood friend Yanis."

"Childhood friend? Do they let the likes of him into boarding school?"

"Boarding school?" Yanis guffawed.

Ruslan slapped him upside the head playfully. But it looked like he was barely keeping from smiling, too.

"And this guy," Ruslan reached out to Johnny and touched his shoulder, too, "is Snake, the most promising fighter to have ever competed for papa's amateur night."

Johnny hoped he didn't look disappointed. That said nothing about what he and Ruslan were.

"What's he to you?" Yanis asked, eyes set on Johnny, but his ear leaning toward Ruslan, waiting for an answer.

"Ah, well," Ruslan smiled, and his hand slid off Yanis's shoulder so that he could get close to Johnny, "he's my main squeeze."

By the way Ruslan was smiling, that was supposed to be a joke and payback for that incident at the gym. But Ruslan was staring at him with his amazing blue eyes, fringed by dark blond eyelashes, oh so damn pretty, and, suddenly, it was a joke no more. Johnny could get lost into those eyes.

Ruslan leaned in and kissed his lips softly.

“Fuck me sideways.” Yanis decided that was a good moment to break the spell. “You two are like love doves! What the hell, Ruslan? Are you even telling me anything anymore? And to think I came to tell you that I bought the damn ring.”

Johnny wanted nothing else but for the fucker to go away that very moment, and let him get his fair share of morning kisses from Ruslan. He cared nothing about no damned ring and whatever the fucker wanted to complain about.

“You did?!” Ruslan exclaimed, turning toward his childhood friend.

Johnny threw one arm over his shoulders to keep him close, and Ruslan obeyed.

“Yeah,” Yanis grinned. “I sure did.”

“So when’s the date?”

Ah, so the fucker was getting married. So what was with that bullshit talk about them sharing Ruslan? Truth be told, Yanis had kissed Ruslan on the mouth in the office that day. But that was no reason to think the two friends were getting it on. By the looks of it, Yanis had some better half already.

“Anya went to visit her folks and tell them the big news. Now it’s out of my hands,” Yanis pushed his hands up as if he wanted to show that he was clean now of whatever mess he had just put in motion.

“That’s great, man,” Ruslan said excitedly.

“So I came to ask you to hang out,” Yanis said. “Since I’m home alone now.”

“Go back,” Johnny said gruffly. “Ruslan’s busy.”

“Don’t be so unpleasant, Johnny.” Ruslan turned to kiss him shortly. “We can all hang out. I’d like the two of you to get along.”

Johnny decided not to let it drop so quickly. “No way. This fucker was talking shit about him fucking you.”

“So?” Ruslan turned again to look at him. “Don’t tell me you’re jealous.”

The blue eyes were examining him from up close. They made him squirm in his seat.

“I thought we had a deal,” he said, trying to pull his hand away.

Ruslan was quick to grab it and keep it there, on him.

“We do. And nobody’s fucking me right now but you,” Ruslan said.

“See, tough boy?” Yanis grinned from across the table. “None of us has the winning hand at this table. But Ruslan here. He’s the boss. So don’t cross him. It’s all I’m saying.”

Johnny was pretty sure he hadn’t gotten that many kicks to the head to justify how confused he was now. What the hell was the fucker trying to say again?

“Take everything Yanis says with a pinch of salt. I just want everyone here to be friends.”

“This guy looks like trouble,” Yanis said to Ruslan again. “How come your papa agrees with him?”

“Does it really matter?” Ruslan sighed. “He doesn’t agree with you, either, and that doesn’t mean you’re not my friend.”

“Seriously? Compared to this guy, I’m an angel,” Yanis protested, but he was smirking now, pleased with his reputation.

“I like him, and that’s the end of story. Stop trying to protect me all the time,” Ruslan protested. “Sometimes, Yanis, I think you’re worse than papa. Thank heavens you’re getting hitched. You’ll finally have kids and stop with this overly protective attitude toward me. You’ll have others to torment,” he said with a small laugh.

“So you’re in good hands? Is that what you’re trying to say?” Yanis looked at his friend with stubborn eyes.

“Hell yeah, he is,” Johnny replied instead.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Yanis said quickly.

“Guys!” Ruslan exclaimed. “Stop it before I ask you to kiss and make up.”

Yanis made a face as he had just licked a bitter lemon. Johnny was pretty sure his cheeks were hurting because of a grimace of his own.

Chapter Eight – Going The Distance / Shallow Waters

Johnny wasn't exactly crazy about chilling with Ruslan's childhood friend in some game room, but the fact that he was owning Yanis at the video game they were playing made him feel good. Once he had been explained the rules and gotten the hang of the console controller, his good reflexes and quick thinking put him on top.

He didn't have to look at Yanis to know that he didn't like having his ass handed to him like that one bit. But the fucker had a competitive streak, and somehow Johnny digged that. Hell, he even respected the man a little. Ruslan had sternly told them to work out whatever differences they still felt they had in front of the big ass TV from which now a blaze of visual effects was lighting up the room. He had also added that he was in no mood to babysit them or try to clean blood out of the carpets.

That seemed like good thinking. The master of the house had gone somewhere while Johnny was turning Yanis's character on the screen into mush, and he did wonder what the hell Ruslan was doing.

Nonetheless, putting Yanis in his place, without using his fists, but only his fingers, felt good.

"Good game, man." Yanis patted his shoulder when the screen closed with Johnny's nickname up in lights.

"Another round?" Johnny asked gruffly.

"Nah, I think I had enough for one day," Yanis replied and laughed.

He wasn't sure if he could really relax around this guy, but Yanis no longer looked like a threat after Johnny had taught him a lesson. Yanis knew how to lose, and that was, again, something Johnny knew to respect in a man. Not many knew. Even in the cage. Winning at all costs was not worth everything. Well, for Johnny, it was. But he was not like most men, so such rules didn't apply to him.

Yanis was looking at him, with hooded eyes.

"Why are you staring at me like that? Looking to get your ass kicked for real?" Johnny asked, but now, he was half joking.

"I'm trying to figure you out a little," Yanis replied with a shrug and eased into the large armchair.

Johnny was sitting on a leather sofa, a bit away from him. He stared at Yanis. "What's to figure?" he asked.

"Well, I told you. You're not like any of Ruslan's hookups."

“And?”

Johnny was never crazy about making conversation, especially with strangers, but he was damned curious about Yanis and what the hell the fucker was trying to tell him. But he didn't have to look too eager.

“So, how good are you?” Yanis asked.

Johnny threw him a crooked smile.

“Hmm.” Yanis linked his fingers and crossed his legs. “Four times?”

Not that many words were needed between them, it seemed. Johnny knew exactly what Yanis was talking about.

He hesitated. It wasn't like him to lie. Then he shook his head.

Yanis grinned. “Ah.”

Johnny snorted. “Don't tell me. You?”

“Yeah.” Yanis snickered like a school kid. “Want me to share some techniques with you? You could use the help.”

“Nah. I always get where I want to be on my own.”

Yanis seemed to ponder for a couple of seconds. “Now, seriously, man, what's the deal with you and Ruslan? And how come his papa hasn't told you to fuck off already?”

“Ruslan does what he wants. He's a big boy,” Johnny replied. “He likes me.”

“He told you that?” Yanis quirked an eyebrow.

“Yeah,” Johnny said.

“Ruslan is not that big on liking people. Especially strangers,” Yanis said. “How many times have you two done it?”

“Enough to piss you off, by the looks of it,” Johnny said with a large grin now.

“You better not hope that you can get something out of this.” Yanis pointed a finger at him. “You try to mess with Ruslan, you'll have a problem with me.” He then pointed the same finger at his chest.

“What do you think? That I want to rob him or something? If I had wanted that, I could have been at home now, selling all this pretty stuff lying around on eBay,” Johnny said. “Although he

should have some more security in place. Seeing that assholes like you can come and go as they want.”

Yanis didn't seem to be bothered by that comment. “Me and Ruslan ... we go way back, man.” The fucker seemed serious now. “We're like brothers. I don't care about you stealing or anything like that. You wouldn't make it to count the dough. Ruslan's papa would be all over your ass in a heartbeat. But I care about you messing him up.”

“What the hell do you mean by that?” Johnny asked. “All we do is fuck like crazy. And Ruslan loves it, or don't you know that, Mr. Four Times?” he added, with a tinge of envy.

“Keep it at that,” Yanis said. “Ruslan doesn't need complications in his life. You smell like trouble from a thousand yards. Don't mess with his head. You know. Think that you're in some kind of relationship and shit. That you're special or something.”

“Are you that pissed that Ruslan doesn't want to get screwed by you no more?” Johnny asked. “What's to you if he wants to hang out with me?”

“That's none of your business,” Yanis replied quickly. “When you leave never to come back, I don't want Ruslan to think of you at all. I want him to be like ‘Snake who?’ and not even remember your real name.”

“What you're saying is totally fucked up. Ruslan's right. You need some kids to bother with this kind of shit. See about some daughter when some punk comes to take her dancing after ten PM, and she's not even fifteen. Ruslan's not some girl. And he's not fifteen either. He looks to me like he can take care of himself.”

Ruslan walked into the room “Thank you for the vote of confidence, Johnny. Let Yanis tell you all he wants to tell you. Otherwise, he won't leave you alone until he does. And Yanis, thank you, man, but both you and papa should back off a little. I'm not like that anymore.”

“You know I won't let anyone hurt you,” Yanis said, looking at Ruslan. “Even if you like the guy. You know that.”

“Yes, I know,” Ruslan said and walked over to Yanis, and placed a small peck on his cheek. “And I can tell you there's nothing to worry about here. Johnny is a good guy.”

Johnny could feel a small lump in his throat at those words. He had to work out his Adam's apple a few times to make that go down.

“Good in bed, I hear.” Yanis snickered, ruining the damned fine moment.

“Yeah, that, too,” Ruslan added with a small smile, and looked over at Johnny, with eyes that said everything.

Yanis stood up. "Then I suppose I should hit the road."

"You don't mind, do you?" Ruslan asked, and placed both hands on his friend's chest.

Johnny didn't like how the two were looking at each other. Like there was some secret bond between them. If what the fucker had said earlier was right, that had to be it.

"Take care, man." Yanis embraced Ruslan shortly. "And, you," he looked over at Johnny, "I have my eyes on you."

Johnny wanted to have a good comeback for that. But he hadn't. So he just nodded.

Ruslan turned back to the game room after seeing Yanis out. Both men were hard-headed, but that was one of the things Ruslan liked about them. And he had secretly enjoyed the verbal sparring between the two. He liked that Yanis cared about him as he had always cared. With a family to look after, Yanis would be less involved in Ruslan's life, and he was totally fine with it. That didn't mean that he wouldn't have his regrets when that happened.

But that feeling, of being cared for, had no equal. His papa cared for him. And that was precious. And now Johnny, for as long as they would go at it, he was caring for him, too, in his own way.

Even if it was nothing but fucking between them, it was still nice. No, nice was not enough a word to describe that. Together, they were fucking amazing between the sheets, and Johnny's rough, yet gentle touch, as well as his simple words, made him feel wanted.

"Care about going back to bed now?" he asked with a small smile.

"Did this guy really fuck you?" Johnny asked, without moving from his place.

Ruslan walked over to him and sat on his lap, hooking both arms around his thick neck.

"Yes," he said and looked Johnny in the eye, to prove that he had no reason to lie, and he wasn't hiding the truth.

"But he's getting married," Johnny pointed out.

"Haven't you heard of bisexual guys?" Ruslan wondered out loud.

"How come he's leaving you for some chick?" Johnny placed one hand on Ruslan's thigh, rubbing his fingers against the thin fabric of the sweatpants Ruslan was wearing.

He laughed. "He's not leaving me. We have never been like that. He's my best friend."

"A friend who can make you come four times in a row?" Johnny asked again.

“Yes,” Ruslan said with a sigh. “I see he could not help bragging. But that has nothing to do with you and me.”

“Like hell it doesn’t,” Johnny said. “That should be me.”

“You’re so competitive.” Ruslan laughed softly. “I’ve always known Yanis would find a girl and settle down. It would be egotistical of me to keep him. I couldn’t, anyway,” he said wistfully.

“But four times? How did he manage that?” Johnny pressed further.

Ruslan took Johnny’s cheek, enjoying the feel of the short stubble under his fingers, and made him meet his eyes. “It just happened. You don’t have to prove anything. Not to me. I want us to enjoy ourselves. For as long as this is going to last,” he added.

Johnny frowned, and his squeeze on Ruslan’s thigh grew tighter. “Why do you all think I’m going to get up and leave any moment now?”

Ruslan looked at Johnny, surprised now. “Aren’t you?” he mumbled, for lack of anything better to say.

He almost yelped in surprise as Johnny stood up, holding him in his arms. “I’m not doing that. I know you don’t know me, and that’s okay. But I’m not that guy. I’m going the distance.”

“Hmm, yes, I heard.” Ruslan grabbed his neck to steady himself, while Johnny took him up the stairs, clearly bent on reaching the bedroom. “No knockouts? Never? Is that really true?”

Johnny’s reply was a curt grunt.

“Wow,” Ruslan whispered. “Color me impressed.”

He wanted to ask more. He wanted to find out more. Like what Johnny meant by going the distance. How many rounds would they last? In the real world?

And was it truly right to think that this, whatever was happening between them, would be more than a torrid, yet fleeting and therefore condemned to die, affair?

Ruslan groaned against himself. Johnny was caressing his flanks, making him feel goosebumps everywhere. He wanted nothing else but for Johnny to hurry. But his lover was bent on proving himself, and Ruslan knew now that there was no way to convince him to do something against what he wanted to do. “How long are you going to keep me like this?” he pushed back into Johnny’s crotch.

Johnny was sitting behind him, using, so far, nothing but his hands. “I need you hot and ready,” he mumbled. “There’s no way I’m going to last through four of your rounds if I rush into it.”

Ruslan giggled. “This is not the ring. And, seriously, you’ve already proven yourself over and over again. I think you’re the best.”

Johnny’s hands remained still on Ruslan’s hips. “Nah, you’re just saying,” he drawled the words.

Ruslan smiled to himself. Johnny was almost like a kid when he was praised. And that was something Ruslan could really relate to because that was also his weakness.

“I might become a little frustrated,” Ruslan joked.

And immediately hissed when lubed fingers entered his tight ring of muscles, not from pain, but surprise.

“Does it hurt, pretty?” Johnny withdrew his fingers.

Now it wasn’t a joke anymore. Ruslan groaned in frustration. “No. Put those fingers up my ass right now. Or your dick already,” he ordered.

Johnny seemed deaf as he plastered himself against Ruslan’s curved back and placed a wet kiss on the back of his neck. And then his tongue began a slow descent on Ruslan’s spine.

Ruslan could swear this was pure torture. He was quivering as Johnny was swirling his tongue over and over again, each time on a different spot. He was moving away while doing that. When the tongue’s wicked journey stopped, Ruslan exhaled. And then yelped, as he felt teeth sinking into one of his buttocks.

“I thought you weren’t going to hurt me.” He glared over one shoulder.

Eyes dark and hot like burning coal stared back at him, and he suddenly lost his train of thought.

He licked his lips, his throat suddenly parched. “Fuck me, Johnny,” he whispered, and now he wasn’t ordering, but begging.

The deft fingers were back at his ass, and this time, Ruslan helped by pulling one buttock apart, while not losing at all the contact with Johnny’s eyes.

When Johnny finally positioned himself for entering, Ruslan was sure of one thing. That he hadn’t joked before. This man was the best he had ever had, and there was no possible way to compare him to anyone. Not even to Yanis. With those deep dark eyes, Johnny was looking straight into his soul, and understood what Ruslan wanted, without any need for words. They understood each other. And that was rare, especially for guys who didn’t know each other from Adam.

Johnny pushed inside slowly, resting one hand against the bed so that he could hover over Ruslan, using his other hand to caress everywhere. Eventually, it settled for Ruslan’s throat,

wrapping around it, without pressing down, just touching and keeping him in that loose, assuring grip.

“Kiss me,” Ruslan begged again, and Johnny leaned closer, teasing for a moment, making their lips touch barely, before delving in.

He was dizzy with the myriad of sensations he was experiencing right now. Too taken, enthralled with the other man, that he didn't notice, at first, the hand moving from the bed and wrapping around his stiff cock.

“I hope this is not against the rules,” Johnny whispered into his ear, licking the lobe, as soon as Ruslan moved his head away from their kiss, unable to deal with so much sensorial attack.

“It's not,” he managed with difficulty.

“Good, 'cause you looked a little in pain, there,” Johnny joked and bit his ear.

“You jerk,” Ruslan whispered, but he wasn't mad.

That, if being mad with desire didn't count. Johnny's hot spear was rooted in his ass now, and he was moving between his grip and the shaft brushing over his pleasure spot over and over again.

When the first orgasm hit him, it wasn't a surprise. Ruslan had been prepared for it for enough time and trying to postpone it would have been unkind for both of them. Johnny murmured words of satisfaction into his ear, and, this time, he didn't let Ruslan time to recover, continuing to move slowly in and out.

The hand in his cock moved away though, and Ruslan shivered when he heard Johnny sucking on his fingers.

“You're so damn delicious,” Johnny said. “Here,” he added, pushing the still wet fingers into Ruslan's mouth.

He took them hungrily. As much as he would have preferred to experience the other's taste right now, being fed his own essence was strangely erotic. They were sharing it, and sharing something, a pure, unblemished pleasure of all things, made everything they did ten folds more arousing.

“Could you take care of your dick?” Johnny licked his fingers again, as soon as they left Ruslan's mouth. “I plan a small change of pace.”

He nodded, incapable of saying any words. Johnny grabbed his hips, and this time, he began fucking him vigorously. Ruslan didn't need to be told twice to grab his cock and pump it. The way Johnny was hammering his prostate was driving him a little insane. He was sensitive as a general rule, but Johnny just knew him, in and out, like they had spent eons together, and they

hadn't barely met weeks ago. Johnny was talking about going the distance. And, until now, no one had gone so far with him, either. He just hoped that, at the finish line, there would be two winners.

And that couldn't be the case. Not with everything he was trying to hide. Johnny liked him because he saw Ruslan as some rich guy, without a worry in the world. And worries were, without fail, what always brought him back to the stark reality.

He chased away the unsettling thoughts. Instead, he whispered the words, to give Johnny his reply. Johnny pulled him toward his chest, and kept him there, looking over Ruslan's shoulder.

"You're so beautiful when you come," Johnny poured sweet words into his ear. "Your cock is so damn pretty, I want to eat it whole, and suck all your jizz."

Ruslan was trembling and had trouble speaking. He leaned against Johnny, as he was falling into a steady rhythm without releasing his ass. For now, it was okay to lose himself into the other.

"Johnny," he whispered and raised one hand to caress Johnny's cheek.

"Pretty," Johnny said back, covering his chest with one calloused hand, and brushing over his nipples, making him quiver slightly.

Johnny pushed himself back, and then drove himself into Ruslan's ass, keeping his hands on his partner's hips to steady himself.

Ruslan dropped back on all fours, arching his back and pushing himself into Johnny's cock.

"Ah, damn, Johnny, you really want that ..."

"To make you come?" Johnny laughed behind him. "Yeah, it's all I want to do."

This time, his hand came to rest on his slowly recovering cock again. Ruslan was pretty sure Johnny's jerking off technique alone was something worth noting down for future reference. His rough hand was squeezing just right, and it created a tight channel, letting Ruslan fuck himself into it.

Guys wanted him on the receiving end, all the time. And he had no problems with being the perfect bottom boy. Yet now, bucking his hips into Johnny's hand, he could feel a different type of desire growing inside him. At the same time, Johnny's cock was assuring him he was where he wanted to be.

"Fuck, this is so good, fuck," he let out words, in almost pained, ragged sobs.

When he came again, he was sure he wasn't exactly feeling his legs. He let himself on his elbows, and Johnny's cock slipped out of his ass. That was okay. Johnny had already made him see heaven.

So his surprise was indeed as big as Johnny's cock as the said sexual organ drove into him fast and hard again. Now he was growing overly sensitive, and his mind was slowly going blank. There was nothing else there, but the man riding him, and the pure, intense desire that was making his entire body burn.

It was rarely that he could bounce back so quickly, and when he came the third time, torturing his cock, squeezing everything out of it, he was sure he needed to ask for a break. Johnny withdrew, making him exhale in relief.

One second later, a playful slap landed on his ass making him groan.

"What?" he pretended to be upset, but he could feel his lips curling up into a satisfied grin, and he couldn't help it.

Johnny plopped himself down next to him. "How about you get on top for a change?" He joked.

Ruslan giggled. "Aww, don't tell me you're tired, Mr. Zero Knockouts."

"Who says I don't want to be sent to the floor by a pretty man like you?" Johnny said again.

Ruslan knew he could stay and look into Johnny's dark eyes forever. But right now, Johnny was calling for him to prove he could be on top, too, so that was something he needed to do. With a small laugh, he pushed himself up and straddled the other, carefully putting the slick cock back inside him.

"Ah, damn," he whispered, feeling how raw and wasted he was, but still incapable of throwing in the towel and just admit that he had enough.

The truth was, he had, and he hadn't. He wanted to keep Johnny there, inside him, no matter how crazy the idea was. No matter how much he knew that he was probably not going to be able to sit down for days after this. Johnny had been right. He knew how to fuck him into the next week, and there was no way for Ruslan to deny that. Or want any other man.

"Look at me, pretty," Johnny cooed.

He raised one hand to cup Ruslan's cheek, as his thumb moved slowly. Hungry for more, Ruslan moved his head to capture the wandering thumb into his mouth.

"Yeah, pretty, suck it, like this, show me how good you are," Johnny encouraged him.

With all the tiredness turning his bones to jelly, Ruslan was riding Johnny's hips, slurping around the offered thumb, crazy, so crazy with the sensations gripping his body from all sides. Johnny took hold of his cock and began pumping it while continuing to encourage him.

It was so hot, everything he felt so wild, so dizzying, difficult to wrap his head around, as he could not even think anymore. Ruslan moved, and moved, sliding up and down on Johnny's cock, wanting to squeeze him, keep him, and make him his, as impossible as that desire was.

"Like this, pretty, yes." Johnny sank the fingers of his other hand in Ruslan's hip and began dragging him down, in short, rough moves.

Ruslan was barely aware of the sounds he was making. He registered, like everything was happening in slow motion, how the ropes of his release were landing everywhere on Johnny's chest and abs.

"Yes!" Johnny yelled victoriously now.

Ruslan was quickly moved on his back, with the other on top of him, and Johnny covered him completely, keeping his head into his large hands, whispering words of praise into his ear, as he moved hard and fast to his completion, too.

When he collapsed and stood there still, just breathing hard, Ruslan's hands moved on their own to embrace him. And they stood like that, lost into each other, for a long time.

Johnny loved the silence. For him, words were not that important. Men proved their worth with what they did, not with anything else. Surely, not by yapping their mouths. But, right now, he wished to be some smooth talker.

Because there was so much he wanted to tell Ruslan right now. His stupid brain didn't know the words, though. He would have felt frustrated, but he was too spent after giving it like that to the pretty man next to him.

It hadn't been to prove something to Ruslan's friend, although it had started like that. No, it had been his ambition to leave a mark on Ruslan. He wanted Ruslan to remember him all his life, even if it were only because of how many rounds he could last.

"How come you're not a pro?" Ruslan started talking, while slowly caressing Johnny's chest.

They were both resting, each one on his side of the bed, now. Ruslan was reaching for him, and that simple thing was making Johnny's heart fill so much that he felt that it would burst or something.

"Not for me," he replied. "That kind of life."

"Why?" Ruslan insisted.

Johnny took his hand and brought it to his lips, kissing the long fingers slowly.

“A pro must give up on a lot of things. A guy who wants to make it big must have discipline.”

“You don’t seem to lack it,” Ruslan said softly.

“Maybe. But I told you, a guy needs to give up on a lot of things. He might not even be allowed to piss when he wants to. And you know. Whenever there’s a big fight ahead, no fucking. I don’t have to live with that rule.” Johnny bit playfully on the elegant fingers, making Ruslan giggle.

“Are you trying to tell me you cannot live without fucking?” Ruslan pushed himself closer, resting his head against Johnny’s shoulder.

“I tell you I don’t have to,” Johnny said. “When he’s in the cage, a man needs to have his anger with him. If he’s already fucked, the good way, I mean, he has no anger left. He doesn’t have to go through the guy in front of him to get to the pussy or the ass he wants to stick his dick deep into. You know. To finally be out of training camp and free to fuck.”

“I see you have no trouble with that. You fucked me until I could not sit, and you still made a mess of your opponent the last time.” Ruslan moved his head so they could stare at each other. “Don’t tell me it’s not me you want to fuck.”

Johnny laughed. When he glared, Ruslan was even prettier, if that were possible. His bottom lip went out a little more and made Johnny want to kiss him. Like right now. He grabbed a handful of tousled hair and brought the pouty lips to his mouth.

“It’s you I want to fuck,” he said simply when he let Ruslan go. “But that anger, of not getting any? I don’t need it. My anger comes from other places.”

“What other places?” Ruslan questioned.

Damn his big mouth.

“Nothing you should trouble your pretty head with,” Johnny said and kissed Ruslan again to shut his mouth and not let him ask any more questions. “Let’s rest a little. That if you still want me in your papa’s ring next Saturday.”

“Surely I want you there,” Ruslan said. “And, no matter how weird that may sound, I think I have been plenty fucked. You were right to say that I would not need anything for the entire week.”

“So, you have no use for me?” Johnny asked, only half-joking.

“Are you kidding me? You’re the best pillow.” Ruslan laughed and, to prove his point, he pushed his head into Johnny’s chest. “Later we can play some pool. Or play in the pool. Or watch a movie. Or do whatever you want.”

Ruslan was babbling. He was probably tired.

“Do you have a pool? And a pool table?”

“All kinds of things,” Ruslan replied. “I’m not sure my body can take another fucking, but I want you to spend your Sunday with me. That unless you need to do something else.”

No, he didn’t have to do something else. Spending his Sunday with Ruslan sounded like the perfect plan.

Johnny was not that great a swimmer. Where he had grown up, there were no such things as pools and places where kids could go for a dip. By all means, relaxing in Ruslan’s heated pool was heaven to his bones.

There was a small voice inside him telling him not to get used to that. Luxuries like heated pools and beautiful men like Ruslan were not for him. So all he was doing now was letting himself become soft.

The splash of water he got straight into his face chased away the little voice. With an exaggerated growl, he pushed himself up and started marching toward Ruslan. He was moving through the water like an eel. It was like his second nature or something. There was no way for Johnny to catch him.

Unless he bid his time and strategized, which was something he was good at. Yawning and stretching, to show Ruslan that he didn’t get caught up in that kind of kids’ game, he made a full turn, as if he wanted to leave.

Within two seconds, Ruslan was jumping on his back, laughing and wrapping both arms and legs around him.

It felt damned good to be completely naked in the pool, and also to feel the other’s skin against him, now slick from the water. He put his hands back to support Ruslan’s ass and turned his head to steal a kiss.

Ruslan was grinning so widely that Johnny’s lips partially landed on his teeth. They both burst into laughter.

“Such a spoiled kid,” Johnny said gruffly.

It was easy to manipulate Ruslan and wrap him around his own body so that they could face each other. Ruslan squirmed a little, as his ass was resting right above Johnny’s cock, now asleep.

Asleep? Johnny could feel the thing twitching. After being in Ruslan’s ass for so much time, and after the long hot shower they had taken before heading for the pool, he was supposed to be anything but hard.

The pool was not only heated, but it was located indoors, too. So they could go crazy with everything if they wanted.

But Johnny needed to have a clear head in this, no matter how much his other head wanted to order him around. Ruslan was not to be used like that. It was enough that he had almost wrecked him earlier, wanting to prove himself.

So he sneaked one arm beneath Ruslan's ass to support him and used the other hand to bury it in his wet hair. And kissed him. Long, without the usual hunger. Just for the pleasure of sensing the pretty man's tongue rubbing against his.

Ruslan seemed to like it, too, so he was glad. He could play around if he wanted to. He controlled the situation, and he wanted to be in control. Pulling his head away just a little, Johnny looked into the deep blue eyes. "You're friggin' beautiful, you know that?" he mumbled.

He didn't have a way with words. Ruslan probably had guys lined up who knew how to tell him sweet words and whatnot. But Johnny wanted to say his part, too, as short-tongued as he was.

"Hmm, I've been told," Ruslan teased, half closing his eyes.

"And a good fuck," Johnny added, bringing him close again for another sweet kiss.

"I'm glad to be appreciated," Ruslan joked the moment Johnny let him breathe.

"But you swim in shallow waters," Johnny said. "I was afraid I was going to make an ass out of myself, not knowing to swim and stuff. But, except for size, this one's like a kiddie pool."

Ruslan's face became serious for a second. And then he relaxed again. "Ah, it's all because other people I know cannot swim either," he said.

"What other people? I thought all rich people know how to swim, play golf and tennis, and stuff like that," Johnny wondered out loud.

"Yanis," Ruslan replied promptly.

"The shmuck can't swim, either?" Johnny laughed.

Ruslan rolled his eyes. "You're so pleased with this, I cannot believe it. What's with all the need for pissing contests between some guys?"

"Well, some of us have to prove themselves in this world," Johnny replied. "You're so pretty, everyone's at your feet. But for ugly shmucks like that friend of yours and me, we don't get anything handed out to us. We have to bite, and punch, and kick."

Ruslan seemed to ponder a little. "You're not ugly at all," he finally said. "You're quite sexy," he added, without one moment of hesitation, and biting his bottom lip.

Johnny looked at Ruslan closely. Yeah, he knew as much. He wasn't blind. His mother had told him one time, before losing her mind, that he had grown to be ruggedly handsome. Also, with so many guys willing to take his dick, he knew he wasn't half bad. Or at least he was some people's type.

But there was no way he was in this pretty boy's league. He was scarred. Broken and remade day after day of training. Yeah, he had a fighter's body. But he wouldn't look less of a goon if he were to wear a suit.

How must the two of them have looked to the world outside if someone saw them? Ruslan looked like he belonged to some royal family while he was just some guy from the wrong side of the tracks.

No matter how close they were now, the others would see only that. The differences. The money. The fact that they didn't belong together. Yeah, other people would say Johnny was getting himself neck deep into something that wasn't for him.

Oh, yeah? Fuck them.

He kissed Ruslan so savagely now that he whimpered in his arms, pulling himself back a little.

Johnny wouldn't back down. He walked over to the edge and put Ruslan down on it, but he didn't let go of the other's lips. Ruslan's hands were in his hair now, going higher, where the fingers could claw at the longer strands.

"I have the secret weapon now." Ruslan giggled when they stopped for air. "I compliment you a little, and you're good to go."

"You shouldn't play with that." Johnny licked his lips, tasting the other's sweet mouth again, from his. "I might not help it and jump you. And I think your ass took enough."

"Who are you to say that?" Ruslan pretended to pout. "I'll say when I had enough."

Johnny smirked. "Oh, do you think you can play rough?"

He pushed Ruslan on his back and bit on his chest hard. Ruslan yelped and laughed. Johnny took one rosy nipple into his mouth and sucked it greedily. By the way Ruslan was starting to jolt and shiver, he was doing a great job.

He wasn't in the mood to postpone things. So he pushed himself away and walked out of the pool. Ruslan was staring at him with hooded eyes, following his every move. He offered his hand and Ruslan took it.

And followed him back into the house. They didn't make it past the hallway. It was Ruslan who stopped him now and pushed him against the wall, attacking his mouth.

“Good thing you’re good with this one, too,” Johnny joked, and brushed his fingers against Ruslan’s plump lips, as they stopped to look at each other. “Suck my dick, pretty,” he whispered.

Ruslan slid to the carpeted floor, his eyes never leaving Johnny’s. He continued to stare, as he pushed the hard cock into his mouth, taking Johnny deep. So deep that the fighter could feel his toes curling against the plush carpet. And, all the time, those amazing blue eyes stayed on him, as if their owner were afraid Johnny would disappear or something.

Ruslan didn’t even blink. He needed this, to keep his eyes on Johnny, to keep that connection between them, no matter how short and fickle it would prove to be, in the end. Ah, damn, he loved tasting Johnny’s cock, just as much as he enjoyed tasting his mouth. Or skin. Johnny was talking about Ruslan being his cookie, but it was the other way around.

He was delicious. Ruslan wanted to trace and cover that entire strong body with his tongue. He wanted to take his cock, his balls, into his mouth, and just go crazy. Taking a good hold of the cock in front of him, he freed it from his mouth with a satisfying pop and then smacked his lips. From above, Johnny’s eyes were watching him with not so veiled hunger.

Without breaking their visual connection, Ruslan went for the other prize he was craving. Johnny had a nice stiff cock and full, heavy balls, and when he tried to stuff his mouth with one of them, he almost felt like laughing. He intended to be artful about feasting on that nice sack of man juice.

So he stuck out his tongue, as far as he could, and gave the tight balls a long swipe from left to right. Going backward, he carefully tried again to fill his mouth.

“Here, pretty,” Johnny cooed, and his voice was raspy, loaded.

Johnny took hold of his own balls and slowly guided Ruslan by keeping him by the back of his head. Ruslan licked with renewed enthusiasm.

“Ah, damn, did I just die?” Johnny laughed, deep and loud, so rough around the edges that Ruslan could feel his hair standing on end, in the best of ways.

“Why?” he stopped, just for a second.

“Because there’s no way this is real and happening to me.” Johnny chuckled. “So I must be six feet under, with my soul up in heaven, ‘cause this freaky sexy angel is licking my balls, and there’s no way that can be.”

Ruslan laughed, too, but still keeping his tongue planted right under Johnny’s balls. He wanted to say he was no angel or anything, but talking like that was impossible.

Johnny wagged the finger at him, sporting a smile the size of a planet. “Didn’t your papa teach you not to talk with your mouth full?”

Ruslan clamped his mouth down on the full sack now to make Johnny shut up. He knew well enough not to use teeth on that thing that made the strongest men vulnerable, so he just pursed his lips to apply firm pressure.

“Come ‘ere,” Johnny drawled, stroking his cock vigorously.

Ruslan stood there, on his knees, like a good boy, allowing Johnny to push his mouth slowly away, caressing his lips with rough fingers, and preparing the load that he now knew well where it would go. So he stuck out his tongue and watched Johnny hovering about him, leaving all fear, all worries slip away from his mind.

Johnny was a sharpshooter, it seemed, as he made sure that the ropes of cum were now landing straight into Ruslan’s mouth, filling it. Ruslan had to rein in the temptation to gulp down every drop as it came, but he wanted to make a little show out of it.

Playing with the cum on his tongue, he continued to look at Johnny. He was wasted, but he continued to look at him, too. Ruslan swallowed and smacked his lips, sticking out his tongue again, to show Johnny he had been a good boy and eaten everything.

“You’re really something, Ruslan,” Johnny whispered as he pulled him up to his feet.

“Hmm, you didn’t call me pretty, like you usually do. Why so serious?” Ruslan joked, giggling as Johnny grabbed him by the waist and placed a quick wet kiss on the side of his neck.

“I wanted to hear it from my mouth. Your name. It still feels like it’s not real.”

“Oh, it’s real.” Ruslan nuzzled his nose against Johnny, as they both began chasing the other’s lips with small moves. “I think I’ll need some soft pillows to sit my ass for the next days.”

“Good,” Johnny said curtly. “That won’t leave you time or motivation to chase after other dudes.”

Ruslan burst into laughter for real now. “I made a promise. And so far, you’ve been keeping your part of the deal. So there’s no reason for me to cheat on you.”

“Hmm, it’s all like we’re in some relationship or something,” Johnny joked.

“I guess,” Ruslan teased, batting his eyelashes a few times.

It was a bit funny to see a strong, rough man like Johnny so taken with someone like him. Of course, Johnny didn’t know the whole truth. Ruslan would tell him, eventually. Just to make sure to clear the air. But right now he was having way too much fun to ruin everything with serious conversation.

Johnny could say that he hadn't felt that good in years. Hell, he could not remember ever feeling that good. Not even as a kid, when he had had no ideas about the real world and whatnot. Ruslan's pretty eyes were making him feel like some stupid teenager. After a weekend spent in Ruslan's arms, the visit to his mom had been uneventful and not as hurtful as usual.

It was strange to think that he had lived for so long without hope. All that guided him was his instinct to survive. His entire life was a ring. A cage. But now someone was digging a tunnel to get him, and that guy was no other than this pretty boy.

He shook his head and chuckled at himself, as he sat at a table in the usual dining dump where he went for his meals. It didn't look like much on the outside or the inside. But they had good food. And Johnny knew what to order to keep himself in shape.

"Would you mind if I took a seat?"

Johnny looked up, a bit surprised. People usually left him alone. Even after coming here for months, they never bothered him. The waitress also knew he wasn't some big talker. So he had every right to be surprised.

And even more so, seeing who was right there, dressed up to snuff, waiting patiently for his answer.

He shrugged, to hide his surprise. Mr. Kent, the older one, sat across from him and began staring at him like he was some mystery he needed to figure out.

Chapter Nine – The Green-Eyed Monster

Johnny looked at Mr. Kent, too, standing his ground. He was still waiting for the other to talk. Depending on the opponent, he either waited for the guy to make the first move, or went for the kill. The former happened when he didn't know his opponent. He had respect for what he had yet to learn about the man in front of him. And, unlike others, he knew to be patient. If he waited long enough, his enemy would show his true colors, and he would know where he stood.

Yet the silence was stretching between them. The waitress approached their table, shuffling her feet. She stood by, waiting. Just like them, she wasn't saying a word, either.

Not for long. "Are you gonna order somethin'?" she asked the older Mr. Kent directly.

"A coffee, please," Mr. Kent said, enunciating every word, and slowly pulling out his leather gloves.

Johnny was damned curious. He knew who Douglas Kent was, had even seen him a few times from afar, but never talked to him. He wasn't interested in the guy. Why should he?

"You seem to have made quite an impression on my son," Mr. Kent finally began speaking.

Johnny said nothing. What was he to say to that? "So?" he eventually asked, seeing that the other was silent again.

Now, if he looked closely, he had the feeling he could see some similarities between Ruslan and his old man. It wasn't much, but still. It proved that the guy's trophy wife hadn't had her baby with the driver or the gardener. Well, Douglas Kent might have been something in his prime. He looked good for a guy his age. He was dignified, a bit thin, and his brown eyes were scrutinizing without fear. And he had that air of elegance about him that said he had been born into money.

He knew how to read his opponents, too. That meant that Douglas Kent was not someone anyone with half a brain should underestimate. And Johnny had half a brain still intact, no matter how many hits to the head he had gotten in his life. Fewer than his opponents, that was for sure. And all that mattered.

All the more reason for Johnny to keep his mouth shut and give away nothing.

"You are a good fighter," Mr. Kent continued. "I like your explosive style. I heard you also have endurance, too. A powerful combination."

The waitress almost slammed the coffee on the table. Johnny ground his teeth for a second. The woman could have shown a bit more care, seeing who decided to have a coffee in that old dump.

He caught himself in time. Why the hell did he care if Douglas Kent were treated like crap and got lousy service? It wasn't like people there cared for the likes of the guy. Just like the man's golden world cared naught for poor people.

Mr. Kent thanked the woman for the coffee, without showing for one second that he was bothered by her behavior. "My son," he began again, "is meant for greater things in this world."

"You mean more than wasting his time with some guy like me," Johnny cut his words.

"Yes," the reply came right away.

"So? What do you want?" Johnny said roughly and began digging into his steak.

It was a bit chewy and leathery, but it was pure protein, and that was all that counted.

"For you to heed my words." Mr. Kent frowned as he looked at the coffee cup, probably considering whether he should drink that crap or not.

"Shoot," Johnny said, with a small shrug.

"Keep things simple. I understand why Ruslan likes you. I may be old, but I still remember the thrill one could get from an exciting affair. Especially a young heart," Mr. Kent said and pushed the coffee cup away discreetly.

"Simple how?" Johnny gestured with his fork.

Somehow he wasn't hungry anymore.

"Don't fill Ruslan's head with empty promises. There are much better prospects lining up for him, and he doesn't need the complication."

Johnny could feel the itch to tell Ruslan's papa to fuck off. But he knew better. That was exactly what his opponent was expecting. For Johnny to behave like an uncivilized ape and then put him down, feeling all superior while dressed up in designer clothes and never having had to endure hunger, real hunger, for a day in his posh life.

So he put his fork down and looked into his plate for about two seconds. "Mr. Kent," he started and looked up.

The old man's eyebrows rose about a fraction of an inch. Enough for Johnny to know he got his attention.

"It looks like you raised Ruslan well. Other guys like him, his age, and with that kind of money, would spit on someone like me. But not him. He's a good guy. And I'd never do something to be ashamed of to someone like that."

And that was all he had to say on the matter.

Mr. Kent eased back into his seat.

“I must admit, Mr. Bryne, I am a tad surprised. Thank you for commending me on my parenting skills. And I do say so without an ounce of irony. It is rare that I am wrong in my assumptions about people, but in this case, I have to stand corrected. You are different than what I imagined. Very well.”

“So, does that mean I have your blessing to date your son?” Johnny grinned.

Mr. Kent chuckled. “The same recommendation still stands. I’m glad that you seem to be a more considerate young man than I pegged you to be. Let me throw a wild guess. Did your mother take care of you not to take the wrong path?”

Johnny tensed. What did this guy know about his mom?

“She must be proud of you,” Mr. Kent continued. “But Ruslan can and will do better. Please don’t take it personal. I have only the best interest in mind for him. Just like your mother must have for you.”

Johnny set his chin high. “Ruslan can think for himself. Or don’t you think he can?”

“Oh, I do think that. But when young men like you are involved, I’m afraid thinking is not at all what Ruslan is doing. And, for that, I must tell you. Have fun. You are both young and like to run a bit wild. But don’t imagine you can go further than this. I will have something to say about it. Men like you will come and go all the time. But family is forever. And when Ruslan chooses, he will choose the right thing.”

Johnny could feel his fists curling tight. He wasn’t even thinking about anything beyond surviving the next week, and this guy thought he was ready to say some vows with Ruslan Kent, a pretty man from the right side of the tracks. It was so unbelievable it wasn’t even funny.

And it was damn pissing him off. Proving people wrong was what he did best, in the cage, and outside of it.

“With all due respect, Mr. Kent, whatever happens between Ruslan and me is none of your damned business. You think you have me all figured out. It’s not right. And I’ll prove myself to you.”

“How? Fighting? I have already told you, Mr. Bryne --”

“Johnny,” he interrupted him. “Call me Johnny. I’ll be around a lot. So get used to me, Mr. Kent.”

“Ah, I see. Well, life is not the ring, Johnny.”

“Nah, that’s where you’re wrong, Mr. Kent,” Johnny interrupted him again. He wasn’t worried that he was stepping on his toes, now. “Life is just like the ring.”

“I suppose you’re young and this attitude is understandable,” Mr. Kent said with a sigh, and he linked his fingers while resting his hands on the table. The mere sight of the peeling veneer against that perfect manicure made his presence odd in that place. “In the ring, there are still rules. You know who is attacking you. You have your muscles, your determination, your training, by your side. But what can you do if all your strength is taken from you?”

“Is that a threat?” Johnny asked bluntly.

Mr. Kent shook his head. “No. Consider it friendly life advice. Ruslan will eventually tire of you. I just wanted to save him a little grief, seeing that there is a risk that you might be the one to walk away first. And to make it clear, you don’t have to worry about me not playing fair. But, as Ruslan’s guardian, I still must put him above else. Is that clear enough, young man?”

“Clear as day.” Johnny nodded shortly. “But just to answer your question from before. Yeah, people can take away your strength in real life. I looked down the barrel of a gun. I’m not stupid. But unless they’re willing to be done with me for good, there’s something they can’t take away from me.”

“Please continue. What you are saying is rather interesting,” Mr. Kent encouraged him.

Johnny tapped his index finger against his temple. “I won’t forget. And whoever wrongs me, better watch over his shoulder. ‘Cause I’ll come for him. One day or another.”

Mr. Kent was examining him with unhidden interest.

“I am aware of your old history, Johnny. I must commend you for the torch you’re holding to your father.”

Johnny struggled with the lump in his throat as his eyes dropped to his plate again. So Ruslan’s dad knew about him.

“Not my father,” he struggled to get the words out.

“Ah, of course, please forgive me,” Douglas Kent said. “Your mother then. You are a good son, Johnny. But you should forgive your father. He’s not the traitor you think him to be.”

Johnny’s head snapped up that the bones in his neck almost popped. “Did you know him?” he asked, his throat dry.

“I only know the facts. And I do believe I still have my faculties in all working order. Of course, I’m not emotionally invested, as you are.”

“Have you told Ruslan? About my family?” Johnny asked.

“No. It is not my business to do so. And just to make it clear, I always check the people I intend to hire. This has nothing to do with my son and what the two of you do together. But you’re an intense man. You, most probably, face uncertainty, every second of your life. This is another reason why I think you would not be good for my son. Spare him the complications you come along with. It is a simple request. Should you be in my place, you would think the same.”

Johnny had to admit he felt a little less pissed now. The guy made sense. But that didn’t mean he wanted Ruslan less. “I’ll do it,” he said without thinking. “I’ll change your mind.”

“Oh?” Mr. Kent expressed his surprise. “I don’t see how you will be able to do so. There is no possible way for you to change who you are.”

“I’ll prove my worth,” Johnny said stubbornly. “About how I’ll do that, let that be my business.”

Mr. Kent reached for his wallet and took out a twenty. He placed it neatly on the table.

“No. Put that back,” Johnny said. “I don’t want no charity.”

“Who’s to say I don’t want to leave the waitress a tip?” Mr. Kent started putting back his gloves and made no gesture to take back the money.

“A tip? What for?” Johnny snorted. “Outstanding service? Or the best coffee you’ve ever had in your life?”

Mr. Kent laughed softly as he stood up.

“You are an interesting man, Johnny Bryne. Well, as young people say today. I do accept your challenge. Feel free to try to convince me you’re the right man for my son. Change my mind, as you said. I am a fair man. Which doesn’t exclude the possibility of failure on your part. But I salute your determination. Should you decide to drop off the challenge, I won’t hold it against you. And I assure you that I’ll do everything I can to point Ruslan the right way, but also that I won’t fight dirty. Please enjoy your meal.”

Johnny stood there, without touching his food, for a long time. First Yanis, then Douglas Kent. Both wanted to protect Ruslan from something. But what? It probably had to do with how scared Ruslan had been that time.

He had not one intention, without a shadow of a doubt, to hurt him. He liked Ruslan. Hell, he hadn’t wanted anyone like this in a long time. And, except for that time, Ruslan hadn’t proven to be some delicate flower. He could hold his own, Johnny thought.

Although the same feeling of protection toward Ruslan was growing in him, too. Like it was something inside him, telling him that if anyone, anytime, would try to hurt him, he was sure to end that scumbag.

That kind of intensity wasn't for hookups. Not even for pretty men who were Johnny's weakness. Why the hell did he care?

Ruslan Kent was good. Pretty. No, friggin' beautiful. That was how he was. But no, that wasn't it.

There was just something in how he stared at Johnny with those deep blue eyes, as he could see inside him. Like there was no place for Johnny left to hide. That was good because he had no intention to do that. And Ruslan's dad could be sure of what he had just said. He would prove himself. He knew Ruslan was all worthy of that effort.

Ruslan took a long look at himself in the mirror. Tentatively, he pressed his fingers against the ghost of a mark on his chest. Whenever he brought someone to bed, he was pretty much against getting bitten. It wasn't his cup of tea, and only put up with it if the guy was good. But Snake was a different matter. Not Snake, Johnny, he smiled at the memory of how the fighter had insisted that Ruslan should call him by his given name, not his ring moniker.

It wasn't only because Johnny was good in bed. No, it was something else, something that went deeper, definitely deeper than that fading mark on his chest. He shook his head and laughed softly at himself. What was he now? Some smitten heroine from a romance novel?

The truth was he felt there was a connection between them. Like they knew each other, much better and for much longer than the few weeks that had passed since they had first laid eyes on one another. And that was ...

Not so easy to explain. Yes, they fit in bed. But that was just part of whatever was going on between them. In Johnny's arms, he felt protected. He felt like he deserved that protection, no questions asked. Not that Yanis or his papa didn't care for him, for real. But Johnny didn't have any reason to hold him like that, and look at him like that, and mark him like that. He was, after all, a stranger.

Unless he probably felt the same thing, somehow. Well, he wouldn't ask. He only risked looking like a fool. They were fantastic fuck buddies, that was what they were. And probably all that fantastic sex between them was making his brain imagine things.

Ah, damn, he bit his bottom lip and pulled at his cock. The memories from the previous weekend spent together came unbound. He only had to close his eyes and see before him Johnny's deep, dark, intense eyes that were telling him that he mattered. More than just a bed partner. More than just a means to pass the time.

Alone, all by himself, he could fool himself with that. He grabbed at his cock and squeezed hard. The familiar jolt of pleasure made his breath hitch. Damn, it seemed so long until Saturday.

And there was this other thing. Usually, after a sex tryst, he wasn't so keen to do it again. Actually, his body wasn't. His fucked up mind wished for another human contact, despite his body not being able to take it.

But he had no idea whether Johnny knew how to fuck without wrecking him for days, or his body was growing accustomed to him. The truth was his body was craving Johnny, just as much as his twisted mind.

Ruslan used his other hand to push at his behind. There was no discomfort, not the usual pain that came after, more often than not. His body was opening up, eager for the touch. He began fingering himself fast to the same rhythm he was stroking his cock. "Fuck," he let out, as he opened his eyes to see ropes of cum hitting the full-size mirror.

His knees were getting weak, and he let himself down. He was getting a bit crazy about Johnny 'Snake' Bryne. And that was a bit dangerous. He craved men and their cocks as a general rule. But one guy in particular? That was not how he handled things.

If he didn't want to lose his head, he needed to put an order in things. Johnny was a diversion, a magnificent one, trapped in a fantastic body that Ruslan was sure he adored by now. He wanted so much to get to know him, to trace every nook and cranny of his body, to taste him, to feel him inside out.

And all had happened so fast that it scared him. So he was a slut. That was nothing new, and he also knew it was wrong. Craving Johnny's cock in his ass was natural for someone like him that used to be a toy up for sale. No one could change that about him. He had been weak, and he had caved in when threatened.

His papa had tried to tell him not to blame himself for that. That he had been young, and without a choice. But others were young, too, and they didn't get to become nymphomaniacs with a penchant for self-loathing. Yanis had been in the same situation, and he hadn't ended up selling his ass. It was true he had been forced into other bad stuff, but at least he hadn't put his ass up to be fucked.

His adoptive father had suggested therapy on more than one occasion. But Ruslan was glad the old man hadn't forced him. He had nothing to say to a therapist. He didn't believe in such things.

And he was afraid that the man or woman would try to take something from him, something that was only his. It didn't matter that it was an unhealthy craving for cock. It was his, and only his, and that was all that mattered.

It took him a few seconds to realize his phone was ringing. He pushed himself up and hurried to see who was calling. "Hey, papa," he said with a smile. "Where are you? Do you care about dining out?"

After eight years spent in the old man's care, he was still giddy with excitement whenever his papa was taking him someplace nice. There were so few people in the world who he truly was connected to. Yanis, then his papa. And now, Johnny.

Maybe he missed his real parents. All orphans of the world must be the same, he thought. Although Yanis never talked about it. The guy either kept it to himself, or he didn't care. But Ruslan didn't think so. Yanis cared just as much; only that he had chosen, a long time ago, not to ever talk about it.

So he was happy for being treated like a favored child. Douglas Kent loved spoiling him, and that was why he was free to run around with guys like Johnny and Yanis. There was nothing his father ever denied him.

"I can't believe it," he pouted.

Somehow his favored dessert didn't seem as tasty. And here it was. Something that Douglas Kent didn't intend to let him do.

"I have no intention to hide this from you, Russy," Douglas said. "I am a tad worried. You're spending so much time with this guy."

"So?" he stubbornly kept looking down. "I like him."

"I want better for you. You deserve better," Douglas continued.

"That's not true," Ruslan murmured.

"Ruslan," Douglas warned. "I understand, to some degree, why you have refused help. But allow me to worry for you. Johnny Bryne is not a good choice."

"And how can you tell that? Because you went to scare him away, and he didn't care? At least, you told me that you went to do that." Ruslan looked up, glaring at his papa now.

Douglas's lips twitched in amusement. "He is determined. I will give him that. But I don't want you hurt. You get too invested in him, and it will end up badly. Men like him are not likely to stick around. They're searching for something that only they know what it is. Trust me, as I have lived a little."

"I want to take my chance," Ruslan said, disliking how much he sounded like begging. "And where did you get that idea that something is going on between us? Except fucking?"

Douglas sighed. "Ah, Russy. Are you asking me how I can tell? It's simple. By the way your eyes light up when you look at him. By the way he stared at me like I was his opponent in the ring when I went to talk to him about you. You are both young, and while at your age, you must

be well beyond first loves, I fear, yes, that something is going on between you two, that you don't even realize."

Ruslan pursed his lips. He was trying hard to hide his excitement over what his papa was telling him about Johnny. Could it be that they both felt the same? What were the odds?

"I want to introduce you to someone this week. He comes from far away, and I want you to show him around. He is the son of a very influential business partner of mine, and he would very much like to make your acquaintance."

"Okay," Ruslan murmured. "I can play chaperone. Wait, is this guy one of the strapping young men who happen to be gay, that you were talking about?"

"Indeed," Douglas confirmed. "He is very discreet, as is his family, as you might well imagine, but here, we are far away from any gossipy newspapers and the like. So he might appreciate being able to spread his wings for a bit. I'm counting on you to be an accommodating host."

"I suppose I can do that. But otherwise, I won't promise anything else," Ruslan said with conviction.

"And I wouldn't have it any other way. Although I have a feeling you two are going to hit it well. Call it a parent's intuition."

Ruslan glared a little. "I'm not going to cheat on Johnny."

"Cheat? I thought you guys weren't attached," Douglas joked. "So you keep telling me."

"All right, I will babysit this guy," Ruslan said with a sigh, avoiding to give a direct answer to the unspoken question. "But that doesn't change anything between Johnny and me."

"Fine by me. Young hearts are fickle. I am counting on that. Just make sure that Johnny doesn't become a complication you don't want. Of course, if that happens, I hope you will tell me so that I can take care of things."

"Why are you so bent against me being with Johnny?" Ruslan questioned.

"Besides the obvious?" Douglas quirked an eyebrow. "He is not the right man for you."

"Because he doesn't have any money? I wouldn't have any if you didn't take me in. So we're practically the same."

"He is trouble."

"Seriously, papa, it's like sometimes you and Yanis think the same," he said right away. "I don't need that much protection. I know men. If it's anything I know in this world," he added.

“Yanis.” Douglas looked at him with reproach. “I know he’s your friend, but, just like Johnny, he’s not good for you.”

“You don’t like the guy I’m with, you don’t like my best friend ... What’s next? Are you going to ground me?” Ruslan pouted.

Douglas shook his head with mirth. “If I only could. I care about you. But Yanis is in with some rough crowd.”

“He’s not going to hurt me if that’s what you think,” Ruslan said.

“People can hurt you without any intention to do that,” Douglas says wistfully. “Sometimes, they are not even the ones who do the hurting. It is just something that comes with the territory, I guess.”

Ruslan studied the old man’s face in silence for a while. There was pain there. He could tell. But he knew that if he asked, he wouldn’t receive an answer.

“Who hurt you? Who was it, papa? And what do you mean by ‘that comes with the territory’?”

“Ah, that means that it comes with caring for someone,” Douglas replied, and his eyes seemed to look somewhere far away.

“Who was this someone? Was it your son? Did you ever have one? What happened to him?” Ruslan insisted.

Douglas’s eyes focused again. “No, I do not have a son, nor did I have. You’re the only one, Russy.”

Ruslan let his eyes down again. Somehow, like always, the old man wasn’t telling him everything. Or anything at all.

Nigel Davenport. The guy’s name was a mouthful, Ruslan thought dryly, but he offered his hand and his best smile. It might have been that his papa was insisting so much with this guy, that he took an instant dislike at him.

The man was in his late twenties and had a strong jawline, and straight white teeth that he liked showing in what Ruslan considered an insincere smile. He had the healthy complexion of someone raised up north, and the November chill was coloring the height of his cheeks. From his height, he towered over Ruslan, and the hand that took his to shake it was square and rough.

Maybe he had grown up on some farm, Ruslan continued his evaluation. Maybe something of his slight distaste in the man was showing on his face because the guy’s nostrils flared.

“You’re much more beautiful than people say,” Nigel said bluntly, and his smile stretched even more.

Ah, those flaring nostrils were a sign of something else. Ruslan smiled politely. “I am glad to make your acquaintance, Nigel,” he said, trying hard not to sound like a flirt.

Because of his papa, now he had to police every word that was coming out of his mouth.

“I see you travel light,” he pointed at Nigel’s carry-all.

Nigel shrugged. “I am not exactly a fashionable man. A few changes of clothes are enough for me.”

“So you’re not staying long?” Ruslan said as he looked over to the driver and made a gesture for him to get Nigel’s luggage.

“I wasn’t planning,” Nigel replied, with the same large, a bit dumb, but somewhat cute for a guy his size, smile. “But I might change my mind. Or, better said, you might.”

Ruslan wanted to roll his eyes, but he had promised the old man that he wouldn’t be rude.

“There are not many places to see here, except for casinos, of course. Papa tells me you are interested in some partnership. I can assure you that we offer the best entertainment in the valley. And that I won’t show you the competition.”

Nigel laughed, and Ruslan was starting to wonder what the hell the old man must have been thinking when telling him he would hit it off with this dude. Nigel wasn’t laughing. He was neighing like a horse. Could it be that he was also hung like one? Was that why his papa thought he would like Nigel? At least, internally, he rolled his eyes.

They climbed in the back of the limousine since his papa had told him to receive the guest properly.

“May I offer you something?” he gestured toward the mini bar.

He felt like he was in the mood for one if he was to survive this encounter. But his guest shook his head, and it wouldn’t have been polite to drink on his own.

“Do you not drink as a general rule?” Ruslan asked.

“How could you tell?” Nigel grinned at him and stretched one arm to rest it behind Ruslan.

This guy thought he was at the movies and had to find a way to grab his date by the shoulders.

“Just a lucky guess,” Ruslan said brightly.

“Alcohol fogs your mind and steals years of your life.” Nigel nodded with self-importance. “I never drink.”

“That’s very intelligent of you,” Ruslan said politely.

Nigel’s hand moved on his shoulder. Pretending he needed to lean forward to push away some lint from the hem of his pants, Ruslan shook off the touch discreetly. He eased back into the seat, but Nigel’s hand returned on his shoulder. Ruslan turned to face him, to gauge what all that meant. By the content grin Nigel had plastered all over his face, he was satisfied with his game plan. Maybe he even thought it was working.

“So, what are your plans?” he asked, looking Nigel squarely in the eyes.

“Hmm, probably to do this.” Nigel didn’t hesitate and leaned in to kiss him.

Ruslan barely managed to avoid a direct kiss on the lips, and Nigel just caught his cheek. “Nigel,” he said, trying to sound stern enough. “That’s not very nice of you.”

Eventually, Nigel got the hint, and his hand dropped from Ruslan’s shoulder.

“Sorry,” he said, and giggled like a school kid caught doing something naughty. “It’s just that everyone talked about how pretty you were, and I just thought they were exaggerating. But now that I see you in person, I can only be a little upset over not coming to make your acquaintance a little sooner.”

All right, Nigel had his charm, Ruslan had to admit. He was maybe clumsy and impatient, but he wasn’t a bad guy.

Which didn’t work in his favor, Ruslan thought. He had a thing, a strong thing, for a bad boy, with eyes dark like sin, and with lips so rough that were making him go crazy, and even rougher hands that could pull him apart, but didn’t. No, Johnny’s hands were gentle with all the callouses and hardened skin, and small cuts and fading bruises. He barely stopped a shiver.

“Are you all right?” Nigel asked him, taking him again by the shoulder and pulling him close. “You seem a little cold.”

“I am all right,” he replied and straightened himself up in his place, to minimize the contact between them.

He needed to focus for a bit, and entertain the guest. For sure, the type of entertainment he had in mind was different than the one Nigel was most probably thinking about if he were to take after that broad grin stretching over horse like teeth.

Johnny had been training hard for days now. Yet, there was still a while until Saturday. Never before had he had the feeling that days were crawling like snails. And now, he was thinking about nothing else but for Saturday to come already so that he could score another win, and then spend the rest of his time until Monday fucking Ruslan into the mattress.

He sent the speed bag almost off its hinges. The time passed just the same, no matter how fast he was.

So the old man was trying to make him understand that Ruslan was not for someone like him. And maybe it was the truth. But he wouldn't give up. If anything, he could feel his blood boil more when thinking of the pretty man.

Fucking beautiful eyes. Bedroom eyes, some people might say. Yeah, that was totally how Ruslan's eyes were. They were inviting him to jump in the bed with him and fuck until exhaustion.

Johnny still needed to keep his head sharp. Without beating his opponent, there was no Ruslan and no fucking for him.

But that didn't mean that it was easy to take his mind off him.

He headed back home after training. As much as he could call that home. The room at the old gym felt dingy and crappy. Nothing like the luxury surrounding Ruslan. Some might have said that Ruslan was some golden ticket for someone like Johnny. But all that money didn't matter. If Ruslan were to appear right there, in that crappy room, he could light it up and make it feel like a frigging palace.

Johnny took out his phone. He had promised himself to be good and keep a straight head. He had told Ruslan they might just fuck in the middle of the week if he wanted. But now, he had a sudden fear that he would jinx it if he changed their routine. Also, he wanted to know that it was earned, what was happening between them.

Fighters like him were all about routine. You honed each punch, each kick, each feint, each move to perfection. By repeating and repeating the same routine until it became second nature.

But that didn't mean he couldn't call. "Hey," he said.

Johnny hoped his smile was not easy to guess through the phone because he was grinning so hard right now that his cheeks were hurting.

"Hey," Ruslan replied, and he seemed a bit surprised.

"How's it hanging?" he asked.

"Like usual," came the somewhat curt reply.

Hmm, something was off. He could tell. “What’s up?” he asked, the grin now quickly wiping off his face.

The old man was up. Damn! Had he read Ruslan wrong? Was he the only one who thought something was going on between them?

“I’d love to chat, but now is not a good time,” Ruslan replied.

Johnny ground his teeth. There was apparently a masculine voice he heard somewhere in the background. Maybe it was even Ruslan’s dad, but Johnny wouldn’t fool himself.

Ruslan was somewhere, with some dude. And he couldn’t talk to Johnny. Just what kind of stupid was he now?

“Okay,” he said gruffly.

He wouldn’t ask if they saw each other on Saturday. Johnny Bryne wasn’t some mangy dog waiting for a bone.

“Was it something urgent?” Ruslan asked, and now he seemed a bit concerned.

“No.”

He just wanted to hear Ruslan’s voice. Maybe fool around over the phone. But now he was just getting the cold shower he needed to get his head back in the game.

“Well, then, goodbye,” Ruslan said, after two seconds of silence.

“Bye,” he said quickly.

He almost wanted to throw the phone and have the satisfaction to see it smashing against the wall. But he knew better than that.

What the fuck? Was he jealous now? Ruslan had told him they were exclusive, but he was some rich guy who had never had to worry about anything in his life. So maybe a promise to some guy who wasn’t living in the lap of luxury like he was meant squat.

On Saturday, Johnny would go into that ring and wreck the unlucky fucker who faced him. And then he would see if Ruslan were a man of honor or it was enough for his papa to pull the leash and he was obedient like a stupid well-bred mutt.

Wiping his face with both hands, he suddenly felt like laughing at himself. Surviving this day. Surviving this week. It was all that mattered.

But he would find out if Ruslan tried to play him like a shmuck. He was not that kind of fool.

“Who was it? You seemed very serious right there,” Nigel said while picking a bruschetta from the plate and stuffing his mouth with it.

“Ah, a business contact,” Ruslan lied right away.

Why on earth had he behaved like that? Like he had something to hide. Somehow, he felt guilty of spending time with Nigel, without Johnny’s knowing. It was ridiculous. He wasn’t cheating on anyone. But he could tell Johnny was pissed now.

Which, again, made little sense. He had been happy to hear Johnny’s voice. Should have he been alone, he would have loved to talk to him, most preferably for hours.

Maybe it was because Nigel was openly flirting with him. Ruslan wasn’t offering the desired response, but that didn’t seem to put him off at all. He was trying to tell himself he was doing nothing but being polite to his guest, but there he was, having fun in a fancy restaurant with this guy, while Johnny wasn’t present.

He wanted to slap himself silly. What was with all these fucked up thoughts, all of a sudden? They weren’t that serious about one another, now were they? There was no point to feel guilty. He was just absurd about the whole thing, for some obscure reason.

“How do you find the food?” he asked his guest.

Nigel nodded hurriedly. He had quite the appetite, Ruslan thought, while he stared at his plate. He wasn’t that much in the mood to eat.

It was only late at night that he could call Johnny. It had taken him hours of entertaining the guest without offering anything that wasn’t on the menu, and he had finally managed to put Nigel to sleep, in his own hotel room. The old man was going to be pleased. Nigel had seemed happy with being shown around. Probably the business his papa wanted to strike with the guy’s family was going to work out.

He took out his coat and threw it on the back of a chair. Pulling his phone out, he went to look out the window, at the evening setting in. Days were shorter, colder now, but that only meant staying indoors felt cozier than ever.

“Hey,” he said softly, after waiting for Johnny to pick up for what felt like minutes.

Something like a grunt was the only response.

“Sorry about earlier. I was caught in a business meeting, and I couldn’t talk.”

It was, after all, the truth, despite what a little righteous voice was trying to tell him. In a way, he felt entitled to revolt against himself. No matter how much innuendo – not so veiled, to be honest – Nigel had thrown his way, he had politely dodged any invitation to get busy with him.

Something like a mumble followed now from the other end.

Ruslan frowned. “Am I calling at a bad time?”

“No. I don’t have bad times,” Johnny finally said.

“You don’t have bad times.” Ruslan tried to make sense of Johnny’s words, by repeating them.

“I would have loved to spend some time talking to you. It wasn’t possible.”

“Sure. No problem. You don’t have to say sorry,” Johnny replied.

Ruslan exhaled. “Okay. Now, tell me, have you perhaps changed your mind? You know, about our deal?”

He didn’t want to be led by the nose. That would have been ludicrous. Somehow now he felt pissed at Johnny. If he didn’t want to have anything to do with him anymore, better say it now.

“No. So how was the business meeting?” Johnny seemed keen to change the subject, but his voice remained cold.

“Why are you so ... I don’t know,” Ruslan huffed.

Could it be that Johnny was with someone? So he kept being formal like that, for the sake of the other person. That could be possible. A man like that, as he had noticed from the first time he had laid his eyes on him, must have had plenty of people wanting to bed him.

“So? You mean like you were earlier?” Johnny spat.

Oh, so he was pissed. Ruslan had guessed right the first time. “Are you alone?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m alone,” Johnny replied. “Unlike you earlier.”

“Wait, are you jealous?” Ruslan expressed his astonishment at that idea.

“Nah, why would I be? We have a deal, that’s all,” Johnny said.

“You better not forget about it. It goes both ways, you know?” Ruslan said, somewhat miffed now, as well.

“Wait, are you thinking I’m fucking someone behind your back?” Johnny’s voice now sounded incredulous.

Ruslan opened his mouth to say something and then closed it tight.

“It looks like you’re the jealous one,” Johnny’s voice was warming up now.

“I’m not jealous,” Ruslan protested. “What are you talking about?”

“You are,” Johnny said with satisfaction. “So, do you miss me or something?”

Johnny was now drawling the words with self-assurance. That was getting a bit on Ruslan’s nerves. But somehow, the fact that he could hear how relieved Johnny was now was making him smile a little, too.

“Yeah, I do miss you,” Ruslan said, but his voice still showed his irritation.

Johnny chuckled. “Good.”

Ruslan pursed his lips. “Good? Is that everything you have to say?”

Snake was really something.

“Yeah, it’s good, pretty, because I miss you, too,” Johnny’s voice dropped to a whisper.

Ruslan could pretend all he wanted that his cheeks weren’t getting warm that very moment. He was, after all, alone, and no one could see him, getting all mushy and vulnerable over some guy. Not just some guy. A guy who seemed to be special to him.

“Cat got your tongue?” Johnny teased since Ruslan wasn’t saying anything.

Or breathing too much.

“No,” he replied curtly. “Ah, damn, you really know how to piss off a guy,” Ruslan mumbled, to hide his excitement and the smidge of embarrassment he was feeling that moment.

Johnny laughed. “I know many things. Now tell me, how much do you miss me?”

“Only a little,” Ruslan teased, too.

“Are you sure? Because I miss you a lot. I can barely wait to see you again,” Johnny said gently.

Ruslan grabbed the phone tightly. He felt like a damn school kid talking for the first time with his crush. What the hell was wrong with him? He had already had the man.

But, apparently, it hadn’t been enough. “I wish Saturday were here already,” he whispered.

“Yeah, me, too,” Johnny whispered, too.

The conversation felt so intimate between the two of them, despite few words being spoken. For a while, they only listened to each other’s breathing.

“I guess I should let you train,” Ruslan said.

“I guess I should, yeah. Although now it’s time I go to sleep,” Johnny replied.

“I was talking about the following days, not right now,” Ruslan said. “The days until Saturday.”

Johnny chuckled. “Only Friday left, actually.”

“And the whole Saturday until evening,” Ruslan added.

“Yeah, a whole bunch of hours,” Johnny said, with what Ruslan could only interpret as regret.

“Yeah,” he replied because somehow he could not feel words coming easily to him now.

The silence of the evening was stretching all around him. For the first time in a very long time, he could tell he was all alone in that big house. The old man was right. Only that he wasn’t usually thinking about it. Now, talking to Johnny over a phone, and wishing the man was with him that very moment, he could feel how lonely his big, beautiful house was.

“Well, as they say, time flies.” Ruslan shook away the sudden melancholia. “I can barely wait to see you win again.”

“Ah, so you’re sure that I’ll win,” Johnny joked, and Ruslan smiled.

“Don’t you dare not to come home with me a winner,” Ruslan warned, but he was laughing now.

“With such encouragement --”

“It’s actually a threat,” Ruslan said lightly.

“Ah, so if I’m not a winner --”

“Told you. Don’t even think about it,” Ruslan feigned a more serious tone now.

“All right, pretty,” Johnny said slowly. “See you on Saturday, then?”

“Definitely,” Ruslan replied.

And he continued to smile long after their conversation was over. At least, for most of his weekends, he wouldn’t be all alone in that big house.

Chapter Ten – Good Man, Bad Boy

“Why do I have to take him with me?” Ruslan protested.

Douglas looked at him, frowning. “Nigel has come a long way to spend some time with us.”

“You mean with me.” Ruslan pointed at himself. “Seriously, papa, the guy is such a bore. And I have some stuff to do later.”

“With Johnny? No one says that you can’t do as you please. But I thought you would love to show off our ring to a potential business partner. Seeing how you are already so invested in this.”

“I can tell you’re thinking of something.” Ruslan began pacing the room, while the old man was seated behind his desk. “Of how to make me break up with Johnny.”

Douglas shrugged. “Of course I am. I made no secret of the fact that I don’t condone this relationship.”

“I don’t understand you.” Ruslan sat on the small sofa by the window, which had always been his favorite spot, from the time he was still living under the old man’s roof.

He liked his papa’s studio. He had always found it a peaceful place. It was easy to recall how he had often laid on that same spot, with a book in his arms, while listening to Douglas’s even scribbling. In an age where everyone was using computers, the old man was still adamant against technology taking over every aspect of his life. So he was still sending correspondence written by hand, and he seemed to have a lot of it, too.

Ruslan would have liked to have the same reassuring feeling now, for his papa to tell him that it was all right to feel the way he felt about Johnny. But Douglas seemed to have something against Johnny, and Ruslan needed a different approach to change his mind.

“So many times, I got involved with guys, and you didn’t care about them. Why Johnny?” He pouted and crossed his arms over his chest.

“You mean men with an unsavory reputation?” Douglas looked at him over the rim of his glasses. “You never took one home. You never spent more time than what you deemed enough for a fleeting tryst with any of them. I have my reasons to be worried, Russy, as I told you.”

“It’s like you know something about this guy that I don’t.” Ruslan opened his arms wide, as if in supplication for his plea to be heard. “Wait.” His eyes squared on Douglas. “You do. You know something about Johnny. About his past. Or about his family. What is it that makes you so worried? So he’s a fighter. I get it. He’s not a businessman like Nigel is. And he’s poor. But I don’t see how any of these could make you so worried. Johnny is actually a good man.”

“It wasn’t because he was a good man that he got those terrible scars on his back,” the old man interrupted him.

Ruslan stared at his papa, wide-eyed. So Douglas knew about how Johnny had gotten hurt. Admittedly, he was curious. But Johnny had chosen not to tell him, and he wouldn’t pry. When that happened, it would be because Johnny trusted him, and not before.

“Aren’t you going to ask me about details?” Douglas pushed his glasses back on the bridge of his nose.

“No. Johnny will tell me about that when he’s ready,” Ruslan said stubbornly.

“So you want to believe him. Has it not crossed your mind that he might choose to lie?” his papa inquired.

“Johnny’s not like that,” Ruslan said quickly.

“Ah, you’re so fierce and determined to take his side.” Douglas pursed his lips. “Have you known this man for how long, Russy? A few weeks at best? And you want to believe him over your parent who wants nothing but what’s best for you.”

Ruslan looked away, feeling a little chastised. “I know he’s a good guy,” he mumbled while still averting his eyes. “Are you trying to tell me he’s not?” He looked back at his papa with a tinge of fear.

Douglas’s eyes became warm when they met his. “Johnny Bryne is doing his best, Russy. But that’s not always enough. I am honest with you here. And I will not tell you anything about him that you don’t want to hear from me. I want to save you the pain that might come your way. For you, I want the best. I want to see you with someone who deserves you. Someone who can make you happy. Who will take care of you.”

“Someone like Nigel Davenport?” Ruslan glared now. “I can tell you, papa. The guy would be all down for some horizontal mambo, but I doubt he’s ready to take some vows and have you walk me down some aisle like you might be imagining it. It’s not like I’m some girl whose hand you can offer in marriage. You know that’s not how things work for gay guys. At least, not for gay guys like me,” he added.

“Like you? And what is that supposed to mean, Russy?” Douglas linked his fingers and sat his chin on top of them, elbows against the desk.

“Johnny is not the only one with a dark past. I have one of my own. Do you think goody-two-shoes Nigel would be as enthralled with me if he knew where I come from?”

Douglas’s eyes shadowed. “I am in the position to be able to wipe your past, Russy. I did that. No one would be able to prove anything, should some gossip resurface.”

Ruslan shook his head. "I love you, papa, for all that you did for me. But you forget that there are still people who know the truth. And I know the truth. It will never disappear from up here." Ruslan pointed at his temple.

"I know that," Douglas reproached him. "You still refuse to receive help. It would do you good. It would set you free."

"No." Ruslan shook his head. "I won't have a stranger digging around my brain."

"This is not how therapy works. You have misconceptions about it," Douglas said.

"Maybe I'm wrong, but I still don't want to go." He eased back into the sofa. "Let's say that I won't ever talk about it. What about the others?"

"The others?" The old man continued to look at him with scrutinizing eyes.

"Yeah, like, you know." Ruslan shifted in his place like he could not sit comfortably. "Those people at that place. The bad people," he whispered and closed his eyes.

"Ah, they won't talk," Douglas said matter-of-factly.

Ruslan's eyes snapped open. Something was off in how casually his papa was dismissing that possibility. "Why?"

Douglas shrugged. "It is a simple fact."

"Did something happen to those people? Papa, are you a gangster? Did you make them ... disappear?" he whispered.

"What a ludicrous idea, Russy." Douglas smiled. "I am definitely not a gangster."

"But how you said that those guys wouldn't talk ... I don't know. You give me the willies, sometimes." Ruslan squeezed his arms with his hands like he was suddenly cold.

"I am sure that is not the case. And you're just goofing around now. You know that behaving like a child will not work on me forever."

Ruslan rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I'm bound to get too old for that, at one point."

"You will always be my dear child," Douglas said with affection.

"And you just said that me behaving like that won't work forever," Ruslan replied.

"Just because I will know all your tricks by then," Douglas added quickly.

"All right, I will take Nigel with me to see the match. But my time is my own, okay?" Ruslan said.

“I would like that you don’t behave terribly familiar with Johnny in front of Nigel.”

“Why? Ah, damn, papa, you really think this guy will put some ring on my finger. Seriously, you’re so old-fashioned.”

“Of course I am old-fashioned. I am old, so it’s natural for me to be this way.” Douglas laughed. “Yes, I do believe that Nigel could have serious intentions. And why are you so much against marriage? You know it is possible.”

“C’mon, papa,” Ruslan complained, “not even country girls marry at twenty-four in this day and age. Do you expect gay guys who have all the reasons in the world not to get hitched to fit into some marriage bliss stereotype? You know that’s not working for most heterosexual couples. Plus, I have never had a serious relationship in my life. Jumping to get married would be a bit of a stretch, don’t you think?”

“Just give Nigel a chance. The young man is smitten with you, as I expected.”

“He wants the same thing as anyone else. And that’s fine. It’s not like I want something else, either. But I’m not interested in that particular thing with him.”

“Ah, and that’s because you do have a relationship right now.” Douglas shook his head but smiled.

“It’s not like that,” Ruslan protested, but he could feel his cheeks getting a bit warm.

“Your misplaced affection will be a cause for pain, Russy,” his papa said softly.

“Seriously, I’m not that into Johnny. I mean, he’s better than anyone else I’ve been with --”

“Russy, you can’t judge people only by their prowess in bedroom affairs.”

“Ugh, papa, I told you. Johnny is a good guy. Why are you and Yanis so sure he would hurt me, somehow? He’s the gentlest partner I’ve ever been with. I have nothing to worry about, and you don’t have either.”

“I see that Yanis is more responsible these days than you are.”

“Well, he’s getting married. I suppose he feels a bit more responsible than usual,” Ruslan said with a small smile.

He had wanted to tell his papa the news about Yanis’s engagement for a while, but he hadn’t known how to bring it up.

“That means he is growing up.” Douglas nodded in agreement. “Is he still hanging out with that gang of his?”

“They’re just friends,” Ruslan said, somewhat defensively.

“Friends who get together to break some people’s bones, or squeeze money from certain shady business ventures.”

“It’s a living.” Ruslan shrugged. “I took advantage of Yanis’s skills on more than one occasion, as you know.”

“You just found a way to give your friend some money without him protesting against it because he doesn’t take charity, as I recall.” Douglas smiled. “I still remember how troublesome he was while he stayed with us. He was so certain I was going to ask for something in return that he could not be convinced to stay and get an education and do something better with his life.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Ruslan mumbled.

He still felt ashamed for all that Yanis had said to the old man back then.

“You don’t worry about it. I was glad to have found the way to help him even though he pretended he wanted none from me.”

“How did you help him?” Ruslan asked, leaning forward, all eyes and ears.

“Well, I knew that his proud self would not allow me to give him money, so I had Martin offer him the help he needed. He accepted it as he saw Martin as someone a little more close to him regarding social status. Also, Martin informed me that Yanis paid his debt in full. I hope you won’t tell him that I was behind the help he got that time. I am not particularly fond of the fact that he used the money for his little startup gang.”

“I won’t say a word,” Ruslan promised. “How come you didn’t tell me all these?”

“You didn’t ask,” Douglas replied. “I know you still feel ashamed for Yanis’s tantrums. Truth be told, there was quite a lively atmosphere in this house during those weeks. Poor Martin, I’m afraid, took the brunt of everything.”

As if he knew he was part of the conversation, Martin entered the room pushing a small tea cart, after a short knock on the door. Even when he knew he wasn’t bothering the master of the house, Martin still knocked. Ruslan greeted him, receiving a short nod and a warm look in return. The butler was efficient in his moves as he served the master of the house. After that, he pushed the tray closer to the sofa.

“Two as always, Ruslan?” Martin asked, his strong hands hovering over the sugar bowl, armed with silver tongs.

Ruslan smiled. “You know me.”

It had taken him weeks to stop Martin from calling him ‘young master’, as the butler had seemed bent on doing. Eventually, when Ruslan had pointed out that Martin wasn’t calling Douglas Kent master, either, the butler had eventually backed down. He had noticed how, when only the three of them were present, Martin was calling his employer by his first name.

Ruslan wished he could understand how come people like his papa and Martin could be. They were so dignified, so kind, so well mannered, and Ruslan had seen plenty of the upper class to know that these two men who cared about him so much and whom he cared about just the same, were of a different breed from anyone else. Douglas Kent’s family was a nightmare. Two spinster sisters with too much taste for gossip, and a nephew from a brother who hadn’t survived past his forty-eight birthday, together with his wife, were the only family. And all of them were interested in nothing but how to get their hands on his wealth. Ruslan was, of course, a thorn in their side.

“Are you still working out, Martin? How come you’re so fit?” He teased the butler while Martin carefully fixed his tea by pouring some milk.

“I am still an enthusiast practitioner of the old art of boxing, time permitting, as you well know, Ruslan,” came the prompt reply.

Ruslan knew it well, indeed. More than once he had seen it with his own eyes. The truth was that Martin had a certain grace in his precise moves, but he was a stout man, and anyone could guess that beneath that butler livery a strong body was present, ready to do more than just serve tea.

Martin imposed respect, Ruslan thought.

“Are you and papa still training together?” he asked.

His parent had rarely been generous with information on how he spent his free time. Ruslan had come to think Douglas Kent was a secretive person as a general rule. Martin and his papa were like peas in a pod. Whenever they were together, they always made Ruslan feel like he was the center of the universe, though. That was his family. And he wanted his family to accept the guy he liked. So he decided on a different strategy.

“You know, Martin, I don’t know if papa told you, but I have, sort of, found someone.”

That earned him an amused snort from Douglas. Martin straightened up.

“Congratulations,” the butler said politely, but his lips twitched in a small smile.

Ruslan pouted. “Papa doesn’t like him. And he’s a great fighter, you know? A beast in the ring. I wish you would come to see him. I bet you’ll like him.”

“Are you trying to win Martin over, Russy?” Douglas laughed wholeheartedly.

“Of course I am. At least someone under this roof should be on my side,” Ruslan replied. “Martin, please come sit next to me. I’m sure papa is not such a slave driver that he can’t live with you taking a break for a few minutes.”

There was a small exchange between the butler and the owner of the house that wasn’t lost on Ruslan. It was like the parents were trying to communicate without words about what to do about their troublesome son.

Martin sat on the sofa and, with slow, measured gestures, fixed himself a cup of tea, as well. It was not some liberty he was taking. They were often taking their tea together in that house. Except for the times where there were visitors, the atmosphere in the house was quite relaxed. Well, Martin still wore his livery, and he did so from dawn till dusk, and he took care of everything regarding household chores, but, all in all, they were a pretty eccentric family if Ruslan took the time to think things over.

With an exaggerated sigh, he rested the back of his head on Martin’s shoulder but remained turned toward Douglas, to gauge his reactions.

“Papa is prejudiced because Johnny doesn’t have money,” he started.

Martin eased into the sofa and moved one arm to caress Ruslan’s hair.

“I am sure Douglas has strong reasons to believe that this man is not the right one for you,” the butler said, his voice kind and thoughtful.

“Not in this case,” Ruslan replied. “Johnny is a good guy. And he treats me right.”

“How long have you two been together?” Martin questioned.

Ruslan was pretty sure Martin was up to speed with everything, but he pretended so that he could indulge the young master.

“Several weeks. But, come on, in this day and age, that’s forever,” Ruslan said.

“Who are his parents?” Martin continued.

“Does it matter?” Ruslan turned to look at the butler.

“Yes. If your father is to welcome this young man into the family, it will serve to know a little about his.”

“Hey, it’s not like we’re getting married!” Ruslan exclaimed.

The amused look in Martin’s eyes and the way he looked over Ruslan at his employer, told him he was being played.

“I thought it wasn’t even a relationship,” his papa finally intervened. “So, seeing that it’s not a relationship, why does it matter if I agree with him or not? Strong headed as you are, you’ll do as you like, won’t you, Russy?”

“Yes, but --” he started.

He was about to say it out loud how much it mattered for the old man to approve of Johnny. But he had to save face, given the circumstances.

“If Johnny is the good man you say he is, he will prove his worth,” Martin said with conviction. “But I must say, Ruslan. I thought that wasn’t your type.”

“My type?” Ruslan asked, knowing what Martin wanted to say, but still needing the confirmation.

“I believe the term would be ... a bad boy?” Martin said with a small smile.

Ruslan snickered. “Ah, he is a bad boy. But a good man.”

“Quite a walking contradiction, this Johnny, if I may say,” Martin added.

Ruslan snickered and turned again to rub his head against Martin’s shoulder.

“Don’t mind your father, then, Ruslan,” Martin said. “Prove that your lover is worthy of you.”

“He’s not my lover,” Ruslan protested and blushed.

“Oh, he’s not? Then why are we having this conversation about him?” Martin wondered.

“Because ... ugh, you two are so annoying.” Ruslan pretended to pout.

“We only want the best for you, Russy,” Douglas said. “Both Martin and I. Seeing that you are not even decided about what Johnny is to you, how can you expect us to believe you are serious about him? And to treat him with the required consideration?”

Ruslan fell silent. He knew the old man was right. But it wasn’t like him to commit; after all, he and Johnny were only having a bit of fun and nothing else.

Johnny was breathing heavily, back into his corner. It was the fifth round, and both he and his opponent were starting to feel the seconds stretching with each minute in the ring. A feeling of frustration was beginning to rear its head.

Yeah. He was pissed. And a bit distracted. Looking up, at Ruslan, at the start of each bout he fought in the ring, had been a lucky charm so far. But this time, when he had looked, he had noticed someone was there, with Ruslan, and it wasn’t his old man. When everyone had stood up

to look at the men climbing into the ring, Ruslan and his companion included, Johnny had seen it.

The pretty man wasn't alone. Some young dude was there, too, and he was apparently taking liberties, by holding Ruslan by the shoulders. That green-eyed monster was starting to gnaw at his insides, again.

How could he be so stupid to lose this head like that? It was a good thing that his honed instincts were keeping him bouncing back, round after round. The last one, he had sliced his opponent's brow pretty severely, and, after a short consultation with the local physician, and the guy's trainer, the man was going back into the cage for another one.

Not that he would have liked to win by technical KO. He was fair to his opponents, as much as his training on the wrong side of the tracks allowed, but sometimes, shit went down like that.

He could see that the other was squinting, apparently no longer seeing right with one eye that was only growing bigger, to the size of a hard-boiled egg. Johnny put his fists up, and hunched his head into his shoulders, decided not to let the other get his revenge. Fights weren't only about who was the fastest, or who had the meanest and heaviest punch. They were about who could keep his head in the cage the longest, who resisted the temptation to celebrate too soon.

Fights were about survival not only of the fittest but also of the most desperate. And Johnny knew plenty about that. And he could read in the other man's face hints of that desperation. There was just something in being sent to the floor by another man, and not standing up before the count was done. Many never really got up after something like that.

He bit hard on his mouthpiece, tasting thick saliva and a bit of his own blood. His opponent had managed a quick jab and, while his guard hadn't been down, the man's fist had brushed over the side of his head, making the inside of his cheek crush against his teeth.

As he thought, his opponent was launching himself in a frenzy, hoping to get Johnny down just by making him lose his cool, under the pelting rain of hits. But this time, his guard was up, letting him see like a metal helmet might have allowed a medieval soldier, just enough to gauge where his opponent was.

With each punch, the man was getting restless. That explosiveness could not keep for long. No one had that kind of stamina. And they were both at their wit's end. Of them two, Johnny intended to resist longer.

His opponent stepped closer, still in berserk mode, and Johnny had to take a few steps back. But he wouldn't let the guy push him into the ropes. He danced to one side and caught the other with his right down, and straight into his cheek. His opponent made a small unwilling pirouette like a 190-pound ballerina and crashed into the floor.

Johnny stood there, deaf to anything else but the thunder in his ears. When the ref caught his arm, his eyes remained on the man on the floor. There was just so little, a blink of an eye, that made the difference.

He had no hopes that he was going to get together with Ruslan, not after seeing the guy having company. Maybe he would call later. Maybe.

With a shake of his head, Johnny laughed at himself. What was with him lately? Was he starting to forget who he was? Why was he fighting? He and Ruslan Kent were light years away. It was just fucking luck Johnny had scored with him.

He stopped, in the middle of the hallway, struck by a sudden realization. There had been no real push and pull between them. Ruslan hadn't seemed bent on playing games. So maybe he was just quick to judge the pretty man. He was the only one responsible for the push and pull he imagined. It was all on him.

"Hey, Johnny!" someone called for him from behind.

He could feel his face stretching into a smile. Ruslan Kent was the only man in the world Johnny was willing to let his guard down for. But his smile faded as he turned.

Ruslan was accompanied by some douchebag, dressed up to snuff, and reeking of money. It had to be that companion from earlier.

Ruslan flashed a big grin at him. "You were amazing tonight."

With confidence, Johnny walked forward, decided to make things right, and show that rich dude fresh off some private plane who was boss. But before he could reach Ruslan, the new guy moved faster and stretched out one arm, offering Johnny his hand, and practically walking in front of his host. "Oh, man, what a bout!" he exclaimed, and Johnny had no other choice but to take his hand.

Ruslan's companion had his upper lip curled, revealing his teeth, like a horse. Something in his smile was striking Johnny as insincere.

"Nigel wanted so much to meet you." Ruslan moved on the side. "It looks like he beat me to it, but here are some proper introductions. Nigel, this is the most promising fighter who has put a foot in papa's ring in a long, long time, Johnny Bryne. And Johnny, this is a friend, Nigel Davenport."

Davenport? Johnny worked his jaw. Maybe it was a coincidence? He looked at him while holding his hand, squeezing it now, and making some of that dishonest smile fade from his face.

The resemblance was there. And no, he didn't imagine it. Eventually, Nigel coughed and made a sign that he wanted to release his hand. Johnny dropped it quickly, his eyes trained on him.

“A friend, huh?” he said.

“Yes, he came quite a long way --” Ruslan began.

Johnny pulled Ruslan to him so fast that he almost lost his balance. He took Ruslan hard by the shoulders and stared defiantly at Nigel. The insincere smile was all gone now. Nigel's slightly slanted eyes were examining him with curiosity, and something like the disgust one had to feel while staring at a bug.

Ruslan shifted next to him, trying to pry himself free. But Johnny was having none of it. He wouldn't let Ruslan believe this scumbag was a friend. If he was related to who Johnny thought, he was a scumbag from a family of scumbags.

“Johnny,” Ruslan said quietly, trying to draw his attention.

“You're done here, right?” Johnny said while looking at Nigel. “Let's go.”

“No,” Ruslan protested. “We have a table reserved. I wanted to have you come with us --”

“No, thanks,” he said brusquely.

He had no time to explain to Ruslan what was wrong. What he needed was to take Ruslan away from that guy. “We're going,” he added and started to pull Ruslan after him.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Ruslan hissed at him, and this time opposed more resistance.

“We need to go,” Johnny said stubbornly.

“No.” Ruslan finally pried himself free from Johnny's hold. “It looks like you're a bit too hot-headed after the bout. We'll talk later.”

“Like hell,” Johnny said through his teeth.

“I can leave you guys alone for a few minutes to sort out this ... lovers' quarrel?” Nigel intervened, looking questioningly at Ruslan.

“Oh, no, we're nothing like that,” Ruslan hurried to say while throwing Johnny an annoyed glance.

“Yeah, leave.” Johnny gestured for Nigel to get lost.

“I'm going to inspect a little the ring, now that the bout is over. I hope it is enough time.” Nigel smiled widely, and sauntered over to Ruslan, placing a quick peck on his cheek. “I look forward to the tonight's entertainment,” he added and looked at Johnny with a satisfied grin.

Nigel was playing the generous part, but he was nothing but a scumbag. And what entertainment? Whatever. As soon as he was out of sight, Johnny would tell Ruslan.

“Okay,” Ruslan murmured, and Nigel walked away.

Johnny followed the guy with his eyes until Nigel disappeared around a corner.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Ruslan whispered angrily and punched him in the shoulder, taking him by surprise. “I’m trying so hard to tell my papa that you’re a good guy, and you’re behaving like a possessive Neanderthal!”

“Ruslan, listen to me.” Johnny ignored how pissed the other was and pushed him into one of the side walls.

He grabbed Ruslan’s face and forced him to look up. He needed to be convincing. Ruslan had no reason to believe Nigel Davenport was some scumbag. “This guy is bad, okay? He’s a bad man,” Johnny said, towering over the other, hoping to keep him safe like that.

Ruslan rolled his eyes. “Johnny, seriously, you don’t know him. And he doesn’t know you. How can you say such a thing?”

“Trust me. I don’t know him, that’s right, but I know his family. They’re fucking bad people,” Johnny said, moving his thumbs slowly across Ruslan’s jawline, trying hard to be gentle, but firm.

Ruslan placed his hands over his wrists, obviously wanting for Johnny to let go. “Is this some jealousy you’re feeling? I told you he’s just a friend. And what do you know about his family? And how? If all you have is a name, that may be just a coincidence,” Ruslan demanded to know.

Johnny pursed his lips. There was so much he needed to tell Ruslan. But it was not exactly a good idea to start telling his life’s story with that scumbag nearby.

“Let’s go to your place, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

“Tell me now,” Ruslan said.

“Are you two still arguing?” Nigel said, materializing next to him, and seemingly quick to finish his tour of the building. “Ruslan, forgive me for assuming this, but is this guy bothering you?”

“Watch it,” Johnny growled. “You don’t want to piss me off.”

“Fighters.” Nigel exhaled and shook his head. “Always ready for a scuffle. You’re making Ruslan uncomfortable, pal. Should I call security?” he added, turning toward Ruslan.

“Why? Do you need help?” Johnny finally let go of Ruslan so that he could face Nigel.

“Help? What for? Oh, do you think I want to spar with you? Such a silly thing to believe,” Nigel said, crossing his arms.

“Spar? I’d wreck you,” Johnny said through his teeth.

“Seriously, Johnny, you’re out of line!” Ruslan intervened, putting himself between them. “Go home and clear your head. Nigel, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t worry, Ruslan.” Nigel smiled, full of himself. “I’m sure your lovely company tonight will compensate for any ... nuisance.”

Johnny stared at Nigel, feeling all the blood in his body getting to his head. A vein was throbbing somewhere in his neck.

“Chill.” Ruslan grabbed him and forced him to look at him. “I mean it,” he added, pointing a finger at Johnny.

He thought he was good at this game of surviving. But right now, he wanted nothing but to wipe the smug grin off Nigel Davenport’s face, with both his fists. And, if he was indeed related to the scumbag who had taken everything away from Johnny, which he had little doubts about, now seeing the man’s MO in dealing with others, that meant that beating the crap out of Nigel would mean putting himself in real danger. And not only himself. His mom, too.

If Douglas Kent could find anything about him, no one could say others couldn’t, including where he was keeping his mom. So far, as long as he paid what was due, he was safe, and he had no reasons to fear for his mom. But, now, with his fists still up, curled tightly, he was thinking.

Just like in the ring.

Johnny put his fists down. “See for yourself,” he said through his teeth and shook Ruslan’s touch away.

It wasn’t his business. And his knee jerk reaction from earlier was just that. Reacting on instinct. On impulse. And that did not usually work that well, as far as he knew.

Ruslan looked at Johnny’s retreating back, still confused over his reaction. Yeah, Johnny was a hothead, but what had just happened was more than that. Had to be.

“Shall we go now? Let’s leave all this unpleasantness behind.” Nigel took his arm.

Ruslan smiled politely. “I’m terribly sorry. Maybe it was all because of all that adrenaline going to his head,” he tried to justify Johnny’s behavior.

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” Nigel quipped. “But, if I may say so, Ruslan, I believe that you would do better not letting such men believe they could treat you as they please just because you’re noble enough to treat them as equals. Hmm, what do you say?”

Ruslan knew he had a hard time keeping the same smile as Nigel was looking at him with searching eyes.

“Johnny and I --” he started.

“Let’s not talk about that man anymore. You wanted to invite him over for dinner, and all he could think of was to act in such a manner. But, it’s all for the better,” Nigel said brightly. “This way, I can have you all to myself tonight.”

Ruslan’s smile was strained now. He would have much liked to have had Johnny join them and later to have fun with him, but that was off the table now. He wasn’t particularly looking forward to spending another boring dinner going through arid conversation with Nigel.

Under other circumstances, he would have found Nigel almost charming. He understood why the old man tried so hard to sell Nigel to him as a potential partner. He was from a good family, wealthy, with connections. He had a degree in economics, so there had been topics of discussion Ruslan had found familiar.

Only that Ruslan was not at all interested in talking about how to run a successful business. He had other things he would have much liked to do, and Nigel, while obviously sharing the same interests, was not the desired partner.

If asked point blank, Ruslan couldn’t say what he didn’t like about him. He had jumped in bed with so many men in his life. Nigel was well mannered, and usually, Ruslan was not against that. He wasn’t bad looking, and by his wiry constitution, which could be guessed under his tailored suit, he was probably capable of some serious action between the sheets. Plus, he had made no secret he was interested in taking things to a more heated level than endless discussions about business.

But Ruslan could not care less about him. He had waited for Saturday to come just so that he could see Johnny again, and now he felt frustrated.

Yet, he could not just forgive Johnny for his behavior. It had been over the top and unnecessary. So Johnny was jealous. He didn’t have to come up with some made up lie about how Nigel Davenport was somehow a dangerous man.

Ruslan stole one look at his companion for the evening. By all means, Nigel Davenport seemed a goody two shoes. But maybe, Ruslan pondered, as they walked to the car, he needed to pay more attention than just to appearances.

“So, Ruslan, your father seems interested in closing a deal. Now, that I have seen your thriving business, I will go back to mine with some recommendations.” Nigel leaned over the table, looking Ruslan in the eyes.

“That is great news.” Ruslan nodded. “I look forward to a successful collaboration.”

“Actually,” Nigel covered Ruslan’s hand as he reached for the check, “I look forward to more than just a business deal. And please, let me take this. All week, you have been nothing but an accommodating host.”

“Nigel,” Ruslan pulled back his hand slowly enough to avoid insulting his guest, “I am glad you are interested in doing business with us. Unfortunately, I cannot say anything else about the other part. I am flattered. I truly am. But --”

“Ah, there is someone else.” Nigel smiled, and Ruslan, paying close attention this time, could tell the smile wasn’t reaching his eyes. “That fighter?”

“I would rather not comment on that,” Ruslan said promptly.

“I thought you said you two don’t have that sort of relationship,” Nigel insisted.

“We don’t,” Ruslan agreed. “But I would not go into something I don’t feel strongly about.”

“Okay. Friends, then?” Nigel offered his hand.

Ruslan took it and shook it slightly.

“One last toast?” Nigel tapped his index finger against his wine glass.

“Certainly,” Ruslan agreed.

Johnny was exaggerating. Nigel Davenport was a nice guy, maybe a little too boring, but not the bad man Johnny was talking about.

He made a small grimace as he sipped his wine. While the old man had struggled to make a connoisseur out of him, he only knew that he liked white wine better than red. Somehow he doubted wine sold in that sort of establishment they were in was supposed to have that slightly salty taste. He was about to say something and call for the waiter to bring him another glass when Nigel stopped him.

“Bottoms up and then hit the road?” Nigel asked with a broad smile.

There was little left in his glass. And making the waiter come again would prolong their dinner. He wanted to get back home and call Johnny. The man needed to explain himself and, in particular, what he had meant about Nigel’s family. And, simply put, Ruslan hoped Johnny had cooled off already.

Johnny wanted to smack himself hard. What the hell was he doing, stalking Ruslan like that? He had waited in the shadows when Ruslan and his companion had left the ring and gotten into the car and had overheard where they planned to have dinner.

And now, he was outside that restaurant, trying not to look too conspicuous, or as if he was loitering.

The problem was he could not get rid of that nagging sensation that Nigel Davenport was up to no good. Maybe he was paranoid. But he had eventually taken a cab and had the driver drop him not far away from that expensive place, only so that he could keep an eye on Ruslan and his companion.

He hoped he wasn't right. So Ruslan was entirely out of his league. He wouldn't be upset if the pretty man chose that rich scumbag. But if Nigel Davenport was half the scumbag the other Davenport Johnny knew was, then Ruslan could be in trouble.

He didn't want to risk it. If Ruslan waved goodbye to that scumbag after their fancy dinner, he would go to sleep, his mind at ease. Of course, if the duo left together, Johnny didn't know what to do. Maybe he would follow them. Cabs were everywhere at that hour, ready to collect the last patrons from the lively avenue.

"I'm so sorry, but I must take this call." Nigel pushed back his chair and made a helpless gesture at his phone. "Do you mind waiting for me here? You could have some dessert," he suggested. "I will try to make it as quick as possible."

"Okay," Ruslan agreed.

He pulled at his collar, as Nigel walked away to find some privacy for taking his call. Why was so hot in there? Usually, such places maintained a perfect temperature to ensure their patrons' utmost comfort, so it was rather strange to feel like that.

Taking out his phone, he browsed through his contacts. Somehow, the names of a few acquaintances seemed absurdly funny. He snorted and then tried to hide a giggle with the phone. What was he trying to do again? Ah, he wanted to call Johnny.

Only the thought was making him ... Hmm, maybe that was why the expression 'hot under the collar' was used when guys got aroused. He was indeed, hot, and now even more impatient to be through with Nigel so that he could find Johnny fast and take him home.

Ruslan bit his bottom lip as he remembered Johnny's muscular body stretched on top of his sheets. That man was making him hungry for sex. Not that he wasn't usually horny and up for fun, but Johnny was doing more to him than that.

Johnny knew how to satisfy him. And that was what Ruslan was yearning for. Right that very moment.

Now that was a tad odd. But why? Ruslan tried to focus, but it was like his rational thoughts wanted to slip from his mind, like running water.

"Done," Nigel interrupted his confused thoughts. "How about you see me to my hotel? It's only a little away from here. We could walk by foot."

Ruslan had a mind to say that he minded that. He minded any delay to see Johnny quite a lot at that point. But the old man had told him to be polite to Nigel, and that was what he needed to do.

He stood up. "Certainly."

Was it just him, or were the lights in the restaurant a bit too bright? A bit of fresh air would do him good. Plus, maybe the wine had gotten too much to his head, although that wasn't usually the case.

Nigel offered his arm, with a goofy smile, and Ruslan took it. He wouldn't stumble like a drunk outside the restaurant.

Johnny was starting to get a little anxious, and he was keeping himself away from the door when he finally saw the men he was expecting walking out of the restaurant.

He pulled his hoodie to cover his face. Strangely enough, the two weren't hailing a cab, nor did they seem to wait for their ride. And that wasn't the only strange thing.

Ruslan was holding onto the other man like he could not walk properly on his two legs. Something was fishy. Was Ruslan drunk? During the weeks they had been fooling around, the pretty man didn't seem particularly fond of the bottle. Also, by the fun banter between Ruslan and his best friend Yanis, it looked like he could hold his liquor pretty well.

For the moment, Johnny decided to follow the two from a safe distance. There were plenty of people walking to and fro at that hour, so he could keep a few feet between them, without risking detection.

He was surprised to see them taking one corner and walking down a less traveled street. That didn't lead to any of the posh hotels in the neighborhood, as far as he knew. It was also a

problem that he could not follow the two from up close. That street was not as crowded, but the lights were a bit dimmer.

He fell back and walked carefully so that his footsteps could not give him away.

Ruslan felt his limbs a bit heavy as if he was walking through water. The same euphoria making him giggle was also making a mess of his brain. But he could feel a small chill.

“How long to your hotel? Wait, weren’t you staying at --” he trailed off.

He could not put his thoughts in order. That sudden realization, together with the fact that he could see they were walking now down an almost deserted street, was screaming at him to wake up.

“Nigel,” he said.

“Hmm,” Nigel purred into his ear.

Nigel hed him by the waist. Ruslan knew that standing on two legs was bound to be a little problematic so he couldn't mind. But Nigel's hot breath on his cheek made him want to pull away.

“You look like you would need a bit of rest.” Nigel pushed him into a small dark gang and put him with his back against the wall.

And suddenly, pressed his lips against Ruslan's. Despite the weakness in his bones, Ruslan found it in him to push the other away.

Nigel's hold on him tightened. “How come you're still resisting?”

Ruslan could feel a cold chill rushing down his spine. “What do you mean by that?” he asked.

He could not even keep his head straight.

“Just put out already.” Nigel began to fumble with Ruslan's pants.

“Hey,” Ruslan protested. “Stop. What the fuck, dude?”

“Shut the fuck up, slut,” Nigel said through his teeth, as Ruslan pushed him away again.

“What the fuck did you just call me?” Ruslan tried to fight through the haze of his confusion.

“I called you what you are,” Nigel said viciously.

“Fuck off.” Ruslan made a move to walk away.

But Nigel caught him and slammed him hard against the wall. That was not as surprising as the hard slap across the face that followed.

“All I want is a quick fuck from you,” Nigel said. “And I’m going to get it.”

“I don’t think so,” someone else said.

Ruslan barely had the time to turn his head to look at the newcomer. Nigel disappeared from his field of view as if hit by a freight train.

Only that it wasn’t a freight train, but Johnny’s well-placed fist.

“Get off me!” Nigel cried out as Johnny grabbed him and made him meet the wall face first.

Ruslan winced. His heart was beating fast, and he was blinking, his mind slowly making sense of what was happening.

“Leave him,” Ruslan begged, grabbing Johnny’s arm before he could make Nigel’s face have a taste of his fist again.

Johnny’s muscles were pure, pulsing granite; Ruslan could feel that under his fingers. But he stopped.

“You sure?” he asked, his voice rough.

“Yes. Let me make a call. Someone will come,” Ruslan shook his head, “to clean this mess.”

Nigel turned, with the intention to hit Johnny, but the fighter moved fast, and he stumbled forward, meeting the pavement face first, this time around.

“Let me just call --” Ruslan mumbled.

Even breathing was hard. Johnny pulled the phone out of his hand.

“We’re just going to leave this fucker here,” Johnny said gravely. “Now I’m taking you home.”

Ruslan didn’t protest. Johnny was right, and the fighter’s arm around him was reassuring. It was all that he needed right now.

Ruslan’s skin was flushed, his breath a bit too quick.

“Do you want to go to a hospital?” Johnny asked, now concerned.

“No.” Ruslan gripped his arm. “Take me home. He spiked my drink. But I don’t want the hospital. They’ll ... ask questions. And I can’t say anything against that guy. Papa won’t like it.”

Johnny could feel his jaw tensing. So papa was willing to let his son get molested by that scumbag and keep everything quiet, for fear of what? Some scandal?

“Johnny,” Ruslan begged, pressing against him. “Take me home and take care of me. It’s all I want right now. Trust me; I’ll be fine. Just --”

“Okay, pretty, okay,” Johnny replied. “That I can do. I can definitely do that.”

He gestured for a cab. The yellow car pulled next to him, and Johnny carefully helped Ruslan inside. He could take care of him. And later, he needed to find a way to free himself of the burden he had dragged after him for years.

Chapter Eleven – For This Man

Undressing and helping Ruslan take a shower had been a bit of a challenge with his mumbling a bit incoherently and trying to get Johnny to fuck him.

“Pretty,” he said as softly as he could, as he caressed Ruslan’s cheek, as he lay on the bed, under the covers. “What medicine can I bring you?”

“Your dick,” Ruslan replied, without stuttering.

“It feels wrong to screw you while you’re like this,” Johnny said.

Ruslan huffed and pushed away the blanket Johnny had used to tuck him in so carefully just earlier. Damn, Johnny needed to look elsewhere. The way Ruslan was touching himself, reaching between his legs and stroking his cock, was too much.

He was sexy as hell, even when dressed in three layers of clothes. He was a sex bomb, no matter which way Johnny looked at him. But now, the way he was biting his bottom lip, his eyes moist and at half mast, his breathing coming in short quick gasps, was making Johnny feel the need to run out of the room.

He could control his body. He could watch over Ruslan until the stupid drug wore off.

“Fuck me,” Ruslan begged. “I order you,” he added petulantly, like a child.

“You order me?” Johnny said amused. “Nah, pretty, you know no one gets to do that with me. I’m my own boss.”

Ruslan was now playing with his cock that was oozing precum like crazy. Johnny swallowed. He wanted to take that beautiful cock into his mouth and relieve some of the pressure.

Wait, he could do that. Maybe Ruslan would feel a little better if he came. With that decision in mind, he pushed his hands away, earning a murmured protest for that. “I’m going to take care of you,” he promised.

Ruslan’s hands buried into his hair, pulling at it, as Johnny swallowed his cock in one fell swoop. Damn, he liked to suck cock as a general rule, but Ruslan’s cock was addictive as much as the rest of him was. Maybe it was only because Johnny craved stuff he couldn’t have. So, in a way, this blowjob was like a stolen meal.

He licked over the hard shaft, playing with the sensitive area right beneath the crown. By how Ruslan was shouting obscenities at him, he was doing a pretty good job. He liked doing it, too. He went deep again, bobbing his head fast. Ruslan needed it hard and fast. And while he could not fuck the drug out of his system, he could do that. Bring a little relief, the best way he knew how.

Ruslan was pushing his hips upward, off the bed, and he was fucking Johnny's mouth, while the rhythm of the string of expletives running freely from his mouth was getting faster, too.

When Ruslan kept him there, only moving his hips slightly, and the tang substance landed down his throat, Johnny held Ruslan's lovely ass with both his hands and drank from his cock until the last shudder of ecstasy faded away.

Ruslan crashed back on the sheets, exhausted. Johnny let the spent cock slip from his mouth and began kissing along the hip bone.

"Johnny," Ruslan moaned softly.

"Yeah, pretty?" Johnny asked, moving upward with the kisses until he managed to latch his lips onto a still aroused nipple.

Ruslan shivered under him. "You're a good man," he said. "Stay with me?"

"Sure," Johnny lay next to him and pulled Ruslan into his arms. "I'm going to pull the blanket over us, okay? Be a good boy and don't push it aside again."

Ruslan giggled. "Is that an order?"

Johnny squeezed the lithe body into his strong arms. "Yeah, you can bet a sweet ass that's an order."

Ruslan turned on one side and pushed his ass into Johnny's crotch. "You're hard," he noticed.

"Yeah, sorry about that. It'll go away," Johnny said.

"You can fuck me," Ruslan said and yawned.

"You know I won't do that," Johnny pressed his hard-on against the small of Ruslan's back to relieve some of the pressure. "Now get some sleep. And that's an order."

The sun was up when he opened his eyes. He was on his back, and Ruslan was wrapped around his body, his head resting against Johnny's shoulder. Johnny pushed away a few damp strands from Ruslan's forehead and placed a small kiss on his head.

Maybe he could head down and make some breakfast. Ruslan would need the energy. He moved slowly, but the slender limbs wrapped around him tensed and pulled him back.

"Where do you think you're going?" Ruslan asked in a sleepy voice.

"To make some breakfast. You'll need something warm in your stomach."

Ruslan snorted. "I never get up so early, so don't bother with making breakfast. But you're right about one thing. I do need something warm in my stomach."

Johnny murmured something to himself. At one point, his dick had let him sleep, but now, at the slightest innuendo, it was standing up to attention.

"Are you still under the influence?" he questioned Ruslan like he was some doctor.

"I don't need to be to know that all I want right now is your cock in my mouth. So be a good boy, Johnny, and give me my morning milk," Ruslan joked.

Well, that was good. If Ruslan could joke, that meant that he felt better. He wasn't slurring the words, and he seemed to be okay.

So he didn't protest when Ruslan moved to pull his pants down. Johnny hissed in pleasure when Ruslan blew hot air over his aching dick.

"I could do without any of that fancy foreplay," he joked.

Ruslan seemed bent on taking his words at face value. In an instant, his cock was engulfed by moist heat and that talented mouth was at work.

He liked Ruslan's mouth. He loved it. Everywhere, on his cock, on his body, on his lips. He wished he could say it out loud. But it was hard to do that when all he could do was to grunt and moan while Ruslan was moving his head up and down, making obscene slurping noises.

It was a damn good thing that Ruslan seemed as hungry for his cock as Johnny had been for his that night. It was like they were equal partners in this thing they had going for them. And that was pretty fucking good.

"I changed my mind," Ruslan said, raising his head, and keeping Johnny's cock with both hands now.

He was slapping his own mouth lazily with Johnny's cock. Johnny looked down, enjoying the view.

"Just be careful not to give yourself a fat lip like that," he managed to joke, not without difficulty.

Ruslan laughed. "I think my ass is hungrier than my mouth this early in the morning," he said and pushed himself up.

"Hey," Johnny protested as Ruslan moved away. "It's not fair to leave a guy half sucked like this."

"Don't worry," Ruslan winked at him.

Johnny pushed himself up on his elbows and looked at Ruslan preparing himself by generously lubing his behind. "You could make it a show, you know," he said.

With a small smile, Ruslan turned and presented his lovely ass. He had the perfect ass, even though he was lean. That was no bony ass. His behind was curvy and plump, muscled as it was nice on a guy but round and fuckable. And he knew how to do a good job by pushing his fingers in and out, making small squelching sounds.

"I'd say you're ready," Johnny said in an urgent voice.

He kept his cock by the root, squeezing hard. The head was getting bigger and bigger, obviously enjoying the show.

Ruslan waited for no other invitation. He quickly straddled Johnny, aligning himself with the hard cock and beginning the slow, torturous descent.

"Damn, you're bent on giving me my fix." Johnny steadied Ruslan's hips with both hands.

"That's where you're wrong," Ruslan placed his hands on Johnny's chest, feeling his pecs through the t-shirt. "Because I'm the one using you here. I'm the one taking my fix from your big cock."

"Hmm, I think I like being used."

"Good," Ruslan said, while impatiently pushing up Johnny's t-shirt.

He grunted when blunt nails raked over his naked chest. Ruslan was a bit of a wild cat, and he loved that, too. Also, he knew how to move when riding a cock.

Ruslan was getting seriously into the rhythm. Johnny felt his lean stomach and reached for his nipples, too. Ruslan's response was instantaneous. So Johnny used one hand to wrap it around his bouncing erection. "Come, baby, come," he cooed. "Ride me like I'm your friggin' pony."

Ruslan needed no second invitation to do that and increased the rhythm. Johnny felt dominated, in the sweetest way that could be, and he had not one regret to care for.

"Oh, fuck," he hissed through his teeth.

It was driving him a little crazy to be used like that. He liked it, yet he hated it, in almost equal measure, for the simple fact that he never let his guard down. But, to surrender to Ruslan, to allow the pretty man to use him like that, was an entirely different thing.

He could let go. The only challenge right now was to last enough for Ruslan to get off, too. This was a challenge cut for him. Johnny wouldn't help Ruslan this time around, he decided, and let go of his hard cock. "Can you come like that?" he cooed. "Can you, baby?"

Ruslan laughed and looked at him. “That’s not very nice of you. So you’re looking for a race to the finish?”

Johnny grabbed Ruslan by his golden hair playfully. “Do you think you’re good enough to spar with me?” he grinned.

Ruslan replied with a grin of his own. He grunted as he began riding Johnny’s cock wildly. “Good enough?” he whispered, but he was already moaning and not in control of his voice. “Better even.”

Johnny nodded. He could feel his breath growing rugged, the muscles in his lower belly pulsing from pressure, but he was still going strong, he still wanted to win. Ruslan was squeezing him so well, and he never lost control, but right now, he could feel it, deep inside his gut, that if he were to fail, he wouldn’t mind it that much.

“Fuck.” He ground his teeth and tensed, as his cock began shooting inside the other.

Ruslan squeezed him with his thighs, like a cowboy dealing with a feisty colt, to stay on top. And, as Johnny was getting down from his high, he was laughing.

Johnny glared, although he was sure his big ass satisfied grin would ruin the effect of what he wanted that to look like. Ruslan was still keeping his cock inside, moving his hips slowly.

“So, did you just have your ass handed to you?” Ruslan snickered. “I can’t believe it.” He shook his head. “Snake just got beaten,” he added with satisfaction.

“Well, I let you,” Johnny replied, but with no trace of a bite in that.

“Sure, sure.” Ruslan’s eyes narrowed, but his lips were still twitching. “So I should be glad that you came without getting me off?”

“Oh, pretty.” Johnny pretended to be ashamed by covering his face with one forearm. “Do you have to rub it in?”

“Hmm.” Ruslan seemed to enjoy teasing him a lot. “No, but someone does need to rub it, you know?”

Johnny peaked at Ruslan from under his forearm. “Is that a demand or a suggestion?”

“You ass!” Ruslan laughed and slapped him on the chest, as he pulled himself away from Johnny.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Johnny caught him just in time.

Ruslan laughed as Johnny pulled him back and then pushed him into the bed while swiftly getting on top.

“You need your dick sucked?” Johnny grinned, as he found himself in position to lick the still hard cock root to tip.

Ruslan cursed, and his hands grabbed the creased sheet underneath. “I’d say I want something more, but --” he whispered.

Johnny’s head snapped up so hard, it almost gave him a sudden cramp in his neck. Was Ruslan trying to say ...? Shit. Now that was something he had never thought it would be possible. Not with a guy like Ruslan who looked like a perfect bottom boy. He wouldn’t do it that way. He could never even consider it.

“Are you sucking my dick already?” Ruslan’s protests stopped his train of thought.

So it had been just a joke. Johnny shuddered. There was no way he would be that vulnerable with someone else, no matter how pretty. Or how much he was starting to mean to Johnny. It wasn’t his way of doing things.

“Did I say something wrong?” Ruslan pushed himself up on his elbows.

“No.” Johnny was curt as he pushed Ruslan back and went for the half hard dick that was now in his care.

He put his skill and usual enthusiasm into sucking Ruslan’s dick. And, by how Ruslan was moaning and cursing and trying to stop himself from crying out loud, he was doing a good job.

But now, Johnny had some serious stuff to consider. What the hell would he do if Ruslan asked for that, point blank? Johnny was no one’s bitch. And he wasn’t planning to become one anytime soon.

“Can you please tell me what happened last night?”

His papa’s voice was coming through a bit tense and tired. Ruslan rolled on the bed, the phone glued to his ear.

“Don’t tell me he dared to tell you that he wasn’t in the wrong in the slightest,” he replied.

The old man wouldn’t take this easy. He would be so mad once he learned what Nigel Davenport had tried to do. But the idiot was apparently trying to pour poison into his parent’s ear.

“He just packed his bags and told me that he could not, in good faith, transmit to his family, that we would be doing business together. So I feel I must ask,” Douglas said, in the same tired voice.

“What can I tell you?” Ruslan pulled the blanket around his body. “I’m a spoiled brat, and I ruined your deal.”

“Russy, you’ve been in my care for enough time to know when you’re lying. Someone told me that this morning when Nigel left for the airport, he looked a bit worse for wear.”

Ruslan wished his non-committal shrug could be visible through the phone. “So he wanted to party a little more, and I wasn’t in the mood. I guess he did get splashed, all by himself, after all.”

“And got himself in a bit of a scuffle, too,” his papa continued. “Apparently, with a certain fighter --”

“It wasn’t Johnny’s fault,” Ruslan said quickly.

“Ah, so you do know what happened,” Douglas said, his voice now a little livelier. “I believe the fighter we are talking about is still present in your home. Put him through, please.”

Ruslan fell silent. Why was his father so bent on talking to Johnny now? No, this wouldn’t go down that road. “He’s not here,” he lied through his teeth.

“I do have his number. I can call him,” the old man said promptly. “And I am going to do that right now. Which means that you won’t have even the slightest chance to have him lie for you, Russey.”

“There’s nothing to lie about,” Ruslan protested. “All right, I’m getting Johnny.” He sighed, knowing that trying to win against his papa was just not an option.

Johnny came into the room, as if on cue. Ruslan pointed at the phone, and then made a sign to suggest that he needed to keep his mouth shut. As expected, Johnny looked at him, frowning. Of course, he could not understand what Ruslan wanted.

“Now, Russey. Stop dallying,” Douglas said into the phone.

Defeated, Ruslan handed the phone to Johnny. “For you. Papa,” he added and rolled his eyes.

And then he began gesticulating again, trying to make Johnny understand what he wanted. Johnny’s frown deepened as he took the phone.

“Yes, sir.”

It was almost funny how Johnny stood straight when talking to the old man, Ruslan thought. But now he still needed to make Johnny understand that there was no point to upset his papa.

“He tried to force himself on Ruslan, called him names, and tried to hit him. And he also drugged him.”

Ruslan’s face fell. What the hell? He gestured at Johnny. He was now looking at him, positively surprised.

“Yes, I am responsible, sir. That guy needed to be stopped,” Johnny continued.

Ruslan pulled at his hair, sighed, and dropped on the bed.

“Your father wants to talk to you,” Johnny said, holding the phone for him to take it.

He rolled his eyes but took the phone.

“It is a good thing that at least Johnny is not trying to keep things from me,” his papa began talking. “Why haven’t you called, Russy? You know how much you mean to me.”

“But you are trying to ... oh, fuck it. Nigel is from some important family, right? So there’s not much we can do, I suppose.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Russy,” Douglas scolded him. “There is plenty I can do, and I will. What was all about, anyway? How come he thought he was entitled to behave like that toward you?”

“Didn’t your favorite snitch, Johnny, tell you?” Ruslan glared at his lover who was now surprised for real and was holding his hands up, asking, without words, what the hell was happening.

“He told me what he knew. And it was enough for me to fill in the blanks. I wish that you could talk to me.”

“I told you, papa.” Ruslan sighed. “You can’t stop the entire world from ... You know.”

“What? Trying to hurt you?”

Ruslan could sense the old man’s distress. “I just don’t want you to worry so much,” he said softly, hoping that Douglas could understand.

“You’re a good kid, Russy. If only you let me take care of you, always.”

“Well, I should be able to stand on my own. I’m old enough.”

“You’ll always be my boy, so never old enough,” his papa replied.

Ruslan stole a glance at Johnny. He seemed aware of the intimate conversation he was having with his papa, and could not decide whether he should leave the room or stay. To prevent him from scurrying away, Ruslan walked over to Johnny and grabbed hold of his hand.

“This conversation isn’t over,” Douglas said again. “Nigel Davenport and his family will know not to dishonor my family like this.”

“I don’t want you to make such a big deal,” Ruslan tried to protest again.

Johnny's eyes were hard as he watched him. He needed to get to the bottom of that all. And assure everyone he was fine and there was no point in treating him like he was some wilting flower.

"In this particular case, you don't win, my boy," Douglas said. "Nigel Davenport will present his apologies, and, as far as business goes, I am the one who wants nothing to do with his family."

Ruslan knew he was the old man's soft spot, but this was something else. Although his voice remained calm and even, he could tell his papa was pissed. Really pissed. And he wished he could do something to make it all better.

"Okay, as you wish, papa. Although I'm not crazy about seeing that man again so soon."

"Don't worry about that. First, I will make sure that he will receive the proper chastisement from his father. Later, just so that he doesn't forget and believe that this was some slap over the wrist, he will apologize to you properly."

"Sure," Ruslan agreed. "You're the only one who knows best, right?" he added, with a small laugh.

"When it comes to you, that's what I hope," Douglas replied. "I expect you and Johnny to join me later today for dinner. Here. Martin is cooking all your favorites. I will not take 'no' for an answer. I know you two must eat, at some point."

"Well, we must, that's for sure." Ruslan snickered, hoping he could make Douglas feel more at ease if he didn't seem too shaken with Nigel's attempt to assault him. "We'll be there."

He said his goodbyes, anxious to focus his entire attention on Johnny.

"We'll have dinner with my old man later," he said promptly. "At his place."

Johnny's hard expression was replaced by confusion, and quickly by sheer panic. Ruslan burst into laughter.

"It will just be us; don't worry so much."

"No way. I'm not ... Shit. Count me out, pretty," Johnny sputtered.

"Why? Do you have plans with someone else?" Ruslan crossed his arms over his chest, hoping he looked pretty much like he could not be told 'no'.

"No, but come on, it's your old man, and I bet he lives in a place that's bigger and fancier than this." Johnny moved his hands to point at the surroundings.

"That he is, and it doesn't matter," Ruslan hurried to appease him. "Come on; don't tell me you're scared of my old man. I thought you weren't easy to scare," he teased his lover.

“Ruslan, please.” Johnny looked away. “Don’t make me do this. I’d look like a fool. You can’t put a monkey in a suit and pretend that’s a man. I’m sure your old man has dinner with five types of forks.”

Ruslan grabbed Johnny by his shoulders, to stop him. “Seriously, Johnny, there’s nothing to worry about. No one forces you into a suit. I would not do anything to make you feel uncomfortable. And we’re just using regular forks in that home, I promise. Look, don’t be embarrassed. This is absolutely huge. Papa wants to get to know you. And he had never met any of my lovers.”

“We kind of already met. Me and him,” Johnny said gruffly.

“I know.” Ruslan rolled his eyes. “But I promise. This is different. Hey, I can barely wait to have you two properly introduced. And also, I so want you to meet Martin! He’s the butler, but don’t let the livery fool you. He’s like family. What the hell am I saying? He is family! If I didn’t know better, I’d say he and papa are married or something. Plus, they both love to box. They train weekly and everything. Come on, Johnny, just say ‘yes’!”

Johnny wanted nothing more but to have the strength to run away. But that meant that he first needed to escape Ruslan’s hands and that was definitely impossible because the pretty man had latched onto him, not wanting to let go, and was talking about his family so excitedly that his beautiful eyes were shining.

But, hell, he would make such a total fool of himself. Ruslan had no idea what he was talking about. Everything Johnny had in his wardrobe were sports shoes, tracksuits, jeans, and tees. There was no way he could have dinner with Douglas Kent dressed like he was about to hit the gym.

And the worst part was that he had to spell it for Ruslan to understand it. And he doubted that would make him feel too proud of himself. He would let down the pretty man this time around.

He grabbed Ruslan’s head and looked him in the eyes. Damn, why were people so beautiful in the world? He couldn’t think straight when he felt the smooth cheeks under his fingers, and he was looking into eyes so blue that he felt dizzy. “I’m not like you, pretty. I don’t know what to do with myself at this fancy dinner.”

“Papa will be upset. And I already promised. Oh, Johnny, stop fretting already. Papa is more laidback than you think. Why do you think his butler stays with us at the table? He’s not that kind of aristocrat or whatever you’re imagining. It is dinner in the family, and I mean it. Do you understand what this means?” Ruslan placed his hands on Johnny’s wrists firmly, but with the intention to caress them. “Come on, do it for me. I want you to come with me. Don’t make me

drag you. It'll be hard, but I'll manage somehow. Ah, I know. I'll have papa send Martin to help me. I'm sure he can deal with you," he added with a mischievous smile.

Johnny groaned. "You're bent on laughing at my expense. And how do you think your old man will like seeing me in my jeans and tee at his dinner table?"

"Is this what's bothering you?" Ruslan exclaimed. "Let's go shopping!"

Johnny seriously needed to curb Ruslan's enthusiasm. "No," he said firmly.

Some of Ruslan's enthusiasm vanished. The shiny eyes became duller. And Johnny hated that. To be the cause of it.

"I suppose I got a little too carried away," Ruslan looked away, and his hands dropped by his sides.

Johnny wouldn't let it go, though. He forced Ruslan to look at him.

"You want me to do this fancy dinner? Okay, I'll do your fancy dinner. But don't go crazy, buy me stuff, and shit like that. If I'm going to look like a fool, at least I want to wear my own clothes."

Ruslan bit his bottom lip pensively. "Then you'll come?" he asked, his eyes shiny again with hope.

Johnny wanted to kiss him so badly right now. On his closed eyelids. On his nose. On his cheeks. And on his lips. "Yeah, if it's such a big thing for you," he said.

"Great." Ruslan placed a long kiss on his lips, ending it with a smack.

He thought he could get away now. Johnny had no plans of letting him do that. Ruslan yelped when he was swiftly manhandled and made to walk back to the bed.

Johnny liked it like crazy how well they fit in that bed. In any bed, if he thought better. He was resting on his forearms, catching Ruslan between them. And they were staring into each other's eyes until their breaths fell in synch. If Johnny were to believe in stupid fortunetelling crap, he would say he had met his half, the destined one or whatever because it was too freakish how he and this pretty man could be such a good fit for one another.

Was he letting his mind run away with him again? Maybe he needed to go to that fancy dinner, and see, outside the bedroom, that there was no way he and Ruslan were a fit. Whatever they were doing in the bedroom was one thing. Outside of it, there was the real world. And Johnny knew enough about the real world to be aware that that bitch always won.

"You have such a worried look on your face sometimes," Ruslan said slowly, caressing his face, drawing the deep frown between his eyes with cool fingers. "I should not pressure you into this.

I'd rather still have you than let my family have you, even for one hour. There's no way I'd choose losing you, you know?"

There was no way he could answer that. What the hell was going on between him and Ruslan? Never before had anyone spoken to him nicely like that. It was dangerous to believe such words. But Johnny felt that danger had lost its shine ever since Ruslan Kent had walked into his life. Like nothing and no one could shine as brightly.

So he just dipped his head enough to kiss Ruslan. The pretty man responded eagerly, wrapping his hands around Johnny's neck, to pull him closer.

Damn, how could he so hard from just so little? Ruslan was quick to pull his cock out, giving it the skillful rub and squeeze, as Johnny was already used to by now.

And all the time, they were kissing, wrapping their tongues around one another and devouring each other as their next breath depended on that, on kissing until they could breathe no more.

"Fuck, do you think you could let me, pretty?" Johnny asked, as his hands got busy pushing the robe from Ruslan's body, to uncover the hot naked skin. "I need to fuck you right now."

"Don't ask. Just fuck me," Ruslan hurried him.

Johnny reached quickly for the lube on the nightstand. They were both going to go at it without too much preparation, and he felt guilty for it. Ruslan, however, seemed the more impatient of them both, as he managed to guide Johnny's lubed cock to his entrance and use it pretty much like a dildo, pushing it inside. His impatience made Johnny hiss, as the familiar warmth and tightness welcomed him.

"Don't worry, don't worry," Ruslan cooed like a mantra. "My body knows you, Johnny. It's all yours. Just make it yours already."

"Fuck, pretty," Johnny moaned, as he pushed into the willing body more through Ruslan's will than his own volition. "You're good to me, so good for me. I fucking want you," he admitted simply to his desire.

"Then take me already," Ruslan hurried him, shivering with each of Johnny's thrusts. "Fuck, this is so good. Your cock in me is just so good," he murmured, through small licks and bites he was using to attack Johnny's ear.

He didn't mind it. Ruslan was everything he wanted. Not just right now. He pushed his knees up and looked at how his cock was moving in and out that fantastic body. Ruslan's was rubbing his cock fast, and his soft inviting lips were moving, hurrying Johnny, praising him, encouraging him, and he couldn't think of anything else but what he could do to make this man happy.

When he crashed on top of his lover, making the fresh cum squeezed from Ruslan's cock act like binding between them, he knew he would endure more than just fancy dinners for this man. As long as Ruslan wanted him, he would be like a faithful dog. He would bring this man his fucking sleepers if that's what he wanted.

"Oh, Johnny," Ruslan murmured into his ear, "I love your cock in me."

For a second, his lungs, mind, and heart stopped. But of course, Ruslan loved how Johnny fucked him. That was something he was good at. And he could use it to make Ruslan happy, so happy that he would forget that there were other men in the world, except for Johnny.

"I'm afraid we'll need to get out of the bed, though. We have to wash and everything else," Ruslan mumbled.

"And I need to go to my place and get some clean clothes."

"Ah, don't leave," Ruslan protested and squeezed him in his arms as if Johnny got up that second and ran out the door.

"I will have to, though," Johnny replied as he caressed Ruslan's sweaty forehead and hair slowly. "I don't think your papa will like seeing Nigel's blood on my t-shirt."

Ruslan snickered. "You're underestimating papa. I bet he'd love to see that. You got Nigel good. Seeing how I can't lie to him about the whole incident since you snitched on me," he glared, "I bet he's now plotting some revenge that will leave Nigel's family beggars on the street."

"Wow. Remind me never to get on your old man's bad side," Johnny replied, although he felt happy to hear Ruslan was so well cared for.

"I'm just exaggerating. But I think he won't let the Davenports get out of this hassle that easily. He will squeeze some balls."

"That dude's family is bad news," Johnny said with a frown. "Can your dad take care of them? Because that would be awesome."

"I'm sure his word has plenty of weight in their rich people's world," Ruslan said with a small yawn.

Their rich people's world? Johnny wondered. Why wasn't Ruslan including himself in that world, too? Was he trying to make Johnny feel better about his lack of money and status? The thought was endearing. But Johnny didn't need anyone's pity.

"Ah, wait. I almost forgot," Ruslan said. "How come you know about Nigel's family?"

"Long story," Johnny replied curtly. He was about to have dinner with the old man, and he had been invited. At the moment, he wouldn't jinx his chances to be more than just someone Ruslan

liked only to screw, by talking about history that had to be almost dead and buried. “I’ll tell you all about it one day,” he added, sensing Ruslan’s disappointment.

“Don’t worry. I’m used to secretive people. Papa sometimes talks like he’s about to tell me some fantastic truth I’ve been waiting for all my life, and then he shrugs it off like it’s nothing.”

“Maybe he’s just trying to protect you,” Johnny offered.

“Or he tries to protect himself,” Ruslan sighed.

Johnny could feel the tip of his ears getting red. Wasn’t he doing the same thing? Wasn’t he protecting himself?

“Okay, let’s just freshen up, and then I’ll come with you to change your clothes,” Ruslan said. “You know, you could pack some essential things and bring them here. What do you say? So that you can have access to them without going back and forth so much?”

The words had been spoken casually, but Johnny could tell that Ruslan had strategized every single one of them. Was the pretty man trying to invite him to spend more time together? Even more than what they had already? Nah, it was too much to imagine that.

“Do you want me to spend some nights here? For your protection?” he tried to sound just as casual as he spoke.

Ruslan was up on his feet and was fiddling with the robe, pulling it close to his body. “My protection?” he blinked as he looked at Johnny. “Sure,” he added, with a small mysterious smile. “Make it a bigger bag, then. I feel like I need serious protection.”

Johnny laughed and covered his face. “Fuck. I’m so going to lose that tournament, right? Is this some cunning plan of yours?”

“Frankly, I don’t give a damn about that stupid tournament,” Ruslan shrugged. “I want you here, Johnny. Do you want me to say it out loud?”

Johnny pushed himself to his feet and walked over to Ruslan. He tilted his head back so they could look at each other.

“I’m going to win that tournament. For you,” Johnny said. “Although having you so near is going to be a problem.”

“Don’t worry,” Ruslan said quickly. “On most days, I have a lot to work, and I’m not going to stand in your way. Also, there’s plenty of space for sleeping arrangements, and I can have the gym better appointed to suit your needs and --”

Johnny stopped Ruslan by pulling him into his arms. “Have you been thinking about this, then?”

“For a little while, yes,” Ruslan admitted. “Seriously, Johnny, I’ll let you train. And I’ll live with the ‘no fucking’ rule. I want you to succeed since that’s what you want.”

“Hey, I told you I don’t need to hold to that rule,” Johnny protested.

“I don’t know, Johnny. I don’t want to be responsible for your losses.”

“So you’re going to keep me away from your bed?” Johnny laughed. He grabbed Ruslan’s ass. “Away from this?”

Ruslan pushed him away playfully. “Let’s do something today already. If you keep your hands on my ass, we won’t be able to make it to dinner. And papa won’t forgive us. Trust me, you don’t want to be on his bad side.”

Johnny kissed him. “Ah, so I have to be afraid of your papa, after all?”

“Of course you have to.” Ruslan snickered. “But I’ll let you make your own opinion of the man. I hope you two get along. What am I saying? You’ll get along. You’re so similar in some ways I can’t believe it.”

“Meaning that we both want what’s best for you?” Johnny asked.

Ruslan’s eyes were honest. “And that’s just the beginning of it.”

Johnny wanted to know what else made him and the old man so similar. But it looked like Ruslan wished to have that shower by how impatiently he dragged him toward the bathroom.

His room seemed so drab and uninviting after he had spent the night at Ruslan’s place. It was his room, though. He needed not to forget that simple truth. Yet, as he grabbed his toothbrush and a few changes of clothes, he could not stop the pure happiness he felt bubbling inside his chest. It was like he was leaving for summer camp or something. He had only been once, in fifth grade or something if he remembered well.

Ruslan was standing by the door, leaning against the wall, his hands in his pockets, dressed casually in slacks, a polo shirt, and a long coat to protect him from the November cold. Johnny stole a glance at him, and Ruslan smiled. It was like he had imagined. Ruslan could make even that ugly room look like a palace when he smiled.

“I could help you pack,” Ruslan pointed out.

Johnny waved. “Nah, it’s not much anyway.”

“Okay.” Ruslan’s smile widened.

They were staring at each other like two silly teenagers at this point. He needed to finish stuffing his knapsack with all the necessities and hurry out the door with Ruslan. “Are jeans and a sweater okay for your dad’s dinner?” he asked.

Ruslan snickered. “I’d rather have you naked, but let’s just say that I don’t want to scandalize my family.”

“C’mon, don’t be like this, pretty,” Johnny pretended to complain. “I want to look good for your papa.”

“You saved his son from getting a good beating and worse,” Ruslan said matter-of-factly. “Trust me. What you wear at the table won’t matter in the slightest.”

Johnny shook his head. “I hope this won’t come back to bite me in the ass.”

The only thing he had troubles with was not his wardrobe now. It was dealing with how giddy he felt inside. And giddy wasn’t good. It was a way for him to let his guard down, and he could not bring himself to care about that, either.

Johnny pushed his hands through his hair to control some of the nervousness he felt. It was just damn funny how he could face any opponent in the ring, but he felt so challenged by a simple dinner. The thing was there was nothing simple about that dinner. He had had no time to prepare for it, and now he needed to make a good impression on Ruslan’s dad.

All in all, it wasn’t the kind of battlefield he knew. But he had promised Ruslan’s old man that he would prove himself, and that was included, too. So he would eat little, speak even less, and not drink at all.

Ruslan grabbed him by one arm, leaning against him. “Papa and Martin will adore you,” he said softly.

“I don’t think I’m that kind,” he said dryly.

“You worry too much,” Ruslan laughed. “Damn, I should take a picture. Yeah, why don’t I do that?”

Johnny was too surprised to react when Ruslan pulled out his phone and snapped a selfie of them. He laughed when he showed Johnny the picture. “You’re so damned serious.”

And you’re way too beautiful, Johnny wanted to say when he looked at the picture. *Too beautiful for me.*

“Let’s just get inside so that you can finally see there’s no reason for you to worry.”

Johnny felt a bit assured by Ruslan, his weight as he was leaning against him. Like he felt grounded. Better than ever in his life.

Ruslan pressed the doorbell and gave him an assuring smile. Maybe he would live through this fancy dinner after all.

An aging butler in beautiful livery opened the door. The man looked tall, and Johnny felt dwarfed all of a sudden, not by the man's height, but by how he carried himself. Johnny suddenly felt little.

They were all seated at the table, and Johnny still could not shake off his nervousness. The old man had insisted for him and Ruslan to sit by each of his sides, and now Martin was also seated, across from his master. To his surprise, they were having dinner in a very intimate room, not the huge dining one he had expected. Even the table was made for four people, and it was located in a room that looked pretty much like the kind of space the rich and affluent would spend relaxing evenings. There were many books around and a small corner with what looked like smoking accessories.

"I hope you will enjoy your meal," Mr. Kent said. "Come on, don't be shy and dig in. Martin outdid himself, but Russy is such a picky eater. I hope he will learn the importance of a healthy appetite from you, Johnny."

He nodded solemnly. At least Ruslan had been right. There were no confusing forks. And the artfully decorated steak on his plate was making his mouth water. As everyone began eating, he dared, as well. And almost let out a groan of pure pleasure when he took the first bite.

"I can't believe you're telling on me," Ruslan protested, talking to his father.

"Russy, just eat," the old man said to his son. "You're skin and bones. Don't you think so, Johnny?"

Johnny patted his lips with the impeccable cloth napkin placed next to his plate. "Maybe he could eat a little more," he agreed.

"See, Russy?" Mr. Kent said triumphantly. "Even your boyfriend thinks so."

Boyfriend? Johnny reached for his wine glass. But he loved to think he was that to Ruslan. But maybe Ruslan would deny it, and he was getting all excited for nothing.

"Good job, papa. Rallying my boyfriend under your flag. Johnny, you're a traitor, just for the record." Ruslan turned to glare at him.

"Eat," Johnny said with a small smile.

So Ruslan thought he was his boyfriend, too. It wasn't only the wine making him warm on the inside right now. 'Boyfriend' had a nice ring to it. What was even more rewarding was how Ruslan dug into his plate, with an exaggerated sigh.

After that, they ate in silence, as, apparently, that was the standard rule in that house. Johnny didn't mind it. The food was delicious, and he could tell, well balanced, calorie and nutrient wise.

He was a tad intimidated by sitting at the same table with a real butler and a man who was pretty much like nobility, no matter what Ruslan was saying. The master of the house was also casually dressed, just like Ruslan, but Johnny thought he was still sticking out with his way too ordinary clothes.

The dessert was a light option, but at least that was something Ruslan seemed to enjoy eating without being told to. Johnny accepted Martin's offer of a fruit salad instead of the vanilla pudding Ruslan was eating with greater appetite than earlier.

After dinner, the butler took care of the table, and Ruslan hurried to help. When the old man gestured for him to join him at that smoking table or whatever that was, Johnny realized, too late, that he had been tricked into remaining alone with the master of the house.

Mr. Kent fiddled with a pipe for a while, and Johnny watched, without being able to control his curiosity. The old man looked at him through the veil of smoke and then invited him to take a seat on a small couch by the window.

"I must apologize," he started.

"What for?" Johnny said, a bit gruffly, and regretting it right away.

"For accusing you of being trouble for my son when, in fact, I was the one inviting trouble into our lives," Mr. Kent replied promptly.

"You couldn't have known about that guy, sir," Johnny said simply.

"I could have, and I should have," Mr. Kent said while crossing his legs and putting the pipe into his mouth once more.

Johnny waited patiently. Whatever Mr. Kent wanted to tell him, he would listen, and listen carefully.

"I might ask too much to tell you to watch over my son --"

"There's no need to ask, sir. I'll do it anyway."

Mr. Kent examined him with his scrutinizing eyes. "Are you a bit nervous about being here, Johnny?"

How could he tell? Johnny watched his hands. Maybe he was just too rash, talking too loud, speaking out of turn.

“There’s no need to. You’re welcome here. Although I should ask. How come you were there when Ruslan got assaulted by that man?”

“I was looking after him,” Johnny admitted.

Great. Now Mr. Kent would think he was some stalker.

“We were all lucky you were, then,” Mr. Kent replied. “You see, Johnny, Russy is the most important person in the world for me. His happiness is everything to me. And you make him happy.”

Johnny looked at the old man, wondering, in the most absurd manner possible, if he was joking or having some twisted fun at his expense. But no. The inquisitive eyes searching his soul sustained his and their exchange was honest and transparent.

“So we’re good?” he asked, for lack of better words.

Mr. Kent smiled and nodded. And then he offered Johnny his hand. “Come tomorrow. I intend to train you myself,” he said as they shook hands.

“Train?” Johnny wondered out loud.

“I don’t know if Russy told you, but I’m no stranger to the sport. There are a few tricks you can learn from this old dog,” Mr. Kent said with a small smile.

“I’m not sure I could spar with you, sir,” Johnny said, feeling some of his nervousness returning.

“You won’t be sparring with me, sonny.” Mr. Kent laughed. “I’ll give you pointers. You’ll spar with Martin.”

The thought of sparring in a ring with the quiet butler wasn’t supposed to be this intimidating. After all, Johnny had half the guy’s years and all the advantages that came with that.

“So now I suppose I have to promise I’ll be gentle,” he found himself talking. “No offense, sir,” he added quickly.

“None taken. But we’re not doing this for our fun. We’re doing this because we want you to be the best for our Russy.”

Ruslan was right. The old man was talking as if he and Martin were married. Or, at least, like they were family. Could they be brothers? But no, that couldn’t be. Who would use his brother as a butler?

“We’ll see tomorrow how much leeway you believe you should leave us.” Mr. Kent patted him on the shoulder.

Johnny nodded curtly. So he was welcomed to the family in a way. “That dude’s family,” he began, “they’re powerful, right? I should know.”

“Do you know the Davenports, Johnny?” Mr. Kent asked, a bit surprised.

“You’re the one who looked into my past. You should know,” Johnny pointed out.

“I’m afraid that’s not a detail I came across,” Mr. Kent replied.

“Someone with that name is, you know, who took an inch of the pelt on my back,” Johnny said.

“Forgive me if that’s something I have a hard time believing. I don’t see any of them getting handy with a whip. It was a whip, right?”

“A special kind,” Johnny said wryly. “But no, the man who swung that whip wasn’t the same with the one who gave the order.”

“Oh,” Mr. Kent admitted. “That I didn’t know. But how come you got entangled with their business, Johnny? I know your father had some serious debts to certain unsavory characters, but --”

“It was a lot of money. By our standards, at least,” Johnny said. “I thought what you just said, too. Until they put me in a ring, and Francis fucking Davenport told me that I have to repay what my old man had stolen. With my life, if need be. For some reason, it was personal with him. That’s why he had me beaten within an inch of my life. When I said enough, when I didn’t want to take any drugs and told him I was done, he did that and cared to let me know he was behind it. But it was just between him and me, I guess. No one knew. And maybe one or two of his men.”

Mr. Kent listened in silence. “Personal, you say? And how come he let you live, then?”

Johnny chuckled and shook his head. “He told me that I’d get to repay him in installments if I survived the beating. I did. So he let my mom and me alone. At least, as long as I pay him back.”

“I will take care of that. Just name the amount of the debt.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Kent, I can’t let you do that. It’s my debt.”

“You’re a man of honor, Johnny. That’s so rare these days,” the old man said pensively. “You have me intrigued over this Davenport business. Francis has never struck me as the kind to hold petty grudges. How much did your old man take?”

“Something around one hundred grand. And with interest and everything, it’s more. But I got less than one quarter of that to pay back. If I win your tournament, there won’t be much, and I’ll be there. Half a year, one year, at max, and I’ll settle that shit my old man caused.”

Despite himself, he was getting worked out, moving his hands too brusquely, too fast. He cast his eyes down.

“That’s good to know, Johnny. And all this time, you’re taking care of your mother, too. I must commend you for the man you are. And I want you to know that I could not hope for better. I should have known better when I allowed myself to be blinded by issues such as status.”

Johnny nodded, embarrassed, but happy with the old man’s praise. “My mom,” he said and swallowed hard, “she’s not all ... she’s not herself anymore.” He had no idea why he was pouring his heart out like that, but it was like he couldn’t stop.

“We all have baggage,” Mr. Kent said with an understanding nod. “Don’t believe, for one second, that I would judge you for something like that. I only wished you would let me help you. At least with the expenses --”

“No,” Johnny said stubbornly. “I will take care of her. May I ask something, sir?”

“Go ahead.” Mr. Kent gestured with his pipe.

“How come you didn’t tell Ruslan about my past?”

“It wasn’t my business to talk about it. And Ruslan is convinced you are going to tell him everything when you think it is right to do so.”

“Thank you, sir. You are a man of honor, too,” Johnny said looking straight at the other.

“I can’t wait to see you in training tomorrow, then,” Mr. Kent said. “Make sure you don’t let Ruslan keep you up late. Or you him.”

Johnny could feel his cheeks burning. What was the old man thinking they were doing all the time? Not that he would have been far from the truth. But now he felt like a schoolboy caught by his parents with skin mags under the bed.

Luckily for him, Ruslan chose to walk into the room that very moment, leaning against the butler’s arm and laughing. Anyone could see Ruslan felt at home there, with his two daddies. It almost made him feel jealous. Ruslan could be just as carefree with him, too.

“So, did you two have the big talk?” Ruslan asked, as he left Martin’s side and hurried by Johnny’s.

“How did you know we had some big talk?” the old man questioned, voicing precisely what was on Johnny’s mind, too.

“You wanted Johnny to yourself while putting Martin to take me out the door under the pretext that I should see how he remade the greenhouse. I know when something is afoot, papa. So, is it some secret or you could let Martin and me too, on it?”

“Johnny will be training with us, starting tomorrow,” Mr. Kent said right away. “So, don’t keep him late.”

“I would never,” Ruslan said dramatically while putting a hand over his chest in affectation.

“You know what I mean. Be good, children,” the old man said with a smile.

“So, what do you think?” Ruslan cuddled next to him on the backseat of the taxi.

“Your old man is bent on having me trained. He wants me to spar with Martin. I will hold back, don’t worry.” He stretched one arm around Ruslan to pull him closer.

Ruslan snickered.

“What?” Johnny asked with a frown.

“You’ll see,” Ruslan said secretively.

For minutes, they said nothing, the radio station picked by the driver being the only thing filling the silence. It was cozy, and Johnny could not remember when he had felt at peace like that.

“The most important thing is that you survived,” Ruslan teased, slowly caressing Johnny’s cheek with his lips.

“I did, didn’t I?” Johnny smiled.

He had done that, and, this time, it wasn’t only about surviving another day.

Chapter Twelve - It's A First Time For Me, Too

They were looking at one another over the bathroom sink, as they were meticulously brushing their teeth to go to bed. It was something so familiar in that, and Johnny could feel his chest trying to expand way beyond its means, and it hurt a little, but, more importantly, he could not remember why it was all so easy to recognize because he had never been in that kind of situation before. He was pretty sure of that.

Ruslan's eyes were shining as he looked at Johnny. It was the least sexy situation they were in that very moment, yet they could not help giving each other an eyeful. Like they couldn't live without doing that.

"Come on, to bed," Ruslan said after they rinsed their mouths one last time.

"Am I really going to sleep with you?" Johnny asked, and felt a bit like a kid for asking that.

"Where else?"

"It's a big ass house. Is your bed the only one?"

"Are you trying to tell me you don't want to sleep in the same bed with me?" Ruslan placed his hands on his hips.

Ruslan was particularly pretty when he pretended he was mad. He was like some cute animal trying to look fierce. Maybe that was why crazy assholes like that Nigel thought they could hurt him. That was something that needed to be corrected.

"I promised your dad that I wouldn't keep you up late," Johnny explained.

"Hmm. And do you always do what you're told, Johnny?" Ruslan laughed.

"It's your dad. I must listen to him," Johnny pointed out.

"And why is that?" Ruslan grinned, apparently satisfied with Johnny's answers for some reason.

Johnny frowned. "Because he lets me date you or something."

He was clearly not smart enough to figure out what Ruslan was thinking that very moment.

Ruslan teased him. "Snake got domesticated."

"Hey," he protested.

Ruslan was bent on making him chase him to the bedroom. Johnny didn't have to pick up the pace much as he hurried after the other. He caught Ruslan's raised hands, probably in surrender, and made him stumble toward the bed.

“Do you think I’m domesticated?” He looked Ruslan straight into his deep blue eyes.

Ruslan just nodded and grinned.

“Then I should take you so hard tonight that you won’t be able to sit right tomorrow,” Johnny said, trying to sound menacing, but failing, by how Ruslan’s eyes were glinting with mischief. “Ah, but you want that, don’t you? So the real punishment would be,” he let his words in suspension a little, “not to fuck you at all.”

Ruslan made such a funny face that Johnny burst into laughter.

“You’re kidding,” Ruslan said. “Please tell me you are.”

It wasn’t like Johnny to resist when Ruslan was begging like that.

“Okay, you win, pretty.” Johnny shook his head. “I’ll fuck you. But gently.”

Ruslan pouted.

“Yeah, and I’m serious,” Johnny said. “I need all my strength to go against your daddies tomorrow.”

“My daddies?” Ruslan’s smile widened. “I know, right? It’s like that with them. They both took care of me, just like a family would.”

“Did your mom pass away a long time ago?” Johnny asked.

Ruslan shrugged. “I never met her.”

Johnny knew he needed to stop. Ruslan’s enthusiasm had vanished a little. It wasn’t a good time to ask him about his dead mother.

“Let me hold you tonight,” Johnny said without thinking.

The least he could do was to offer some comfort. Ruslan threw him a pleasant smile.

“Fuck me slowly or hard, just how you want, Johnny.” Ruslan leaned in for a soft kiss. “I like being yours so much.”

That wasn’t the kind of proposition he could refuse. He could do that, fuck the man gently, and hold him tightly and show him why he mattered, even if only to a shmuck like Johnny ‘Snake’ Bryne.

Ruslan’s skin under his fingers was smooth, as Johnny reached inside the other man’s clothes. So smooth it felt unreal, just like anything else about this man. Johnny was not one for foreboding prophecies, but he could feel it, even in a quiet, pleasant moment like that; good things like this had a price. What it was and how he would pay it, he didn’t know.

But that was something he knew - that he would do everything, everything he could, with every muscle and bone in his body, to pay that price. No matter what it was and what it asked of him.

Ruslan laughed softly as Johnny leaned in to draw a wet trail from the now exposed chest down on the lean abdomen muscles, stopping just for a bit of teasing around the belly button, and then going for the kill.

“Ah, Johnny,” Ruslan whispered, and his long fingers were soon in his lover’s hair, caressing, pulling, running through with gentleness well balanced by impatient and arduous roughness.

Johnny thought he knew what he liked most in Ruslan, yet the man still surprised him. Right now, even though he was a guest in that fancy house, Ruslan was treating him like an equal, like someone who deserved to be by his side, despite how different their worlds were.

“Could you hurry?” Ruslan pleaded with him. “I know how much you like to suck my dick, but I’d like to head over to the main course.”

“Which is?” Johnny teased.

“Ha-ha,” Ruslan said curtly, without one sign that he was amused.

“C’mon, pretty, you have to say it,” Johnny insisted.

“Say what?” Ruslan teased in turn.

“Say: come on, Johnny, fuck my sweet ass already,” Johnny used a whiny tone on purpose.

“I don’t talk like that.” Ruslan pushed himself up on his elbows and glared.

“My bad. I can’t remember how you do sound. Remind me, pretty,” Johnny said slowly.

“Oh, damn, so clever ... What should I do with you now?”

Johnny laughed. “Be a good boy and beg for my cock.”

He was busy taking up Ruslan’s cock out of his pajama pants and playing with the tongue around the head. Ruslan was delicious and elegant everywhere.

“Johnny, be a good boy and fuck me already,” Ruslan ordered, but his voice was growing a bit breathily like he could not quite control it.

Johnny smirked, looking at Ruslan. “Then get on all fours, and I’ll give you a ride.”

The pretty man obeyed without protest. He was an expert at throwing away his clothes, and then placing himself on the bed, in the most proper position Johnny had to admit he had seen in his life.

He only needed to reach out and touch. Pushing apart the beautiful ass cheeks, he peered at the small hole. It was clear Ruslan had been fucked earlier that day, but his ass still looked good like that. Johnny put himself in position so that he could lick Ruslan as he deserved.

“Oh, fuck,” Ruslan whispered. “You’re so good with your tongue, Johnny, you know?”

“Aw, thanks.” Johnny laughed and gave the little hole another long lick. “Then I’ll stick here for a while.”

“Don’t you dare,” Ruslan threatened. “Don’t just stick there. Stick it in there. Catch my drift?”

“I think I do, pretty.” Johnny got to his feet and sauntered by the bedside to grab the lube.

Ruslan had put it on the nightstand for easy access. It made Johnny feel all giddy inside and ready to admit defeat that Ruslan thought about all these things.

But there had been enough teasing. Now he needed to show him why he deserved to be considered a boyfriend. Ruslan wanted a fucking, and he would get a fucking, no questions asked. Johnny would fuck him into the next century if need be.

As he pushed himself slowly inside, he took his time to admire Ruslan’s gracious back. He had moves. It made Johnny jealous to think that there had been others before him, watching Ruslan from above like that, sinking their dicks in that incredible ass, and thinking that they had him, that Ruslan, somehow, belonged to them.

No one was allowed to think that. Each thrust came with a sense of possessiveness that was scary. Johnny wasn’t fighting it. Fear never scared him. Anyone hearing him saying that could tell him he was stupid. But it was the damned truth.

Ruslan moaned and arched his back, pushing his ass into Johnny’s cock. “Oh, fuck, Johnny, you have such a great cock,” he whispered.

“Do you want me to jerk you off?” Johnny asked.

“No.” Ruslan shook his head. “I want to come from your dick; it’s just so good.”

Each word was a staccato whisper, Johnny carefully increasing the rhythm and getting more and more inside, deeper and harder. He had made a promise to Ruslan to take him slowly, but he could not fully keep it. It was beyond his means at the moment, and he was losing himself a little, but it was okay.

“How are you holding up, pretty?” Johnny asked.

“I’m close, I’m close,” Ruslan confirmed. “Don’t stop; just fuck me harder!”

It was just what he wanted, too. They were so on the same page when it came to sex that it was uncanny.

His heavy breathing mingled well with Ruslan's moans, louder and louder. Good thing there were no neighbors to worry about. They could bring the house down, and they couldn't care less.

"So good, fuck, so good, Johnny!" Ruslan shouted and, by how his lithe body was convulsing, he was coming, as promised, without touching himself.

Johnny knew he had to be thankful for such mercies. So he came, too, with a loud growl, keeping Ruslan's hips so tightly that he knew he would leave marks.

As he withdrew, his cock was still hard, and there was a rope of semen between him and the other that broke as soon as he pushed himself back. He could stay there and look at that beautiful ass, so generous in taking him, taking everything from him, too, in the process.

He could not watch for long. Ruslan let himself drop on the bed, and then he rolled away to look at him.

"Stop giving me that smug look," Ruslan teased him, but his eyes were smiling.

"I'm not," Johnny protested.

But he was smiling, too, and not only with his eyes.

"So you won't pout if I send you to sleep with just one time?" Johnny hurried and caught him under his weight as he pushed Ruslan into the bed.

Their naked bodies weld together. That was how they were.

"Somehow, it's enough when I'm with you," Ruslan said and pushed one hand through Johnny's sweaty strands of hair.

Johnny laughed. "I'm glad then."

"Don't get complacent, though." Ruslan pretended to be all serious but burst into laughter right away.

"Why are you laughing, pretty?" Johnny looked deep into his eyes.

"I don't know," Ruslan replied, and just laughed harder.

"Let me take you to the shower," Johnny offered. "Like naughty boys, instead of sleeping, we chose to fool around."

"Oh, are you complaining?" Ruslan glared this time.

“Not one bit,” Johnny replied. “Hop up. I need to care for you, you know?”

“And that includes washing me?” Ruslan smiled.

“Among many other things,” Johnny said. “And it’s my pleasure to carry you around.”

It was his pleasure to do everything with Ruslan, Johnny thought. And, by that, he meant everything.

He hadn’t lied one iota. Ruslan knew that with the utmost clarity, that Johnny was doing a great job at satisfying him. His body did crave the man, but he was also left satisfied, and that was not something he could tell about anyone else in his life. Not even Yanis.

And now it was morning, and he felt like he hadn’t slept that well in years. Maybe at first after his papa had saved him and his friend from that terrible place. By all means, his nights should have been plagued by nightmares, but that hadn’t happened. Under his adoptive father’s roof, he had finally felt safe. And that had given him restful nights like never before.

Once he had insisted on becoming more independent and living on his own, the feeling of security had waned. But Ruslan wanted to be strong by himself, and he could not do that if he were to live forever in the old man’s shadow.

Yet, right now, a premiere since leaving his papa’s side, he had slept so well, his head resting on Johnny’s magnificent chest, his strong muscles the best pillow he could have. Johnny’s soft, rhythmic breathing had lulled him to sleep, and he could not remember when he had fallen asleep.

Now it was morning, and Ruslan searched with one hand for his bed partner. Johnny was sitting on the edge of the bed, fiddling with a phone.

“Hey,” he called in a sleepy voice.

“Hey, I didn’t mean to wake you up.” Johnny half turned. “Did you set your alarm to wake me up?”

Ruslan noticed only then that Johnny was holding his phone.

“Yeah,” he said with a smile.

“You didn’t have to.” Johnny smiled back. “It’s like I have an internal clock. I always know when to wake up. When I heard your alarm, though, I thought I was in the army or something. Also, I didn’t want to wake you up. You’re a bit of a late sleeper, aren’t you?”

“Correct.” Ruslan stretched and moved to sit by Johnny’s side.

Johnny moved the phone from one hand to another.

“I didn’t mean to be nosy,” Johnny said a bit guiltily. “I just wanted to look at that picture you took yesterday.”

Ruslan kissed his lover’s cheek. “Don’t worry. I don’t have anything I’d keep hidden from you. Here, give it to me.”

Ruslan navigated quickly through the menus to find the picture.

“Look at us,” he said with a chuckle and held the phone so that Johnny could look at the picture while he sneaked one hand around his waist. “You look like a little lamb ready for sacrifice.” He giggled.

“Hey, I was about to meet your old man,” Johnny pointed out, a bit gruffly.

“And you made a great impression on him. I told you. That’s big. And you are in his graces, too.”

Johnny used one hand to trace invisible lines over the screen.

“You’re beautiful here. So beautiful,” Johnny said pensively.

There was a change in Johnny, Ruslan could tell. And maybe, just maybe, it was the same change taking place inside him, but he wasn’t ready to start comparing notes. So he laughed.

“I had no idea you could be such a sentimentalist, Johnny.” Ruslan ruffled his hair. “Let’s send this pic to your phone since you like it so much.”

“Is it wrong of me to like it so much?” Johnny’s question sounded clumsy like the words were boulders tumbling down a steep hill.

Almost like a disaster in the making. But Ruslan felt like he was at the foot of the hill, waiting to embrace the rolling stones, and run away with them, like a river of bedrock on the move.

“No.” He shook his head. “I like it. That you like it. That you like me.”

There was no poetry left in him, except for stunted phrases and repetitive words. For a few seconds, they looked at each other, and their eyes said more than what their tongues and throats and vocal cords could.

“I knew you had to get up early,” Ruslan said. “That’s why I set up the alarm.” He gestured with the hand holding the phone, eager to change the topic.

“Thanks.” Johnny nodded. “I guess I need to go. Your daddies are slave drivers.”

Ruslan laughed.

“I’d say they’re no worse than you. Ah, let’s not forget.” He looked at his phone. “There. Sent to yours.”

Johnny moved to take his phone and seemed lost in thought as he thumbed through something.

“I made it my wallpaper.” Johnny waved the phone for Ruslan to see it with an almost childish grin on his rough face.

“Ah, I had no idea it took so little to make you happy.” Ruslan smiled. “We’ll take many other pictures then. We’ll fill up a few albums if you want.”

Johnny seemed to consider. “This one’s special,” he said, and his dark eyes were filled with warmth as he looked over at Ruslan.

It should have been easy to ask just what Johnny meant by that, but Ruslan felt that the moment was perfect as it was.

Only several minutes later, Johnny was out the door, ready to meet Ruslan’s papa and Martin for the training session of his life. If he had been honest, Ruslan would have admitted that he should have warned Johnny more about how seriously boxing as a sport was taken in that family. But Johnny was quick to think on his feet. Ruslan had no reason to worry about him.

There were other things to worry about. Like how fast they were going. Like why he didn’t mind. Why he was, actually, the one to pull all the strings to make it happen.

It. Ruslan didn’t dare to call it by its name. But he lay on the bed, his eyes on the ceiling, looking at nothing, mainly because his entire attention, everything was turned toward the inside, and there only one question seemed to live.

Was he falling for Johnny ‘Snake’ Bryne?

Johnny could not say he expected what was right now in front of his eyes. Ruslan’s papa had something like a ring at his house. And both his lover’s daddies were there, dressed in tees and shorts like they were ready to get on with the training as usual.

He stole a glance, hoping he wouldn’t be considered rude for staring. Without his fancy clothes, Mr. Kent looked lean and muscular. Martin, on the other hand, looked more like a bull. In his case, the butler livery hid quite an impressive physique.

Both men looked good, and not only for their age. They looked like they could take men twenty years their juniors. Johnny gulped nervously, as he moved to greet the two. He had been instructed to enter and find the place, so there he was. Now what?

Douglas and Martin seemed deep in conversation, talking in hushed voices. Johnny cleared his throat to let them know he was there.

“Johnny.” Mr. Kent welcomed him with a smile.

Martin, quiet as usual, just nodded.

“Let’s warm you up.” Mr. Kent gestured for him to climb into the ring.

Without wasting words, Johnny obeyed. Mr. Kent began giving him orders spoken in a soft, yet firm voice. Johnny glanced over at Martin who was doing the same thing. He wasn’t easily impressed, but, right now, he could not take his eyes off Martin.

Now he knew that he should not have joked about sparring with the quiet butler. Martin looked like he could take Johnny. Maybe not beat the crap out of him, seeing how he wasn’t as young as his opponent, but Johnny knew great shape when he saw it.

“Great,” Mr. Kent said. “Now let’s see what you got, Johnny. Martin, please, grab the training pads.”

For a while, they opted for some routine moves. Douglas was correcting Johnny on the go, in the same mild-mannered voice.

“Let’s see the two of you spar now,” Mr. Kent said shortly.

Johnny could feel his blood getting warm. Martin didn’t look ready to break into a sweat, but he hadn’t been the one punching the training pads for the last half an hour. Now, shit was about to get real.

And he had no idea if he should hold back anymore. As Johnny raised his eyes to meet Martin’s, he knew.

The eyes of a real fighter were like that, impenetrable, not letting anything in. There was a lot to learn from staring into your opponent’s eyes. You could tell if you were going against some crazy man, or against one who knew to strategize.

“Fight.”

The order was short and precise. Keeping his guard up, Johnny began moving slowly toward his target. Martin looked undisturbed. A small move, as if Martin was trying to shake off one gloved hand, was his cue. He moved fast, reaching for the opening, but Martin stepped out of his way with grace uncharacteristic to a man of his size.

Johnny realized too late he had been tricked. Martin’s gloved fist grazed over his side, not too hard, but enough to draw his attention.

“Stop. What did you do wrong, Johnny?” Mr. Kent asked.

Johnny shrugged. “I got fooled.”

“Not entirely correct. Where were you looking?”

“At his fists,” Johnny replied.

“You need to widen your horizon. Body language is often more important than positioning. If you had paid attention, you would have been able to tell Martin’s intention. Let’s try again. Fight.”

Johnny shook his head. This was a whole different level. These guys knew head games. For a little while, he proceeded in the same manner, moving slightly to one side and the other, waiting for an opening.

Martin was a boulder, he was that unmoved. And then, in an instant, Johnny caught it. The little cue that he could invade the other’s space. But, just as soon, he noticed Martin moving one foot forward, and then he knew.

He feigned a move and executed Martin with his non-dominant hand instead. The man stumbled backward, and Johnny froze. He was not supposed to beat up his lover’s daddies. What the fuck was he thinking?

“Very good.” Mr. Kent praised him from the sideline. “Don’t worry about Martin. His chin is made of pure granite.”

Johnny looked over at his sparring partner. Indeed, Martin seemed unshaken.

“All right. Let’s go again.”

Johnny positioned himself. Martin was entirely made of granite, he would soon learn. Over the next couple of hours, Ruslan’s dad took him through so many tricks he was sure he already forgot half of them.

At the end of their session, he was breathing hard, he felt beaten, and was sure that he was one lucky fucker never having met an opponent of that caliber in his life.

Mr. Kent handed him a bottle of water and then threw one at Martin.

“What do you say, Johnny?” Mr. Kent asked him. “Is it any good to train with a couple of old timers like us?”

Johnny worked his shoulder.

“Old timers, my ass,” he said under his breath.

Mr. Kent laughed. Even Martin smiled. That had to count for something.

“Come now. A little stretching.”

Johnny had to admit Mr. Kent did nothing by half. After following the directions, he felt about half less beaten.

“Were you some big name boxer in your days, Martin?” Johnny addressed the butler as they sat at the table.

“Nothing fancy,” Martin waved. “I just took part in a few local events where I used to live. Then I found something more important to fight for.”

The small exchange between the master of the house and his butler wasn't lost on Johnny. Ruslan was right. There was something between the two. But they weren't upfront about it. Or maybe he was trying to read too much into everything.

“How come Ruslan is so helpless in a fight with the two of you around?” Johnny questioned.

Mr. Kent laughed wholeheartedly. Martin shook his head in mirth.

“Russy, unfortunately, can be quite a stubborn brat when he wants. He says he doesn't like violence. I assume he's a bit too vain about his looks. And training too hard would, according to him, make him lose some of those looks. Also, I had trouble getting him to wake up early in the morning. We could not have dreamed of making him do even more.”

Johnny felt all warm on the inside. He was in this fancy house, at this fancy table, eating prime cut steak, and sharing laughs with Ruslan's papa. He had to be dreaming. Stuff like that was not supposed to happen to guys like him.

“He still needs to learn a bit of self-defense. Just so that crap like that with that Nigel dude doesn't happen again. Shit, sorry I said crap, sir.” Johnny caught himself too late.

This time, even Martin laughed.

“No worries. In this house, we may not curse, but we are well aware of people with silver tongues and just as poisonous. Talking to a frank person like yourself, Johnny, is a breath of fresh air.” Mr. Kent was smiling as he said those words.

“You are better company than the usual visitors,” Martin added.

The usual visitors? What was that supposed to mean? Johnny looked over at Mr. Kent who seemed pensive all of a sudden.

“I want you to take care of Ruslan, Johnny,” Mr. Kent said.

He nodded solemnly. “Of course.”

“He is stronger than he looks, but, well, let’s just say that I feel better knowing that someone as strong as you has his eyes on my Russy.”

“You have my word, sir.” Johnny felt like he needed to kneel and be knighted, that solemn the atmosphere was.

“You are a man of honor. I am glad Russy met you. If it hadn’t been for you, I would not have forgiven myself for pushing my boy into that scoundrel’s arms.”

“No need to mention it, sir.” Johnny hurried to say. “You know what? I’ll convince Ruslan to learn some self-defense moves. He can’t say ‘no’ to me.”

“That’s a brilliant idea.” The old man’s face lit up. “I am confident you will succeed where we failed. Now, while Martin takes care of the table, come with me.”

Johnny addressed Martin his thanks for the meal and followed Mr. Kent in an adjoining room. As the man took a box from the table, Johnny frowned a little.

“There’s no need for gifts, sir. I will take care of Ruslan anyway.” He protested, and his eyes were soon met by stern ones.

“In the ring, Johnny, you need every edge. You are correct. This is a gift. But these gloves have been in the family for many years. Don’t worry. They are in pristine condition, and they undergo regular maintenance under Martin’s watchful eyes. I want you to have them. Not for training, but for when you climb into the ring, and you have doubts.”

Johnny took the gloves from Douglas’s hands. He checked them. He had heard of such gloves, but he had never worn a pair. The padding was thicker around the wrists, but thinner around the fist. That meant they were designed to make a man with an efficient punch destructive in the ring.

“That’s not exactly the kind of stuff I’m in,” he eventually said.

“I know. You wear different gloves. But I don’t give you these gloves to wear them in the ring. They are meant as a gift that tells you how much I trust in your abilities as a fighter. I know what you are going to tell me. Something like the fact that you trust yourself enough, perhaps? And that you don’t need further validation from someone else. These gloves tell you something, Johnny. And that is that we have your back.”

To say he was touched would have been an understatement. He caressed the thick leather with reverence.

“I wouldn’t know where to keep them, sir. Or what to do with them. Or how to take care of them.”

“Don’t worry.” Mr. Kent squeezed his shoulder. “Martin will give you pointers. And give them to Russy and tell him that I need him to find a place for your gloves. He will know what to do. Consider this gift a token of my appreciation, Johnny. Since you wouldn’t take my money and I can appreciate that, it is the least you should accept from me.”

“I am honored, sir.” Johnny bowed.

“I believe I’ve taken enough of your day. Russy wouldn’t forgive me if I kept you longer.”

“It’s been a pleasure to be trained by you,” Johnny said.

“Don’t think this is all.” Mr. Kent patted him on the back. “Twice a week, swing by. We need to hammer into your brain and muscles all these teachings. We haven’t told you half of it. Actually, we have given you very little. I’ll be glad to have you as a fixture to our ring and our house. Dinners can be a boring affair from time to time. I will tell Russy to bring you over.”

“Thank you, sir. I don’t know what to say.”

Johnny looked down. He was overwhelmed, that was what he was. Could it be that a bit of happiness was straying down his street once in a lifetime?

“Martin will show you off. Unfortunately, duty calls and there is plenty of correspondence to take care of.”

Johnny murmured his goodbyes. Someone had his back. In that wild and grim world, someone finally had his back. And it felt friggin’ nice.

“Are you kidding me? He gave you THE gloves?” Ruslan’s eyes grew as big as saucers.

One look at Johnny told him how smug Ruslan was about it all, and also happy, by the size of that grin.

“Yeah. He told me you’d know where to put them and such. What’s the deal with these gloves? I mean, they’re pretty awesome, but they’re not for training or the ring.”

“It is the same pair with which Martin fought some big match when they were both young and stupid. Their words, not mine,” Ruslan said defensively. “So they have this huge sentimental value. Wait, what did papa tell you when he gave them to you?”

“He told me that he has my back from now on.” Johnny’s smile was as big as the sun.

Ruslan threw his arms around Johnny and hugged him.

“This is huge! I mean, Johnny, nobody, absolutely nobody, is ever good enough for me, according to papa! Well, at least the guys I like. Martin may seem like he’s on my side, but I’m sure he sides with papa the moment I’m not looking. Damn, I’m so happy!”

“You won’t be so happy when you hear what I have in store for you.” Johnny’s smile seemed a little mischievous now.

Ruslan frowned a bit. Hmm, what could have his papa and Martin told Johnny? Oh, no, they were all going to insist that he should eat more. He was almost sure that was it.

“Are you going to force feed me?” Ruslan asked, staring at Johnny through his eyelashes.

“Force feed you? I won’t have to do that. When I’m through with you, you’ll ask for food yourself.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Having sex with you makes me sleepy, not hungry.” Ruslan felt the need to argue.

“Nah, pretty, that’s not it. Guess again?”

“I have no idea what you mean.” Ruslan shrugged, to show that he wasn’t worried.

“You’ll have to train with me and learn how to take care of yourself. You don’t want your skinny ass handed to you when I’m not around, do you?”

Johnny’s eyes were shining. The guy was having so much fun at his expense. Ruslan wasn’t amused.

“Skinny ass? You know well it’s not skinny!” He chose to protest.

“Don’t try to change the subject, pretty. I’m going to teach you. Your papa’s orders.”

“Ah, then it’s easy. Papa loves me. So if I refuse, he won’t do anything.”

“Maybe he won’t, but I’m not your papa. You’ll learn how to defend yourself, or I’ll find ways to get you to obey.”

Ruslan rolled his eyes. Johnny was bent on this; he could tell. But if there was someone who could wiggle his way out of something like this, that someone was him.

So he smiled sweetly at Johnny. “But, Johnny, look at me. Would you really like me if I had muscles this big?” He gestured with his hands, trying to make a point.

“No one’s asking you to start lifting weights,” Johnny said. “Of course, I’m sure you can’t lift for shit.”

Right now, Johnny was trying to challenge him and make him feel a bit ambitious about proving him wrong.

He wasn't usually that easy to stir, but, in this case, he would make an exception. Ruslan set his chin high. "I can't lift for shit?" He scoffed. "I can assure you that I'm not that helpless."

"I'm sure you're so helpless that no other guy in the entire town's as helpless as you are."

Hmm, Ruslan thought and pursed his lips. Johnny was a bit too good at getting a rise out of him. He was almost taking the bait. Almost.

"You know, I have my weapons," he said with a smile he hoped seductive.

"Nah, pretty, you're not going to use this on me. Not this time." Johnny brushed the tip of his nose.

Ruslan glared. "Why are you so bent on getting me to train or whatever?"

"There's nothing I want more but to have you in my sight twenty-four-seven. But I can't. And there are creeps in this world who'd stop at nothing when seeing someone pretty and helpless as you."

"Oh, damn, so it's about the incident with Nigel." Ruslan sighed deeply. "The guy had me drugged, just for the record. Of course, I could not do much under the circumstances."

"So, if you hadn't been drugged, you would have floored the guy?" Johnny crossed his arms over his chest and looked at him, his face all a frown.

Ruslan opened his mouth to reply.

"You couldn't have done that," Johnny replied in his stead. "Because the guy is bigger and stronger than you."

"And? It's not like I can suddenly become bigger and stronger than I am," Ruslan said with a shrug.

"You can get smarter, though. Let me teach you a few moves, pretty. I promise you won't get muscles this big." Johnny mimicked his gesture from earlier.

Johnny had a point, Ruslan admitted to himself.

"All right," he said. "Feel free to torture me with whatever you have in mind. But if I'm too exhausted to fuck later, it's all your fault, so that you know."

"I assume full responsibility," Johnny said solemnly. "And don't worry. I can fuck you while you're half asleep."

Ruslan could not believe he was doing this. There was an underlying motive of why he wasn't crazy about learning how to fight. As much as he liked strong men the best, the simple idea of going against someone like that was making him weak in the knees, and not in a fun way. He was terrified, mostly because he knew he wouldn't stand a chance, and also because the idea of hurting physically was repulsive to him.

"Self-defense is not about fighting fair," Johnny began. "So what I'm showing you here are pretty much dirty moves."

Ruslan nodded, feeling as much as a fish out of the water as he had felt since they had entered his home gym.

"So go for the eyes."

"The eyes?!" Ruslan was sure he looked pretty much terrified only hearing that piece of advice.

"If you're in a position where you can hurt the guy's eyes, do it," Johnny said curtly. "Don't use your stretched fingers though. Use your knuckles. The point is to inflict as much damage as possible within the shortest time. While your attacker is busy clutching at his eyes and calling for his momma, you get busy running."

"Running?" Ruslan asked, fairly surprised.

"Yes. Don't stay and fight. Just buy yourself enough time to get to safety. Other areas to hit are the nose, the neck, the knees, and, of course, the crotch."

"Wow, Johnny, I thought you would be the last guy to teach me how to hit a man in the balls."

"It's only for life or death situations. Otherwise, don't do it," Johnny said shortly. "Are you ready now?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," Ruslan replied.

"Good. Let's go."

Just sighing and complaining wouldn't save him from this. Ruslan shrugged. It was for the better to get it over with.

"So how was it?" Johnny whispered into his ear while the warm water slushed down their bodies. "Not so bad, right?"

"I guess," Ruslan said softly and brushed his lips against his lover's mouth.

Johnny's hands were rough as they traveled down his back. Ruslan knew how much he affected the other. And it was enough for him to feel all giddy inside, and also, something that wasn't that familiar to him.

It was power. Johnny was taller, heavier, stronger, skilled at fighting, yet his dark eyes were vulnerable when they are staring at each other like that. Johnny was opening a door for him to go through, and it was enough to fill Ruslan's heart to the brink.

"I promised your dad I'm going to take care of you."

"And that's all the reason you need to do that, right?" Ruslan snickered.

A hand was in his wet hair while the other was firmly grabbing his ass. Ruslan liked to feel restrained like that. Johnny was asserting his power, too, even if his was more of the physical kind.

But no, that wasn't what Johnny was doing. He was holding Ruslan, taking care of him, just like he had promised. In the meantime, he was expressing his biggest weakness, too, which was how much he wanted Ruslan. Even if that need was merely physical, it mattered.

Instead of an answer, Johnny brought Ruslan's lips to his. It was so intense, whatever it was that both were feeling. Like their next breath was depending on kissing the other. Ruslan liked that. He liked that so much that he wanted to be able to grab Johnny just as hard, and kiss him, and hold him close, and tell him that he wasn't allowed to leave ever.

Ruslan couldn't stand fear. He had known plenty of it and wanted none. Although he was well aware that wasn't possible, he wasn't one to invite it in his life. But, right now, he was pushing the door wide open, and he was letting Johnny in, just like Johnny was letting him, and that meant that fear was coming, too.

No matter how hard it was to shut it down, Ruslan was willing to try. It was Johnny kissing him, responding, as it was his habit more often than not, with his actions rather than his words, but Ruslan was kissing back, too.

Their bodies were warm under the hot shower and slick, and Ruslan felt something akin to a rush as they rubbed against each other like rutting animals. Johnny pulled his head away, his hand still buried in Ruslan's hair, looked him in the eyes, and then suddenly made him turn.

Ruslan yelped when a heavy hand swatted his ass, not too hard, but enough to make him assume the position. He arched his back and lifted his buttocks, eager for some action. The water running down his back was pure bliss, relaxing, a contrast to how Johnny was handling him.

He heard Johnny spit and braced for it. It wasn't like him to say 'no' even if it were a bit of a rough ride. But Johnny, even when he was like this, was thoughtful. Skillful fingers were opening his passage slowly, stopping to add more and more of the improvised lube.

“Oh, damn, you’re going to take all night, aren’t you?” Ruslan threw sassily over one shoulder.

Johnny growled in response, but Ruslan knew his impatience amused the other. Within such a short time, he had come to learn the tiniest changes in Johnny voice or the sounds he was making. That level of familiarity was scary, too.

Ruslan gasped as Johnny’s cock made contact with his hole. But he didn’t push in, but teased the opening, brushing his cock over and over again over the sensitive skin. Johnny was such a teaser, and Ruslan needed more.

“First time you’re going anal with a guy?” He teased Johnny, no matter how big the risk.

“Yeah,” Johnny teased back. “There’s this little hole, and I’m supposed to put my cock inside it. I have no idea how others do it.”

“It’s actually quite simple,” Ruslan said while lifting his ass higher and pushing it against Johnny’s cock. “You’re starting to push, and that’s when the magic will start happening.”

“What magic? Will my dick shrink?” Johnny snickered.

“Oh, damn, do I have to spell it for you? That’s why I don’t do novices,” Ruslan replied with a small huff.

Johnny’s hand left his hair and grabbed him by the back of his neck. Ruslan liked that, too. With a small grunt, Johnny began pushing inside, going in slowly, letting Ruslan adjust to his girth.

“You’re a very promising novice,” Ruslan said.

“Thanks. The magic you were talking about was your hole getting bigger, right?”

Johnny had his big cock in his ass and still wanted to joke. Ruslan moved a bit brusquely, and his ass swallowed half of Johnny’s magnificent sword. A short, but louder grunt, was the response.

“Someone likes to live dangerously,” Johnny whispered into his ear.

“Just a bit,” Ruslan said and gasped as his lover pushed himself inside even more.

Johnny was not usually talkative, except for the usual praises and how he liked to express his wonder at Ruslan’s body taking him in like that. But there were changes in that, too, and Ruslan loved, loved it to the death, that he could get this brooding man to open up like that. Ruslan could tell that what he had with Johnny was precious.

There was no longer time to find meaning in what was happening between them. Holding him in place, Johnny began to ride him, amply, slowly, at first, then settling into a rhythm that was nothing short of ideal for both of them.

Ruslan could feel the other filling him, so much that there wasn't room for anything else. Their lovemaking, because that was what it was, confirmed his fears, but there was nothing he could do about it, anyway. Now, for the first time in his life, he could depend on a stranger, someone who wasn't Yanis or his papa or Martin.

But he was wrong. Johnny was not a stranger. And not only because he knew how to fuck Ruslan's brains out, and leave him satisfied, and wanting more at the same time, yet without that permanent ache that had been making him feel restless and incomplete all his life.

He wasn't aching for Johnny's touch. He was yearning for him, which was a different matter because it went as deeply as his fear. The fact that he could do nothing to stop it was a force in itself. Ruslan was ready to admit defeat, whatever it meant.

Johnny was a skillful, amazing lover. He knew how to angle his cock that Ruslan felt a small shiver with each brush over the sensitive spot inside his ass, and this small shiver was growing in intensity, too, bringing tears to his eyes from too much stimulation.

When he felt Johnny's hand wrapping around his cock, Ruslan whimpered against himself. What had been good before was amazing now. He could fuck himself into Johnny's closed fist while he was hammering his prostate. He went so fast down the slope of no return that he couldn't care less what happened when he would hit the ground.

"Fuck, Johnny, fuck, this is so fucking good," he moaned over and over again, as his body tensed and his cock started to shoot all over the wall in front of him.

"Hold on tight, pretty," Johnny almost hissed, by all signs, stretched to his limits just as well.

Ruslan closed his eyes and focused on how his ass was turned into a cock sleeve for the other, enjoying the way he could feel Johnny coming in short bursts, doubling the sensations sparked by the strong fingers digging deep into his hips and holding him there.

They were both out of breath when they finally straightened up.

"We should wash, I guess," Ruslan mumbled.

"I guess so, too." Johnny pulled him close to his body, making him toss his head back and feel the other's rough cheek against his.

Later that night, as they lay in bed, Johnny asked. "Is it always like this?"

"What do you mean?" Ruslan asked.

"Do you always treat your men like this?"

“My men?” Ruslan turned to look at Johnny’s profile.

There was enough light in the room, from the bedside lamp. It was like neither of them was yet willing to go to sleep, so neither was reaching for it to turn it off.

“You know. The other guys.”

Ruslan sighed. “Does it bother you? That there were others before you?”

Johnny didn’t reply.

“Okay, let me put it differently. Does it bother you that maybe there were many?”

Johnny turned to look at him, too. “No.”

The answer was simple, and Johnny’s eyes were honest. Yet Ruslan felt the need for a stronger confirmation. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I don’t care about that.”

“Then where is that question coming from?”

Johnny seemed pensive before he gave his answer. “For me, it’s the first time.”

Ruslan swallowed, suddenly feeling his throat growing small. “Seriously?” he joked. “I could not say it was your first time.”

Johnny didn’t care for banter, though. Not this time. “I’ve never felt like this with anyone. I’ve never had anyone like you, that’s true. Maybe that’s why. Or I don’t know.”

What are you trying to say, Johnny? Ruslan wished he had the nerve to say those words out loud.

“So do you make all the men who are with you feel like this?” the question returned.

“They never stayed enough to tell me that,” Ruslan said simply. “You’re basically my longest relationship, Johnny.” He reached for the other and caressed his cheek. “So maybe the right answer is that, well, it’s the first time for me, too.”

Johnny took his hand and pressed a kiss inside the hollow of his palm. “That’s good then. That’s really good.”

It was a nice thought to go to sleep with. Ruslan closed his eyes slowly as Johnny shifted to turn off the bedside lamp. And then he sighed in contentment as his lover pulled him into his arms.

Johnny's face was all a frown as he talked in a low voice on the phone. Ruslan watched him from the corner of his eye, wondering what could be that was putting his lover in such a foul mood.

"I need to go ... somewhere," Johnny said in a brusque tone.

"Should I come with you? I can come with you!" Ruslan reached for his coat, thrown over the back of a chair.

He had gotten back from work minutes before, only to find Johnny like that. The fear, the familiar creep of anguish was rearing its head, and he could not stand it. More so, he could not stand looking at Johnny and seeing him so shaken.

"Don't!" Johnny put one hand up, taking him by surprise. "Sorry, Ruslan, it's just that ... It's something I need to do alone."

"Are you serious? If it's something bad, all the more reason for me to come with you," Ruslan insisted.

"Ruslan, no." Johnny shook his head. "Stay put, and I mean it."

The words came out pained, with difficulty. Ruslan stopped. Johnny threw him one last haunted look and went out the door.

For minutes, Ruslan stared at the door. His hands were getting cold. Despite that, when he brought one hand to his forehead, he wiped away a bit of sweat. Automatically, he turned on his heels and began undressing.

I should have gone with him, Ruslan scolded himself. But his feet still felt like lead.

Had he read everything wrong? No, he could not have done that. Something bad had happened. Something that was enough to shatter a man as strong as Johnny. And he, Ruslan, had just stood there and hadn't rushed after his lover, too busy with being afraid to do the right thing.

Ruslan pushed the balls of his hands into his eyes and rubbed them until they began to sting. He needed to call Johnny.

"The person you are trying to reach is unavailable right now. Please call again later."

He placed the phone on the table. Wrapping his arms around his knees, he buried his head into the crook of his elbows. Johnny was fine. He would call back. Nothing bad had happened — just an emergency. Johnny would come back.

Chapter Thirteen - Let Me Be The One To Hold You

Ruslan had slept fitfully throughout the night, his so-called rest plagued by nightmares, or better said, pieces of them that made no sense at all. He willed himself to stretch over to the nightstand and check his phone. There were no missed calls, no messages.

What could have caused Johnny to get up and leave like that? And why all the secrecy? Weren't they together? A part of him wanted to revolt, but another was gripped by fear. What if Johnny had left for good? What if it was something he had said? Ruslan knew he could be dense sometimes.

The phone rang, and he almost sent it flying to the floor, that fast he tried to move to reach for it. "Papa," he mournfully said as he answered.

It wasn't like he could keep things hidden from his parent.

"What's wrong, Russy?" the old man's voice came through.

"Nothing, I guess." Ruslan tried to shrug it off for the moment. "Are you calling about dinner? Papa, I don't think --"

"Actually, I wanted to ask you about Johnny. He's not picking up," his father interrupted him.

"I know," Ruslan said softly. He squeezed the phone hard in his hand.

"Did you two fight over something?"

Ruslan exhaled. "No. I mean, all seemed fine. Just that, yesterday evening, he got a phone call and left in a hurry. He didn't tell me what it was all about. He just ... left."

It was hard to pretend he was okay, now that he was saying the words out loud. He left.

"There can be many explanations for that. And you are coming to dinner, Russy, with or without Johnny."

His papa's voice was stern. Ruslan knew that voice and what it meant. That he had no reason to fear and that he needed to reach inside and find his peace.

"But what if --" he started.

"No 'what ifs', Russy," his papa interrupted him. "You know what this means. It means nothing. Johnny had an emergency, and he will be back. If he preferred being alone, that was his choice. Have a bit of trust in him."

Ruslan knew his father was right. Still, he could not stop the inner tremble that had started since the moment Johnny had been out the door.

“You know you’ll always have us, Russy,” the old man said quietly.

“I know,” he whispered.

“And Yanis. See? Even I agree that your good for nothing friend actually has his uses. And don’t worry. I will investigate this. If Johnny is in trouble with a certain someone --”

“Do you mean Nigel?!” Ruslan didn’t want to believe that. Had he put Johnny in danger simply by being stupid and letting himself drugged by that asshole?

“Don’t worry, Russy. I will let the Davenports know that my protection extends over Johnny.”

“But what if it’s too late for that?” Ruslan shouted.

“No ‘what ifs’, Russy. That’s the deal.” His papa was back at being firm.

“Okay,” he murmured.

“I’ll let you know as soon as I get hold of the man. Dinner tonight, Russy. We won’t be able to enjoy our meal without you.”

His heart was just a tiny bit less heavy when he got off the phone. If his papa was on it, he would find out about Johnny sooner or later.

“Mr. Bryne, I understand that you wanted to see me.” A woman dressed in white approached him.

“You’re the one in charge?” Johnny asked gruffly, as he stood up from the tiny plastic chair.

For hours, he had sat there, waiting for news.

“Yes.” The woman straightened up as if she tried to compensate for the difference in height between them.

“Then tell me how the hell something like this could happen!”

Johnny knew that shouting wouldn’t solve anything, but at least it was a way to get rid of some of the anger boiling on the inside.

“Mr. Bryne, I suggest that you keep your voice down. Patients need their quiet. Please, follow me, and we’ll talk in my office.”

Johnny nodded without another word. He towered over the woman in white by at least half a foot, but it was like his life was in her hands.

He sat on a chair that sighed under his weight after the woman gestured at him to sit down.

“What do you want to know, Mr. Bryne?” The woman placed her hands neatly on the table and stared at him through her thick-rimmed glasses.

“How the hell could a thing like this happen? And why isn’t she in a real hospital?”

“Language, Mr. Bryne. This is not the ring, as you may well see.”

Johnny ground his teeth hard. It could have been easy to reach over the table and strangle the woman until she was left breathless.

“Now.” The woman stared at him without one trace of fear in her gray eyes. “Your mother has been unwell for years now.”

“Tell me why she was left to wander around this goddamn place. It’s November, for fuck’s sake!”

The woman exhaled. “She was not left to wander. This is not a prison, Mr. Bryne. The patients are not exactly kept under lock and key.”

“Shouldn’t someone be in charge of them, though? Some of them are,” Johnny struggled to find his words, “not all up here, are they?” He gestured for his temple.

“Someone is in charge,” the head nurse agreed for once. “It is unfortunate that this happened. Believe me. The one responsible will be severely reprimanded.”

“Reprimanded,” Johnny scoffed. “My mom wanders off and catches pneumonia, and what do you do? Why the hell am I paying you, people?”

“Mr. Bryne,” the woman said in an even tone, “you are free to take your mother and your money somewhere else.”

He stared at her. This time, there was a small sign of fear, just a speckle, but enough to tell him that his face inspired enough respect.

“We can assure you that we are offering your mother the best care, as we speak. There is nothing for you to do now, and we only wanted to keep you informed. That is all. We didn’t ask you to come down here to cause a scandal.”

“I want to see her.”

“She is resting.”

“I want to see her,” Johnny repeated, and this time, he said the words through his teeth.

“Fine.” The head nurse stood up. “Come with me, but no nonsense from your part, Mr. Bryne. Your mother needs to get well.”

The woman’s moves were brusque. Johnny could tell that she wasn’t pleased with him.

He followed her down the corridor to a door that looked different than the ones leading to the regular rooms.

“See? She is asleep,” the nurse pointed out.

Johnny ignored her and walked over to his mother’s bed. She looked so small in that large bed like little was needed for the white sheets to swallow her.

“She looks thinner than last time,” he mumbled, as his hands hovered over his mother’s, resting on top of the sheets, pale and showing dark blue veins.

“We can do only this much when it comes to convincing her to eat. From time to time, we’re even giving her glucose, delivered via IV.”

“How generous of you,” Johnny said sarcastically.

“It’s all that’s covered,” the nurse pointed out.

Of course, covered by the payment. Johnny’s blood and sweat poured into payments. To the nursing home, and the debt collectors. Not his tears, though. He had not shed a tear since he had been a runt.

“Let us alone,” he barked at the nurse.

“Lower your voice, Mr. Bryne,” the nurse scolded him.

“Out,” he said in a lower tone but gestured with his chin toward the door.

The nurse shrugged and walked out. Johnny went closer and stared at his mother’s face for a few long minutes.

“Why aren’t you eating, mom?” he asked, his voice hoarse and unnatural.

To his surprise, his mom’s eyelids fluttered, and slowly her eyes opened.

“Johnny, are you back from school? There’s a casserole in the fridge. I have to leave for work now.”

Johnny placed his hand over his mother’s and squeezed it.

“Your father’s not coming tonight, either,” she said, and this time her voice seemed filled with hate. “That woman,” she hissed, “always that woman.”

Johnny frowned. His father had been a gambler and a piss poor scammer, but Johnny had never heard of him being unfaithful.

“What woman, mom?” he asked his heart in his throat.

“That Davenport floozy.” His mom pursed her lips. “I’m telling you, Johnny, if that big shot husband of hers finds out about their fooling around, you’ll read about them both in the morning paper. They’ll find them with their throats slashed and thrown into some ditch, like dogs.”

His mother’s face was splotched with red, and a bout of cough seized her.

“Mom, you need to rest.” Johnny caressed her hair. “Do you need some water?”

He tried to reach for a plastic cup left on the bedside table, but his mother’s gnarly hand caught his wrist.

“Johnny, promise me that you won’t end up like your father. Don’t go messing with women wearing fancy dresses and diamonds in their ears.”

His mother had no idea about him and his preferences. And when she had turned like that, it had been too late.

“I won’t,” he said softly.

“Promise me, Johnny,” his mother insisted.

“I promise, mom.”

“Be a good boy, Johnny. Don’t fall for the charms of some rich girl. She’ll use you and dump you. That’s what they do. That’s what happened to your father. Oh, he was a charmer, wasn’t he? He thought he could fly to the moon and touch the stars, and maybe steal some. But he got burnt with that Davenport bitch.”

“What are you saying, mom?” Johnny caressed her hand, but it didn’t look like she was willing to let go of him.

“That was when he disappeared,” she said in a low voice, stealing glances around. “Some say she ran away with him. But I don’t think so.” She shook her head. “No, they’re in a ditch somewhere.”

Johnny could feel his blood freezing in his veins. What was his mother trying to tell him? Could it be that his father had been a cheater on top of everything else?

“How could I live after he left?” His mother’s hand released his and dropped on the white sheet like dead weight. “You were with me. That’s why. But they came to drag you away. To make you pay, for what your father did.”

Suddenly, she began to sob uncontrollably.

“Mom,” he whispered, “it’s okay. I’m here. Your son, Johnny, is here.”

“Johnny,” she cried and clutched at him, “why is your father never home?”

He felt her forehead. She was burning like a furnace. Damn, he needed to call that nurse and ask him if that was normal. No wonder his mother was frantic. Who knew how high her fever was running?

“Mom, I need to get the nurse,” he told her, as he tried to pry himself free.

“Just promise me, Johnny,” she continued to hold him, “that you won’t go with some fancy rich girl. She’ll be the death of you like that Davenport whore was the death of your father.”

“I promise you, mom,” he whispered into her hair, caressing her.

His mom had always wanted what was best for him. And right now, she was making him face the grim reality. It wasn’t his place to fool around with Ruslan while his mother was fading away. She was right. Rich people had pushed his family into the chaos and misery they were in. Maybe even killed his father, although he could not tell whether his mother was telling the truth or not.

What had Mr. Kent said that time? That Francis Davenport would have killed him if it had been that personal the grudge the man was holding him. Could it be that his mom was telling the truth about his father? And by ‘that Davenport woman’, maybe she meant that man’s wife.

That could explain the punishment he was still going through. It also explained the beating he had gotten when he had refused to fight high as a kite. Except for killing him that man had done everything to him.

“Have you heard from Johnny, papa?” Ruslan rushed to answer, the moment his phone started ringing.

“Apparently, he is back to training at his old gym,” his father replied. “I would scold you over not greeting me properly first, but seeing how much you yearn to see your boyfriend, I will just let it slide this time.”

“At his old gym?” Ruslan expressed his surprise. “What could he be doing there? Never mind, papa, thank you. And sorry for being like this.”

“Russy, be careful. We all like Johnny, and we want him to be part of the family. But if for whatever reason, he doesn’t want the same thing, I’d say to let him be.”

“Papa, I thought you liked Johnny now,” Ruslan complained.

“All I care is protecting you, Russy, and you know it. Johnny has problems of his own.”

“Of which none of you care to talk about.” Ruslan huffed in annoyance. “It’s unfair that he seems to share some things with you, but he doesn’t want to do the same with me.”

“I can share them if you want.”

“No, Johnny would feel betrayed and, anyways, I want him to be the one to talk to me about this. Well, thank you for letting me know where he is, papa. I’ll make sure to get him to understand where he belongs.”

“Russy --”

“Don’t worry, papa. You won’t have to mend my broken heart this time. Because I’m a little pissed at the guy right now and I’m not just a boy anymore.”

It was true. Had he learned that Johnny had something terrible happening to him, he would have rushed by his side, willing to forget all about his own hurt. But it looked like Johnny was well enough if he could train. And that was making him a little bit upset with his lover.

Who was he kidding? Ruslan felt plenty upset at the moment. So much that he wanted to find the means to teleport to where Johnny was training, and slap the man silly for making him worry so much. Now there was no time to dwell over what he would or wouldn’t do. The most important thing was to see Johnny, and maybe kiss him or slap him, or any other thing. He would see once there.

His father hadn’t been wrong. Johnny was there, beating the crap out of a worn out speed bag, with a deep frown on his face. Ruslan felt relieved. Johnny appeared to be okay. He walked over to him, hoping that Johnny wouldn’t tell him to fuck off, at least, not without giving him a strong reason to do so.

“Hey,” he said, his hands deep into his pockets, his whole attention trained on the other.

Johnny stopped and turned to look at him. The frown only deepened. “I’m training,” he said curtly.

“I can see that.”

“Then don’t mind if I get back to it.” Johnny made a move to punch the bag again, but Ruslan caught his arm.

“Seriously, Johnny? You get up and leave, you don’t call, you have your phone turned off, and I’m supposed to come here and what?”

“Nobody asked you to come here,” Johnny said but didn’t remove his arm from Ruslan’s hold.

“No, because there’s no need for that. I came here because I care what the hell is happening with you. Tell me how do you think that’s normal? For you to leave like that and not care that I worry about you?”

“You worry about me?” Johnny’s mouth was set in a deep, harsh line, and his eyes weren’t looking at Ruslan.

“Yes. I thought you were my boyfriend. I thought we were together. What? You’ve never had a lover, so you don’t know that me worrying about you comes with the territory?”

The look Johnny finally threw at him was pained. “Look at you, pretty,” Johnny said softly.

“Is that supposed to mean something?” Ruslan reined in the trembling of his hands.

“Yeah,” Johnny confirmed. “You’re high class, and I’m trash. We’re never going to happen. Just let me be, and I’ll let you be, too.”

“We were happening until you bolted out the door without telling me anything. So don’t give me that crap. Plus, that was definitely not what you were thinking while pumping my ass full of cum.”

Johnny threw a few glances around. Ruslan didn’t have to look to know that they had a bit of an audience which, most probably, was finding something else to do right now.

“And what’s all this about how we’re different? We’re not. Let me tell you something about me, Johnny. I’m like you.”

Johnny stared at him. “Are you done? I told you. I need to train. Money doesn’t grow on trees for some of us.”

“Oh, fuck me,” Ruslan moaned. “It’s not like I don’t know that. I was just lucky, that’s all. All you see now, my clothes, my house, it’s all because of luck.”

“Yeah, lucky to be born rich,” Johnny shot back at him. “Ruslan, I’m fucked up, okay? Maybe you’re fucked up, too, and you feel better if you’re with a fuck up like me. But I won’t let you fuck me up even more, and I’m sure as hell that I don’t want to fuck you up more, either.”

“Come with me.” Ruslan grabbed Johnny’s hand.

For a second, Ruslan feared that Johnny would resist. He had no means to make two hundred pounds of pure manly muscles move. So he hoped his determination was enough. Fortunately for him, Johnny finally decided to move.

They walked quietly out of the room, under the curious looks of bystanders. Ruslan could not care less about them.

“Where are we going?” Johnny asked.

“Somewhere quiet,” Ruslan replied. “Your room.”

He knew how to find his way around there, so he pulled Johnny after him, afraid that he would change his mind.

Ruslan pushed the door open and closed it after as if that was his room, not Johnny’s. His lover was looking at him, waiting for him to speak.

“What’s your problem, Johnny? Where the hell have you been? Don’t you dare to say that it’s none of my business.” Ruslan stood tall, looking Johnny straight in the eye.

“Family business,” was the short reply.

“All right, I understand. And what kind of family business was that?”

“None of --”

“I told you. Don’t you dare.”

“My mom is sick.”

Ruslan exhaled. “I’m sorry to hear that. But how is that a reason for you to get away from me like that?”

“We’re just fucking, Ruslan. It’s not like we said some vows or anything.”

Ruslan blinked hard a few times. “I wasn’t saying that we were engaged or something, either. But still, we’re not just fucking. We’re friends, okay?”

It was Johnny’s turn to blink like there was something in his eye.

“So, tell me, is she all right now?”

“Yeah, she’s stable. Or so they say.”

“Where is she?” Ruslan asked. “We can find a place, a much better one, for her.”

“Will you stop throwing your fucking money in my face?” Johnny looked down at Ruslan in anger.

“I’m not throwing anything in your face, you fucking --” Ruslan stopped and swallowed his words.

“Oh, no, don’t stop,” Johnny said sarcastically. “What were you trying to say? That I’m an asshole? That I’m an idiot?”

“A bit of an ass, but whatever,” Ruslan replied, pursing his lips. “Johnny, let me help you. Other people helped me when I was in need.”

“And what need was that? You’re just a rich spoiled fancy dude,” Johnny said.

“Rich? Spoiled? Fancy? Okay, let’s make a few things clear. Maybe you’re right, and we were way too busy fucking. We didn’t have time to talk to each other properly.”

“What? You’re trying to say you’re not rich and all that?”

“Maybe I am. But only right now. I haven’t always been rich, and the chances are that I might not be that well off in the future. I am saving some money, of course, but --”

“Is papa having money troubles?” Johnny snorted. “Maybe he shouldn’t be throwing money on stupid amateur tournaments then.”

“Ugh, listen to me, you big oaf. I’m trying to tell you something here!”

Ruslan could feel his patience running thin. He wasn’t even that sure he wanted to pour his heart out, especially with Johnny being like that.

“Tell me the truth about your mother.” Ruslan chose to ease the burden on Johnny’s shoulders, first. “How bad is she?”

“I told you.” Johnny was working his jaw. “You know what, Ruslan? Maybe you’re right. I am an asshole for treating you like this. But now it’s not a good time. What my mom told me, she reminded me of where I stand in this world.”

“I have no idea what she told you. And I don’t know her. But I can tell that you care for her a great deal, and probably she has always cared for you, as well. So you’re lucky. Because I had nothing like that until --”

“She told me some stupid shit my father did. She told me not to make the same stupid mistake.”

“Which is?” Ruslan insisted.

“My father was screwing Francis Davenport’s wife,” Johnny said bluntly.

“Oh, fuck,” Ruslan murmured. “So Nigel knows you? But no, that cannot be --”

“Nigel doesn’t know me. I guess his dad never told him his momma was putting out for some gambler with empty pockets. I always thought my old man just got into stupid debt over his love for craps. But apparently, that wasn’t it. Do you want to see something, Ruslan?”

Johnny moved and pulled his t-shirt over his head. Then he turned and pointed at the scars on his back.

“Take a good look at these, pretty. I got these because my old man thought good enough to stick it into some fancy broad.”

Ruslan remained silent for a while. “Did Nigel’s dad give you these?” he asked, his voice barely a whisper. “I thought the Davenports were some well-off family, not mafia.”

“You don’t have to believe me.” Johnny shrugged and made a move to put his t-shirt back on.

Ruslan embraced him from behind. And he pressed his lips slowly against the edges of the scars. Johnny seemed ready to throw him off, but by how he exhaled, Ruslan could tell that he was about to win this round.

“He beat you because of what your dad did?”

Johnny leaned into his arms, and Ruslan pressed his hands gently over his chest.

“I had no idea about the cheating at that time. But my old man just disappeared one day, and the next we had some people at our door, asking for money. My mom kind of lost it during that time. They told me that since I could fight, I could pay off by going into the ring. And I said ‘Yeah, I can fight, no problem’. And that was how it all began.”

“Did they ask you to lose on purpose?”

“Nah, that wasn’t it. I wasn’t as big as I’m now. So they could bet on me, this kinda scrawny kid, and win big. It was when they started to push drugs on me. And, at first, I was like, why not? But that went downhill fast. One day, I beat up a guy so badly that ... I don’t know. I was high as fuck, but when I saw him not getting up ... I knew. That I wasn’t going to do that anymore.”

“And you told them that you wanted out?”

“Yeah. I told them that I was going to pay fair and square. But they didn’t like it. So they dragged me in front of this dude, Francis Davenport. And this guy said that if I could survive the beating they were going to give me, I was free to try to pay them back without going into their fucking ring.”

“Damn,” Ruslan whispered. “You survived, Johnny.”

Johnny snorted.

“I’m not exactly boyfriend material, pretty. And my mom is right. I shouldn’t do what my dad did. I shouldn’t do the same mistakes.”

“Screw Francis Davenport’s wife?” Ruslan tried to joke.

He knew what Johnny was trying to say. But he wouldn’t admit it.

“You know what I’m saying, pretty. You know well. You’re like one of the stars up there. And if I dare to believe that I can touch the stars, that will only fuck me up, sooner or later.”

“Like the stars, right,” Ruslan snorted. “So your mom is against me because she thinks I’m some rich dude who’s going to screw you over?”

“She’s not against you. She doesn’t even know about you,” Johnny protested. “But she did tell me to stay away from fancy rich girls.”

“Oh, that’s actually good advice,” Ruslan replied. “Because I’m none of the above.”

Ruslan’s hands caressing his chest were maddening. How could he have grown so used to this pretty man? Johnny knew he had to be insane. He had supposed that Ruslan would change his mind after learning the truth. But instead, Ruslan was still holding him, his head pressed against his back, without feeling repulsed by those old scars, or by his confessions.

All he had to do was to turn and take Ruslan in his arms. The last twenty-four hours had been hell. But if he were to crawl into bed with Ruslan again, he would be everything his mom had warned him not to become. He could not let himself fooled like that. Yet it was okay to stay like that just a little while longer.

“What do you mean you’re none of the above?” Johnny asked, Ruslan’s words sinking in with some difficulty.

“First, I’m not a girl. I’m totally with your mom on this. Don’t go chasing skirts, Johnny, or we’ll have a problem.”

Johnny chuckled. He could tell Ruslan was laughing, too.

“She doesn’t know I swing that way,” he explained. “I’ve never had the chance to tell her.”

“I’m sorry, Johnny.” Ruslan squeezed him in his arms a little more. “Maybe you could tell her now?”

“She’s not herself most days. She keeps telling me about the old days. She even thinks I’m still in school sometimes.”

Ruslan was holding him close. “I think you’ll be able to tell her someday. And maybe I can come with you.”

It was suddenly clear what Johnny liked so much about Ruslan. It wasn’t the man’s gorgeous ass, or beautiful body, or how good he was in the sack. It was this determination, this confidence that he liked Johnny. And Johnny could not just dismiss it all, and say to himself that Ruslan was playing games. No one went so far for just a fuck.

“So you’re not a girl,” he decided to lighten up a little. “But you’re rich and fancy.”

Ruslan scoffed. “Well, big news, Johnny. Papa picked me up from the street when I was sixteen. I was selling my ass. Not to get rich, mind you, but just to survive.”

Johnny took Ruslan’s hands and pried himself free from the embrace. He turned to look at him. His beautiful eyes were sad, no matter how cold and even his words sounded.

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“I’m not.” Ruslan shook his head. “I was adopted. Papa’s family can’t stand me, and as soon as they will be able to, they’ll find a way to exclude me from that family. Not that I’d care, after papa’s gone. So, this situation with me living the life in the lap of luxury, how things might look to you, is only temporary.”

“Adopted? I could swear you were Mr. Kent’s son,” Johnny said.

“Seriously? Not that I’m not flattered, but any resemblance you see is probably the result of how much hard work papa put in to make me behave like a member of the high society.”

Johnny was pretty sure that wasn’t it, but he could not say what was, so he remained silent. Ruslan had no reason to lie about such things.

“Where was I?” Ruslan seemed to ponder. “Ah, yes. You told me how fucked up you are, and now it’s my turn. I grew up in an orphanage with Yanis. So, as you can see, you’re luckier than me. I’ve never seen my mom or dad, and frankly, at this point, I don’t know how much I care. Anyways, when we were sixteen, we ran away, idiots with their heads full of how they would take over the world. Well, it was that, or they would have kicked us out anyway, at one point. It was no life, living there, I can tell you.”

“That must have been tough.” Johnny was the one to embrace Ruslan now.

“Well, I guess.” Ruslan sighed. “But I’m not here to tell you stories and try to squeeze tears out of you. I want to let you know that I’m not this fancy rich dude you think I am. I’m just an ex-hooker. And not even the fancy kind.” He laughed humorlessly.

“You had to eat, put a roof over your head.” Johnny pulled him closer. “Just so you know, pretty, I don’t care about that at all. People everywhere do things to survive.”

Ruslan was trying to put on a brave face, but Johnny could sense what was happening inside that beautiful head right at that moment. And he felt angered at the world and a bit helpless because if that was Ruslan’s past, he could do nothing about it.

Ruslan started talking again. “Wait, let me tell you. I guess it’s been too long. I owe you this much. There were these guys who grabbed Yanis and me one night. You see, being a sex worker was not exactly my first career choice,” he said with a forced smile. “Sure, Yanis and I were fucking, but that was all. We were also pickpocketing and doing other things together. So these guys grabbed us, told us we were shoplifting on their turf. To make things clear, first, they beat us bloody. More Yanis, less me. I can’t really take a punch. And they had this idea after. That Yanis should steal for them, and I should sell my ass.”

Johnny held Ruslan close. “If you still know where those assholes live, just let me know.”

He hadn’t been so conflicted in his entire life. On the one hand, he felt Ruslan so close after all these confessions of suffering and misery. After all, he wasn’t the only one with a fucked up life. But, on the other, he felt a physical need to strangle someone. Yet he had to turn that in what he felt for Ruslan into hugging him and keeping him close.

“Don’t worry. I think papa took care of them a long time ago. I don’t know what happened, and frankly, I’m afraid to ask too often. Maybe my papa is like Francis Davenport, after all.”

“I don’t think so, pretty. Your dad is a good guy. He has to be because he took care of you and he still does.”

“The thing is I don’t want your pity, Johnny.” Ruslan looked up, so their eyes could meet. “While I was selling my ass, I came to enjoy it. Like really badly. Like I couldn’t have enough. There were nights when I was turning tricks so fast ... but I don’t want to make you feel repulsed with me.”

“I can’t feel like that toward you.” Johnny grabbed Ruslan’s head and looked him in the eyes. “You did what you had to.”

“And you don’t care that I enjoyed it?” Ruslan’s eyes were deep pools of sorrow.

“It would have been worse if you hadn’t. You survived, Ruslan. And that’s all that matters, pretty.”

“It does, doesn’t it? But do you know what else matters, Johnny?”

He had no idea how to reply to that. Ruslan seemed suddenly older, wiser, not in how he looked, but in how his eyes were. And Johnny knew right then that he had read the pretty man all wrong. And he had read himself all wrong. His mom wasn’t right. He wasn’t looking for some glitzy life, without worries. He wanted someone who could understand him, and that someone had to be like him.

Johnny knew he must have been blind not to see it.

“What else?” he asked, his voice a bit low and quiet.

“What matters is to have someone to hold you. So let me be that one, Johnny, okay? Let me be the one to hold you this time around.”

When had it been the last time someone held him? For years, he had done nothing else but train day after day, week after week. Between paying off debts and looking out after his mom, he had barely had time for a quick fuck, and a few moments to forget. But none of those men had held him, definitely not like Ruslan was holding him right now.

Johnny caressed Ruslan’s cheeks with his thumbs, staring into the deep blue eyes that were sometimes with him when he went to sleep. Maybe he was getting a bit crazy, thinking he deserved this. Ruslan. A chance at life.

“I can tell you’re thinking of something,” Ruslan said. “I don’t know what that is, and, honestly, it scares me a little.” He laughed as if he was trying to hide how serious he was about all that.

“I think that I don’t deserve you,” Johnny said simply.

“Seriously? You don’t deserve me, someone who used to sell himself to whoever had a few bills and a hard cock? I should be glad that you’re not holding yourself to high standards, yet I shouldn’t. I want what’s best for you, Johnny, but I also want you, so between my selfishness and --”

“Hush, pretty,” Johnny said softly. “I’ve done plenty in my life, things I can’t be proud of, things that still make me feel ashamed and keep me up at night. So stop talking, and tell me why you’re really here.”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m here to take you home with me.”

Johnny sighed.

Ruslan glared. “Don’t you dare to make me beg.”

“Or else what?” Johnny thought it safe to joke.

“Or else I’ll tickle you until you piss your pants!” Ruslan launched himself into a sudden attack, going for Johnny’s sides.

Johnny laughed, and in an instant, he had Ruslan in a deadlock, arms pushed back and held flush against the ribs.

“You fail.” He smiled and stuck out his tongue.

One thing he hadn’t calculated. Ruslan easily reached for his tongue and bit it, not very hard, but enough to make him yelp.

“Ouch! That’s not nice, pretty. I thought your papa taught you better. And no biting in the ring. Don’t tell me you don’t know even that.”

“There are no rules in self-defense. You taught me that,” Ruslan replied.

“Oh, so you’re acting in self-defense now?”

“Of course I am. You’re stronger than me, and you’re holding me like this. So nothing is off the table.”

“Oh, shit. Does this mean that I should worry for my balls once I let you off the hook?”

“Maybe you should, but not for the reasons you think. I want to do stuff to your balls as you’ve never had anyone do to them.”

Johnny grinned. “Now you’re making me curious.”

“You’re right to be, so let me go already.”

“I still have a feeling you’re playing me.”

“What could I do against someone like you?” Ruslan was looking way too innocent for Johnny to believe him.

“I don’t want to find what,” Johnny teased in turn.

But he could not hold Ruslan at arm’s length for long. So he pulled him into a tight embrace.

“Are you sure you’re not making a mistake?”

Ruslan snickered. “What? Chasing you down? Johnny, you’re a keeper.”

“That’s what you are.” Johnny caressed the tight shoulders slowly. “Are you cold? You’re trembling a little.”

“It will go away,” Ruslan said. “I wasn’t expecting to get into such an emotional upheaval with you, yet here we are. That was one hell of a confession, Johnny. About your past life.”

“I should say the same thing. So you weren’t at some fancy boarding school?”

“Sorry if you had fantasies about meeting some innocent young man just out of boarding school.” Ruslan giggled and buried his face in Johnny’s chest.

“Actually I’m relieved. I might even chew loudly at the table.”

Ruslan glared. “Seriously? I might want to put you in papa’s care for a while. You won’t remember how it was to chew loudly in your life.”

“Scary.” Johnny feigned a shiver. “Ah, that explains that fucker Yanis. I could not understand, for the love of all that’s holy, how you could be friends with that guy.”

“I’d tell you Yanis is not that bad, but I know that the feeling is mutual,” Ruslan said with a sigh. “You two should get along. He’s my best friend, and you’re my boyfriend.”

“How come your papa only adopted you? Did he take one good look at that fucker and thought he was too much work?”

“Actually, no. Looking back, it was pretty ridiculous. Yanis thought papa wanted us for some perverted stuff which was simply untrue. He was so scared he would find himself with a hard cock in his ass that he decided not to stay. Yanis ran away, but I found him later, and I included him in some business so that I could repay him for taking care of me before I met papa. Just recently I learned from papa that, through Martin, he gave Yanis some money so that he would not end up on the streets again. Oh, damn, that’s kind of a secret. Just don’t tell Yanis, please.”

“I don’t see myself talking to that guy at all, let alone share secrets with him. So what’s Yanis doing?”

“Well, he is sort of involved in protection services and the like.”

“Ah, he beats up people.”

“I wouldn’t put it exactly this way,” Ruslan said with a small smile. “He has a life. And it’s in a way, the one he chose, as much of a choice that can be called. I wished he would have stayed with papa and me, but that’s Yanis. He needs to know that he got through by his own means or it wouldn’t matter. Kind of like you.”

“Hey, don’t put me in the same boat with that fucker,” Johnny protested.

“Well, as my boyfriend, you’ll end up spending some time with Yanis, too. So don’t be so thorny about it all. For my sake if for no other reason.”

“For you, I’ll try,” Johnny said with an exaggerated sigh. “So he took care of you, you say? How come he let those fuckers force you into selling your ass?”

“He didn’t. So they beat him again, and I couldn’t stand it, and I told those guys that I would do anything, just to stop beating him. And he was constantly thinking of ways to escape. Together. We were held in a basement of some kind when we weren’t ‘working’. That until papa found us.”

“How come some rich dude like your papa found the two of you and saved you? I mean, it’s pretty strange if you think about it,” Johnny added.

“I know it is. But papa is tight-lipped when it comes to talking about such things. All I know is that one night, there was a huge scandal and the police came and grabbed us all. It wasn’t just Yanis and me in that basement. They had many people, some who were begging in the streets at day, some who were doing what Yanis and I were doing at night. And we were scared shitless, and then Martin practically grabbed the two of us and shoved us into a car, and we found ourselves taken to papa, to his house. We had no idea what was happening. But when I saw papa, I know it sounds stupid, but I felt like I was safe. Not Yanis, though. He kicked and screamed like a savage. I have no idea how Martin could be so calm.”

“I bet a shmuck like Yanis was easy for Martin. Seriously, pretty, your daddy number two is built like a brick shithouse. How come you’ve never told me how ripped your dads are?”

Ruslan laughed. “I let it be a surprise. They may be old, but they’re tough. Yanis went on and on about how the old man was some pervert and wanted to fuck us, but I knew it wasn’t true. And, well, I knew it because I offered and I was turned down. You see, Johnny? I was already pretty much fucked up when papa saved me.”

“Hey, you’re not allowed to say you are fucked up because I am, too. So, after that, your dad started teaching you about forks and all that?”

“I was home-schooled, yes. I had tutors, and I learned to become an accountant. I even took some special classes later. I also un-learned all kinds of bad habits, except for one.”

Johnny waited for Ruslan to continue. The blue eyes were filled with sadness again. He hated that look. It was hollow, and it made him feel empty on the inside, too.

“I could not stop fucking men. I mean, letting myself fucked by them. When I found Yanis again, I left for days only so that I could spend them fucking. Papa was worried and told me that he wouldn’t stop me, as long as I was safe. So, you know, it was good to be understood, even if I could not understand myself.”

“There are worse things than fucking dudes,” Johnny said through his teeth.

“Not like I was doing it. I was reckless. And I was always sorry after. And papa always took me back, or brought me back, depending on the case. Eventually, when I saw how sad I was making him, I started playing safe. Using the rubber, getting checked regularly, all that. But I could not give up on men and fucking until I could not stand.”

“Does your dad have anything against you being into dudes?” Johnny questioned.

“No, nothing like that. Can you believe that he tried to hook me up with Nigel because he thought that guy would marry me or something?”

“Seriously?” Johnny ground his teeth.

“Well, he was trying to hint at it, but it was clear that he was trying to tell me that I should settle down.”

“Does your dad want to see you married? To a guy?” Johnny asked, feeling his heart in his throat for some reason.

“I guess so.” Ruslan shrugged. “He wants someone to take care of me. He is a bit obsessed with this. It’s like he doesn’t believe that I can take care of myself.”

“Your dad might be true,” Johnny pointed out.

“Not you too, please,” Ruslan begged, but he was smiling. “This Nigel incident affected you, guys. But I guess I can put myself in papa’s shoes a little. And he’s right, in a way.”

“Your dad told me to look after you,” Johnny said simply.

Ruslan’s eyes grew wide. “Ah, this was all he wanted to talk about, right? After that dinner?”

“Yes. And I told him that he didn’t have to tell me that because I’d look after you, anyway.”

“So you’re bound to me!” Ruslan looked genuinely happy. “Johnny, you’re not allowed to run away from me anymore. Papa will find you, and he surely has the means to make you keep your promise.”

“Are you threatening me with what your dad could do to me?” Johnny laughed out loud. “What could he do?”

“Maybe put Martin to beat the hell out of you,” Ruslan said, pretending to be pissed.

“That I should fear, indeed. Then it’s settled, pretty. For as long as you need me, I’ll look after you.”

“Are you serious?” Ruslan looked into Johnny’s eyes like he was trying to reach inside the his soul. “No more running away?”

“No more,” Johnny promised solemnly. “Now that I know how helpless you are --”

Ruslan punched him in the shoulder. “Hey, I’m not that helpless!”

“There’s also your constant need for cock, and I have plenty of that.” Johnny took one step back and grabbed his manhood through his shorts.

By the hooded look Ruslan threw him, he knew both wanted the same thing. It had been so little since they had been in bed together, and yet, right now, they could only think about screwing each other’s brains.

“Let’s get home,” Ruslan said, pursing his lips.

“What, aren’t you going to jump my bones, pretty?” Johnny grinned.

“You pissed me off by running away. Now you’ll have to wait until we get home.”

“And I thought you had a thing for men and their dicks. It looks to me like you’re a master of restraint or something.”

“Just you wait until we’re home,” Ruslan said through his teeth. “I’ll show you restraint then.”

Ruslan was true to his word. They were barely through the door that he attacked Johnny, pushing him against the wall and kissing him roughly. Anyone looking at Ruslan would have thought the guy to be some prissy delicate prince like Johnny had thought before. But Ruslan was right about how much he wanted cock. And going wild like that made Johnny feel that he had scored the deal of his life when he had met Ruslan.

He was willing to let the other guide him this time. Although he could feel his balls hurting from having to endure the taxi ride while still hard and thinking of nothing but how to sink into Ruslan’s beautiful body, he knew that he was in the dog pen this time around. And it felt good to let his boyfriend in charge for a change.

Boyfriend. The word had a nice ring to it. It was a bit childish like they were still in high school, but Johnny had never had a boyfriend during his teenage years. He had never had a boyfriend, period. The guys he had fucked in his life had been only that: men who had been there just for a quick fuck and nothing else.

Ruslan gestured for him to lie on the bed, as soon as they were in the bedroom. He obeyed without a word but grunted as soon as one of his wrists was grabbed and attached to the headboard with a silky scarf.

“Did you prepare for this?” Johnny examined Ruslan who seemed bent on his task.

“Not really, which is why I need to find another thing to tie your other wrist,” Ruslan said matter-of-factly. “You need some discipline in your life, Johnny. Don’t you dare to untie yourself while I find a suitable item for that.”

“Should I be scared?” Johnny joked but made no move to untie his wrist.

“A little. Maybe.” Ruslan’s eyes shone with mischievousness.

“Okay. I lived through bouts when I thought I wouldn’t be able to walk, let alone stand up. I think I can handle you.”

“Hmm, famous last words,” Ruslan purred.

For a couple of minutes, Ruslan rummaged through his closet until he came back with another scarf which he used to secure Johnny’s other wrist to the headboard. He stood back for a moment, to admire his handiwork.

There was no way of telling what Ruslan had in store for him. The possibilities were making his cock twitch; Johnny could feel it. Ruslan was quick to straddle him and sink his tongue deep into Johnny’s mouth.

By force of habit, Johnny tried to move one arm to embrace Ruslan and get in control of that wild kiss. But it was in vain, as, apparently, Ruslan knew a few things about tying a knot.

To his frustration, Ruslan straightened up, and grabbed his chin with one hand, looking at him from above. At the same time, he was pressing his gorgeous ass down on Johnny’s erection.

It felt good, but it was not enough. Johnny moved his hips up, hoping he could get more out of that.

“Easy,” Ruslan cooed. “I could try tying your legs, too. So, Johnny, promise you’ll behave.”

“I promise,” he said.

Ruslan patted his cheek. “Good.”

And then he moved away. Johnny stared after him and tried his restraints once more. Those were pretty damned good knots. Maybe if he put all his strength, he could get away, but that meant ruining Ruslan’s fun, and Johnny didn’t want to do that.

The only option was for him to wait patiently, and, unfortunately, that particular moment, he was far from being patient. Especially his cock wasn’t willing to wait too long. But it wasn’t after him or his cock this time.

Ruslan began undressing. His hands were quick as they unbuttoned the crisp shirt, not lingering, not putting on a show. In a way, he moved too brusquely, but Johnny knew what that was all

about. There was something a bit frightening in how Ruslan was so serious about all this; about them being together.

Johnny wanted Ruslan to bring it on, to show everything he felt, as he felt it. He trusted his lover to do that.

Ruslan moved toward the bed, completely naked. With sure moves, he pulled Johnny's pants down, along with his underwear. Johnny inhaled. The idea of being vulnerable, even if those restraints were a joke if he put his mind to release himself, was exciting in a way that was new and surprising.

"Glad you're standing up to attention," Ruslan noted, as he looked down at Johnny's cock.

"For you? Always."

"Hmm."

Ruslan bent and grabbed his cock with one hand. For a few seconds, he stared at it, like he couldn't decide what to do with it. And then, he went down quickly, and Johnny almost shouted as Ruslan's hot tongue gave his cock a long firm lick.

"I remember I promised something," Ruslan said with a small chuckle.

Johnny had no courage to ask what. Ruslan adjusted his position so that he could reach Johnny's balls from a more comfortable angle. He could feel the long fingers wrapping around close to his cock, separating the balls, making them swell.

The hot tongue returned, and this time, he inhaled sharply.

"Fuck," Johnny whispered.

Ruslan's breath was on him, on his cock, while his tongue was doing some sort of crazy dance, pressing against the tight balls a bit recklessly. Johnny could almost sense teeth scraping over the surface, not enough to hurt, but enough to make him wary.

It wasn't like he didn't trust Ruslan, but his instincts, the same that kept him alive day after day, were reacting. His body wanted to feel more, but his gut was still trying to push him to run.

He could almost tell what it felt like. As a child, he had tried to walk on a tight rope hung between two poles, in the schoolyard. The rope dipping in slightly under his soles had given him a sudden thrill. This was like that.

"Are you trying to scare me there?" Johnny asked, trying to hide the tension in his voice.

"Do you still not trust me?"

“I do, but --”

“You’re so hard, Johnny,” Ruslan said, interrupting him. “Just know this. I’d never do anything to hurt you, even if it were in my power. Take it as it is.”

Johnny closed his eyes and gave in to the sensation. Ruslan’s mouth was slowly swallowing one ball, then the other, giving licks and kisses in between.

“You see? There are perks to fucking a former hooker,” Ruslan said softly.

Johnny could feel his arms tightening as he struggled to keep in position.

“That time,” he whispered, “when I said --”

“Hush,” Ruslan shut him up, “you couldn’t have known.”

He wanted to say something, maybe sorry, but he couldn’t. Ruslan’s mouth was back on him, and this time he took his cock deep, down to the hilt. Johnny could tell he could now feel everything with clarity so sharp that it made all his skin tingle as if the air buzzed with electricity.

If Ruslan wanted to prove he was one in a million, that was one hell of a piece of evidence. It wasn’t like him to let himself manipulated like that, but this was Ruslan, and he could do it. Johnny owed it to him.

If it wasn’t only that, it just proved how lucky he was. Johnny had never believed in bullcrap like soul mates and such. He had never believed in fairytales, or that some people were just destined to be together.

But this wasn’t some fairytale or romantic story. They were two fucked up men, carrying their scars, making their way through life, with everything they got, with teeth, and fists, and all the bones and muscles in their bodies.

They had met because they drew each other. And, maybe, even if they had been each on the other side of the world, this incredible pull would have brought them together because it was impossible to be any other way.

Johnny closed his eyes tightly. Ruslan was sucking his cock, not gently, not with measure, but with a kind of carelessness that was scary and thrilling. Never before had anyone sucked him off like this, like a mad man whose life depended on getting Johnny off.

“Fuck, I’m coming, pretty, I’m gonna fill your fucking beautiful mouth!”

Ruslan took him impossibly deep as he began shooting. His arms were hurting, the silky wraps were digging into his wrists, but Johnny could not care if both his hands fell off, or were ripped from his body.

Their harsh breathing was filling the room. Ruslan's eyes were moist as they stared at each other. Johnny said nothing and just noted, as if he was far away, out of his body, how Ruslan moved to untie him.

Ruslan's pleasant body scent tickled his nostrils. He leaned into the other, wanting a taste. Ruslan snickered as Johnny licked his neck, and with that, the strangeness of whatever had just happened broke.

"Come here," Johnny said roughly and pulled Ruslan into his arms.

They rolled on the bed, and he trapped Ruslan under him. For long seconds, they looked at each other, without a word.

"I am here, Johnny. What are you going to do?" Ruslan challenged him.

Johnny crossed the small distance between their lips and kissed his lover. Nothing had ever felt as right.

Chapter Fourteen – My Plus-One

He should not have cared for Yanis and the likes of that fucker, but Ruslan was insistent. And, after a short struggle that had ended up with him fucking his pretty lover up against the wall, and Ruslan biting into his shoulder hard while coming just as hard, there he was.

Johnny wished he could just shake away the unpleasant feeling he had about Yanis. Ruslan had teased him, called him jealous, and that he was. He couldn't stand the thought that the fucker had been Ruslan's first guy and also his fuck buddy for so long. It was like Yanis was permanent in Ruslan's life, and he wasn't.

He had no real reason to be jealous. Yanis would tie the knot with his woman, and Ruslan had no reason to hook up with that fucker ever again. It was all in the past. So how come he could be this stupid?

It wasn't like he didn't know why. Johnny knew Ruslan had gotten pretty deep under his skin. And the fact that Ruslan was such close friends with Yanis was just something he needed to accept.

Under different circumstances, he would have had nothing against the man. He was rough and tough, he belonged more to his world than Ruslan seemed to, and he was talking Johnny's language. With his fists.

"So he's hanging around this old place?" he pointed out at the dilapidated building. "Don't tell me the fucker loses all the money you give him gambling or something?"

Ruslan looped one arm around his elbow. "It's good cover. When it's like this, you don't want the wrong people coming around and asking you where the hell your cash comes from."

That was actually good thinking.

"Say it to me again why we're here," Johnny said.

"C'mon," Ruslan laughed, "we must assist Yanis with his wedding and stuff."

"Knowing that fucker, he'll want to make me the flower bearer or something."

Ruslan guffawed. "I promise I won't let him do the unthinkable, heavens forbid. You will be there as my plus-one, and besides looking like arm candy, you'll have nothing else to worry about."

"Arm candy?" Johnny grinned. "Are you sure it's not the other way around, pretty? 'Cause I'm sure I'm no sweet thing like you are."

Ruslan leaned against him and smiled. "Aw, Johnny, am I really sweet?"

Johnny laughed. "Sweet like friggin' candy, baby. C'mon, let's get this over with."

"Please, behave. The man's just getting married," Ruslan joked. "So we're the support network," he added brightly.

"Support network," Johnny said under his breath. "Is this a nice way of saying that we need to take care of moving chairs and whatnot while he goes make himself pretty at the spa or something?"

Ruslan snickered. "No. That will be all taken care of by the people we hire for the wedding. I told you, you're my arm candy. I bet everyone will envy me. My companion will surely be the most handsome of them all," he said and carefully straightened Johnny's lapel.

After much deliberation and begging from Ruslan, Johnny now wore a new coat, paid for by his lover. It did make him look somewhat distinguished, not like his usual clothes. He had expected to feel uncomfortable and out of place in it, but he didn't. Actually, it seemed like just one thing he found easy to get accustomed to, now that he was Ruslan's official boyfriend.

Between training with Douglas and Martin, going back home to Ruslan and what looked like pretty good home cooking for a guy who worked as an accountant most of the day, and winning match after match at the tournament, life was pretty awesome. His mom seemed to be on the mend, too, eating a little, still lying in bed, but apparently stable. He hadn't tried to ask her now about his father and that, as she said, Davenport woman.

For the first time in a long, long time, he felt happy, truly happy, and he didn't want to jinx it. Let sleeping dogs lie, he thought, as he looked at Ruslan, and his lover looked back with stars in his eyes.

He wasn't in his rights to think of all this being possible, but there he was. Johnny 'Snake' Bryne would amount to more than just a stupid fighter lucky to end up with at least half a brain when he couldn't fight in a ring no more.

He slung one arm over Ruslan's shoulders. "Let's just get this over with, then."

"Let's," Ruslan said with a small, all-knowing smile.

Now that was a bit of a surprise. On the outside, the building didn't look like much, just the kind of industrial place forgotten for decades and run over by weeds, but, on the inside, a bunch of guys seemed busy training at some quite good quality equipment.

"Ah, welcome to my lair," Yanis said to them, as he sauntered down from a ring where two dudes were busy giving each other some serious punches and kicks.

Yanis looked exactly like what he was. Now he was wearing a tracksuit, the jacket opened in front, to let people see his white tee and the muscles beneath through it.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Ruslan replied and hurried to embrace his friend. “Working out some last-minute jitters?”

“Nah, man, I’m good.” Yanis smirked and looked over at Johnny who was standing a few steps behind. “I see you brought your boyfriend over.”

“Of course. We’re coming as a couple at your wedding, as you know, and we’re here to help with some last minute stuff.”

Johnny sustained Yanis’s stern gaze. And was taken by surprise when he moved quickly past Ruslan and pulled him into a strong hug. “Thank you for taking care of Ruslan, man.”

“You’re welcome,” Johnny replied, a bit stiffly. “But it’s not like I’m doing it for you.”

Yanis laughed and patted him on the back. “Please step into my office while we let Ruslan talk a little to the guys. They’ve been sneaking about lately. I bet it’s all about my bachelor’s party. So I’m supposed to know shit about it.”

Johnny looked over Yanis’s shoulder, taking in, with some displeasure, how Ruslan was getting chummy with some of the guys. It seemed like Ruslan knew everyone well. Also, that he had deliberately let Johnny deal with Yanis.

He sighed. He had promised that he would make an effort to get along with the fucker, and he needed to keep to that promise. So he followed Yanis into a side room that looked appointed as an office of sorts, indeed.

“So,” Yanis sat behind the desk and gestured for Johnny to sit on a comfortable sofa placed flush against a wall, “you and Ruslan are going at it big time, eh?”

Without asking him, Yanis reached inside a drawer and took out a bottle of scotch and two glasses. He walked over and handed one full glass to Johnny and clinked his against it. “For the future!” Yanis threw his head back and grimaced.

Johnny wasn’t sure what to make of this change in behavior in the fucker, but took a sip, too.

“Man, I heard you got that scumbag good. I tell Ruslan all the time these fancy dudes are all fucking perverts. In my book, if you dig someone and that someone doesn’t dig you back, well, tough luck. There’s no point in wasting your time.”

Johnny nodded in agreement.

“So, no kayos? For real?” Yanis grinned and gestured with the empty glass at him while leaning against his desk. “You’re some big shot, Snake.”

Johnny shrugged and downed the rest of his glass.

“Ruslan told me you wouldn’t warm up to me that easily,” Yanis said with a sigh. “So, man, I’m going to tell it straight to your ugly mutt face. You’re a brother to me now. You saved Ruslan; you can do no wrong in my book. So, friends?”

Johnny looked at the outstretched hand and took it.

“Good,” Yanis said. “So, assuming that my gang and Ruslan have not yet finished arranging that stupid bachelor party, how about a game?”

“What game?” Johnny asked, looking around.

“A game of chess,” Yanis said brightly.

“Do you play chess?” Johnny snorted.

“Nah, I was just pulling your leg. I have a game room, though. Let’s go.”

Johnny followed Yanis, feeling a bit relieved. Not that it wouldn’t be nice to wipe that smirk of the guy’s face by beating him into submission at any game. Well, Yanis would marry soon. So he needed to get used to losing more often than not.

“How come you don’t want to face me in that ring outside?” Johnny gestured with his chin over one shoulder.

Yanis seemed to ponder for a while as he turned on the console and plopped down on the sofa next to him. “What can I say, man? I ain’t stupid.”

Johnny grinned. “I can still beat your ass at any game.”

“Let’s just see about that.”

Yanis added nothing else as the game loading screen popped up. Johnny had no troubles with going for a win, only that this time, he wouldn’t do it to spite Yanis. He no longer felt that threatened by the fucker, and he was willing to use that term as endearingly as possible.

“So, you and Ruslan,” he started, his eyes focused on the screen. “Fucking since you were in your teens or something.”

Yanis grunted in response. “He told you that?”

“Yeah, he kinda told me everything.”

“Well, it was what it was. It just happened, I guess.”

“So, you have a thing for dudes?” Johnny probed further. Making conversation was bullcrap. But there were some things he wanted to find out and without asking them to the guy’s face.

“Nah, only Ruslan. But don’t worry, man, I’m not going to steal your bride,” Yanis joked and executed Johnny’s character on the screen with a stupidly simple move. “Gotcha!”

Johnny shook his head. For a moment there, he hadn’t paid attention. Yanis had a devilish grin on his face when he looked at him.

“What’s next, my dude? Are we going to braid our hair and talk about feels?”

Johnny swatted the fucker upside the head. “Stop being a smartass,” he said, with a grin of his own.

“Ready for another beating?” Yanis sneaked one hand behind and smacked him back.

“Just you wait,” Johnny said.

Now he could have his entire attention trained on the game. Yanis wasn’t that bad, after all. Although, he was still a smug fucker.

“So, how was it?” Ruslan hanged on his arm.

Johnny smiled wryly. “You sure know how to play me, pretty. But okay, I get it. I’m okay with that fucker.”

Ruslan grimaced. “Right. So he’s still ‘that fucker’ to you?”

“It’s just a habit,” Johnny replied. “We’re all a big happy family now. Is this better?”

“Much better,” Ruslan agreed. “Now, we need to go find some really nice matching suits for the wedding.”

“Matching suits?” Johnny asked, feeling alarmed. “Ah, you fooled me that meeting Yanis and his gang was such a big thing when all you wanted was to soften me up for cruising clothing stores and such?”

“Yeah, pretty much, yeah,” Ruslan said. “Now, don’t give me lip and let’s go. I know just the perfect place.”

“What am I going to do with you?” Johnny shook his head. “I’ll find myself with some silk leash around my neck pretty soon, right?”

Ruslan smiled sweetly at him while he pretended to be all innocent. “How do you know you’re not already collared, Snake?” he leaned in and whispered into Johnny’s ear.

“Snakes don’t get collared,” Johnny replied with a smirk.

“Hmm, I must be good with them, then,” Ruslan concluded and kissed Johnny right on the lips, in the middle of the street.

Johnny looked around, pretending he was busy checking the perimeter. It was just a small try to hide how he felt.

“So you two are getting ready for your wedding?” the seamstress asked while moving around Johnny and adjusting a few things here and there.

Johnny was sure the suit was already perfect, but the woman with a tailor’s tape around her neck seemed to find the minutest flaws with hawk-like eyes. Her question took him by surprise.

“Just a wedding. Some friend’s,” he said cautiously.

“Ah,” the woman commented, and somehow she sounded disappointed.

They had been together for a while now, that was true. But wedding? Like in marriage? He had no idea what the seamstress was talking about.

“You two make such a nice couple,” the woman went on, while almost stabbing Johnny with a small sharp needle. “Mr. Kent has been our client for a long time. It is a pleasure to serve his partner, as well.”

Partner sounded okay. Seeing how Johnny remained quiet, the woman eventually resumed working in silence, as well. Johnny had never gotten a suit, let alone one that was made-to-measure. Maybe he was expected to make conversation. He had no idea about such things. This was Ruslan’s world, and, sometimes, Johnny felt like a fish out of water in it.

Ruslan was more than pleased with how Johnny looked. It troubled him much to see a frown etched deeply into that rough face, nonetheless.

“You look amazing,” he said, trying to get Johnny to smile.

His lover nodded shortly. “How long will this take?”

“Johnny, what’s wrong?” Ruslan decided to grab the bull by the horns.

Johnny looked away. Ruslan placed one hand on his cheek and made him turn so they could look each other in the eye.

“I don’t know, pretty. It’s like it’s too good to be true, right?”

“Stop talking nonsense. Everything is new to me, too. I’ve been, how should I say, committed like this never in my life.”

“I’m not talking about you and me,” Johnny said and placed one hand over Ruslan’s. “When we’re at home, just us, it’s great. But outside, how do people look at us?”

“Do you really care?” Ruslan shrugged. “I don’t. And I know who I am and who you are. And frankly, that’s enough for me. Isn’t it for you?”

It was a bit funny to see a man like Johnny, of his stature and strength, look so confused. But Ruslan could understand the source of his lover’s dilemma.

“Yeah, it is. But is this going somewhere? Anywhere?” Johnny asked, and Ruslan’s smile faded as he took in his lover’s troubled eyes.

“This?” Ruslan asked. “What do you mean?”

“Forget it. It’s stupid.” Johnny shook his head. “I should be glad, right?”

“I don’t really get you,” Ruslan said slowly. “Is this about the suit? Is it too much? I’m sorry I tend to go overboard like this. I just want to show you off a little. I’m proud of you. And I’m proud of being with you. Is this making any sense to you? Because I really want it to make sense to you.”

Johnny laughed and pushed a strand of hair behind Ruslan’s ear. “I guess. Tell me again why you’re with me, pretty?”

“Hmm, let’s see,” Ruslan pretended to be suddenly preoccupied, “first, you’re handsome, second, you’re tough as nails, third, you have such an awesome big cock, fourth, you know what to do with it --”

Johnny grinned. “Ah, damn, it’s all about what I can do in the ring and between the sheets, right?”

“Not only,” Ruslan said with tenderness and caressed the other’s cheek. “I told you, Johnny, you’re a good man. I value that more than everything else.”

Johnny’s hug was comforting, but Ruslan could tell there was still a bit of hesitation in there. It wasn’t like Johnny to be hesitant. He would find out what the guy was thinking, but that had to wait. For now, they had a wedding to attend.

He looked into the full-sized mirror, taking in both Johnny and himself. They did look nice like that. He smiled, and Johnny’s reflection returned the smile.

“The woman at the store thought we were going to get hitched or something,” Johnny mumbled.

Ruslan turned to look at his lover. “Don’t worry about her. She’s awesome at what she does, but a bit of a gossip. And she’s always looking for extra business.”

Johnny’s eyes set on him, dark and full of meaning. Ruslan cocked his head to one side. “Did it bother you?”

Johnny shrugged. “Nah, it was just weird what she said, that’s all.”

Ruslan nodded. Of course, in Johnny’s world, probably dudes didn’t get hitched with other dudes. They were just fucking each other’s brains out. And that meant that their relationship or whatever that was between them had an expiration date, somewhere.

As much as that thought was suddenly making him feel sad, he needed not to dwell on it. “I suppose it was,” he said, hiding everything with a small smile.

“Who is that?” Johnny heard someone murmuring not far from him.

Some people sucked at gossiping. He wasn’t one for such things himself, but the least these people could do was to keep their voices down. They were already seated and waiting for Yanis and his woman to say their vows.

“That’s Ruslan’s lover,” someone else replied to the first woman talking.

“Are you serious? I had no idea Ruslan Kent was gay. I did find it strange to see them together, though.”

“Such a shame, right? What, did you hope you could seduce him or something?” the man snickered.

“Well, he’s like the most handsome and also the richest guy around. How come someone like Yanis knows him?”

“Beats me. They met when Ruslan needed some security detail or something. Now, let’s just watch Yanis and Anya getting hitched.”

The woman sighed exaggeratedly. “How come the best guys are either married, or gay?”

“Seriously? What am I then?”

“My lucky charm,” the woman added with a small giggle. “And I know you’re actually a bad boy,” she purred.

“What? Now that you know you have no chance with Ruslan, you want me? You may still try your luck.”

“Did you look at them?” The woman replied. “How could I break up such a nice couple?”

Nice couple, Johnny thought. Everyone from dressmakers to random people at weddings thought so. But what could Ruslan really think? Was Johnny just a guy who happened to stick around a little more? And was he seriously thinking about weddings, and marriages, and all that bullshit? Maybe he needed to ask Yanis to smack him upside the head so that he could wake up and stop having wide-eyed dreams like some thirteen-year-old girl.

Ruslan sat next to him. “Sorry about this. Sometimes catering employees need a bit of straightening up. What did I miss?”

“Nothing yet,” Johnny replied.

Ruslan leaned against him and looped one arm around his. On the dais, Yanis was starting saying crap about how much he would love his woman when they were both going to be one hundred or something.

Later, as Ruslan walked with him hand in hand, to meet the newlyweds, Johnny could feel a few curious looks thrown their way. As it seemed, neither Ruslan’s orientation nor his relationship with Yanis, was common knowledge. That was little comfort seeing how they appeared to be the main focus of the conversation.

Yanis grinned broadly as they greeted him. “How did you like my little poem? I wrote it.”

The woman next to him looked Johnny up and down with curious eyes. She was a tiny thing, now almost drowning in white ruffles and whatnot, but by how she was staring at him, she was the fiery kind.

“Sure, sure,” Ruslan laughed, “it was amazing. Shakespeare has nothing on you. Congratulations, guys. Anya, you look so beautiful.”

The woman took Ruslan’s hands after a short, calculated moment of hesitation and blew air kisses on his cheeks.

“I know very well that you found that poem for Yanis on some website,” she said. “You guys have never really fooled me while sneaking behind my back.”

Ouch, Johnny thought and threw a nervous look at Yanis. The fucker seemed completely relaxed, and couldn’t care about his wife’s little pointed jabs.

Ruslan hurried to smooth things over. “We have only a few details to talk about so that you guys can go and spend an awesome honeymoon.”

“Great. So you need to talk about it some more,” Anya said brightly. “Seeing how this is supposed to be the most beautiful day of my life, I am allowed not to care about such details.”

Ruslan, do you mind if I steal your boyfriend for a minute while you go over the trip stuff with Yanis? Thank you,” she added without really waiting for a reply and taking Johnny’s arm swiftly.

Ruslan threw Johnny a strained smile.

“It’s okay,” Johnny found himself talking. “Just go see about that honeymoon trip. I suppose I’m in good hands.” He looked pointedly at the tiny woman hanging by his arm.

Anya didn’t look down. As it seemed, she needed to talk to Johnny, and he had a feeling that he wanted to hear her out.

“Okay, if you’re sure,” Ruslan replied and stole a careful glance at Anya.

“Don’t worry, Ruslan. Johnny is in good hands, indeed,” she said.

Ruslan nodded shortly and let himself almost dragged away by Yanis. Johnny found such moments of insecurity endearing in his boyfriend, but Ruslan had nothing to worry about. As soon as the guys were out of earshot, he turned toward Anya.

“So, what you wanted to talk about?” he asked roughly.

Anya squinted while looking up at him. “Straight to the point, aren’t you?”

Johnny shrugged. “Yeah.”

“You know what’s been going on between those two, right?” Anya gestured with her chin in a vague direction.

“Whatever it was, it’s no more,” Johnny replied.

“Are you sure?” Anya stared at him with pleading eyes.

“The punk married you,” Johnny pointed out. “And it’s kind of late for you to get cold feet, don’t you think?”

Anya sighed. “I don’t know. I mean, I do have this beautiful dress and Yanis said all those beautiful words, but even for that, he had to lean on his fuck buddy,” she explained, her lips pursed.

Johnny would have lied to say he was surprised to hear Anya talking so directly. Both Yanis’s and his bride’s guests were clearly not some upper class.

“No longer his fuck buddy. I can guarantee that,” Johnny said curtly.

“For real?” Anya’s eyes seemed hopeful. “You two look good together. And I thought Ruslan didn’t do relationships. I could not even hope that he would, too, get hitched someday, and forget about Yanis.”

“They’re best friends. That’s all,” Johnny said.

It was strange to give a bride the reassurance she needed, when, for some time now, he had felt like the one in need of the same thing.

“You have nothing to worry about,” he added, with a bit more conviction than before. “You should trust your husband.”

“I know.” Anya looked away, the corners of her mouth dropping. “But this thing between them, it’s like deep and weird ... I just don’t get it. And I frigging hate it.”

“They’ve come a long way together. I suppose that’s why,” Johnny said matter-of-factly.

“Don’t you ever feel threatened?” Anya asked, looking at him again. “I mean, I suppose not. Guys are not meant to feel threatened,” she added with a small scoff. “And gay guys don’t have the same troubles as women do, I suppose. So my question is: how do you do it?”

Johnny placed one hand over hers. “It’s all in the past. You can’t change that. Those two will be like peas in a pod forever. But they’re just best friends. If a fucker like Yanis chose you and managed somehow to trick you into dragging you to the altar, that means he must be serious about you. There’s no doubt.”

Anya smiled and cocked her head to the side. “Yanis says you’re some big shot fighter. But talking to you like this makes me feel better than talking to all my girlfriends. I’ve never told anyone about Yanis and Ruslan, but I did complain about how I suspected my boyfriend and later soon to be husband was cheating on me. Everyone I knew told me to dump his ass.”

“Yet, here you are, wedding gown and all.”

“That I am,” Anya replied and wiped away a discreet tear from one eye. “I guess I love him.”

“Then do your best,” Johnny said. “And, don’t worry. I’ll take care of things from this side,” he joked.

“So you’ll keep Ruslan busy?” Anya asked, his eyes lit up.

Johnny grinned. “Plenty busy.”

“Okay,” she said, and this time, she sighed in relief. “I suppose I should go get ready for my honeymoon. I’m glad I met you, Johnny,” Anya pushed herself up on her toes to reach his cheek and plant a small kiss on it.

Johnny nodded briefly. So much conversation was already making his head hurt. For a while, he stood there, watching the guests milling about. Well, it hadn't been that bad.

"Ready to go home?" Ruslan interrupted his reverie.

"Sure," he replied with a small shrug.

Ruslan took his arm and looked at him pointedly. "So," he tried to sound casual, "what did you and Anya talk about?"

"This and that," Johnny decided to keep it vague on purpose.

He could sense Ruslan squirming a little, and he found it a bit funny.

"Did she tell you what an insensitive careless douche I am or something like that?" Ruslan asked directly.

Johnny burst into laughter. "Why? Did she ever tell you anything like that?"

"Yeah, while throwing some pretty heavy objects in my direction," Ruslan replied dryly.

"I suppose your papa taught you not to hit women. So how did that end?" Johnny asked.

"Yanis managed to drag her back into the house. And I dodge well," Ruslan said and grinned. "You're not going to keep me in the dark about what she said, right?"

"I won't," Johnny replied. "She's just insecure or something. I suppose it wasn't easy on her to know Yanis was screwing your brains out behind her back."

Ruslan shook his head. "Yanis and I --"

"Yeah, I know," Johnny interrupted him. "Best friends forever, right? But no longer with benefits because I'm sure I can do a much better job at kicking Yanis's ass than Anya's attempts to kick yours."

"Wow, Johnny," Ruslan laughed, "you still have it bad for Yanis, huh? You know you have nothing to worry about. Right?" He shook Johnny's arm, waiting for a confirmation.

"I trust you," Johnny said curtly. "Plus, I know I keep you too busy to have time to hook up with your best friend. But, seriously, the fucker should do right by his woman. Tell her and stuff."

"Wasn't the wedding nice enough? That's Yanis's way of doing right by her."

"Ah, well, she might need the words and all that. Just saying," Johnny said.

"Aren't you an expert in reading women's minds now?" Ruslan laughed.

“No mind reading. She just expressed her doubts directly. So tell the fucker, next time you have some best friends talk with him, that he has to pay his dues.”

“All right, if you insist,” Ruslan said and squeezed his arm. “So really, no word from her that I’m a basic bitch?”

“None. I don’t think she hates you or anything. For some reason, she’s in love with that fucker. Beats me why, but that’s how it is.”

“Then that’s good for Yanis. Because in his own way, he loves her, too.”

“Are we done with this crap, then?” Johnny asked. “Frankly, I feel a bit hungry, and I want to get out of this suit.”

Ruslan laughed. “Say no more. But how come you’re hungry? There was food around to feed an army.”

“Everyone was staring at us so much; I didn’t want them to have even more to gossip about how I eat like a pig or something.”

“Johnny, how come you’re so rough and tough, but you care about what others think?”

“I don’t want to reflect badly on you; that’s all.”

Ruslan placed a quick kiss on his cheek. “We really need to solve this. It’s bothering you way too much.”

“It’s nothing,” Johnny protested.

Great, instead of eating and fucking, there was even more conversation waiting for him at home. Ruslan’s home. He was getting used to everything way too much.

Ruslan placed a plate full of food in front of Johnny and patted him on the back. “Dig in.”

“You’re not eating?”

“Unlike you, I wasn’t aware that I would be a hot topic of conversation at the wedding if there were something stuck in my teeth. I had enough.”

“How come you make such good food, yet you’re so skinny?”

“Complaints about my weight, again?” Ruslan rolled his eyes. “Cooking is a basic skill. Everyone should know it.”

Johnny just nodded. Ruslan watched him for a while, pondering over how he would attack the thing that was bothering his lover so much lately. The best strategy was to be direct.

He waited until Johnny finished his food and took the plate to wash it in the sink.

“What’s bothering you, Johnny? Last chance to say it first. Or I’ll start talking.”

“People staring. Talking shit. Stuff like that.”

“If I think you’re good enough for me, that’s all that matters. But that’s not it, is it?”

Johnny didn’t look directly at him.

Ruslan sighed. “I’m joking about putting a leash on you. Snakes don’t get collared, and that’s not what’s happening. But I won’t joke anymore. If you’re so afraid people will start talking about how you got tamed or something, here’s the deal. The door is open, anytime you want to go. I won’t say a word.”

The last bit was a lie. Ruslan knew he would hurt and he would bawl like a child if Johnny left him, but that was precisely what his lover was afraid of right now. So he needed to stop thinking about himself and see things from Johnny’s perspective.

Johnny worked his jaw. “The door is open, huh?”

Ruslan frowned. Why was Johnny pissed about now? He was just trying to leave the guy’s options open, and he was a douche about it. “Well, yeah, it is. No need to feel your freedom threatened or anything.”

“How about you go shut that door?” Johnny said roughly.

Ruslan shook his head. “Um, what?”

“You heard me. Go and shut the damn door. It’s high time you stopped joking.”

“I don’t get it. I just told you I wouldn’t joke about collaring you --”

“As I said, stop joking. Bring on that frigging leash already. Do I need to spell it for you?”

Ruslan’s mouth fell slack. Johnny’s eyes were burning coals, set on him. He moved with predatory grace as he stood up and pushed back the chair. Ruslan almost felt a tiny impulse to run. There was something aggressive and determined in how Johnny moved, and he could feel his knees wobbling a little.

He let out a small gasp when Johnny grabbed him and kissed him on the lips. A firm hand was in his hair while the other was squeezing his ass hard.

Ruslan felt pretty much like a doll in Johnny's strong arms. Almost effortlessly, he dragged him out of the kitchen and into the hallway.

It was unnerving to be pushed down on his knees, right there on the carpeted floor. He had thought that they would take things to the bedroom, but it looked like Johnny believed there was no time for that.

He reached blindly for the other's crotch, but his hands were pushed away. He tried to look up and ask 'what the hell?', but Johnny was quick to push him on his back and then turn him.

"Oh, wow," Ruslan commented. "Do you want to do it like this? My knees will kinda hurt."

Johnny grunted in response and pulled his pants down. Ruslan yelped when a heavy hand swatted his naked ass hard. "Can't we, just, you know, use the bed?"

"Shut up, pretty," Johnny replied, and his voice was heavy, loaded with something that made Ruslan shudder.

A hand was back in his hair, and he was forced with his ass up. He heard his lover spitting. So Johnny was in for a rough ride today. Not that he minded. No, he couldn't do that. Johnny often had troubles speaking up, not because he wasn't the kind to speak his mind, but because words sometimes didn't come to him.

So Ruslan knew this was the actual answer Johnny was giving him. He jolted as he felt something wet against his ass. He didn't have to look to know that his lover intended to make it just a little less rough.

He whimpered softly, as Johnny's tongue pushed inside his ass. It was just so damn good. Johnny had nothing to worry about. And if he wanted to be collared, after all, that would happen. Ruslan was more than happy to oblige.

"Sorry, pretty, but it's just how it is," Johnny said as he straightened up and replaced his tongue with the big head of his cock.

"Don't worry," Ruslan murmured in reply.

Johnny's breathing deepened as he pushed inside. He was holding Ruslan, one hand in his hair, the other digging deep into one hip, but he did his best to take it slowly.

Ruslan willed himself to relax. A few times, Johnny withdrew to add more spit, but came back at it, relentlessly. Ruslan loved it, even if his ass wasn't used to be stretched so fast. When Johnny finally bottomed out in his ass, he moaned in pleasure.

Johnny started to ride him, slow, but hard, and Ruslan closed his eyes. No matter how rough Johnny wanted to be, there was nothing more comforting than this. Tears were welling up behind

his eyelashes, but this time, he was okay with letting them fall. Because his lover wanted him, and also wanted a commitment of sorts. Ruslan would make that happen. He would give Johnny all he wanted, and even more. Yes, he would draw that leash out and collar his lover.

He bit his bottom lip and then cried out as Johnny began hammering him fast. Oh, fuck, he was big in all respects, and Ruslan should have felt like breaking in two. That wasn't possible, though. He was kept so tightly, so close, that he couldn't break. No, it was impossible to do so.

Johnny increased his rhythm and Ruslan knew he would not take long. Coming hands-free was common since he had gotten together with Johnny. So he knew, by the building pleasure in his loins that he would come without touching himself.

He cried out, throwing his head back, and Johnny cursed under his breath. The rhythm didn't give in. Ruslan could still feel the last spasms of his pleasure when Johnny began shooting inside him. It made the orgasm last beyond what was humanly possible.

They crushed on the floor. Ruslan started laughing. "You know, when people ask their lovers to go steady, they tend to use other methods."

Johnny snickered. "Well, I don't think other methods work with you."

"You can't know until you try them," Ruslan said, and half turned to look at his lover. "Is this what you want, Johnny?" he asked, this time serious.

"Yeah."

"Okay," Ruslan said with a smile. "You could've just said so."

"I'm not good with words."

"Maybe you should practice."

Johnny turned to look at him, his gaze intense. "You belong to me. Is that good enough, pretty?"

"Hmm, for now."

"And it's for good. Not all that wishy-washy crap."

"Like what wishy-washy crap?" Ruslan asked, pushing himself on his elbows, and wincing at the pain in his back.

"Doors left open and whatnot," Johnny replied.

"All right, since you're the owner," Ruslan joked. "Wait. You are the one who wants a nice shiny collar. So you belong to me."

Johnny laughed. "I guess it goes both ways."

“Okay. Then that’s how it is.” Ruslan sighed in contentment. “Still, my knees hurt.”

“Do you want me to kiss them and make it all better?” Johnny mimicked the way mothers spoke to their children.

Ruslan rolled his eyes. “Joke more. I might just have you do that.”

“I don’t mind.”

Johnny straightened up and moved to drag Ruslan’s pants down and place two loud kisses on his knees. Ruslan giggled.

“What?” Johnny looked up.

“Nothing. It looks like you can be house trained, after all. I had no idea snakes make such good pets. They are clearly underrated.”

Johnny played along. “Well, it’s a secret. Don’t let others know, or my kind would get hunted down for crazy people’s entertainment.”

“What do you know?” Ruslan laughed. “You know how to tell a joke.”

“Of course. I’m a fun-loving snake,” Johnny replied. “Isn’t that what all people on matrimonial ads say or something?”

“That they’re fun-loving snakes?” Ruslan guffawed. “And how did you end up reading such stuff?”

“Just something I read to my mom once in a while. She seems really interested in what people who put themselves out there have to say. Don’t laugh. I don’t get it either. But it seems to make her calm.”

Ruslan sighed. “You take me by surprise sometimes.”

“Really?” Johnny quirked an eyebrow and watched him closely.

“I took your words at face value. No one collars a snake and all that.”

“I guess I’m no good with words.”

“I think you’re better than you think.” Ruslan leaned over and kissed Johnny slowly.

He could feel the other moving, a steady hand back in his hair. Johnny was just the right combination of rough and gentle, as he had come to learn for weeks now. So it didn’t hurt when he kept him like this. Johnny knew what he wanted, and his hands touching and grabbing told everything he wished to say.

Ruslan pulled up his pants and moved to straddle his lover. “Would it be too much to ask for a second round?” He hovered over his lover and Johnny touched him tentatively at first.

“No. But let’s get in bed. I don’t want your knees to hurt or something.”

Ruslan snickered. “So thoughtful of you.”

He stood up and offered Johnny a hand. Without hesitation, he took it and straightened up. Ruslan shook his head and smiled.

“Hey, you want it, too, right?” Johnny asked, looking at him with serious eyes.

“Yeah. Like a lot. I just didn’t want to chase you away by being too clingy.”

“You? Clingy?”

“C’mon. If I could, I’d wrap myself around you and never let you leave for training each morning.”

“Shut up, pretty. You sleep so soundly that you never wake up when I leave.”

“I guess I’m sleeping well lately,” Ruslan said with a small smile. “It must be because I found myself the perfect bed companion.”

“Bed companion? Is that what I’m to you?” Johnny smirked.

“What can I say? You’re the perfect plushy toy. I doubt they sell plushy snake toys anywhere, but you’re mine.”

“I can live with that.”

“I’m glad. So, together and all?” Ruslan asked, but his eyes darted sideways.

“And Anya thought gay guys have it easy,” Johnny said, shaking his head. He tipped Ruslan’s chin and looked him in the eyes. “I suck at saying big words and all. Maybe you should find a poem for me, too.”

“A poem?” Ruslan grinned. “What should it say?”

“Dunno,” Johnny shrugged, “something like ‘I love you’?”

Ruslan swallowed hard and looked at Johnny. “You’re serious,” he whispered.

“Like a heart attack,” Johnny said solemnly. “So, what do you say, pretty? Will you take this half-assed confession from a guy who’s taken way too many hits to the head?”

“I’ll take it,” Ruslan replied. Closing the distance between them even more, he brushed his lips against his lover’s. “I love you, too, Johnny Bryne.”

Johnny hoisted him up into his arms. “I guess that’s settled, then.”

“So no more worries about people gossiping?” Ruslan asked.

“Nah. What for? They’d only tell the truth.”

“Hmm,” Ruslan purred. “Aren’t we confident now? What if they say you eat like a pig or something next time we go to a wedding?”

“So what?” Johnny snickered. “I have to eat and keep my energy up. My partner is too damn sexy, and I must fuck him good.”

“You’d say something like that? For real?” Ruslan felt the need to pull Johnny’s leg a little.

“Try me,” Johnny replied.

Ruslan laughed all the way to the bedroom. When Johnny dropped him a bit unceremoniously on the bed, he felt the need to protest. But Johnny got instantly busy with pulling his pants and planting kisses on his naked ankles.

He tried to pull his legs free, laughing. Johnny grabbed him hard and pulled him to the edge of the bed, his ass almost hanging over. Ruslan knew he was limber, but he yelped as Johnny pushed his legs so hard that little was needed to start wrapping them around his neck.

The look on his lover’s face was intense as Johnny stared down on him. He could feel those dark eyes burning trails in their wake, and he shivered.

“What?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“I’m looking at you, pretty.” Johnny moved one arm to caress Ruslan’s lower belly in slow circular moves. “I see it with my own two eyes, and still find it so hard to believe.” His hand moved lower, brushing by Ruslan’s cock and then further. “My cum in you, dripping. It’s so hot, you know?” Johnny’s fingers were now probing him again.

Ruslan grabbed the sheets with both hands. He was a bit raw from earlier, but he found himself helplessly wanting to push himself into those rough fingers. “I don’t need anything more. There’s plenty of you in me, so just fuck me, Johnny,” he asked.

“Easy,” Johnny cooed. “Sometimes I just want to look at you like this.”

Ruslan could feel his arousal growing steadily.

“Look at me, pretty,” Johnny whispered. “Just at me.”

While speaking, Johnny moved his other hand to grab Ruslan's cock.

"What --"

Ruslan's words were cut short. "Hush, just let me."

"I can see you're hard. Your dick's practically hanging out."

"No." Johnny shook his head. "This time, I only want to look at you. To see you when you come."

"You can do all that by putting that gorgeous cock of yours inside me. C'mon, don't make me beg."

"Beg all you want," Johnny replied. "Cuss at me if you feel like it. But this is mine."

Ruslan did want to cuss at Johnny. "C'mon," he complained, "you know fingers can't be enough for me."

"You sure?"

Johnny's fingers changed their angle, and Ruslan cursed, throwing his head back. The hand on his cock was firm and increasing the rhythm slowly.

"Eyes on me, baby, eyes on me," Johnny insisted, his fingers still busy torturing Ruslan in the most delicious way possible. "This is mine," he repeated the same words from earlier.

Ruslan wanted to ask, to demand imperatively what he wanted, but all he could do was moan and curse. Johnny knew his ass well. So well that his fingers curled and moved, making him thrash on the bed. They just hit the right spot, over and over again, a bit too much, and more intense than a cock.

He missed the sensation of being full, but he had to live with what Johnny needed to do to him.

"Talk to me, pretty. Even if it's just to call me a fucking asshole," Johnny encouraged him.

Ruslan had his feet placed against Johnny's shoulders. He looked at his lover. "I miss your cock. In me. Already. Why the fuck do you want to drive me crazy?"

Johnny chuckled, sending eddies of warmth right up his spine. Ruslan knew he was lost that very moment. Everything Johnny said or did touched him. And it did it so profoundly that he almost found it impossible to breathe.

"I'm not punishing you. I'm giving you more. Let me give you more."

"Then give me your cock," Ruslan begged shamelessly.

“You sure?” Johnny laughed. “Look at how you’re leaking.” He pulled at Ruslan’s cock, brushing the head with the thumb. “Suck it,” he whispered as he pushed his thumb briefly into Ruslan’s mouth.

He did so, greedily. Not that he had never tasted his precum ever in his life, but right now everything felt sharper, more intense and his own taste hitting his flavor buds made him go a bit insane with soaring arousal.

“Ready for me?” Johnny asked, and his fingers left Ruslan’s ass.

Ruslan moaned. “Put them back,” he asked.

“I think this is better, indeed,” Johnny replied and pushed his length inside Ruslan all the way. “Don’t forget, pretty. Your eyes on me.”

Ruslan couldn’t do otherwise if he wanted. His eyes locked with Johnny’s, and his lover hurried to support the back of his head with one hand so they could look like that while their bodies moved in the most ancient of rhythms to ever rock the earth.

He mouthed the words as he came, fast and hard, and Johnny smiled in turn.

“I love you, too, pretty,” Johnny replied, and only then he closed his eyes and pulled Ruslan into an intense kiss, the kind that had to leave them breathless or otherwise, could not count.

Johnny moved inside him for minutes after, and Ruslan did nothing else but hang on to him, his entire body spent, his heart full, and the restlessness in his soul finally gone.

Johnny lay awake in bed for some time after they were showered and good to go to sleep. It wasn’t that he felt like he could not sleep or anything. He caressed the blond head resting on his chest.

“Can’t sleep?” Ruslan murmured.

“Don’t worry your pretty head. You go to sleep.”

“I think I’m a little too excited to do that.”

“Too excited? Ready to go back in the saddle?”

Ruslan met his chuckle with a small slap on his chest. “Weirdly enough, I’m spent. And my ass is a little sore.”

“See? You should sleep,” Johnny pointed out.

“Yeah, sure. While you stare at the ceiling or something. I don’t think I can. So what’s keeping you awake?”

“Just what’s keeping you. I guess I’m too excited, too.”

He laughed and pushed Ruslan’s hand away from his sleeping cock.

“At least some parts of you are human,” Ruslan commented. “And here I was, thinking that I could never meet a man with an appetite for sex bigger than mine.”

“Well, it’s not bigger,” Johnny replied. “But the same, I guess. How come we met, pretty?”

Ruslan moved to lie on his back. Since neither of them was sleeping, he could handle some conversation. “It just happened, I supposed.”

“What if we never met?” Johnny asked.

“What if,” Ruslan sighed. “I don’t know. I would have been unhappy from one point onward, I believe. There’s only this much dick hopping a guy could do. What about you?”

“I don’t know. But I like where I am now. It’s better than anything else that happened to me in years.”

“Same here. I’m glad that you’re serious about me, Johnny. ‘Cause I have no idea what I would have done if you had said one day that you were bored and wanted to leave.”

Johnny remained silent for a little while, taking in Ruslan’s words.

“Tell me I didn’t just scare you off,” Ruslan interrupted the silence.

He could read the tiniest sign of distress in his lover’s voice by now. “You didn’t. I told you. I got plenty of hits to the head. So I need time to ... Ah, time to ... What’s that word?”

“To process?”

“Yeah, to process. I want to understand. How come a shmuck like me got lucky.”

“You put too little value on yourself, Johnny.” Ruslan moved again to lie against him. “I’m not making that mistake so that you know. You’re the best guy I’ve met in years. And I don’t think anyone else would ever compare to you, all my life.”

“All your life? For like the next fifty or sixty years or so?”

Ruslan punched him playfully in the shoulder. “Yeah, if you must know.”

“And I’m the best, huh? Better than Yanis?”

“Of course you’re better than Yanis. He’s my best friend. But as much as I enjoyed his fucking, he was never mine. And I was never his. Just to make this clear once and for all. Is Anya’s insecurity contagious or something? I might have to cure you with plenty of blowjobs then.”

“Blowjobs? Why?”

“I don’t know.” Ruslan shrugged. “I just thought they might work as a treatment for insecure lovers.”

“They might,” Johnny said, amused. “But you know what should work?”

“What?” Ruslan asked, drawing small circles with his fingers on Johnny’s chest.

“That leash,” Johnny joked. “Then I’ll know for sure you’re serious about me.”

“Hmm.” Ruslan seemed to ponder. “I’ll think of something.”

“Good. Just make sure it won’t chafe my neck.”

“No worries,” Ruslan nuzzled his neck slowly, “I wouldn’t dream of that.”

“Good. Now go to sleep. I knew too much conversation would make me tired.”

“Hey, you wanted to talk,” Ruslan pointed out. “I’ll get that leash. Until then, you’ll have to do with this.”

Ruslan wrapped around his body, throwing one arm and leg over. Johnny chuckled. “I thought I was the snake. And here you are, slowly choking me.”

“Oh, is it too much?” Ruslan eased his hold.

Johnny was quick to pull his lover back. “No, pretty. I don’t think it’d ever be too much.”

That was a nice thought to go to sleep with. Ruslan’s weight in his arms made it all real. He heard Ruslan wishing him ‘good night’ and murmured the same thing back as his eyelids grew heavy.

Chapter Fifteen – Collared Snake

Walking into a ring never felt like this. Johnny was sure he was different, and the world was a different place, too. It had to be true what songs and whatnot said about love giving you wings and all that.

For a while, he had thought that he would care less. But the soonest he jumped the ropes, into the cage, he knew that wasn't it. What before had been anger and hate and every little dark corner of his soul stretched and bound against the world, now was a thrill, an excitement of the best kind, as he knew Ruslan was watching his every move.

He had used to fight to survive. Now he fought because he felt alive, so alive that it was like something was growing inside him, threatening to burst through all his pores.

Johnny looked up and saluted with his gloved hand. By now, people had to know he was Ruslan's lover. They weren't hiding or anything. But if anyone knew what was good for them, they would keep their mouth shut before spewing bullshit about the owner's son playing favorites.

"I'd love you even if you lost," Ruslan had joked at one point.

"I wouldn't," had been his reply.

"What? Love yourself?"

Ruslan had just laughed it off. But he needed to understand that now Johnny was doing it for him. Every win was for him and him only. Money and fame were nothing. Cash was a means to an end, as he still dutifully dropped fat envelopes into the same box. Ruslan had tried to convince him to give up side gigs as he could cover for everything. But Johnny didn't want that. He would terminate that stupid debt, and then he would see what lay ahead.

For now, he had to score another win. It was the last match of the tournament, and then Johnny would cash in. But that would be the only money he was going to take from Ruslan's hand.

His opponent was looking at him from across the cage with an ugly smirk. Johnny knew the kind. Such people were losers, but that was hard to get through their thick skulls. Not even after getting beaten time and time again, they didn't learn. They were like cockroaches, coming back over and over.

The man had a short neck, and the muscles on his shoulders had overgrown so much that his head seemed like stuck in there by the impatient hand of a kid having fun with play dough. It wasn't like Johnny to underestimate his opponents. And this one was a mean cockroach; he was sure of it.

That stocky build meant the cockroach could take a beating, not just a punch. If he hoped to win against Johnny, his strategy was, most probably, to try to wear off his opponent by lasting longer.

The man walked over to him and for a few moments, as the announcer recited his part, they stared at each other. Johnny watched the other intently.

“Can you last for twelve rounds, lover boy?” the man smirked, his upper lip curling over crooked teeth.

Lover boy? Johnny frowned.

“I guess not. Never went that kind of distance, huh?”

The other fighter was trying to rile him up. Johnny had a bad feeling about this.

“How will your owner react seeing you going down?” The man made a vague gesture like he knew what he was talking about.

Johnny shrugged and moved his head to the sides to work out some kinks in his neck. The sound of the whistle caught him prepared, as usual. It was a full house, and Ruslan’s papa was probably raking in big profits. Johnny knew he needed to make a good impression, not only on his lover but on Douglas, too. After all, the man had taught him everything he knew, and now Johnny felt like a much better fighter than months ago.

“Johnny’s opponent seems pretty strong,” Ruslan said, feeling a bit worried.

Sometimes it happened to him to feel anxious without an apparent reason.

“He definitely is. He would not have made it to the final, otherwise,” his papa agreed. “But Johnny is in perfect form, Russy. I trust him that he will give us yet another outstanding performance tonight.”

“I don’t really care about performance. I just don’t want to see him getting hurt.”

Douglas chuckled. “Johnny is a fighter, Russy. Getting hurt comes with the territory. And you can’t take this away from him. Also, it was this bad boy attitude that made you set your eyes on him, wasn’t it?”

“I guess.” Ruslan rolled his eyes. “But now I really worry. I’ve never seen a man looking so buff in my entire life. Where did he come from?”

“He joined the tournament sometime later. We had some injuries, and we needed the show rolling, so I gave him a shot.”

“He’s not from around here,” Ruslan noted.

“No. We only did a cursory background check on him since it was all in short notice, but I believe he is just like the rest. A fighter looking to make a name for himself.”

“So, are there no attachments we should know about?” Ruslan asked.

“It doesn’t seem so. However, as Johnny’s tutor, I must say that I have great faith in my student. Johnny will go places, Russy. He’ll hit his prime during his first fights as a pro. And I hope to see a long string of victories from him. He deserves it.”

Ruslan looked down in the ring. His papa still didn’t know that Johnny had no idea that he would sign a contract for Efige at the end of it all. Of course, from that point forward, he would be a pro, and that changed things. Ruslan wasn’t sure he wanted to pull that trigger.

But, on the other hand, Johnny had a stellar career in front of him. And Ruslan knew all the risks. If he didn’t take them, he wouldn’t be worthy of having Johnny as his lover.

“As you can see, he’s doing fine,” Douglas pointed out. “This bulldog he’s facing may be out for blood, but Johnny’s not your average amateur fighter. I wish Martin could see him.”

“Why didn’t you bring Martin along, papa?”

“He has something important to take care of.”

“What? Polish the silverware? I swear that house is sparkling clean.”

“Don’t be a smartass, Russy. Martin is in charge of many other things, besides overall property maintenance.”

“Like what things?” Ruslan hurried to ask.

“Are you sure you want to listen to me talking about Martin’s administrative duties instead of watching your boyfriend winning the tournament? Or should I say, fiancé?”

Ruslan snickered. “I don’t plan on scaring Johnny off, papa. He is upset with me if I buy him socks, let alone a ring.”

“He should accept your generosity more often. As someone by your side, he needs to look the part. I noticed that you did manage to dress him up a little.”

“Oh, you should never talk to him about such things,” Ruslan replied. “He’s already too sensitive about it all. Each time I manage to buy him something, it is after a long and tough fight. I mean it. Tougher than whatever happens down in the ring right now.”

Douglas laughed. “At least you’re making progress. Just say the word, and I’ll convince him.”

“No way. I’m taking care of him.”

“I’m sure of it,” Douglas added with a small smile. “Now let’s just pay attention to the fight, shall we?”

“Sure. Johnny’s kicking ass,” Ruslan said and smiled, too.

Johnny’s opponent seemed to be in the ropes most often than not. This match would be easy. And then, Ruslan would present Johnny with the shiny collar he so much wanted.

Things didn’t look good for the cockroach. But Johnny didn’t like it when things were too simple. Something fishy was happening, and he needed to find out what. After all that nasty talk in the beginning, his opponent seemed to lack basic skills. And that couldn’t be true. If the man was there, in the ring, facing him in the final battle, it meant that he had beaten plenty of other fighters.

So, for Johnny, the man’s game was transparent. He was trying to get Johnny frustrated, make him commit too soon or too late, put himself in the way of a kick or a punch at one point. As expected, he was trying to wear him down.

But Johnny had learned the importance of patience a long time ago. And he wouldn’t fall for such shitty acting the cockroach was putting on. As a snake, he could lay in waiting for the right strike.

The trick was to split his effort. As he had understood from the first look at his opponent, this one could take a beating. Until Johnny could land a critical hit, the man would stand his ground.

“Why don’t you hurry and finish me off, lover boy?” The other sneered at him at the end of the fifth round.

The crowd was booing, by now upset with the lack of real action in the ring. Johnny could tune out the noise without a problem. Yet, it was a matter of pride and honor to show his trainer and his lover that he could provide the entertainment they were expecting from him.

During the small break, he looked over at his opponent some more. The cockroach had a tough exterior, but any man had a weak point. By how high the guy was holding his guard, he wasn’t afraid of kicks to the ribs too much. But he was protecting his ugly mug very carefully. Johnny needed to find an opening.

He pushed the mouth guard into his mouth and put his fists up. This time, he waited. The opponent came to him, but instead of attempting a hit, he began dancing around Johnny. In an instant, the crowd started booing.

“They’re cheering for you,” his opponent said. “Too bad to end your pro career even before starting it, right?”

Johnny continued to look at the other fighter, over the close guard he held to his face.

“Aren’t you afraid your boyfriend’s gonna kick you out if you lose?”

The cockroach knew about Ruslan and was trying to use that to his advantage. He needed to do better to make Johnny lose his cool.

Unlike him, his opponent seemed to let the noise of the restless crowd get to him. He was shaking his head once in a while like a horse bothered by flies. Johnny focused on the man’s moves, hard, until he could predict an opening. When his fist exploded like a sling, it was in a blink of an eye that everything followed.

The man’s head snapped to one side, and he wobbled.

“Time to get real, bitch?” The cockroach threw at him.

The whistle announced the end of the round and Johnny returned to his place. There would be no twelve rounds. He would kayo the cockroach by the end of the tenth.

“Is it just me or is this dragging a bit too long?” Ruslan asked.

His papa appeared a tad concerned. “Indeed,” was the short answer.

“Um, care to enlighten me? Unlike you and Johnny, I am not well aware of the intricacies of this sport you two love so much.”

“Johnny’s opponent is trying the drag the match on purpose.”

“But Johnny got him good just last round,” Ruslan pointed out. “Why is Johnny hesitating? He should have no trouble with someone who appears to be so unskilled.”

“Johnny is not hesitating, son. He sees his opponent eye to eye in the ring, unlike us. And he observes him, waiting for that opening that will hand him the victory.”

“Ah, so all is well,” Ruslan said, crossing his arms over his chest. “Why are you so worried, then?”

“Because I don’t believe it’s the right strategy. Johnny is now made to believe that his opponent can take a beating and still stand.”

“Ah, damn,” Ruslan whispered. “So what should he do?”

“Johnny is good at trusting his instincts. I think he’ll realize that he’s being played. I expect him, soon enough, to go at his opponent hard.”

“And what if he doesn’t realize it?” Ruslan asked, now even more worried than before.

“Have faith in Johnny. I know I have.”

“Can’t we do anything to transmit Johnny what you think he must be doing?”

“That would be cheating, Russy. No. Johnny will win on his own.”

“Okay,” Ruslan said and returned to watch the evolution closely in the ring.

The cockroach was eyeing him with an ugly grin splitting his face in two. Johnny was still keeping his distance, but an idea was starting to make rounds in his brain. His opponent didn’t look like it, but he was good at mind games.

Changing his strategy, at this point, seemed risky. Even if he didn’t send the other to the floor, he would still win. No judge in the world could be this blind.

But that was not what he was after. He wouldn’t hand Ruslan and his papa a lackluster victory as the end of the tournament. It was a matter of pride, as a fighter, as a trainee, but most of all, as a lover.

Douglas had told him before he liked to keep his distance too much. He needed to get into the other’s space and start kicking his ass for real. The whistle announced the beginning of the eighth round. Without one second of hesitation, he went straight at his opponent, pelting him with rights and lefts fast.

Within seconds, the guy was pushed into a corner and was resisting the rain of hits, still carefully guarding his head. Suddenly, he moved, with more agility than expected from a fighter with that kind of build and attempted to hit Johnny’s side.

He dropped his elbows by pure instinct but left himself open for a fraction. The next hit was to the head. Johnny took a few steps back, fast, shaking his head.

“Running already?” The cockroach sneered.

“Come at me.” Johnny grinned and quickly dodged the predictable punch.

The next was his. His opponent wobbled and crashed. Johnny could hear the referee counting, but he wasn’t celebrating just yet. The cockroach had to come back, at least one time. Otherwise, Johnny would be disappointed.

The man got to his feet. His scowl was as ugly as Satan's ass. He wiped the blood from one corner of his mouth.

He tried to rile up Johnny once again. "You hit like a fucking fairy."

For the first time since the beginning of the game, Johnny worked his jaw. It was no surprise the guy was trying to make him lose his cool. Actually, it was surprising that he had waited so long to play this card.

"At least I can hit," Johnny said curtly.

The man launched himself at him like a crazed animal. Johnny tied him up effortlessly and kept him close.

"Who's pulling your leash, mutt?" he asked.

"None of your fucking business. You'll know when I win," the reply came back.

The referee pushed them apart and sent them to their corners. Johnny watched his opponent and got stared back. The man made a vague obscene gesture and Johnny nodded. This round the cockroach would go down.

But he was still resisting. And that was not the outcome Johnny was after. Ruslan wouldn't care if what he said was true, but Johnny cared about not being made a fool in front of his lover. The next time he put his fists up, he was sure he wouldn't win by points decision.

"How does it feel to hit that loose ass?" the man taunted him as soon as they were facing each other.

The crowd noise faded away. Johnny could feel blood shooting his eyes, his skull under pressure, and his fist traveled fast, hitting nothing but air. The blow to his side that followed, in the same spot as earlier, almost knocked the wind out of him. Quickly, he pulled himself out of the harm's way.

"Gassing out already, bitch?" the cockroach laughed at him and followed to continue.

Johnny put his guard up fast. He could see all crystal clear. Getting mad about stupid insults wasn't like him. There was only one way he could avenge Ruslan for the bullshit his opponent was spewing and throwing random punches was not it.

He focused. What he needed now was to understand how he could crush that cockroach. All the time, the man had protected his head, but he had proven that it was no trouble for him to take some hits.

All the time, his opponent had almost flaunted his unprotected sides like he was sure Johnny would fall for that any minute now. And Johnny finally understood. Douglas had warned him about mind games throughout their training. He had been stupid not to see it.

When he slammed one fist into the guy's right side, the cockroach grunted. His head dipped low, almost bent from his waist, Johnny went at it with all his strength. He pushed his opponent into the ropes and relentlessly hit the same spot.

The man sank to his knees. The referee pushed Johnny back.

But now he knew. The cockroach's eyes were filled with mean despair. He had just been discovered, and he couldn't tell how. Johnny smirked. Twelve rounds? There was no way that would happen.

The moment they could fight again, Johnny knew all he had to do. It was as easy as taking candy from a baby as he began pelting the guy's side with punches again.

The cockroach was on the ground, spitting and coughing. The referee was counting, again, and trying to push Johnny back.

"Hitting that ass feels fucking great," Johnny spat at him and turned.

When the referee hurried to grab his arm, Johnny didn't even care about the victory anymore. What mattered was that he had shut that asshole's trap and he would never talk smack about Ruslan again if he knew what was good for him.

"Now that the formalities are over, I think it's time to honor all our obligations." Douglas gestured at him with a glass filled with bourbon. "Russy, you have the papers ready, right?"

"Of course." Ruslan moved to pick something from his desk.

"Papers, what papers?" Johnny asked roughly.

Ruslan hoped he could do that without his papa watching, but it was not like he could drag it out forever. Damn, it would be awkward.

"It is an honor for us." Douglas patted Johnny's back. "Now you are part of the Efige family, Johnny."

Ruslan looked straight at his lover. Johnny looked at the glass in his hand as if he was trying to make sense of something.

"Could we talk about papers and whatnot later?" Johnnys asked, working his jaw.

Ruslan now felt his papa's eyes on him, questioning, for sure. He had expected this fight to take place sooner or later, and he wasn't afraid of it.

"I think Johnny is a bit tired, papa. I'll take care of everything. It's been an interesting night."

"Interesting?" Johnny snorted.

"Yes, interesting," Ruslan decided to have the final word. "So, papa, is it okay if we celebrate some more another time?"

Douglas said nothing as Ruslan kissed both his cheeks and pleaded with his eyes.

"Of course," his papa replied. "I will see you both soon at dinner, I hope."

"Definitely," Ruslan accompanied Douglas to the door.

He closed the door behind him and leaned against it. Taking in Johnny's hunched back, he pondered over his next words.

"What is your answer, Johnny?"

"My answer?" Johnny looked at him over one shoulder. "Was this the plan all along? To make me sign?"

Ruslan shrugged. "It was part of the tournament deal. So, yes, that was the plan all along."

"And never, for one time, you thought to tell me about it?" Johnny moved his eyes away.

"For starters, you should have known. It wasn't a secret."

"So you call me stupid?"

Ruslan had a vague sensation of restlessness in the pit of his stomach like muddy waters troubled all of a sudden by a foreign presence in their midst.

"Where is this coming from? Are you hurt? Do you feel ill? Do you need the hospital--"

"I'm fine. But I thought you were the last person on earth to play me, pretty."

Ruslan exhaled and walked toward Johnny's chair. He embraced him from the back, winding him tightly between his arms.

"You asked me for a leash, Johnny. This is your leash. Does it chafe your neck already? Is that what's eating at you?"

"What's eating at me is you not telling me about it."

Ruslan could feel the bad sensation in his stomach dropping lower as an alien thing bent on devouring his insides. “I thought it fitting to tell you about it tonight. And, from the start, I wanted that, I guess. Of course, it all sounded better in my head. The outcome is ... maybe not what I hoped for.”

“From the start? You were gunning for me, pretty?” Johnny asked.

Ruslan could feel his lover relaxing, if only for a fraction. “I guess I was. Of course, no one is forcing you. You can take it or leave it.”

Johnny chuckled. “And here I thought you were serious about collaring me.”

Ruslan leaned closer and kissed his lover’s cheek, the nasty sensation in his stomach now gone. “You want me to act like a badass. Then here it is. You’re collared, Snake. Just sign the damned papers.”

“Not without punishing you first.”

“Punishing me?” Ruslan asked. “Rest assured that I will get my just desserts from papa. I’m in for a real lecture, by how he looked at me when he left.”

“Unlike your papa’s scolding, you’ll love my punishment.”

“Oh, really?”

Ruslan was happy to hear Johnny make light of the situation in the end. He yelped when he was pulled over, losing his balance and ending up across Johnny’s lap. Instinctively, he tried to push himself up, but Johnny pressed firmly against his shoulder blades.

A hand squeezed his buttocks roughly through his suit pants.

“Johnny,” he warned.

And cursed the next second, as the hand was removed only to drop fast and hard over his ass.

“Seriously? Spanking?” Ruslan asked, feeling much scandalized by the turn of events. “And how am I supposed to enjoy it? I’m not even naked!”

“Now that you mention it, yeah, you should be naked,” Johnny said promptly. “Come on, down with the pants.”

“And what if I don’t want to?” Ruslan sounded like a petulant child on purpose.

A second slap over his still clothed ass drew another string of explicit words from him.

“Then we’ll make do with what we have,” Johnny explained. “I don’t mind giving you a red butt like this. It’s my right, after all.”

Ruslan drew an exaggerated sigh. "Help me to my feet, then?"

Johnny allowed him to get up and watched him, eyes at half mast, as he pushed down his pants, underwear, and shoes. When he reached for the buttons of his waistcoat, Johnny shook his head.

"No. I just want you ass naked for this."

"If you say so," Ruslan said with a small roll of his eyes.

Was it wrong that he felt a sort of thrill as he draped Johnny's lap graciously, hoping that wiggling his ass a little would earn him another well-deserved slap? As a child, living in a group home with many other boys, he had gotten his fair share of beatings. But nothing like a spanking. In a weird, unintelligible way, later in life, he had come to think that spanking would be somehow related to caring. A parent never hits their child in any other manner because it would hurt too much. But a slap over the ass is meant to draw attention to a bad deed without delivering anything beyond matching punishment.

Maybe it was all because of a kink an old client had tried with him at one point. That man had been obsessive with treating Ruslan as a child. Ruslan had found it weird, but, on the few occasions when the man spanked him for some imaginary misdeeds, he had discovered the light physical punishment comforting and arousing in the strangest of ways.

His papa had never hit him, obviously. No matter how much he must have driven the old man crazy with his running away from home, and doing stupid shit. Seeing the disappointment in the man's eyes was a bigger punishment. Sometimes, Ruslan had wanted to yell at him and make him do something just to get a little physical. But, in turn, the old man had shown him the kind of love he should have yearned for.

Yet, a part of him, the one that wanted to rebel, to yell to the world that he took it up the ass and loved it, yearned for a different thing. As Johnny's hand descended once more over his ass, he felt a surge of long-awaited pleasure.

He wiggled, finding a sweet spot in his position so that he could rub against Johnny's thigh. The man's jeans were rough against his aching cock, but he didn't mind it.

Johnny was starting to breathe a bit more deeply. "I was joking when I said you would enjoy it," he whispered. "Wiggle that ass some more, pretty. Move it, baby. Ah, damn, you're so hot. Do you want me to spank you? Do you want me to spank your sexy ass?"

"Fuck, don't ask," Ruslan whispered back. "Aren't you the one in charge?"

Johnny squeezed his ass, and Ruslan could feel the skin burning under his lover's rough fingers. He could feel the callouses brushing against his skin and pushed his ass a little higher. Johnny smacked his ass again, and Ruslan shivered. Now he was moving his hips, hoping the friction against Johnny's thigh was enough. His cock agreed with the rough treatment.

Johnny, however, seemed to have something different in mind. He guided Ruslan to his feet. "Hands against the desk," he ordered, and Ruslan quickly obeyed. "Your ass is so red," Johnny chuckled.

"Take a picture; it will last longer," Ruslan joked.

"Lube," Johnny said shortly.

Ruslan looked over one shoulder. "What now? Are you going to fuck me?"

"Don't tell me you don't want it," Johnny replied. "Lube, pretty."

"The second drawer on the left," Ruslan said with a small shrug.

He tried to play it cool only in hope of getting more. No matter how rough Johnny had been, Ruslan could tell the man had been holding back. He didn't want that. He wanted Johnny to show his real strength, to mean it. But he didn't want to ask for it in big loud words.

Ruslan followed Johnny with his eyes. His lover had a serious expression etched on his face. He wanted to ask what was wrong, but it felt like a bad moment.

He hissed as cold lube began pouring over his ass and sighed contently as Johnny hurried to push the viscous liquid inside with his fingers.

Johnny chuckled. "I like your red ass. I think I can see finger marks."

"What can I say? You're so savage," Ruslan replied, hoping to get the other to notice his misbehaving.

"Savage? You've seen nothing, pretty." Johnny laughed as he positioned himself for penetration. "Hot for spanking, aren't you? You're so hard," he added as he sneaked one hand in front and played with Ruslan's cock.

"I admit nothing," Ruslan said with a small laugh. "And I'm always hard."

"True, true," Johnny admitted, seemingly amused. "Now let's see when you're going to beg me to stop."

"Hmm?" Ruslan said questioningly.

Johnny slapped one of his buttocks hard, and he gasped. His ass pulled itself tight as a natural response.

"Yes," Johnny cooed. "Like this, baby."

"You are having way too much fun," Ruslan said and glared over his shoulder at his lover.

“Sure thing I am,” Johnny confirmed. “So how do you like it now?” He smacked Ruslan’s ass playfully.

“Is that all you got?” Ruslan provoked the other.

“Hmm, you’re keen on testing me. Well, don’t complain tomorrow when you won’t be able to sit.”

“I’m not known to complain,” Ruslan replied. “So, what are you waiting for, Johnny? Give me all you got already.”

Johnny didn’t look like he needed to be told twice. He used one hand to grab Ruslan by one hip, to steady him and began fucking the best way he knew how. From time to time, he slapped one ass cheek then the other, making Ruslan curse and beg.

“My hands are full, baby, so take care of your cock, okay?” Johnny said.

Ruslan needed no other encouragement. He grabbed his cock, trembling with growing desire. As Johnny fucked him, the occasional slaps over his ass only made his sensations soar. He was pushing his ass against Johnny’s hard body in a desperate need for more.

Johnny grabbed him hard and pulled him close. Ruslan felt his hand being pushed away from his cock and didn’t protest. At the same time, Johnny was kissing his neck and whispering lewd praises into his ear.

“Let me see you come, pretty,” Johnny demanded, and Ruslan had no idea if he was begging or ordering.

It didn’t matter anyway. The hard cock hammering his ass felt like heaven, just as the hand moving up and down over his. Johnny sank his teeth into one tender lobe and Ruslan came with a loud cry. Johnny licked the bitten ear and pushed his tongue inside, making Ruslan shudder along with the waves of his orgasms.

He was aware of his lover filling his ass. It was a good thing Johnny was holding him because his legs were like jelly now. A few minutes after, Johnny was still embracing him, kissing his neck slowly.

“I think I’m ready to sign now,” Johnny said.

Ruslan burst into laughter. “So it couldn’t be done without some hard fucking?”

“I guess it couldn’t. Seriously, pretty, you had me in a corner. Papers and all, huh? That wasn’t the kind of leash I had in mind.”

“What kind of leash did you have in mind?” Ruslan asked, with a small giggle. Damn, how was he going to walk after this?

“I thought you’d buy something from some sex shop and such.”

“Did you think I was in for some rough trade with you?” Ruslan laughed for real this time. Johnny was still inside him, slowly getting soft. He didn’t mind it.

“I had no idea. But it looks like someone likes getting spanked,” Johnny said, and Ruslan could picture the smug grin on his lover’s face.

“I’m not usually into this.”

“Did anyone spank you? In your life?”

“Yeah. But it wasn’t as fun as this,” Ruslan confirmed.

“I don’t think I’ll do it for you too often though, pretty. I like your beautiful ass as it is.”

“So you’re unwilling to play into my kink?”

“Only if you do something naughty,” Johnny replied.

“Then I must think of something.”

“Think hard. It won’t be easy to top this trick you just pulled on me.”

Ruslan snickered. “Oh, poor little Snake got tricked.”

“Hmm, I feel like my hand is itching for some action, again.”

“So soon? Ah, Johnny, and you were just playing hard to get.”

“Hard to get? With you? Never.”

Johnny finally pulled away and caressed Ruslan’s ass slowly. “Yeah, you’ll have trouble sitting tomorrow, you naughty devil.”

“I’m tougher than I look,” Ruslan said with a small shrug.

Johnny set back in the chair and motioned Ruslan to come to sit on his lap. Ruslan could tell his lover was thinking of something. He could almost hear the gears turning. Johnny had one hand in his hair, caressing him slowly, while the other was drawing small circles on Ruslan’s thigh.

“You’re no longer upset about the papers, right?”

“Nah, pretty. I’m sure I’ll like it here,” Johnny answered with a smile and a small nod.

“I can feel you’re troubled,” Ruslan said, decided to grab the bull by the horns.

“That man, the one I faced in the ring, where’s he from?” Johnny asked.

“Why?” Ruslan paused and looked at Johnny intently.

“He was bent on riling me up about me being with you,” Johnny replied.

Ruslan shrugged. “That’s not uncommon. And we didn’t make it a secret that we’re seeing each other.”

“Nah, this was different. It was like he was sent to play me or something.”

“Papa said something about him joining the tournament later. I asked,” Ruslan said. “But, by what he could tell from his preliminary background check, the guy’s like any other fighter who joined the tournament. But, if you say something was fishy about him, I’ll ask papa to look closely into his history. What did you make of his attitude, then?”

“He wanted me to lose my cool. Mind games, that’s something fighters do all the time. All of them talk smack. But it was like this fucking cockroach wanted to use that like some hit below the belt.”

“Hmm,” Ruslan said. “I trust your instincts, Johnny. So I’ll have papa learn about this fighter’s whereabouts. Do you think it’s someone coming after you? You know, from that family? Papa made it clear to them that you’re under our protection. I believe his word has some weight.”

“He told you that?” Johnny asked.

“Yes. And papa is a man of honor.”

“I don’t doubt it. But with scumbags like those, you can’t ever be sure of anything.”

They spent some time in silence.

“Johnny,” Ruslan said, his head still resting against Johnny’s, “when can I meet your mom?”

“My mom?” Johnny seemed surprised. “Why?”

Ruslan shrugged. “I don’t know. You’ve met my family. I want to meet yours.”

“She’s not herself,” Johnny replied. “I don’t know how much good that will do.”

“It’s your choice, of course,” Ruslan said gently. “But I would very much like to meet her.”

“Even if she won’t understand who you are?”

“Yeah, even.”

Johnny said nothing else. Ruslan got up to his feet. “Now, seriously, you should sign those papers,” he said with a laugh as he began searching for the documents on his desk. He turned with one pen in one hand. “What do you say, Johnny?”

Johnny grinned. "Seeing how you're asking me nicely, your bottom all naked, and my cum pouring from your ass, yeah. I say 'yes'."

Ruslan bit his lips not to laugh. "I guess it looks pretty strange. But it's not the usual way we do business around here."

"Thank heavens," Johnny laughed. "I would have to fuck you and fill your ass each time you'd need to have people sign with you or something. All employment goes through you, I guess. But I can't agree with you parading your naked ass in front of all your employers, old, new, or whatever."

Ruslan shook his head. "Come, get your leash already." Johnny moved, and Ruslan pointed the blank space to fill with his name. Then he kissed his lover. "See, it wasn't all that hard."

"I think it was plenty hard. Both ways," Johnny added and kissed Ruslan in turn.

"If you say so. I'm still not looking forward to the scolding I'll get from papa."

"Do you need any help? I can lie for you."

"To papa?" Ruslan feigned shock. "I'd rather you wouldn't. Papa can usually tell when people are lying to him. Well, not all the time, but you must be a pretty good liar to fool him."

"So you don't want my help?"

"Not this time, no. And just as your spanking from earlier, I totally deserve it. So I will go through it without any complaints."

Johnny could feel Ruslan's finger lazily tracing the scars on his back. He had so much to think about. Ruslan wanted to meet his mom. His lover wanted that part of him, too, his family, and Johnny was weirdly okay with it.

For so much time, he had kept his mom a well-hidden secret. At least, for the longest of time, he had hoped it was so. But in today's world, people could find anything about anyone if they wanted. In time, he had gotten used to it, too, his mom living a life separated from him kept just somewhere remote from his own.

And now Ruslan wanted in. He wanted to walk into that hospital room and meet her. And Johnny could not figure out, for the love of all that was holy, how that could work. What would they talk about?

"Nigel's dad gave these to you," Ruslan said, continuing his exploration of the jagged lines.

"You like things that are broken, pretty?" Johnny asked, his voice rougher than he wanted.

“I like you. Broken or not. And why would you say that? Aren’t we a pair? I might not have scars. But I’m sure as hell that I’m plenty broken on the inside.”

“Don’t say that,” Johnny protested. “You ain’t broken. If you are, maybe that’s why we are like this, you know? It works.”

“Are you going to say ‘you complete me’?” Ruslan laughed. “Because it would sound so cheesy.”

“I won’t say it,” Johnny replied with a sigh. “So you really want to meet my mom?”

“Why not? I mean. She’s an important part of you, and I would like to meet her.”

“Even if she’s like she is. She talks to me like I’m fifteen years younger or something.”

“I guess you’ll always be her little boy,” Ruslan said wistfully.

“Do you, like, miss your mom or something?”

“I gave up on things like that when I was ten, I think. And you can’t really miss someone you’ve never met, right? Do you?”

“What? Miss my mom? As she was, yes, a little, I guess. She’s taken care of where she is. It’s not the best, but they seem to be decent people there.”

“If you ever want to move her to a better place --”

“She’s good there. And the head nurse says that routine is good for her. For this thing she has.”

“Okay. Then maybe my meeting her is not such a good idea, after all?” Ruslan asked.

“I think she’d love to meet you.”

“Even if I’m not part of her routine?”

“I’ll ask the nurse. She’ll know if it’s a good idea. Yeah, I’ll call tomorrow, and on Monday, we could go.”

“What flowers does she like?” Ruslan asked.

“Flowers? Daffodils, I think.”

“Okay.”

“You want to make a little fuss over this,” Johnny said.

“Forgive me. I shouldn’t. I mean your mom needs her quiet and I’m just thinking about myself. About making a good impression. Are the flowers too much?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Johnny replied. “She also likes chocolate. If you really want to spoil her, get some, too.”

Ruslan laughed. “Ah, so you want me to make a little fuss, after all.”

“I do,” Johnny said and turned to embrace Ruslan.

It felt so nice to have Ruslan lying on top of him, feeling each other toes to shoulders. Ruslan sighed contently and placed his palms flat against Johnny’s chest and then his chin on top of them. It was not the most comfortable position to stare at each other like that, but Johnny didn’t mind.

Ruslan was using his own toes to tease Johnny’s feet. He was a bit ticklish, and the moment Ruslan had learned about it, he had found a new way to torment him. His lover’s smile was stretching, lighting up his entire face.

“Would you be mad, like really mad, if I bought a ring at one point?” Ruslan asked, and his feline eyes were glinting with mischief.

“A ring? Nah, pretty, I don’t like men’s jewelry. It makes you look like a shmuck.”

“It’s not that kind of ring,” Ruslan said quickly.

“What kind of ring is it?” Johnny asked, frowning a little. He was missing something here.

“Forget it. I’ll ask you again, another time.”

Ring. Oh shit. Johnny could feel himself sobering up, and he had barely had a drop of whiskey, earlier that evening. He straightened up and made Ruslan roll over, with him on top.

“A ring?” he asked, swallowing hard.

“Yeah, a ring,” Ruslan said, defiantly, pushing his chin upward.

“Like in a commitment type of ring?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

“Do you want to ask me to marry you?” Johnny asked, feeling hopeful and suddenly extremely happy.

“Something like that, yeah. Of course, the first ring is an engagement ring.”

“Hmm, so many complications,” Johnny teased his lover, “I don’t know, pretty. Will it be a long engagement? Like two years or so?”

Ruslan rolled his eyes. “You’re making fun of me. Don’t worry; I won’t ask again for like five years.”

“And what if I say ‘yes’?”

“If?” Ruslan glared from behind a curtain of pretty curled eyelashes the color of dark gold. “Oh, damn, I will have to change the terms of that contract. I see I must tighten the leash.”

Johnny laughed so hard the bed was creaking under them. “Pretty, I thought I would be the one to ask you.”

“And why is that?” Ruslan asked.

“I don’t know. I’m the bigger one.”

“You’re the bigger one,” Ruslan said each word through his teeth like he needed to check them, sound by sound. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“I can carry you. You can’t carry me,” Johnny pointed out.

“Okay, point taken, but still, what’s that got to do with anything? So you can lift. Big deal,” Ruslan said with a delicious pout.

Johnny leaned in and bit the full lips playfully. “Get that ring then, pretty.”

“And you’ll say ‘yes’?” Ruslan questioned him, observing him with his big pretty eyes.

“Yeah, I’ll say ‘yes’. It’s high time a Bryne marries up.”

“You’re such a joker. I’ll take you for a spin. Don’t think I’m asking you to marry me. We’re only engaged. I’ll see if you make good husband material or not.”

“Ah, so you think you can screw my brains out, hook me up on this,” Johnny said and sneaked one hand to grab Ruslan’s ass, “and then leave me at the altar or something?”

“Leave you at the altar,” Ruslan scoffed, “like you’re some virginal bride, you mean?”

“Virginal.” Johnny burst into laughter so hard that even Ruslan had to forget he was trying to be upset.

Ruslan’s hands traveled down to the small of his back. Johnny could read the question in the beautiful eyes staring at him.

“I would need to take your virginity, you know,” Ruslan said and grinned like a cat, as his hands suddenly grabbed Johnny’s ass.

He laughed, but only half-heartedly this time. “And I thought you were the perfect bottom boy,” Johnny said.

“I guess I am saving myself for someone special,” Ruslan joked, but his smile was subdued now, not larger than the sun, like before.

“Pretty,” Johnny said lovingly, caressing Ruslan’s hair.

“Don’t say a word,” Ruslan replied and kissed him quickly. “I was just joking. You should have seen your face.”

Johnny shrugged. “What can I say? I’m chicken.”

Ruslan chose to shrug it off with a joke. “It’s okay. I’m brave enough for the two of us.”

“That you are,” Johnny admitted.

He leaned in and kissed Ruslan gently on the lips. As expected, his lover opened his mouth and licked his playfully. Johnny liked this sort of play. They both enjoyed kissing each other. With other men, Johnny hadn’t been that high on kissing. But with Ruslan, everything was different, more than anything else he had ever felt in his life.

This was more than just sex. As weird as it sounded, he was even going to marry the guy. He had no idea how that was supposed to work. But Ruslan knew, and Johnny was more than willing to let him take the lead in this case.

Ruslan pinched his nipples hard, almost making him bite his tongue, in turn. “Ouch. Want to hurt me, baby?”

“No, I just wanted to draw your attention. You seemed a bit far away just earlier.”

“I will marry you,” Johnny said solemnly.

“That’s great. I hope that thought doesn’t give you erectile dysfunction.”

“Does this seem to you like it’s not working?” Johnny pushed his erection against Ruslan’s crotch.

“No, but one never knows. They say married couples tend to have less sex than the rest.”

“That’s stupid,” Johnny replied. “When they were together and happy, my mom and dad ... Okay, now you make me say stuff that’ll make me limp.”

Ruslan snickered. “It’s good that you have nice memories of them, Johnny.”

“Well, let’s say that I could live without some of them,” Johnny said dryly and began laughing, too. “If that’s what they say about married couples, let’s be the exception to the rule. I’m sure I would fuck you even more than I do now.”

“Big words, Johnny, big words,” Ruslan teased him.

“You like things that are big about me,” Johnny replied.

“I sure do,” Ruslan said.

If that was what it took to rile him up and make him perform, Johnny was taking it. He sneaked both hands under Ruslan’s ass and cupped the lovely butt cheeks, loving how nicely they filled his palms.

Ruslan winced.

“Does it hurt, pretty?” Johnny asked.

“You did spank me properly,” Ruslan said. “Come on, get to work, Johnny. Don’t let the little things bother you.”

“Your ass is not that little,” Johnny said with a small smile.

“I’m glad you noticed,” Ruslan replied smugly.

Johnny shut his lover up with a deep kiss. They loved kissing, and they loved talking. And they loved fucking. Maybe that was all that was needed for them to work. The rest of the world didn’t matter. He had found himself a match, and he wasn’t even scared that the guy was asking him to marry him.

Johnny couldn’t imagine any answer to that except ‘yes’.

He searched for the lube with one hand while Ruslan remained hanging on his neck, peppering small kisses across his jawline. Sometimes, Ruslan glued to him so hard that he could barely do anything, but he liked it.

“I need to use the lube on us, Ruslan, or your beautiful ass will hurt even more.”

“Hmm, you didn’t seem so concerned when you were spanking my ass tonight.”

“I was very much concerned,” Johnny protested. “Only that you deserved it. And I didn’t want to stay mad at you.”

“Good, I’ll take it,” Ruslan said and nuzzled his neck.

Johnny was thankful for the small reprieve as Ruslan eased his hold a little. He could focus on squirting some lube into his hand so he could spread some over his now aching cock and

between Ruslan's ass cheeks. This pretty man was going to squeeze him dry, Johnny was sure of it. But he didn't want to trade that tight ass, that lovely face and that kind soul for the world.

Ruslan was everything he wanted in someone to share his life with, and that without even knowing that he was searching for something like that.

"So, we're like, husband and husband?" Johnny asked.

"We will be if you pass the test," Ruslan teased him some more.

"Then let me do my best." Johnny pushed inside, and Ruslan immediately wrapped his long legs around him.

With Ruslan, lovemaking was sometimes fast. And sometimes it was hard. Or it was slow and sweet, like this. Johnny loved it either way. Their bodies moved together as they were made for one another.

"I love you, baby," he whispered into Ruslan's hair, as he increased his rhythm.

He could feel Ruslan's cock rubbing against him, and he loved that sensation, too. His lover was spilling himself from that friction only. It was his cue he could come, too. Ruslan always came first.

Chapter Sixteen – Soon To Be

Ruslan watched his father talking on the phone. That deep etch on his face, between his furrowed eyebrows let out nothing good. Who could the old man be talking to? The conversation was held in a hushed tone, and Ruslan didn't want to intrude, as he knew his adoptive father to be a man of great secrecy.

"I'm sorry, Rusky, it was important," Douglas apologized as soon as he was off the phone with the mystery caller. "Do you want to tell me something?"

"How would you feel if I told you that you would soon become a father in law?" Ruslan chose his words carefully, but could not keep in a playful smile.

His father's eyes grew wide and then filled with fondness. "Should I gather that he said 'yes'?"

Ruslan nodded happily. "All we need is your blessing. And, of course, Johnny's mom's, too, which is exactly what we plan for today. I thought about letting you know that I'm taking the day off from work. I know it's in short notice, but I still have plenty of leave days."

Douglas waved. "Do you really think you should worry about such things now, Rusky? I know how much you work every day. You really are an asset for my business, and I didn't just give you a job to have something to come back home from. Take as many free days as you need to plan the wedding. Of course, unless you want me and Martin to take care of everything. We would love to do that."

Ruslan got up from his seat by the window and hurried to hug his dad. "I know I would, but Johnny would throw a fit. He becomes fidgety when he has nothing to do. And an imposed vacation wouldn't work on him. I must have him involved. And, seeing how the wedding won't happen sooner than several months --"

"Several months? I thought you, young people, are all for making things happen in a rush."

"Johnny and I decided that he should first liquidate his debts toward Francis Davenport."

"You mean he decided."

"Well, you know how he is," Ruslan said apologetically. "I could squeeze him into doing things how I want, but I am well aware how important his duty is to him."

"I would not call it duty, but plain blackmail," Douglas replied.

"Johnny doesn't quite see it that way. And, since he said he would marry me only after dealing with his past, I can't antagonize him much. I'd rather have him feel happy and free with his decisions, including the one to marry me."

“Ah, Russy, you have no idea how happy I am to hear that you wish to settle down. I would not want to go away without seeing you happy and protected. I have great trust in Johnny that he would do that.”

“Hey, it goes both ways, and I’m not helpless,” Ruslan protested. “And what’s this talk about going away? You’re not sick. Are you?”

Ruslan could feel familiar fear creeping in. The old man looked healthy, and nothing seemed wrong, but not all ailments could be easy to notice. He was no doctor to know about such things.

“I’m not sick; don’t worry, Russy.” Douglas caressed his hair slowly. “I want to know that you are in good hands. I would have expected it to happen many years from now, so I’m happy to see you don’t throw your youth away on mindless and reckless entertainment. What’s going on between you and Johnny, Russy, is real. Don’t you ever forget that. Even if there are moments in life when you might feel differently, don’t forget. You love Johnny, and he loves you just the same.”

Ruslan scoffed to hide his nervousness from earlier. “We wouldn’t get hitched if we weren’t serious about one another. Have you ever been married, papa?”

Douglas smiled. “This isn’t about me, right, Russy?”

“You never tell me anything.” Ruslan pouted, pretending to be childish to rouse a reaction from his father.

“You’ll know everything soon enough, my dear child. Soon enough.”

Ruslan rolled his eyes. “You’re just so mysterious.”

“Maybe I exaggerate. But everything I have ever done was to protect you. Forgive an old man a few secrets or at least, to hold on to them a little while longer. Now, Russy, you go and see Johnny’s mom. Don’t forget that your soon to be husband just has to say the word, and I will arrange for his mother to be transferred to a better facility.”

“I won’t forget, but Johnny is stubborn. It’s all about duty with this man. Of course, once we’re married, I’ll make sure he understands his new position.”

“Make sure you do that.” Douglas’s face was all a smile.

“Do I look all right?” Ruslan patted down his shirt as if he was trying to smooth out imaginary wrinkles.

“You look beautiful,” Johnny made doe eyes at him.

Ruslan snickered. "For you, maybe. But I must look good to see your mom, and not just my usual self. Are you going to tell her, Johnny, that we --"

"Of course. She might not understand or forget as soon as we're out the door, but I must try. I would not keep such a thing away from her. I'm getting hitched, and that's the kind of thing moms want to know about their boys."

Johnny looked so serious but in a solemn way. Ruslan felt like walking a bit stiffly, to make sure he didn't appear aloof, given the occasion. After all, he was on the point of meeting his mother in law, or soon to be, as he tried to correct himself mentally.

Ruslan was pleased to see that the care unit where Johnny's mom was housed seemed a decent enough place. Not that he would ever suspect Johnny of not doing everything he could to give his mother the care and protection he needed, but he knew well that limited funds could only do this much, particularly for people with special needs.

He breathed in, one last time, as the nurse nodded for them to proceed and walk down the hall. Johnny squeezed his hand. "Don't worry. She'll love you."

Ruslan wished he could share the same conviction, but the truth was he could not repress the nervousness that had seemed to be with him since he had decided to meet Johnny's mom.

Johnny opened the door and signaled for him to walk in. Ruslan entered and took in the small, grey-haired woman on the bed.

"Mom, this is Ruslan Kent," Johnny said first.

"Hello, Mrs. Bryne," Ruslan hurried to greet her.

"What a beautiful name. Who is this handsome man, Johnny? Is he a prince?"

As Johnny had said, his mother seemed out of it. Ruslan offered her the daffodil bouquet and the chocolate he had brought with him.

"Daffodils," Johnny's mom whispered, and touched the heads of the flowers gently as if she was afraid to disturb the arrangement. "And chocolate. Ah, Johnny, I haven't had Belgian chocolate since your father brought us from the hospital after I gave birth to you. I wish you could remember him as he was. Sometimes, he was a good man."

Ruslan could sense Johnny tensing as his mom mentioned his dad. He was about to say something and break the awkwardness threatening to tear this little get-together, but Johnny beat him to it.

"I'm getting married, mom. To Ruslan. I thought you should know."

For a couple of seconds, Johnny's mom looked a bit confused at her son, and then back at Ruslan. "Are you getting married to a prince?"

Ruslan exhaled in relief. He was afraid of many other reactions that could all be possible. "I am no prince, ma'am, I can assure you. I am sincerely flattered, but I'm just an ordinary person. Nonetheless, Johnny and I would like to have your blessing."

Johnny's mom took a long, thoughtful look at him. "Such beautiful golden hair." She raised one hand as if she wanted to touch Ruslan, but dropped it on the sheets without doing that. "Just like a prince. Will you take care of my Johnny? He gets in trouble sometimes. Someone like you could protect him and keep him from harm's way."

Ruslan threw a look at his lover. It might have seemed to some completely ludicrous that Ruslan should take care of Johnny, but he knew what his soon to be husband's mother wanted to say. He took the woman's frail hand in his. "I promise you that I will do everything in my power to protect Johnny and that I will always love him."

Johnny's mom seemed delighted to hear that and squeezed Ruslan's hand, too. "I trust you. You are so beautiful."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Is Johnny good to you? His temper is too quick sometimes. He must take after his father."

"Yes, he is." Ruslan looked at Johnny with stars in his eyes. "You have nothing to worry about, Mrs. Bryne. We will take good care of each other."

"That's good." Johnny's mom nodded. "It's everything you have in this world. Nothing else matters but the one you're sharing your life is. Is your father coming today, Johnny? I feel like I haven't spoken to him in years."

Ruslan could feel Johnny's pain at those words by how the big man shifted in his seat, making the chair under him sigh mournfully. "I would like to join Johnny when he visits you, Mrs. Bryne, if you allow it," he asked respectfully.

"I would like to see you again, Ruslan. Is your name Russian? It just sounds so exotic. Where are your parents from?"

"I am adopted, ma'am, so I wouldn't know," Ruslan replied promptly.

"Do you want me to brush your hair, mom?" Johnny intervened. "Ruslan can read you something."

Ruslan was sure he wasn't that much in need of saving, but he appreciated Johnny's care. It just showed, once more, how Johnny felt about him. He took a book from the nightstand and began

reading out loud, after a few indications from Johnny's mom. At times, he stole looks at his lover, amazed to see those large hands which he knew to be rough, but gentle, skillfully brushing and braiding the woman's long, grey hair.

"So, what did you think?" Johnny asked, after a few minutes of silence.

They were on their way back, and they both seemed to be with their thoughts. Johnny was dying to know what Ruslan thought of his mom. Right now, he was so happy like he could not remember being too often before meeting Ruslan.

"You have her eyes, Johnny. I liked her a lot, and I'm seriously happy she didn't hate me although I think I butchered the names of some of the characters in the novel I read to her. Your mom really loves fantasy books, doesn't she?"

"Yeah, right now. It was pure torture when she was in her romance period. I had to read some pretty embarrassing things at times, I'm telling you. I skipped a lot, and I was lucky that she fell asleep fast. I might be the reason why she now prefers fantastic stories."

Ruslan laughed. "I had fun today, Johnny. And she gave us the blessing we came for. I want you to take me along when you go to visit her. As much as possible, I would like her to be part of our lives."

"You would?" Johnny looked at Ruslan, his heart big as the sun in his chest.

"Of course. I'm sure she can tell me a lot of embarrassing stuff from your childhood. I would not pass that for the world."

"Come here, pretty." Johnny pulled him close. "I'm a damn lucky bastard. You know that, right?"

"Make that two lucky bastards, Johnny. I'm so happy I met you." Ruslan leaned into the caress, as Johnny brought one hand to touch one smooth cheek.

They were on the backseat of a taxi, as Johnny wasn't big on showing off his lover's money. He knew that they were putting on a bit of a show for the driver, though, one of a different kind, but he couldn't care less. So he brought their mouths together and kissed Ruslan deeply, without giving a damn if the entire world was watching.

They were back at Ruslan's place before dinner. Johnny climbed out of the car and took a lungful of chilly air. The spring had yet to come fully. A small shiver made him pull his coat around him tightly.

Johnny looked around by force of habit. Now that was a bit odd. A man dressed in black, with a wide brim hat was tinkering something at a parked car. Ruslan's house was located in a pretty remote area, and seeing such domestic scenes was not quite a common occurrence. Also, he had a slight sensation that he had seen something like that before. That man appeared to be out of place there.

"Neighbor of yours?" he asked Ruslan and pointed at the man in black.

Ruslan shrugged. "I don't think so. But let's just say that I'm not big on neighborhood meetings, so I am not familiar at all with who lives around here. Let's hurry inside. I can't believe the weather is still so chilly. I wish summer were here already. What would you like to eat? I could whip out something, or we could order in. I'm fine with either."

Caught by Ruslan's happy chatting, Johnny turned his attention on his lover. And the annoying sensation that they were being watched by malevolent eyes slipped from his mind.

"We are invited today to join papa for dinner. Apparently, there will be some other guests, but papa didn't mention who they are," Ruslan leaned against Johnny and kissed him on the cheek. "We need to be a little formal if that's not too much for you to bear."

"I suppose that marrying up comes with strings attached, like dressing up for fancy dinners," Johnny joked and kissed Ruslan back. "I believe I can go through a formal dinner now without making a total fool of myself. Martin taught me all about that."

"Well, I'm glad he did. Is there something on your mind, Johnny? I've seen you lost in thought lately, more often than not. You're not getting cold feet about the wedding, are you?"

"I got no cold feet," Johnny replied. "Don't you worry your pretty head with that. It's just that I got this gut feeling that someone's been watching us."

"Can you tell me more about this gut feeling?" Ruslan asked.

Johnny shrugged. "Not much. It's like that man pretending to repair his car not far from your home a few days ago. He seemed pretty damn shady."

Ruslan seemed to ponder. "Just because he was fixing his car?"

"Yeah. I mean, in this kind of neighborhood? Who doesn't call some repair service? What was he trying to do? Change the oil dressed up in a suit?"

"Now, that you put it like this, it's kind of odd," Ruslan admitted. "Besides that man, what else did you notice?"

“I can’t really say. I told you, it’s more like a gut feeling. Just like that cockroach in the ring. He was trying to rile me up good about you. Don’t tell me it was just smack talking. It was more.”

“I believe you, Johnny. And that’s why I asked papa to investigate more since he has the means. I’ll tell him about all these, too.”

“If anything happens, I will protect you,” Johnny said as he pulled Ruslan close.

“Don’t worry that much. Papa is a pretty influential man. He will find out everything and quench this, whatever it might be.”

“You’re my business now, not only your dad’s,” Johnny said.

Ruslan looked at him, a bit guiltily. “I know. I have relied on him for so long. I will rely on you from now on, right? Is this what you’re trying to say?”

“You can bet that’s what I’m trying to say,” Johnny replied, pleased with how quickly Ruslan had realized what that was all about. “I’m by your side from here on out. Strapped to you like a friggin’ gun.”

“Hmm, that’s quite the confession. I’ll take it.” Ruslan glued to him and nuzzled his neck. “I can’t wait to get married, Johnny. Then I know you won’t be able ever to get away from me.”

“Big words, pretty. But there’s no need to fear.” Johnny caressed Ruslan’s cheek slowly. “I’m not letting you go, either. So, what’s this fancy dinner all about?”

“Maybe papa has like a big announcement to make or something. I can’t really tell when he’s all mysterious like that. We’ll see when we get there.”

Ruslan hugged him tightly. Johnny kissed him deeply, and then pushed him away. “Too bad we don’t have time to fool around.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll have plenty of that when we get back,” Ruslan promised with a small smile.

Johnny could not shake off the feeling of uneasiness creeping in, as he walked inside Douglas Kent’s house. The same dreadful, oppressing sensation that they were being watched didn’t seem to let go of him.

The house was brightly lit, in waiting for the guests, and even that Johnny felt like an overwhelming detail that would not let him focus. Sometimes, in the ring, the lights felt like that, and he had learned to ignore all other senses except for the will to crash the man in front of him.

The same sensation overcame him when he walked with Ruslan, guided by Martin, to the impressive dining room. This was no usual, family only, dinner. And Johnny realized why he had felt like that as his eyes set on one of the people already seated at the table.

He pursed his lips and frowned. Ruslan squeezed his arm tightly, a clear sign of nervousness, in synch with what he was feeling. For Ruslan, it was a different reason, or better said, a different man to elicit such a reaction for him.

What could that mean? Why were the Davenports, both despicable father, and equally despicable son there? What was Douglas playing at?

“Welcome,” Douglas said and stood up to come to them and embrace them.

“Papa, what’s the meaning of this?” Ruslan asked what Johnny didn’t dare. “Why are these people here? Why is Nigel here?”

Douglas’s eyes were deep shadows, despite the bright lights shining over the room. Somehow, to Johnny, that very moment, the man looked older than he was, his face sallow. “I believe it is a good moment to bury the hatch. We will talk over dinner.”

The guests stood up to greet them, and Johnny could not help but glare at the man who had changed his life and his mother’s for the worse and continued to loom over them for years now.

With reluctance, he shook Francis Davenport’s hand, but he refused to take Nigel’s.

“For my sake, Johnny,” Douglas said.

Nigel’s eyes were glinting with something nasty in them as Johnny shook his hand. His half-smile disappeared, as Johnny’s hold increased. Nigel rubbed his hand as soon as Johnny let go of him.

They sat at the table without a word. Johnny could sense Ruslan’s restlessness without even looking at him. He looked at Douglas, but the old man’s eyes and entire face were shut, hard to read.

“What my son did was unpardonable,” Francis Davenport was the first to break the silence. “We are here to present our formal apologies. There is no need for bad blood between our families over something like this.”

Johnny eyed the man across from him, trying hard to control his anger. “Something like this?” he asked through his teeth.

Francis Davenport looked like he had seen better days. Now, that they were side by side, Johnny could see clearly the resemblance between father and son. Only that, while Nigel was stout and healthy, at which his inbred arrogance came only to complete the picture, Francis looked small in

his seat, the big bones supporting the expensive suit, but looking like the body underneath had not much to fill it with. Francis appeared ill, although he must have been younger than Douglas. Johnny could not stop thinking that the man who had ordered for him to be tortured looked nothing like the one who still came to visit him in his nightmares.

“Let’s look at things with a cool head,” Douglas intervened.

“Papa --” Ruslan started.

A single glance from Douglas was enough to shut up Ruslan who looked away, his face even paler than before.

“We are seeking to treat this situation as gentlemen,” Francis continued, seemingly undisturbed by being interrupted. “It was all Nigel’s fault,” he looked over at his son with stern eyes, “and I feel that, as the head of the family, I need to step in and reestablish the status quo. Our families have known each other for a long time. It’s only natural that we should continue in the same manner, despite mistakes committed by young people with no life experience and too much hubris to show off.”

Johnny remained silent. He noted how Nigel seemed unaffected by being called out by his own father.

“We want to extend a friendly hand and do everything in our power to leave this behind us. Johnny, I know you still have some of your debt to pay.”

“Don’t you mean blackmail?” Ruslan spat, taking Johnny by surprise.

Francis smiled affably. “Johnny and I have an agreement. And I’ve known him to be someone who doesn’t let others do the talking for him.”

“I will pay you till the last dime,” Johnny said, ignoring Francis’s jab. “And that’s final.”

“Refusing a gift could be considered an insult,” Francis warned.

“Gentlemen, please. I feel like this conversation, held in such an offhand manner, will take us nowhere,” Douglas intervened. “It is important to us to reach an understanding tonight. To all of us,” he added, and his eyes searched Johnny’s as if the old man tried to tell him something without words.

Johnny wanted nothing else but to stand up and leave that fancy dinner with equally fancy guests. Fancy didn’t equal honest, or fair. He could not understand how Douglas could do such a thing, and not only to him but to Ruslan, particularly given the circumstances. But this was the rich people’s world, and he could understand none of it.

That was why he loved the ring. Even if some looked to cheat or hit below the belt, he could still do something about it. He would not feel helpless like he felt right now.

“What happened to my father?” he asked, setting his eyes on Francis.

“How should I know that?” Francis shrugged. “The only thing I know is that he ran off, leaving a massive debt behind him. The one you so honorably chose to take upon yourself.”

“Big words don’t work with me. What happened to my father?” Johnny repeated the question.

Francis shifted in his seat. Douglas didn’t seem keen on taking sides this time around. Everyone at the table seemed to wait for the answer. It was like a boulder waiting to fall on the nicely arranged table and break the delicate china into smithereens.

“Johnny, Johnny,” Francis showed his teeth, so fake that they appeared stark white against the ashen face, “you have always been so stubborn. It must be something you took after your father. He used to be that, too. Always thinking he would score big on the next hand.”

“Used to? Why are you talking about him like that? Is he dead?” Johnny insisted.

“Seriously, Johnny, you’re ruining my appetite. I have no idea what happened to your deadbeat dad.”

“Then let me ask you something else. What happened to your wife?”

Francis seemed to sit straighter in his chair for a fraction of a second. In an unconscious gesture, he pulled at the collar of his shirt, as if he could not breathe easily.

“What wife?” Nigel intervened. “Mom? Why is he talking about mom?”

“Your mother chose to leave us, Nigel. I believe you’re old enough not to make a scene. You were properly weaned when she left.”

Nigel’s healthy complexion drained of blood, not gradually, but in a second, like Francis had just used a magic wand to make it all disappear. It looked like those words had hit a little too close to home.

Nigel opened his mouth to say something else, but a stern look from his father shut him up. He chose to stare sullenly at his plate.

Johnny chose to press the matter further, anger slowly filling his skull, pulling a dark veil over his eyes. He clenched a napkin hard between his fingers. “My mother says that they ran off together, your wife and my old man.”

“What? Is it true?” Nigel shouted. “Dad, is he telling the truth?”

“Nigel, shut it,” Francis barked at him. “Johnny, your mother has been institutionalized for years. What is it? Early onset of dementia? She might not survive long, you know. And she might have found a way to cope with your father leaving her, in her addled brain.”

Johnny could feel his teeth grinding. “She appeared pretty lucid when she said that. Even patients like her can have such moments, once in a while. And that threat you’ve just made? That’s something I’ll keep in mind.”

He stood up, throwing the napkin on the table. Ruslan caught his arm and looked up at him with begging eyes. Johnny set his jaw hard. That wasn’t about Ruslan at all. Right now, he needed to get out and get some air. His lungs felt oppressed in the air-conditioned room.

“What threat? It was merely an observation,” Francis replied.

“We all know what it was, Francis,” Douglas intervened. “I must admit that I was rather curious about the whole thing. It appears that you have not been completely honest with me.”

Francis turned toward Douglas, his body tense, by what Johnny could tell. “I thought you invited us tonight in good faith, Douglas.”

“That I did. But what I see right now makes me believe that my good faith and I are taken for fools. I would have expected a smidge of honesty from you, Francis. After all, we have known each other for so long, as you said. I have always treated you and your family with proper respect. I expect the same.”

“Do you feel insulted by my conversation with Johnny? The last time I checked, he was not part of your family.”

“I told you before that my benevolence extends over Johnny, too. As for his not being part of my family, that is something that will change, in paper and formally, in the foreseeable future.”

Francis seemed taken aback by that. He threw Johnny an odd look and then he turned toward Douglas once more. “Really? That’s surprising news. I thought you would aim higher for your only son.”

“That is exactly what I’m doing,” Douglas replied with a thin smile.

Johnny sat down again, Ruslan’s hand dragging him. But it was not his lover’s determination that stopped him from leaving. Right now, in his eyes, Douglas looked larger than life.

“Now let’s all get back to being honest and what that means,” Douglas continued. “I will have you know, Francis, that I am very well aware that a certain troublemaker in your, let’s say, unofficial employment, was sent to make waves in my ring at Efige. In case your memory is still hazy, and you want to say that you have no idea what I’m talking about --”

“I have no idea --”

“Please, let me finish.” Douglas put one hand up. “I am talking about a fighter by the name Luis Vallejo. Does it ring a bell? Or could it be that he used an alias when he joined my tournament? He was all for making Johnny lose his cool by insulting his relationship with Ruslan. Of course, he didn’t succeed. And I guess he was the one to lose something that night.”

“I really have no idea what you’re talking about,” Francis said with a deep frown on his face.

Johnny looked over at Nigel. Still with his head down, the asshole was smiling. “Maybe you’re asking the wrong Davenport about that cockroach, Douglas,” he said.

Francis’s eyes slid over him, and then he looked at his son. “Nigel, what did I tell you? Why are you hiring riff-raff? Is this what you’re doing nowadays?”

“Riff-raff?” Nigel sneered. “It’s not like I’m doing things that different from you. You told me to see about my business in my own way. That’s my own way.”

“While I told you specifically that you were not to get close to the Kent family in any way,” Francis said icily. “I think I’ve let you run amok far too long. I will adjust your role in the family business until you learn to behave.”

Normally, Johnny would have suspected Francis of putting on a show, to fake that he wasn’t involved with that final night of the tournament. But Johnny felt that the man was sincere. At the same time, Nigel wasn’t good at faking anything. The asshole was proud of what he did, and he wanted to rub his dad’s nose in a little. Johnny believed that the idea of this visit had not made Nigel too happy. He clearly had no intentions to bury the hatch, simply because he wanted to spite his father.

“But, dad,” Nigel whined.

Francis might have spoiled the asshole rotten after his wife had taken off with Johnny’s dad. And that was the result.

“We will see at home how we can adjust your behavior, too,” Francis said.

Nigel turned sullen again.

“We apologize,” Francis added, turning toward the others. “I will make sure nothing of the kind will repeat. I am interested in keeping the peace as much as you are, Douglas.”

“I am glad to hear that. One more thing. The truth about Johnny’s father.”

Johnny stared in disbelief at Douglas, then at Francis. The man was grinding his teeth, and his sallow face was turning a deeper gray.

“Anything you say will remain between these walls, of course.”

“Are you taking me for a fool, Douglas? You’ll get nothing out of me.”

Johnny understood what Ruslan’s dad was doing. It was unorthodox, but the old man could be ruthless, and that was one of his faces he never showed to his son, without a doubt. Francis’s refusal could also be considered an answer. Now Johnny had every reason to believe that something did happen to his dad and Francis’s wife. Maybe they had had the fate spoken of by his mother, and they were six feet under, somewhere.

Still, it was cruel of Douglas to say that kind of thing in front of Nigel. The asshole clearly thought his mother had to be alive and well, somewhere. Johnny knew why Douglas had chosen to do that. Just as Francis, earlier, he was making threats, too. But his were far more subtle and more efficient. Johnny could bet Douglas could find out the truth, or maybe he already knew it. He wasn’t sure he wanted to find what it was.

“No need to panic, Francis,” Douglas said politely. “It was an obligation for me to ask. Now, please, let’s enjoy our dinner.”

“I’m afraid I lost my appetite.” Francis stood up and made a gesture with his chin for his son to get up.

“Francis,” Douglas said smoothly, “I don’t like you to leave here upset.”

“Douglas, you know, as always, how to play your cards well. I almost fell for your act. Everything is duly noted, in case you’re wondering, which I doubt. Nigel, come.”

“Martin will see you out.” Douglas stood up and shook Francis’s hand.

Nigel was ignored, on purpose. Johnny could not help but feel avenged.

Douglas’s face was as calm as ever after the two guests made their exit. Even more, he was smiling now. “Would you, boys, like some potato salad? Martin made a lot, knowing how much you both like it. Unless, of course, you’d like to have the course on your plates.”

Johnny stared at the fancy herbs arrangement on his and felt like laughing. “Douglas, I have to give it to you, man. You almost had me jump over the table and strangle the bastard.”

“And ruin dinner?” Douglas laughed. “I know you’re better behaved than that, Johnny. Forgive me if I kept you two in the dark about the whole thing. Consider it one of the many wedding gifts I’m planning to give you.”

“Douglas, you didn’t have to take care of my debt,” Johnny protested.

“Nonsense, my dear boy. And I haven’t paid a dime. Francis will have to adjust his books, too, not only his son’s behavior.”

“Papa, I don’t know if I want to kiss you or strangle you. Have you always been this badass?” Ruslan asked, with a broad grin on his face.

“Badass is not a word I would like people to use to describe me,” Douglas replied. “I am, after all, a businessman. And this was just my way of dealing with a situation that was bound to spin out of control.”

“Nigel,” Ruslan said, breathing out the word.

Johnny put one hand around Ruslan’s shoulders.

“Yes. It wasn’t difficult to find out who Luis Vallejo was and who sent him. I just wanted to make sure that Francis would see with his own eyes, what his son is capable of. Francis Davenport may be a bad man in his own rights, but he still has a moral compass of sorts.”

“He has?” Johnny asked, somewhat aggressively.

Douglas sighed and placed both hands on the table, as he looked down at them as if he could get some inspiration on what to say next from them. “Yes. You know how the world is, Johnny. I would not lie to you. I trust Francis to keep his promise, unlike his unruly son. That boy is trouble.”

“He’s a lightweight,” Johnny said with a scoff.

“Don’t underestimate his meanness. Francis coddled him, and the result is a spoiled, rude, and downright reckless character. Nigel tried to hurt Ruslan because he thought he would get away with it. As usual.”

“As usual?” Ruslan asked. “Do you mean there were others --”

“Without a doubt,” Douglas interrupted him. “I should have looked more into Nigel Davenport, and not blindly believe the picture perfect image Francis painted of him. I knew Francis to be hard on everyone surrounding him, and I had not expected his son to be the exception.”

“Why is it important to be on good terms with these scumbags, papa?” Ruslan gave voice to the same thing Johnny was thinking.

“Our world is an ecosystem of sorts,” Douglas explained. “I guess men like Francis and me are the dinosaurs. New blood will take over. Francis needs to put his house in order, or there will be trouble. I wanted to make sure that the type of trouble resulting from the exchange of power that will soon happen will not touch us. He still has some time left, and he should use it to put that boy of his on the right path.”

“Some time left? What do you mean?” Ruslan questioned right away.

“Francis Davenport is ill. Terminal, or so I hear. I won’t go into details. It is bad taste to talk about another man’s health. He needed to see his son for what Nigel truly is. Francis will get Nigel to understand what’s expected of him, or he’ll have enough judgment left to choose another replacement.”

“Is Nigel that dangerous?” Ruslan asked.

“Not by himself. But his father’s power, money, and connections could make him difficult if he keeps his ways. I am protecting my family. If Nigel doesn’t understand how important it is to change, he’ll embark soon on a path of self-destruction. I don’t intend to let my family affected by the splatter.”

“That’s good thinking,” Johnny admitted. “Douglas, can I ask you something? About my dad. Do you know where he is?”

Douglas shook his head. “Francis was careful to keep the secret of his wife’s disappearance well hidden.”

“He almost incriminated himself earlier,” Ruslan pointed out.

“Almost doesn’t mean a thing, Russy. And Francis knows that well. I tried to find out more, but it’s too old history to be easy to unearth. I am sorry about that, Johnny. I wish I could tell you the truth about your father.”

“That’s okay,” Johnny replied. “You’ve given me so much already. Oh, damn. I should have asked you about me marrying Ruslan, right?”

Ruslan snickered. “Seriously, Johnny. I basically proposed. You don’t have to do a thing. It is you who are courted here, not the other way around.”

Douglas laughed, too. “You two have my blessing. And I will continue my investigations and hopefully learn about your father and what happened to him.”

Johnny nodded solemnly. “I would like to know, too. For mom’s sake. And mine.”

“Would it make a difference?” Ruslan touched his shoulder. “My parents abandoned me when I was in diapers or something, and I don’t give a shit about them.”

“Russy!” Douglas sounded rightfully appalled by Ruslan’s comment.

It made Johnny wonder what was more offensive, the use of that four-letter word, or the implications of Ruslan’s feelings toward his biological parents?

Ruslan huffed. “Seriously, papa, if they ever came to see me, like on those stupid TV shows, I would tell them to go where they came from because I already have a family.”

Johnny looked at Douglas briefly and saw pride and happiness in the old man's eyes.

"Johnny's situation is different," Douglas pointed out. "He may want to know why his father chose to leave, or whether it was his choice or not. Isn't it so, Johnny?"

"I want to ask him why he left mom and me. He seemed to love her, you know? And me --" he trailed off.

Ruslan placed one hand over his and squeezed in sympathy.

"You'll know everything as soon as I learn the truth. Now let's enjoy our dinner. Ah, Martin, great timing," Douglas said.

The quiet butler began taking their plates and replacing them with what looked like much plainer, but definitely more filling and palatable food. Without a word, Martin took his place at the table, at Douglas's right. Now that was the kind of scene Johnny was now already used to. And he liked it.

"I forgot to tell papa about that man in black you saw a few days ago," Ruslan said the moment they were back home. "Damn, how could I forget?"

"Don't worry, pretty. You can tell him another time. And it might be nothing. Just my habit of looking over my shoulder all the time."

"Still, I wouldn't put this aside. I trust your gut as I trust you," Ruslan climbed his lap and looked him in the eyes. "That was pretty intense, wasn't it? Damn, I wanted to grab the salt and throw it into Nigel's face."

Johnny laughed, and rolled Ruslan on his back, fitting there, between his lover's long and slender legs as he had never fitted anywhere in his entire life. "I seriously doubt your papa would have tolerated that sort of behavior from your part."

"And?" Ruslan challenged him with his eyes. "He would have given me one of his looks, and that would have been all. Oh, I shiver just as I'm thinking of it," he added and pretended he was gripped by cold.

"I see that not only Nigel was spoilt rotten by his rich dad."

Ruslan laughed. "Yeah. But I didn't turn out a scumbag."

"That's true. Then it must be those looks you're talking about. Your dad is more efficient at being a father than that asshole."

Ruslan fell pensive and caressed Johnny's ears with his fingers. "How do you feel, Johnny? About all this with your dad and --"

"Don't worry, pretty. At this point, I'm not sure I even care that much. It's just something that's been with me a long time, is all. I don't have anything to put there. Maybe if I know what happened to him, I won't have to think about it all so much anymore. Chapter closed, and all that."

"That's good," Ruslan said half-heartedly.

"What's wrong?" Johnny asked, sensing his lover's sadness.

"I wasn't completely honest tonight, at dinner. I would care," Ruslan said. "You know, if my real parents showed up. I'd want answers, too. And I guess I might not be able to be that, I don't know, indifferent. I don't usually think about things like that," he added hurriedly. "And I definitely don't want to ruin the mood. I have a feeling you were trying to tell me something, or maybe do something."

Johnny leaned in to kiss Ruslan. "I can't wait to have you like this, as my husband."

Their crotches touched, and they were both pushing against each other now. "Really? Should we move the date earlier?"

"I saw you sending like a thousand or so invites. I don't want to watch you licking another thousand just to let people know of that. It would take too much of your precious time."

"Hmm," Ruslan purred as Johnny began kissing him lower, and lower.

They both had plenty of things to do the next day, so tonight Johnny wasn't at all about artful lovemaking. They only half-undressed, and Johnny entered his lover without that much preamble.

"It's okay," Ruslan whispered into his ear, as he hung to him as if for dear life. "You know by now that I won't break."

Johnny just nodded. Sometimes, he felt everything like it was too much. And then, he needed just to focus, on what was in his heart, and how his body moved, making a whole with Ruslan, like pieces of a puzzle. Only then, he felt all right, and happy, without thinking, for a moment, that this could all disappear like a night's shadows in the morning.

Later that night, as Johnny was close to falling asleep, he could only think of one thing: how happy he would be, for as long as he could see into the future.

Ruslan checked his messages, mostly absent-mindedly. Some were work-related, and some were just from acquaintances, hurrying to congratulate him on the upcoming wedding. Whenever he was with Johnny in the mornings, and he didn't want to have their sex sessions, no matter how short, interrupted, he put his phone on vibrate.

One message, however, was from his papa and that gave him pause. "Oh," he barely managed.

"What is it?" Johnny asked, getting out of the shower, in nothing but a towel.

"Francis Davenport died last night," Ruslan replied.

There was a short moment of silence as they looked at one another.

"Your dad told us he was ill," Johnny pointed out. "It's not that big a surprise, right?"

"It was only two weeks ago. Well, he was terminal, but isn't it a bit odd?" Ruslan wondered out loud.

Johnny shrugged. "I'm no doctor. And sorry if I won't shed a tear. I won't say 'good riddance', either, although the scumbag had done a lot to hurt my family."

Ruslan tapped his phone against his lips. "Papa says that we should attend the funeral."

"Nah, I don't think I'll do that, pretty," Johnny replied. "Not even for your father's sake."

"Don't worry about that. I thought you would say that. It will be enough if I go."

"I don't want you to go, either." Johnny had crossed his arms over his chest and was now looking at him somewhat accusingly.

"Sorry, Johnny. That's non-negotiable. I have to be there. Be glad we're not married yet, or you'll have to be present, too."

Johnny worked his jaw and looked away. Ruslan stood up from the bed and touched Johnny's forearm briefly. "I will be okay. I will be with papa and Martin. It's just a formality. It's not like I'll keep a eulogy, telling the world what a wonderful man Francis Davenport was and how unlucky we are all to see him gone. Dead men can't hurt anyone, Johnny."

"Yeah, that's true," Johnny said with a short nod. "Dead men can't. It's the ones still kicking that can."

"Do you mean Nigel?" Ruslan asked. "You said it yourself. The guy's a lightweight."

"Yeah, and now, as your papa said, he has all his father's money, influence, and an army of scumbags at his beck and call."

It was Ruslan's turn to look away. Johnny was right. And he could sense unease, too, now. Nonetheless, he chose to downplay the restlessness setting in the pit of his stomach. "I bet Nigel is devastated over losing his father."

"I bet he isn't."

"Are we really fighting over this?"

"We're not fighting, Ruslan. I'm just telling you how it is."

There was no proper way to get Johnny to see reason when he was like that. Nigel Davenport was no topic of conversation that could make either of them happy.

"Well, if you think I'm in some danger for attending a funeral, you can always come with me."

"Okay, I will," Johnny said, but the words were pushed through his teeth like he didn't want to let them out. "If not for you, but to see that scumbag in that coffin and buried six feet under once and for all."

Ruslan shook his head. "Now I know for sure that I'm not letting you hold any kind of speech."

Johnny remained all a frown for a second, but then his face relaxed. "Don't worry, pretty. I'll behave."

Ruslan didn't like to force Johnny's hand in any way, especially in regards to such a delicate topic. But he had obligations to pay toward his papa, and that was one of them, even if the unpleasant kind.

Chapter Seventeen – A Twist Of Fate

Ruslan looked around, trying hard to look pious. Apparently, he wasn't the only one who was trying to do that. Francis Davenport might have had more enemies than friends attending his funeral, people who wanted to make sure, just like Johnny, that the defunct was dead without one shadow of a doubt, and would soon be six feet under.

As his eyes roamed over the attendees, something caught his attention. Nigel was close to the priest, his head down, his hands clasped in front of him, in a visible effort to hold it together. Ruslan felt a bit touched. No matter how big an asshole Nigel was, he had just lost his father, the only parent he had had left in the world, and that could not be easy.

For a few seconds, Ruslan looked at Nigel from his place. There was plenty of distance between them, so he could not see him clearly. Yet, the oddest thing, when Nigel lifted his head, Ruslan thought he saw something that startled him. A grin seemed to split Nigel's face in two. Impatiently, he pulled at Johnny's sleeve.

"What is it?" Johnny whispered.

"Just look at Nigel," Ruslan replied.

The priest managed to catch himself into his long robe and stumbled. Courteously, Nigel hurried to help him. Ruslan set his eyes on him, avid to see any traces of that nasty grin he had noticed. But right now, Nigel's head hung down again, and discreetly, he patted his eyes with a handkerchief.

"I suppose even an asshole like him could have tears for his father," Johnny commented.

"I wasn't talking about that. Just earlier, he seemed to be smiling."

"Are you sure, pretty? He looks kind of wrecked."

Now Ruslan wasn't so sure anymore. At this distance, his sight could play tricks on him. "Not sure. Not really. It just struck me as unusual. But I might have imagined everything. I don't like the guy, but I shouldn't be this petty. It's his father's funeral, after all."

Johnny's eyes seemed to follow Nigel for a while. Ruslan knew Johnny took his words at face value. Right now, though, he could not help but feel a little guilty. He started to say something, but an old lady in front of them turned in her seat and hushed him with a severe look and a hissing sound. The tall black feather adorning her hat was shaking with equal indignation. Ruslan murmured his apologies and looked down, chastised.

After the ceremony, Ruslan had to drag Johnny after him to address his condolences. They had to do the whole thing since they were present. They stopped in front of Nigel. "I'm so sorry for your loss, Nigel," Ruslan said in a voice he hoped didn't sound fake.

Nigel took his hand and stared him in the eyes. Right now, he looked like a kicked puppy. “I guess I’m an orphan now,” he said with a long, heart wrenching sigh.

Ruslan patted his shoulder. “You must be strong, Nigel. Your father would be proud of you. It was a beautiful service.”

Nigel nodded solemnly. He then offered his hand to Johnny. Ruslan watched his lover as he shook Nigel’s hand shortly, without saying a word.

“We should see each other sometime. It won’t be long until you take over your father’s business, too,” Nigel said. “I would like to continue the good business relationship our dads had.”

“Of course,” Ruslan said after a short moment of hesitation. “But it will be long until I take over the family business. Papa has plenty of active years in front of him.”

“Eh, you never know,” Nigel said with another long sigh. “I thought my father would live for many years and that I wouldn’t take over the family business this soon. I suppose that I must rise to the occasion, now. That is why I want to keep the relationships my father worked so hard to build over the years.”

“Of course,” Ruslan said again, but now something in Nigel’s body language was making him wary.

They were pushed from behind by other people who wanted to address their condolences, so they bid their goodbye in a hurry and moved along.

Ruslan could feel Johnny walking next to him, his body tense. He didn’t have to look to know that his lover’s face was all a frown.

“Johnny, do you think we could walk a little slower? Any faster, and I’ll have to sprint to catch up with you.”

“Sorry, pretty. Just lost in thought, is all,” Johnny said.

“Can you tell me what you’re thinking about? You look like you’re ready to wreck someone with your fists.”

“I believe what you thought you saw earlier is true. That asshole Nigel is pretty damned happy about his father kicking the bucket.”

“Now it’s my turn to ask, Johnny. Are you sure?”

Johnny nodded curtly and followed with a grunt.

“What of his behavior made you think that?” Ruslan asked.

“I watched him. As soon as someone approached him, he was all sad and weeping. But, in between, he looked at everyone like he had just won some fucking lottery. The fucker is happy about his father’s death. And it doesn’t look like Francis had managed to choose a replacement or teach Nigel how to stop being an asshole.”

“That’s bad,” Ruslan said in a low voice. “I should warn papa. He’ll know what to do about this.”

“And, in the meantime, we don’t go to meet this asshole at all, not even for a scoop of ice cream. I don’t care if your papa thinks we should. That’s not happening.”

“Of course,” Ruslan hurried to appease his lover. “I was just being polite when I talked to him.”

They walked in silence to the car waiting for them. This time, it was a car put at their disposal by Douglas. The old man was traveling with Martin, like usual. They would talk about it all at home, as they were supposed to reunite back at his papa’s. For him, that mansion, austere on the outside, but warm on the inside, would always be his home, even if he didn’t live there anymore.

Douglas seemed lost in thought, as they walked inside and gathered all inside the old man’s studio. Ruslan beckoned Johnny to sit by his side on the leather sofa, but his lover shook his head. He chose not to insist. Johnny was restless and he couldn’t sit down. Ruslan wondered whether Johnny was reading too much into Nigel’s behavior. Yet, at the same time, he could not wholeheartedly reject the idea that Nigel wasn’t at all devastated by his father’s death.

“Papa, we need to talk about Nigel,” Ruslan was the first to speak.

Douglas just nodded. He picked a letter from his desk, stared at it like it was important and then threw it back into the pile. Ruslan found that odd. His papa was a stickler for orderliness.

“Yes, we must,” the old man said. “The worse came to worst, eventually. Nigel is in charge of the family business, and that doesn’t bode well with a lot of people. We should be prepared.”

“Prepared? But for what? Sometimes, papa, I wish you haven’t kept me so much in the dark about your business.”

“I haven’t, Russy. What you see is all there is with us. You’re as involved with the casino business as you need to be. And, if I were to retire, you know everything to take it all from my hands.”

“Retire? Seriously? But why? Papa, I don’t want that much responsibility. And you’re in top shape. What reason could you have to retire?”

“I am getting quite old, Russy. Don’t you want to take the burden of responsibility, as you say, from my shoulders?”

“Just what I said,” Ruslan replied with a huff. “Come on, papa. I’m not five. What’s going on? It’s not like you to think of retirement.”

“You’re getting married, Russy. Don’t you want to be completely grownup? Running the business by yourself is in your power. And you’ll have Johnny to help you.”

“Well, if running the business means having to deal with that asshole Nigel on a regular basis, no, thanks. And how come he knew you would retire?”

“He knew? What do you mean?” Douglas seemed surprised. “No word of such a thing was spoken outside this house.”

“At the funeral, he just ran his mouth about how we should continue our business relationship just like our dads. He was talking about that as if he knew. Not that he said it directly.”

Douglas frowned and his hands reached for the pile of letters again. “Don’t worry, Russy. If Nigel Davenport believes that he can play the big boys’ game, he’ll be in for a rude awakening.”

“What do you mean?”

“It means that, for the time being, a lot of people will have their eyes on him. He can try to shake things up, but he’ll not end up well if he steps the wrong people on their toes.”

“And what are we supposed to do in the meantime?” Ruslan asked, throwing a sideways glance at Johnny, whose face seemed to be all granite, his lips set in a harsh thin line.

“You two? Plan your wedding, of course, and enjoy your youth. Time flies and you never know when your joints start to swell, your bones start to hurt, and you can’t sleep more than six hours a night.”

“Anything I can do for you?” Ruslan asked. “Don’t say ‘take over the business’ because I won’t. But, maybe, if you want a break.”

“Actually,” Douglas said and he finally seemed to find what he was looking for, “there is something you can do. Take over the business only for a couple of weeks. See how you feel walking in my shoes a little. Let’s call it a test drive.”

“Okay, I can do that,” Ruslan said with a sigh. “But what will you do in the meantime, papa? You’ll still guide me, right?”

“Over the phone, yes, and only if you really feel like you must ask for my advice. As for what I’ll do, Martin and I will take a vacation.” Douglas showed Ruslan a colorful flyer, which appeared to be the thing the old man had searched for through his correspondence.

Ruslan stood up and took it. “Wow, you really meant it about aching bones and all that. I won’t say that you don’t deserve it. Ever since I’ve known you, you’ve been nothing but work, work, work. What can I say? You two should have some fun. But only for two weeks. I’m seriously not taking over the business this soon. You’re not intimidated by Nigel, are you, papa? I mean, he didn’t say anything to scare you, right? I know that now he has money and goons probably --”

“Russy,” Douglas looked at him visibly amused, “Nigel doesn’t even play in the little league. He can’t be someone I would be afraid of.”

“But is there someone that you could be afraid of?” Ruslan asked, sensing that his old man was omitting something on purpose, yet again.

Douglas chuckled. “We all have someone like that. And it’s a good thing. It keeps us modest. Ask Johnny. It’s a simple truth that anyone who ever picked up a pair of gloves knows.”

Johnny just nodded, without saying a thing. Ruslan noted briefly how his lover had kept silent throughout their visit.

He huffed. “I’m asking you a direct question, and you become a philosopher. But have it your way. I’m sure that if I insist, you’ll have me running in circles, trying to chase my own tail.”

Douglas’s face lit up. “Russy, I would never do that. Don’t worry about Nigel. He’s nothing but flotsam. He might believe he’s in charge of some juggernaut, but the truth is that he has an entire life ahead of him to build up his father’s legacy from scratches.”

“What do you mean, papa?”

“Francis didn’t leave behind the prosperous business everyone thought. There are troubles with the books, a lot of losses that haven’t yet been accounted for, and overall, Nigel’s inheritance is one big mess.”

“And does Nigel know that?”

“If he doesn’t, he will soon enough. This is not exactly word on the street. But let’s say that his father’s associates who used to play golf with him know it very well. Nigel will have to work hard to salvage something. Along that train of thought, I can see clearly now why Francis had sent Nigel to woo you. Knowing how much I wanted you to settle down, he had hoped for a swift arrangement that would save his dying business. Again, it was something I should have been aware of.”

“Good thing Nigel sucks at wooing,” Ruslan said.

Douglas looked at him with reproach. By how Johnny shifted in his place, Ruslan was sure his lover wasn’t laughing at his joke, either. “Fine, I take it back. It was bad taste,” he said quickly. “Then I should wish you a great time getting massages and water therapy for the next two weeks.

But don't relax too much, and think that you can buy that resort and live there. Your business is here and will be waiting for you. And I'm here, too. You can't abandon me," he added in a theatrical voice that made his papa laugh.

"I think I'm leaving you in capable hands. Johnny, just make sure Ruslan is happy. It's all I'm asking."

"Sure thing, Douglas," Johnny said.

Ruslan was relieved to hear Johnny talking. "Then if you know about Nigel and all, we won't keep you from packing for your vacation. Ah, papa, one more thing. Johnny noticed some weird things lately."

Douglas looked at him, and then at Johnny. "Define weird," he said.

Johnny was the one to speak now. "Someone's tailing us for days."

"Tailing us?" Ruslan was surprised. "I thought it was just a hunch."

"It was," Johnny replied. "But dudes in black suits, black hats, and black cars, were at the funeral, too. And funny thing, they followed our car."

"And you didn't think it was something I should know?" Ruslan asked.

"I'm telling you now."

"Boys, don't fight. That's just my security detail, watching over you, until things are right again. I could not say if striking a deal with Francis Davenport would work, and I hired people to keep an eye on you. I didn't think you would notice."

"Well, Johnny did. And papa, you could have told us."

"I didn't want you two to worry."

"You had us worried by not telling us. What if Johnny walked over to one of these guys, and gave him a piece of his mind?"

"But that didn't happen. Well, I hope you don't mind a bit of discreet company for the next several weeks. Until Nigel understands his place in the food chain."

"That's a bit overkill," Ruslan said. "Do you really think we need protection? Johnny might feel offended."

"Johnny is a great fighter. But he knows plenty about people who don't fight fair. Don't you, Johnny?"

"Yeah, I do. But you could have told us."

“In hindsight, I believe I should have,” Douglas offered an apology. “Just until the little chaos stirred by Francis’s death dies down. After that, everything will go back to normal.”

Johnny nodded, and Ruslan stood up shaking his head. “As long as you’re not offended, I’ll go with papa’s security detail, too.”

His lover was silent again, as they left his father’s house. Ruslan wanted to ask what was still troubling him, but Johnny beat him to it. “Your papa is worried, Ruslan. I can’t tell why, but there’s plenty he’s not telling.”

“Don’t I know it,” Ruslan said dryly. “That’s him. There are always secrets. And he somehow believes that he’s keeping them to protect me.”

“Do you have any idea what those secrets might be about?”

“None. Each time I insist, he somehow steers the conversation away and then tells me that I’ll know everything when the moment is right.”

“He left you in charge of the business. Maybe that’s what he wanted. All this secrecy is about that.”

“Maybe, but it feels personal. Whatever, I’m just babbling at this point. A lot has happened lately, and I might just be a bit confused. Don’t worry; we’ll steer clear of Nigel. I believe papa expects the worst from him.”

“But if that’s true, why leave for a vacation now?”

Ruslan shrugged. “He does deserve it. And he hired those dudes to keep an eye on us. We should be safe.”

“Do I look like I’m afraid?” Johnny snorted.

“Hey, looks who’s all macho now. Back in there, you were all for papa’s philosophical take on guys who don’t fight fair, and all that.”

“Yeah. And I’m keeping to that. I’m never afraid, though.”

“Well, that’s a comforting thought.” Ruslan took Johnny’s arm, and leaned against it. “I’m safe when I’m with you.”

Johnny threw him a look full of love. “That’s good to know.”

“But I will protect you, too. Like I told your mom.”

Johnny smiled. “Do that.”

“What? No protests? No ‘I can handle myself,’ and all that?”

“No,” Johnny said promptly.

“Wow.”

“It feels nice to have someone who’s having my back for a change,” Johnny explained.

“That’s actually my papa who’s having our backs.”

“You’re stronger than you think, pretty,” Johnny said and kissed the crown of his head in a tender gesture.

“I hope you’re right. Because I feel a bit thrown off balance by papa’s behavior. But I will do my best not to bankrupt us all while he’s away.”

“Hey, he’s only one phone call away. Whenever in doubt, just call him. But I think you will be fine.”

“How can you be so sure?” Ruslan asked.

“Once, because you’re not only beautiful, you’re smart, too. And your dad has trusted you with the books for years. You just need to take on some more responsibilities now, is all.”

“Thanks for thinking so highly of me,” Ruslan said, half-joking.

“I wouldn’t get hitched with you if I didn’t,” Johnny replied, and laughed.

“Joker.” Ruslan made a sour face and punched Johnny in the shoulder.

One week into his papa’s vacation, and Ruslan had every reason to believe what Johnny said about him. He was not one to brag, but he had managed to take care of everything beautifully. And he had kept from calling Douglas every single day. Actually, he had only called once, and then decided that he should allow his old man to have a relaxing vacation.

“I told you you’d be great as a boss,” Johnny said as he came behind him and began massaging his stiff shoulders. “Now, Mr. Boss, take a break. It’s an order.”

“Really?” Ruslan leaned into Johnny, enjoying the firm fingers working the kinks in his muscles with determination. “But I have no time for that. In one week, papa will be home, and I won’t have that much to show.”

“Are you planning to grow the business by twenty percent in two weeks or something? You work too much.”

“Wow, you sound just like a nagging wife.”

Johnny chuckled and slowly began licking his ear, making his entire body shudder. “Do nagging wives do this?”

“All right, you convinced me.” Ruslan turned to face Johnny and kissed him.

Johnny was quick to push him into the desk and step between his legs which he had opened willingly. They were busy trying to undress each other, when the sound of the phone ringing made them stop. “I probably should get this,” Ruslan said apologetically.

He was still smiling, and Johnny was squeezing his ass, when he answered. “Martin? Hey, don’t tell me you miss home already --”

Ruslan listened to the butler’s steady, grave words, and all became a blur. He caught the desk with his free hand to keep himself from falling. Sensing his distress, Johnny stopped. “When, how? No, it can’t be --”

He put the phone down and doubled over as if punched in the stomach.

“Pretty, what’s wrong?” Johnny’s voice swam to him, muffled and unreal.

“Papa,” he whispered.

He could not say anything more. He just broke down and began sobbing.

Johnny kept Ruslan’s hand in his tightly. Ever since Douglas Kent had passed away in what seemed to be a strange accident, Ruslan had not been himself. The problem was Johnny had no idea what to do to deal with that kind of situation. In the end, he had just settled for holding his lover, and Ruslan seemed to be appreciative of that, even if he said nothing, and still remained silent, spacing out, sometimes for hours.

Martin had told him to let Ruslan grieve, and just be present in case he needed him. But Johnny still felt useless. They had received an urn with the old man’s ashes, as Douglas had apparently left clear instructions about his funeral, and Ruslan hadn’t spoken much since.

And now, they were in some lawyer’s office, and they were waiting for a man with a balding head, and thin-rimmed glasses barely hanging on his nose, to read Douglas Kent’s will. The name on the door was Murray Young, and Johnny noticed in passing the lavish surroundings.

At first, Ruslan hadn’t wanted to go, but Martin had insisted. The quiet butler had been of great help. The only time when Ruslan said more than just a few words had been when he begged Martin to stay. And Martin had said simply that one could not quit being a friend.

Now, they were seated in front of Mr. Young, and the room was full of strangers. Johnny had gathered as much that they were the late Douglas Kent's other relatives. There were some angry whispers, and Johnny could tell there were pointed looks thrown in their direction.

As Mr. Young asked if everyone were present, one man who was seated the closest to the desk began talking. "I don't see why he has to be here." He put his thin chin high and gestured toward Ruslan. "He was just Douglas's whim on the last leg of his life. I bet that if we look into those adoption papers, we will see plenty of irregularities. I had counsel looking into his situation. If those papers are not in order, he has no right to any inheritance."

The lawyer listened calmly to the man's complaints. "If you believe there are any problems with Douglas's will, you can attack it in court later. As for Ruslan Kent's situation, I can assure you that Douglas left me clear instructions in regards to his inheritance."

It seemed as if the displeased relative wanted to add something, but a stern look from Mr. Young shut him up. After that, the lawyer began reading the will in a monotone voice. "I leave the house located at," he recited the address, "to my legal spouse, Martin Hoffman --"

The room exploded. "Spouse? What spouse? Is this some kind of joke?"

"Quiet," Mr. Young ordered. "I have the marriage certificate right here. I verified its authenticity myself, so there's no room for error."

"Did Douglas lose his mind right before passing away? Maybe this man," accusing fingers pointed at the butler who sat impassibly in his corner, "staged the whole accident in which Douglas lost his life!"

Ruslan squeezed Johnny's hand. Johnny looked at his lover to see him turned toward where Martin was sitting. He could tell Ruslan was trying to catch the butler's eyes, but Martin was staring straight ahead, looking dignified and calm, as always.

"The certificate is five years old," Mr. Young continued, completely ignoring the scandal taking place in his office. "Douglas told me at that time to keep it a secret from anyone else. As his counselor and confidante, I have respected his wish until this moment. Please, refrain from accusations. Douglas's and Martin's relationship had dated long before they decided to make it official. Now, if I may continue," he added, staring over his glasses at the men and women in the room who varied between feeling completely perplexed, yelling, or grinding their teeth. "As for the rest of my wealth," he began enumerating various assets, "I leave it in its entirety to my natural grandson, Ruslan Kent."

Now Ruslan was the first to jump to his feet. "What?!"

For the first time in his life, Johnny stood there, dumbstruck. Natural grandson? What was the old man playing at?

“What’s the meaning of this?” Ruslan took a step toward the lawyer’s desk, but he stopped, his fists closed by his sides.

“Now that I won’t believe!” One of the relatives yelled. “First, Douglas marries his butler, and then he fakes that there’s a biological connection between him and some ... bastard child?”

“That is a strong accusation. I have everything right here. DNA tests, Ruslan’s birth certificate, and everything you might or might not think of to prove this is true.”

“So she had the baby. Go figure,” someone from behind, a woman now, hissed like a poisonous snake.

“Shut up. This is all staged,” another protested. “Douglas wanted so much that the stray he picked up from the street to inherit everything that he invented it all. With his lawyer’s help.”

“Do you really want to pick a bone with me?” Mr. Young pushed the glasses up his nose and stared at the protester. The man shut his trap in a second. “I thought so. Feel free to attack the will. But here is a piece of advice: don’t. It will be just a waste of money. This will is rock solid.”

Johnny watched as the angry relatives got up from their chairs, mumbling and throwing ugly looks Ruslan’s way. The woman from earlier grabbed her bag with gnarly hands and marched toward Ruslan, with her chin set up high.

“Your mother was a slut,” she spat at him, and Ruslan recoiled from her, as if from a physical blow.

Johnny shot up to his feet.

“Let’s not turn this into a death match,” Mr. Young said, and Johnny stopped. “Now, except for the beneficiaries of Douglas’s will, please, everybody out.”

Mr. Young was not a big man. His body seemed frail, under his perfectly tailored suit, but, from his chair, he dominated the room. That was his turf, and he would not allow anyone to insult him there. Johnny nodded curtly toward him, and was met with a mirrored gesture.

Ruslan’s voice trembled as he began talking. “What’s this? About my ... mother? And my ... grandfather?”

The lawyer sighed. “It was Douglas’s wish to keep everything in great secrecy. For the record, I did advise him, on several occasions, to tell you everything.”

“Why didn’t he? And, is it really true? That I’m his grandson?”

“Yes. I would not lie about such thing. My profession and my career would be on the line. As for why he didn’t tell you, I can only say what he shared with me. He didn’t want to place you in

any danger, by letting this information out. Also, he was hoping to find your mother, too, and reunite you all. However, that was something he didn't manage to achieve."

"My mother? She was his daughter?" Ruslan was talking slowly, as if the words were foreign in his mouth.

"Yes. Illegitimate, a mistake from his youth. Well, those are my words, please forgive me. He didn't consider Melanie a mistake."

"Melanie? Was that her name? And who was her mother? Why didn't papa ... my grandfather marry her?"

Mr. Young put one hand up. "I understand that you have a lot of questions, young man. Allow me to speak, and you might save up some energy. Now sit and listen."

Ruslan sat on the chair obediently, like a child. Johnny reached for his hand and took it in his. It was stone cold.

"For a long time, Douglas had not been aware of Melanie's existence. By the time her mother decided to tell Douglas the truth, I'm afraid it was too late."

"Too late for what?" Ruslan asked, in a low whisper.

"Melanie was a wild child. Willful, stubborn. Douglas thought he needed to be hard on her, but her running away showed us all clearly that particular approach didn't work."

"She ran away? How old was she? And what about me?" Ruslan leaned toward the desk, as if being closer meant he could get more answers. "Was I born then?"

Mr. Young shook his head. "No. But she was pregnant when she ran away, yelling at us all that she would take care of her child by herself, without our help. What a frightful night," he added, shaking his head. "Martin searched for her, in the rain and cold, for eight hours straight, only to come back empty-handed."

Ruslan turned toward the quiet butler. "Martin, why didn't you tell me anything? All these years?"

"They weren't my secrets to tell," Martin replied in his usual, steady voice.

"Always loyal to papa," Ruslan said with a mix of bitterness and affection in his voice, and forgetting, for the moment, that Douglas had actually been his grandfather. "What about my father?" he turned his attention back to the lawyer. "Do you know who he is?"

There was a short moment of hesitation from Mr. Young that wasn't lost on Johnny.

“There were rumors that he was quite an influential and, let’s say, unsavory character.” Mr. Young replied.

“What? Like a politician or something?” Ruslan asked, seeing how the lawyer showed no intention to provide more information.

“No, not that kind of influence. He was just earning his bad boy stripes during those days.”

“Aren’t you going to tell me who he is?”

“As I said. There were rumors. I would not be able to say, in good conscience, that he is your father. And let’s just say that he is not an easy man to reach for a paternity test.”

“Why say anything, then?” Johnny asked gruffly.

Mr. Young pushed his glasses up his nose again and looked at him sternly. “All the information I am allowed to give, I will give freely. The reason I’m telling you this is because Douglas didn’t want that particular man to catch even the slightest whiff that he has a son.”

“Why?” Ruslan asked, and something in his voice was making him sound like a lost, frightened child.

“Douglas was afraid of losing you to him. He told me on several occasions that it was enough that he lost Melanie. He always blamed himself for her running away. And not only for that. After Martin didn’t find her that night, he just said that she would come back when she would feel hungry and realize her mistakes. She never did, as you know. Douglas never forgave himself. When we started the search for real, it was too late. It was like she had fallen from the face of the earth. He told me that his own pride and belief in his parenting skills blinded him.”

“But it wasn’t that,” Martin intervened.

“What was?” Ruslan asked and his voice trembled a little.

“He thought she loved him, even if he had been absent from her life for so long. And she did. When her mother sent Melanie to Douglas, she was already fifteen, wild and restless, as I told you.”

“Did papa suspect that maybe it was that bad man who hurt my mother?”

“At first, yes. But he even aided in the search later on. We all kept the secret of her pregnancy, though. The last thing we all wanted was for him to become too involved with us.”

“Still, maybe it was all ... I don’t know, a ruse from his part,” Ruslan said, flexing his fingers and wiping his palm against his pants.

“We did suspect him plenty. But everything we learned led us only to the conclusion that he could not have been involved. With the utmost certainty. He was out of the country, and none of his associates were around during the time of Melanie’s disappearance.”

“But where could she have gone?” Ruslan murmured.

“Melanie knew a lot of people. Her mother had been quite an exotic character. She had relationships with people from every walk of life. Some of them must have helped Melanie. Throughout her pregnancy, and later, to give birth. They must have hidden her pretty well. All our efforts, and not only ours, were in vain.”

“I hate it,” Ruslan said, his fingers curling angrily into a fist. “That he didn’t think I should know.”

“He thought he was protecting you.”

“Protecting me? How?”

“Douglas thought he had committed plenty of mistakes while trying to take care of Melanie. He told me that he wouldn’t do the same mistakes with you. He just didn’t want you to get any ideas into your head about searching for your presumptive father. More than once he told me that he wouldn’t lose you how he lost Melanie.”

“He could have just told me. I would have kept the secret,” Ruslan said and stared down, lost in a world of hurt only he knew.

Johnny let his hand to wrap an arm around him. “Forgive your papa, pretty,” he said. “He loved you as he could.”

Ruslan still had his head hung low. Johnny pulled him closer as his lover started crying.

“What now?” he asked the lawyer.

“Now Ruslan is the rightful heir. Don’t worry about the accusations and threats Ruslan’s relatives tried to make earlier. They have nothing.”

“Could we see that birth certificate?” Johnny asked.

Mr. Young nodded and handed to him a piece of paper.

“Look here, pretty,” Johnny said gently, pushing the birth certificate under Ruslan’s eyes. “It says who your mother is.”

Ruslan didn’t look, but instead he turned toward Johnny and wrapped his arms around him. Johnny huddled his shaking body for a while, as the other people present remained silent.

For weeks after the reading of the will, things looked as if they could not go back to normal. Ruslan was still shaken, and Johnny was still walking on eggshells around him. But slowly, as with anything in life, the pain was fading away, leaving behind a constant, dull ache. They still visited the old mansion from time to time, as Martin was most of the time away. The old butler had offered no explanations, but Johnny could only assume Martin wasn't particularly crazy about living by himself in that big house, especially since it was a place where he had used to open the door.

Martin was just one of the many secrets Douglas had left behind. Ruslan had tried to get more out of the quiet butler, but to no avail. Had they been married? Yes. Had they been lovers? Yes, for a long time. How come Douglas had let him continue to be the butler if that was the case? Martin had said it was his choice. Douglas and he came from a different world. When they were young, secrecy about such things was normal. They were too old to change.

Johnny didn't quite buy everything Martin said. But, for Ruslan's sake, he just pretended he didn't notice.

The aftermath after Douglas's death had more repercussions on Ruslan's heart. The business, otherwise, was thriving. That, in itself, could not be considered a source of trouble, but, as the saying went, trouble sometimes just finds you.

"Nigel Davenport asked for a meeting. A business meeting," Ruslan said, his voice loaded with wariness.

"So blow him off," Johnny replied. "Is the scumbag bankrupt already?"

"By what word is on the street, his situation is not exactly good. I suppose he wants a loan."

"Don't even speak to him, pretty."

Ruslan hesitated. Johnny didn't like that. Ever since Douglas died and Ruslan learned about his mother, there was something about him that wasn't quite right. There was anger there. Johnny got that. In his place, he would be angry, too. But there was also something else. Like Ruslan was no longer complete and was trying hard to fill that hole inside him. While doing that, he kept to himself more often than not.

Now it was one of those situations. Johnny could bet his right arm that Ruslan would take the meeting with Nigel Davenport.

"You will meet him, won't you?" Johnny asked, feeling bitterness creeping in, despite trying to keep it at bay. "Why?"

“I have some questions to ask. It was strange that Nigel had been so sure that I would take over papa’s business.”

Despite knowing that Douglas had been his grandfather, Ruslan didn’t change his way of talking about him. Johnny got that, too. What he didn’t get was why Ruslan was so stubborn about seeing that scumbag.

“He’s dangerous.”

Ruslan shrugged. “And? It’s not like I will lock myself in some ivory tower and spend there the days of my life. I’m not helpless, Johnny.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Are you sure?” Ruslan frowned. “I think I’ve had enough of a man who tried to protect me. I expect more from you.”

“I get it that you’re still mad at your papa ... grandfather.” Johnny could feel his anger rising, too. “But don’t play this card with me, pretty.”

Ruslan’s beautiful eyes set on him, and right now, they were challenging him. “I’ll take the meeting with Nigel.”

“So what I have to say about that doesn’t matter?” It was Johnny’s turn to frown.

“Unless you agree with me, no, it doesn’t,” Ruslan said defiantly.

Johnny grabbed Ruslan’s arm hard and shook him. “Nigel could hurt you,” he said through his teeth. “Why can’t you get it through your head?”

Ruslan shook his arm free and set his chin high. “Well, then I think it’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

“Oh, yeah? So it’s your risk? Yours only?”

“Yes. Mine.”

“Good. Then don’t let me stop you.” Johnny turned on his heels, and made sure to slam the door behind him hard enough to make his point of view known.

He was getting pissed more and more at Ruslan. Grief, he got. Anger, too. But not this stubbornness that put a wall that went sky-high between them. Ruslan didn’t let anyone in anymore.

Of course, there was no more word of the wedding. Johnny understood it all. Douglas's passing away was still fresh in everyone's minds and hearts. But the problems between them ran deeper than that.

They slept in the same house, under the same roof. They shared the same bed, but even if they made love as usual, it was like any joy was gone from their relationship. Johnny hated that. Ruslan had to understand that Johnny was there for him.

Whatever, he would put up with everything until the hell froze over because Johnny would not give up ever on the man he loved above all else. But he needed to think of a way to get Ruslan to open up, and if there was one thing he wasn't good at that was thinking too much.

Ruslan stared at the door for a while and reached for his phone. He was about to call Johnny and tell him to come back when an incoming call appeared on the screen. With a grimace, he took it. Johnny could not understand the crap he was dealing with right now. But he would put all the demons to rest, as soon as he discovered what Nigel knew.

"Yes," he said. "Anytime you want. Please, I would like you to be my guest."

It roiled the acid in his stomach to talk to Nigel Davenport. Either way, he would make that man spill the truth about Douglas. Whatever he knew, Ruslan was entitled to know. There were too many details about his papa's death that didn't sit well with him.

First of all, Douglas had been in perfect shape, and to say that he just slipped on ice and fell, hitting his head, seemed a bit farfetched. Not that it couldn't happen; even young healthy people could die like that. But Ruslan wasn't convinced. He felt there was something there that didn't feel right.

Douglas's desire to have his remains cremated had been a novelty to him, too. There hadn't been a proper burial, and Ruslan still felt like he hadn't said goodbye.

He shook his head. Nigel would be there soon and he needed his head in the game. If he needed to bribe the scumbag to find out the truth, he would do it. There was plenty of money in his personal account that he could use without hurting the business in any way.

With a sigh, he checked his phone. Johnny hadn't called, and now there wasn't enough time to have a proper conversation about everything that was going on. Johnny couldn't understand everything. Hell, Ruslan had a lot of problems understanding himself.

He knew Johnny was getting restless. In a way, it made Ruslan want to be done with everything fast, tie the loose ends of Douglas's death already, so that he could get back to being happy with his lover.

Johnny just needed to have a little more patience. Ruslan knew he needed to tell him directly that. Yet, somehow, lately, whenever they talked, they seemed to be at odds. It was like Johnny wasn't even on his side anymore. He would deal with everything later, after he got to the bottom of what Nigel knew and why he could not let go of his papa's death just yet.

The last few months have been rough. Ruslan knew, deep inside, that Johnny tried his best, but he could not bring himself to tell his lover that everything would be all right. There was something, like a premonition of sorts, that stopped him. The things that he had learned about his mother and father didn't help. Now he was restless, like there was a part of him that wanted to reach for something and he just couldn't grasp it.

His grandfather had been right in one way. Ruslan wanted now to know everything, about his mother, about his father, about why Douglas thought it better to keep it all hidden from him. He felt hurt like never in his life, although he knew well that he had hurt plenty. This was deep, so personal that it held a distinctive place, all of its own, and Ruslan sensed it like a cold pebble right in the center of his chest, slowly expanding and threatening to take over.

He took his coat and went out the door. He would meet with Nigel soon at the office. In the meantime, maybe Johnny could get a cool head and they would talk. That was something waiting to be solved, too. Despite the loss and anger he experienced, he didn't want to lose Johnny. And that would take quite a bit of work.

"Please, have a seat. Something to drink? What's your poison?" Ruslan pretended to be relaxed, making small talk, so that Nigel wouldn't notice how nervous he was.

Nigel waved. "I'm good. I have some important business to talk to you, Ruslan."

The asshole was staring him in the eye, his smile wide and insincere. Ruslan just nodded. "Shoot."

"You might have heard rumors --"

"Of your situation? Everyone has. Let's cut it to the chase, Nigel. What is it that you want from me?"

Nigel leaned into his chair and stared at Ruslan through his eyelashes. "You know I'm sorry for what I did."

Funny thing, Nigel chose that particular moment to repent. Ruslan could not keep a small grimace. "Let bygones be bygones," he said politely.

"No, I shouldn't have done it. You are just so ... pretty."

Ruslan could feel the mental eye roll coming, but kept a straight face. Plus, that word in Nigel's mouth just sounded wrong. "Thanks," he said curtly. "Let's forget about that. Now, the present is more important. What can I do for you?"

Nigel was a complete oaf, apparently. He threw Ruslan a look full of innuendo and smiled. "Are you sure that's a question you want to ask me, because --"

Ruslan stopped him. "Nigel. I want to help you. I mean it. But I want something in return."

Nigel's smile faded. "Okay. How much can you give me?"

Ruslan wrote something on a piece of paper and handed to Nigel. There was a frown on Nigel's face as he looked at it. "I'm sure you can do better than that, Ruslan. Everyone knows you have golden hands when it comes to business."

"I would not take from my business to hand it to you. That's what I can afford."

"It's hardly something I can work with," Nigel protested.

Ruslan could not say whether Nigel was trying to be a tough bargain, or he really meant it. "That's all I can do for you. But if you help me with what I want to know, I will continue to help you. Until you get back on your feet," Ruslan added.

Nigel's eyebrows shot up, a clear sign of interest. "All right. What do you want to know?"

"At your father's funeral, you hinted at my taking over the business. Why? You almost said it like it was a sure thing."

Nigel seemed to ponder for a bit, his hands clasped in front of his face, tapping his lips with his index fingers glued together. "Do you know what my father was best at?"

Ruslan shook his head. Nigel didn't deny knowing something. That was a good sign.

"He dealt in secrets mostly. And now you know there's no secret that the business he left me is all in shambles."

Ruslan nodded. There was a sensation of growing pressure weighing on his chest.

"Well, it wasn't by accident that that happened. Others didn't care to help him. Apparently, they were affected, too, one way or the other. Within certain circles, there are just a handful of men who are truly in charge. And all, every single one, told my father that they were having troubles of their own. What do you think about that?"

"I am surprised to hear this."

"Funny. I would have thought you would know more, even than me."

“Why? Papa ... I mean, my grandfather didn’t tell me anything.”

“Grandfather,” Nigel said the word like it was something foreign he was trying to pronounce for the first time in his life. “Now that’s what I call a twist of fate. And you had no idea, right?”

“Right,” Ruslan admitted with a small grimace. Talking to Nigel about Douglas wasn’t on top of his list.

“Well, that may be the case. But, I’m telling you, someone was pressuring your grandfather into something. It could be that my dad knew the guy. I overheard him telling someone that and I quote, we all have the same enemy, even Douglas Kent. The fact that his business wasn’t affected was thought very strange by my father. Unfortunately, he died before finding out more.”

“You’re only making me confused, Nigel. Who is this common enemy?”

Nigel shrugged. Ruslan could tell the scumbag knew more, but he didn’t want to say anything. “I’ll write you a check right now, Nigel. Just spill it, okay?”

“I want more than just money, Ruslan,” Nigel said. “How about becoming business partners?”

“That’s a bit too much. No deal.”

“Is it because of that incident? Oh, of course. Your fiancé wouldn’t agree. But it’s not like you have to tell him. I doubt that he even understands what we do is all about. All brawn that man.”

Ruslan pursed his lips. “Leave Johnny out of it.”

“That’s exactly what I’m proposing.”

“I told you. No deal. As for the reason, let’s just say that I don’t see any good to come from such an association.”

“Are you trying to tell me I’m some loser?”

“You’re good at filling in the blanks, I have to give it to you,” Ruslan replied.

Nigel’s face darkened. “You should keep your friends close, Ruslan. You never know when you might need them.”

“Come on, Nigel. Don’t be such a sourpuss. What I’m proposing is far better. You get enough money to get by for a while, and I don’t have to get mixed up with you.”

Nigel showed teeth, but only for a second. “I like you. You’re all fire. But I think we’ll get to know each other better sooner than you think.”

Ruslan sighed and began writing the check for Nigel. He held it, without handing it over to the other. “Tell me what you know, Nigel.”

It was clear that the scumbag was eyeing the check with hungry eyes. “Okay. You know how to haggle. What can I say? Well, the thing is like this. My dad told the guy he was talking to when I overheard them that your dad’s business wasn’t affected for a single reason.”

“Which was?” Ruslan could feel his impatience growing.

“That whoever is this enemy everyone is speaking of used to be friends with your granddad.”

“That makes little to no sense at all.”

“Yeah. I thought so, too. But my father also said that your grandfather needed to either get rid of the business or give it to someone else if he wanted to escape the maelstrom.”

Ruslan pressed his index fingers against his temples. Instead of making things simpler, Nigel’s revelations only made them more complicated. “So, are you trying to tell me this someone killed my grandfather?”

Nigel shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. And I thought your granddad died when he slipped on ice or something. Your butler, oh, sorry, his husband was with him. It couldn’t be foul play, could it? Or do you suspect the butler of being in with your granddad’s killer?”

Ruslan shook his head vehemently. “No.”

That was one piece of the puzzle that would not fit such a theory. Martin would have never betrayed his grandfather. That’s why he could not fathom why he was still so bothered. Maybe it was all just a string of coincidences and nothing else.

“So no one suspects who this enemy, as you call him, is? And what exactly is it that he does?”

“Hostile takeovers, stuff like that. You go into some new play, thinking the terrain is fertile, and all you find is dry land. You expect to buy cheap and sell high, and nothing works as you want. You even might end up having troubles with suppliers you worked with for years. Has anything like this happened to you?”

Ruslan shook his head. “My grandfather’s business is prosperous. We don’t expand, we don’t deal in stocks, and the suppliers so far have made no problems.”

“Well, maybe you’re just lucky. Or maybe it’s just the calm before the storm, you know. When your business is hit, remember that I warned you and that I extended you a friendly hand. The offer still stands, you know.”

“No, thanks,” Ruslan said dryly.

“Well, don’t mind me if I take this, though.” Nigel stood up and grabbed the check Ruslan was still holding while lost in thought.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Friends?” Nigel offered his hand. With some reluctance, Ruslan shook it. Nigel kept his hand and looked at him. “I still beat myself over ruining that chance I had with you by being stupid.”

Ruslan pulled his hand away. “Don’t worry, Nigel. You didn’t have a chance to begin with.”

Nigel offered a toothy grin. “Famous last words, Ruslan. See you around.”

With that, the scumbag sauntered out of the office, seemingly in a better mood than when he came in. Ruslan shook his head, wondering what that could be all about.

“So I met Nigel and spoke to him,” Ruslan started, as he was undressing and putting his clothes neatly on a hanger.

A noncommittal grunt from Johnny was the only answer. Johnny lay on the bed, some magazine in his hand, pretending to read. Ruslan knew he wasn’t reading; his eyes weren’t moving on the page. If he was looking at some picture, he was surely making an obsession for it.

With a sigh, Ruslan shed the undershirt and stepped out of his boxers. Maybe that was something that would cheer up Johnny a little. But Johnny didn’t put down the magazine, and didn’t look at him as he climbed the bed.

“Are you still mad at me?” Ruslan asked.

“I’m not mad at you.”

“You left slamming the door. I might have to repaint the studio, you know?”

Johnny looked at him now. His eyes traveled over Ruslan’s naked body, but then moved away. “I don’t want to know what you’re doing with that scumbag.”

“Hey,” Ruslan touched Johnny’s arm gently, “it was important. And I did find out some things. I paid him and that was all.”

Johnny stood up brusquely and began pacing the room. “Do you think I’m stupid, pretty?”

“No. Why would you say that?”

“Because you don’t listen to me. I told you not to talk to that scumbag.”

“As I said, it was important. And what did you think he would do? Screw me over the desk?”

Johnny's eyes were dark. Ruslan yelped as his lover moved quickly, and pushed him into the bed, taking his arms and putting them up, stretching them to the point of hurting. "Did he try anything?"

"No." Ruslan hoped he sounded convincing. Johnny made him feel guilty, for some reason.

"Good, 'cause there's one thing I don't want to tell you anymore."

"What's that?" Ruslan challenged him.

Johnny leaned down and bit his lips, a bit too hard. But Ruslan reacted, and Johnny clearly knew he would do that. He tried to bite back, but Johnny moved quickly.

He complained. "Hey, not fair."

"What's not fair is you hanging out with that asshole."

"I'm not hanging out with him. Just cut it out."

"I won't." Johnny kissed him this time, licking and placing small bites everywhere.

Ruslan knew his lover well, but right now he felt Johnny was showing him something new. Could it be that he was jealous? There was no reason to. And Nigel had no chance, and he had never had.

"Are you jealous?" he asked, feeling a little dizzy with Johnny's kisses.

"No, I'm pissed at you. Royally."

"Ha, you said you weren't."

"I lied."

Johnny pushed himself down, only so that he could reach Ruslan's nipples, which he began torturing, sucking them hard into his mouth, making the sensations almost unbearable. "Oh, fuck," Ruslan whispered. "That's a bit too hard, Johnny."

"Tough luck, pretty. And just so you know, I had plans to tie you up and spank you really hard until you told me you were sorry."

Ruslan protested. "I'm not sorry. It was just business."

"Business? And what are we?" Johnny asked, pushing Ruslan's legs apart and nudging at his backdoor with his cock.

Ruslan knew Johnny better than going in dry, but right now, he could feel the guy was really pissed. "We are together, Johnny. We just had a bit of a disagreement."

“That guy wants to fuck you. Wet these.” Johnny pushed two rough fingers into Ruslan’s mouth.

So that was the only lube he would get, Ruslan thought, and began lapping at Johnny’s fingers. He made sure to blink slowly and watch Johnny as he swirled his tongue around the calloused fingers. Johnny’s eyes softened, and he removed the fingers.

“On all fours,” he ordered.

Ruslan obeyed with some reluctance and grunted as a hard hand smacked his bottom. At least, he could feel Johnny’s fingers, now coated with something more slippery than his spit, entered him and stretching him.

A hand was in his hair, its pair on one of his hips, and he sucked in a breath. Johnny wasn’t in the mood for gentle. Ruslan welcome the intrusion. He could feel Johnny’s cock like a spear splitting him in half, but he didn’t complain. His skin was tingling, all his nerve endings were expecting the pain, and they weren’t disappointed.

He began breathing hard, as Johnny pulled his body to him hard. His lover steadied him, and began imposing the rhythm, a bit rough, a bit unforgiving, but fitting. Ruslan knew he wanted Johnny not to be pissed at him anymore. If a bit of hard fucking was all it took, he was down with that. Explaining his actions seemed no longer a reasonable choice, given Johnny’s anger.

Ruslan adjusted his position. His knees were set too far apart, and there was so much lack of control that it made him feel losing balance. Johnny pushed them with his thighs again, and Ruslan could feel that he was hanging only by where his lover held him.

In a confusing way, it was an exhilarating sensation. He moved to the rhythm, feeling the slow growing hum of pleasure building inside him. His cock was so hard, it made obscene noises as it slapped against his belly. He groaned and thrashed, trying hard to get a hold of something, but his hands were clasping at the sheets while he was spread open and skewered with higher and higher intensity, until the knot of pure pleasure inside his ass began exploding, triggering his release. Johnny pulled him into his cock a few more times until he, too, grunted his release.

Johnny had his eyes close as he crashed next to him on the bed. Ruslan reached for him with one arm. Johnny pulled him closer.

“Tomorrow, things will look a little better, I promise,” Ruslan whispered before letting sleep take them both.

“Now that’s something odd,” Ruslan commented as he looked at his phone.

Johnny frowned. They were still at odds over that scumbag Nigel. Apparently, Ruslan was sure that idiot had some important information. Johnny wasn't okay at all with whatever Ruslan wanted with Nigel. But his lover was seemingly very hardheaded when it came to certain things.

Johnny didn't want to drop it. Yet, he had no idea what to say to make Ruslan stop. All he did was sit there, and do nothing. Well, not exactly nothing. At least, they were back at screwing their brains out like they were crazy or something. That dulled whatever he felt inside, but he was sure it couldn't be enough.

"What's odd? What are you looking at?" Johnny asked.

"Martin sent me a text to meet him at the house."

"A text? Couldn't he just call? Call him back and see what he wants."

"He's not answering," Ruslan replied. "The text says something about an emergency."

"This sounds fishy. Don't go, pretty. With scumbags like Nigel Davenport everywhere, you can never know."

"Johnny, Martin needs me. I won't become paranoid now."

"Then I'm coming with you. There's no way I'm letting you go alone," Johnny said.

"Didn't you have practice?"

"I did. Not anymore. Let's go," Johnny said roughly.

Ruslan hurried after him. "I still need to put my shoes on, you know. Seriously, Johnny, you should lighten up a little. Maybe Martin's phone battery is dead or something."

"He's at the house. Can't he plug it in?"

Ruslan stopped for a second and shrugged. "You can never know what's going on with old people."

Johnny didn't buy that, but he would not let Ruslan go alone. He could feel it in his gut that something wasn't right.

As they were outside, and then inside a cab, Johnny looked over his shoulder. "For just how long do you think your granddad's security detail is going to follow us around?"

Ruslan followed what Johnny was pointing at. "I guess that's something I should ask Martin about."

Johnny shook his head. Everything was damned fishy.

Ruslan let them both in with the spare key he had. "Martin!" He began calling.

There was light in the dining room and they both hurried there. Johnny was about to stumble over Ruslan as his lover stopped dead in his tracks. He looked at what could make Ruslan behave like that, and his feet got cold in an instant.

At the beautiful lacquered table, there was a man sitting. By his sides, one step back, a clear sign of respect, two men dressed in black with scrutinizing eyes, bald heads, and necks thick as bulls, were standing.

But it was the man sitting Johnny could not take his eyes off. He appeared so familiar, and for a couple of seconds, Johnny blinked like that could help him figure out why.

As he stared at Ruslan, hoping for an answer, it hit him. His eyes went back to the stranger, who was smiling at them, or, better said, at Ruslan. Johnny could be as good as invisible.

Chapter Eighteen – I Will Be Your Soldier

“What’s the meaning of this?” Ruslan asked. “Who are you? Where is Martin? What did you do to him? And why the hell do you sit there like you own the fucking place?”

The stranger put one hand up, and his smile grew wider. Johnny was in too much shock to say anything. Now he understood a few things, especially about why Douglas had wanted so badly to keep it a secret that Ruslan was related to him by blood.

The man in front of them needed no paternity test or fancy DNA screening. He was Ruslan, head to toes, some twenty-five years from now. Or maybe not entirely. His face was harsher, his lips thinner, and there was something cold and measured in his eyes even as he smiled. The designer suit fit him like a glove, and he was impeccable to the last hair on his head.

“I do own the fucking place,” the reply came.

Johnny noted the heavy foreign accent right away.

Ruslan gasped. “What did you do to Martin?”

“Butler? He’s fine. I just needed his phone. And this house.”

“Why?” Ruslan asked. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Such a dirty mouth. Just like your mother,” the man said.

He made a gesture to stand up, and one of the goons hurried to pull his chair. The man paid his servant no mind and walked slowly around the table, touching the lacquered table with something in his eyes and his moves that, from where Johnny stood, looked like nostalgia.

“What do you know about my mother? You still haven’t told me. Who the fuck are you?” Ruslan shouted.

Johnny could not believe Ruslan didn’t see it. Maybe he was too much in shock. “Pretty, I think that’s your father,” he said slowly.

“Ah,” the stranger said with satisfaction. “Smart. Who’s this? Bodyguard? Good choice. He looks strong.”

“You can’t be,” Ruslan said, shaking his head.

The man sighed. “All right. Let me introduce myself. I’m Vladimir Petrovsky.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell,” Ruslan spat.

“Of course not. Douglas told you nothing about me. He was right, in his own way, I suppose. Because my son belongs to me.”

Johnny wasn't sure whether it was the man's broken way of speaking a foreign language or he did mean that as it came out. Instinctively, he stepped in front of Ruslan, to protect him.

"Easy, bodyguard," Vladimir said. "No one here wants to hurt your boss."

"He's not my bodyguard," Ruslan said. "He's no one. Let him leave."

Johnny turned to stare at Ruslan. "Now what are you playing at, pretty?"

"Ah, he's the fiancé," Vladimir intervened. "I heard of him. I didn't know he was this strong. Now, Ruslan, come here and let me embrace you."

Ruslan's eyes were shifting from Johnny to Vladimir and back again. Johnny felt a bit relieved. He was wary still, but it didn't look like this man wanted to hurt Ruslan. Vladimir was looking fondly at his son.

Respectfully, Johnny took one step to the side, but Ruslan made no sign that he wanted to move. Vladimir opened his arms wide and walked over to him. He pulled Ruslan who seemed more like a ragged doll at this point, into a tight embrace and kissed both his cheeks loudly.

He took Ruslan by the shoulders and made him walk to the table and sit. "You can come, too, bodyguard," he said over his shoulder.

Johnny followed in silence. It was so strange to sit there and look at Ruslan and that stranger. Side by side, the resemblance was even more striking. It was like a punch to the gut, and Johnny could not help but wonder what Douglas must have felt when he saw Ruslan for the first time. It was clear as day who the father of his daughter's son was. The lawyer must have lied through his teeth at the will reading. They must have all known Ruslan was the spitting image of his biological father.

Presumably, none of them thought this would bite them in the ass. Yet, Vladimir Petrovsky, as the man had dutifully recommended himself, had clearly caught wind of having a son, and he was now here to claim him.

Johnny always went with his gut instinct, and he felt completely calm in the presence of this stranger. Maybe it was because he looked so much like Ruslan that Johnny could not see him as the bad guy. If that were the case, and Vladimir's intentions were bad, they were in deep shit.

"So, your grandpa failed to find your mom," Vladimir said in a playful tone like he was talking to a child.

Johnny could barely keep a smile despite the seriousness of the situation. Ruslan's glare was legendary. His lover wouldn't tolerate being patronized like that. "And? Have you found her or something?"

Vladimir was holding Ruslan close, by his shoulders, forcing their chairs together. In turn, Ruslan looked like he wanted to be in a separate universe. “I wish I did. I wish I found you before now, little treasure.”

“Little treasure?” Ruslan sputtered. “Seriously?”

“What? Is it the wrong term of, how do you say this, endearment?”

“Let’s just say you’re just about twenty-something years late to use any term of endearment,” Ruslan said icily.

Johnny rubbed his face with one hand to hide his smile.

“Ah, I didn’t know about you,” Vladimir replied, his own smile never leaving his face. “I was interested in some small business, something little to give my cousin who wants, for who knows what reason, to live here. And I find that Douglas Kent has a son named Ruslan.”

“And? Douglas will always be my father,” Ruslan spat.

“He’s your grandfather. And did nothing to clean your spiteful mouth,” Vladimir replied, looking at his son pointedly. “Melanie told me. ‘We ever have a son, let’s name it some name you want.’ And I chose your name for you,” he added as he pushed a finger into Ruslan’s shoulder.

Johnny shook his head. He could not believe his ears, or his eyes, but Ruslan’s real father was right in front of them, and that was no fantasy.

“So I wanted to see this Ruslan. They kept me in the dark, all these years. When I could have watched you grow,” Vladimir said with affection mingled with regret.

“Spare me the crocodile tears,” Ruslan said and looked down stubbornly. “You don’t know my life.”

“But I want to know it,” Vladimir said in an excited tone. He slapped Ruslan’s back hard. “Should your mom have come to me, I could have made her a princess. Now I’ll make you a prince.”

“No, thank you,” Ruslan replied.

Johnny could feel that Ruslan’s façade was breaking. Whatever toughness he had in him, Ruslan must have felt it dissipating right now, hearing this stranger talk so casually about him and his mother.

“Ah, don’t be mad at me. Douglas should have told me of you.”

“Papa didn’t have to tell you shit,” Ruslan said and pushed the back of his hands into his eyes.

Vladimir pulled him close. “He robbed me of you. Like he robbed me of Melanie.”

Ruslan pushed his father and stood up. “He did nothing like that. You just fooled around with my mother, and I was some accident.”

He began to walk away stiffly. Vladimir was quick to stand up and catch him by one arm. “That’s not true,” he said sternly.

Johnny stood up, too. He was nothing but a spectator, but he felt like he needed to intervene. “Maybe you should listen to your father a little, Ruslan,” he asked in a soft voice.

Ruslan threw him a cutting look. “This man is not my father. My father died months ago, and his remains are ashes in an urn.”

Johnny felt taken aback by Ruslan’s determination. Vladimir sighed audibly.

“And what is that you want anyway?” Ruslan turned toward his father. “I inherited a fortune, so you came to grab it for yourself? Do you want to pressure me into it? And are you the one who’s messing with everyone’s business? How about you go back where you came from?”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Vladimir said. “So many questions. Your fortune is your own, my son.”

“Really? Didn’t you pressure Martin into giving this home to you? When you knew it was papa’s?”

“I bought it above the market price. He agreed. And I’m giving it to you. You should have it. You should have everything.”

“Oh, fuck. You’re a great actor, aren’t you? Do you have any other children?”

“Yes, you have two brothers and three sisters,” Vladimir replied promptly. “And you’ll meet them all when you come with me to Russia.”

Johnny’s ears prickled. Now that was the kind of development he wasn’t expecting. And five siblings? Ruslan’s father had been a busy man, it seemed.

“I don’t want anything to do with your wife and her kids,” Ruslan replied.

“Wives,” Vladimir corrected him in the same playful tone he had used throughout the conversation.

Ruslan rolled his eyes. “Can you be married to more than one person in your country?”

Vladimir shrugged. “Technically, no. But divorce, marriage, is all blurred lines. They all live happily together. I make sure of that.”

“Fucked up,” Ruslan commented and turned on his heels again.

Vladimir caught him from behind into a hug. “You’re lucky you’re too old to turn you on my knee,” he said.

Johnny sighed and walked closer. “Mr. Petrovsky, please. I should take Ruslan home. Maybe you’ll talk more later.”

It wasn’t like him to be some diplomat, but the situation was far from being normal so that anything could go.

“You have enemies here. Both of you,” Vladimir said. “I’m here to clean up mess, too.”

Johnny was now very much interested in hearing Ruslan’s father out. “What do you mean?”

Vladimir finally let go of Ruslan who straightened up his clothes and pushed his hands through his hair like he wanted to make sure that all of himself was still there.

“You say, Ruslan, that I’m the one messing with business. But you know why the jungle goes all quiet? It’s when the king arrives. Lion,” Vladimir pointed at himself with uncontained satisfaction.

“Oh, and that’s you,” Ruslan said. “And? What am I supposed to get from that? That everyone gets out of the way the moment you make an appearance?”

“Something like that,” Vladimir said, his smile growing wider. “Who is this Davenport?”

“Nigel?” Ruslan asked.

“Friend of yours?” Vladimir asked affably.

Johnny wasn’t falling for the act. “No,” he replied in Ruslan’s stead.

“Thought so,” Vladimir said with satisfaction. “He’ll be history. Soon.”

“What? Are you just eliminating people randomly? No wonder papa didn’t want you to know about me,” Ruslan said.

Vladimir quirked an eyebrow. “Eliminate? He’ll be asked to leave. Politely.”

“So you’re ruining his business for what?”

“I don’t ruin anyone’s business. They’re weak. All. His father left him debts on top of debts. That’s not my fault,” Vladimir said, raising his shoulders as if he could not believe he was being accused for no reason.

Johnny sort of liked Ruslan’s real father. The man seemed ruthless, but he was telling the truth about Nigel. And if that fucker was out of the picture, it was all for the better. Johnny could not stand the thought of that scumbag around Ruslan.

“Did you pressure papa, too? Was that why he was worried?”

“Your grandfather did keep you hidden from me. That’s not a thing easy to forget,” Vladimir wagged a finger, and his smile became skewed a little.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Ruslan pressed the matter further. “Do you have anything to do with his death?”

“Nothing. Old man, frail bones. I guess all that happened. Not me,” Vladimir said with a shrug. “It worked out good. He would have sold everything to me anyway so I could give it to you.”

Ruslan got into his father’s face. “He gave it all to me anyway — no need for your interventions. And you know what? I don’t give a rat’s ass about all that. I’d give it all only that he was here with me still.”

“Easy there,” Vladimir warned. “It’s easy to kick it all with your foot when you have everything.”

Johnny almost felt the need to duck for cover. Ruslan’s eyes were stormy skies. “Oh, really? Didn’t your intel tell you? I had nothing until papa saved me. I was sixteen and working the streets when he got me and took me home with him.”

Finally, something seemed to get through to Vladimir. Johnny could tell by how the man’s features darkened and the few wrinkles on his face deepened. Without thinking, he took a step to be closer to Ruslan.

“She gave you away?” Vladimir said the words slowly like he could not bear to talk. “I thought she just left you with her father.”

Ruslan shrugged. “I have no idea. I have no idea what either you or she ever did. The only parent I’ve ever known is no longer with me. You don’t matter.”

Vladimir stood there, frozen. Johnny wanted to feel for the man, but couldn’t. The guy had clearly expected to come in there like a champion, and have Ruslan fall into his open arms. Nothing was like those stupid shows on TV, though. This was no lost and found reunion, with tepid tears and crooked flowers.

“Wait,” Vladimir called after Ruslan.

Johnny followed his lover, as Ruslan was marching out of the room. Then he stopped suddenly. “Are these goons of yours going to follow me?”

Vladimir shook his head. “Not these. Others.”

So, the security detail wasn’t Douglas’s doing, after all. Johnny had wondered why they still had their shadows long after Douglas’s passing away. At the time, he hadn’t questioned it at all. If it

were the man's wish to watch over them even from beyond the grave, those dudes in black could do it until their contract expired. Now it all made more sense.

"Call them off. That if you want me to talk to you again," Ruslan said through his teeth.

"Ruslan," Vladimir said in an apologetic tone, "don't be mad. I won't call off the men. You need people watching you."

"Why? What did you do that I'm in so much danger?" Ruslan snarled.

"I told you. You have enemies," Vladimir explained.

Ruslan threw his father a pointed look. "Choose. Call off your goons, or we'll never talk again."

Vladimir said nothing.

Ruslan shrugged and walked out of the room, with Johnny on his tail.

"You know it's not his fault. If he didn't know about you --"

"Johnny, stop. This has nothing to do with you, okay?"

"So? I'm not allowed to say anything or something?" Johnny asked and frowned. "And where are we going?"

"There's an exit through the back. I bet that those goons are waiting for us in the front."

Ruslan walked quickly, two steps in front, and Johnny had to speed up to keep up with him. "Maybe your father is right --"

"Don't call that man my father," Ruslan said.

Johnny wasn't fooled. There was heartache right there, and Ruslan could not deny it forever. Johnny was no good at talking about things like that anyway, so he just needed to wait for his lover to calm down. Maybe they just needed to go home and sleep over all this. Yet, there was something he needed to say. "I believe Vladimir when he says that Nigel is dangerous. Don't tell me you hate your ..., whatever, Vladimir so much that you want to be on Nigel's side on this one."

"I'm on no one's side but mine," Ruslan said while stubbornly walking ahead.

"So you're in this alone? Is this what you're saying?" Johnny questioned, his face all a frown now.

Ruslan stopped and turned toward him. "Yes, maybe that's what I'm saying. If you like Vladimir so much, why don't you go to him and hold his hand? Maybe sing Kumbaya or whatever."

“Pretty, that’s not fair,” Johnny warned.

Ruslan was royally pissed. But Johnny could feel himself heading over there fast, too.

“Are you coming home or not? I’m so done with all this for now.” Ruslan turned and walked away without waiting for an answer.

Johnny hurried after him. Now he was sure he didn’t want to let it drop.

They were out in a backstreet and Johnny followed Ruslan since apparently he was the only one knowing where they were going. “What the hell are we doing?” he asked.

“Getting out of here and looking for a cab,” Ruslan said shortly.

“We could call for one. We have these things called phones,” Johnny tried to joke.

“Not a good moment, Johnny.”

They walked for minutes, without saying anything.

“Ruslan,” Johnny called again. “How about you stop with the attitude? Are you pissed at your dad? I don’t care. But don’t treat me like shit or we’ll have a problem.”

Ruslan stopped only to get in his face. “Problem? What kind of problem? Have you taken that many hits to the head that you can’t think of why the hell I’m so pissed?”

Johnny’s eyes darkened. Ruslan knew better than to challenge him like this. Well, he would go home alone now. Johnny had had enough of all that bullshit.

He was about to tell Ruslan to fuck off when he caught something from the corner of his left eye. “Watch out,” he barely managed and tried to reach for Ruslan, but sudden pain shot through the base of his skull and the world around him tilted in slow motion before it got completely dark.

Johnny woke up suddenly, the sensation of not being able to breathe too much to bear. He shook his head and realized that someone was throwing water into his face. He sputtered and spat. The first instinct, to get to his feet and strangle whoever thought could drown him with water from a bucket, had him struggle furiously. His hands were tied at his back, and whatever they used for that dug into his skin, cutting circulation. He flexed his fingers in an effort to eliminate the numbness. His legs were immobilized, too.

He stared at the man in front of him. It wasn’t anyone he knew. Could it be that Vladimir had sent his goons after them anyway, and now they were taught a lesson not to disobey ever again? Somehow that didn’t seem to be it. Johnny could feel it. His gut instinct was telling him right now that they were in deep trouble.

Ruslan. Where was he? His eyes began searching around frantically. The goon in front of him, a dude in his late forties with the face peppered with deep craters from some childhood measles or something, caught his chin and then slapped him hard.

Johnny struggled against his restraints and growled loudly. The man slapped him again, seemingly amused with seeing his futile attempts to break free. “Who the fuck are you? Where is Ruslan?” he demanded to know.

The man moved out of his line of sight to allow someone else to step in. Johnny cursed loudly. “Motherfucker.”

Nigel stood there, his hands in his pockets, a jovial grin on his face that seemed completely out of place in that dank room. “Well, you do know my real name, Johnny. Or should I call you Snake? Hmm, you seem pretty fangless to me right now.”

Nigel leaned downward as if he wanted to take a better look at him.

Johnny ignored him. Now was no time to get riled up like a rabid dog, no matter what that scumbag wanted. “Where is Ruslan?”

“Ruslan? Your fiancé, you mean?” Nigel asked, his eyes glinting with something nasty that made Johnny want to kill the man just for speaking Ruslan’s name. “Oh, he’s okay. For now. I understand that his market value just went up. I have yet to make up my mind about him. At least, I know what to do with you.”

Johnny ground his teeth hard. “Where the fuck is Ruslan?”

Nigel made a bored gesture, and someone else in the room dragged Ruslan into Johnny’s line of sight. He was silenced by a piece of thick rope pushed through his teeth, and his hair was glued to his forehead with sweat. Except for looking a bit roughened up, he seemed okay.

Johnny focused on that. They weren’t dead yet. That meant the scumbag wanted something from them. “What do you want?” he asked Nigel directly.

“A man of few words. I like that. I just wished we could have been friends. Well, that ship sailed. So, here’s what I want. I want you to get into my ring, and fight until you’re dead,” Nigel spat the last word at him as if he was projecting poison.

“Yeah? And why would I want to do that? You’re that strapped for cash that you need me to bring in people for fights?”

Nigel tsked, more and more pleased with himself. “Are all fighters this stupid? It’s going to be for one night. Your last performance, Snake.” The grin on Nigel’s face was cruel, that of a mad man. “It’s fitting, don’t you think? My dad had you fight for him. I’m doing the same. But I’m also finishing the job.”

“I won’t do it,” Johnny shrugged.

He could sense Ruslan’s struggling against the man holding him, and hear his muffled angered cries. But he needed no distraction now.

“Oh, no? Even if I threaten your beloved?” Nigel gestured for the goon to push Ruslan into his arms.

Nigel held Ruslan and pushed the sweaty strands of hair out of his eyes. “Pretty. Is that what you call him? So sweet. Now here’s the deal, Johnny. You fight, or I’ll slash his throat right in front of you. I’ve always wanted to wreck something beautiful, you know?”

“Then you can slash his throat right now. If it’s now or later, what does it matter?” Johnny said in a matter of fact voice, over the crack in his heart, over the thunder in his ears.

He could swear Ruslan’s angered, but silent struggle was directed at him now. But there was only one way out, the only one he could see with the utmost clarity, no matter how many kicks to the head he had taken in his life.

“So you don’t care? How precious,” Nigel commented, but it was clear that the little scenario the scumbag had played in his head didn’t go as planned.

“Let’s make it interesting,” Johnny said and stared straight at Nigel.

Looking at Ruslan now would ruin him. And Ruslan needed someone else now. He needed Snake, the crazy fighter, not Johnny, his fiancé, not the new, better version of him.

“If I beat up your so-called fighters, you let him walk,” he said in a single breath.

Nigel began laughing hysterically. Long moments passed until he stopped, and then, he took his time, pulling out a handkerchief and wiping his tears. “Ah, Johnny, Johnny, Johnny,” he said with false affection, “now that’s what I call an interesting deal indeed. And that’s also what I call having your cake and eating it, too. I’ll have you wrecked so badly. As for Ruslan, if you die, he’ll be all mine to do as I please. Maybe I’ll kill him. Maybe I’ll fuck him first, and then kill him. Maybe I’ll keep him. Ah, so many possibilities,” he said with a long sigh.

“Do you have any idea who Ruslan’s father is?” Johnny asked, searching Nigel’s face for any sign of surprise.

The grin faded in an instant. “That Russian mobster? He’ll learn his place once he knows I have his son.”

That was good to know. It meant Ruslan was safe, at least from being killed by Nigel in a reckless suicidal gesture. But he could not live with just that. There was no way of telling what was in Nigel’s head. His eyes were a bit manic, his laughter was nervous, and overall, he looked

like he was about to come undone. Nigel was in a bad place, and crazy people in bad places spelled danger in capital letters.

No, that wasn't enough to know for sure that Nigel wouldn't hurt Ruslan. Johnny had barely met Vladimir. The man was clearly some big shot, but this wasn't his turf. So he needed to put it all on one card and play it with every bone, and muscle, and fiber of his being.

"So, you're not afraid?" Johnny asked with a smirk. A well-placed fist from the man with the measles marks on his face made him work his jaw. "If you want a show, you shouldn't mess me up too badly. It would be bad for business if I go down from the first round, right?"

Johnny was carefully fishing for information. He needed details about the environment, about what Nigel had in mind. He could rely on his senses only this much, given that he was tied up and the dull pain pulsing at the base of his skull wasn't helping, either. If Nigel just wanted to have fun killing him, he didn't need Johnny in a ring. There was something there he needed to find out.

"I guess you have a point," Nigel said and smiled.

The guy's left eye was twitching. He was putting on a big show of keeping it together, but on the inside, Nigel was a wreck. Johnny knew that could be an advantage, but also a big problem. There was no way of telling what Nigel would do.

"So, big audience?" Johnny continued.

Nigel grinned. "All set. Just let me put it like this, Johnny. The bets will go about how long you'll keep standing. Not if you win. That's not going to happen."

"I have conditions," Johnny said.

A lot of witnesses meant lousy planning. It was one aspect he was counting on.

"Do you think you're in any position to ask for that kind of thing?" Nigel expressed his surprise.

"I want to see Ruslan there. I want him there. I want to see him walk when I win."

Nigel made an annoyed gesture, but in a second, his face lit up with another ugly smile. "I suppose I could have him watch you die. It would be fitting."

Johnny could feel again that something that he could not put his finger on. "Why?"

"Well, let's call it a bit of sentimentalism on my part. My father had my mother watch while he killed your deadbeat dad."

Johnny could feel all his blood rushing to his feet. But he kept his bearings. "And then what did he do? Did he kill your mother, too?"

Nigel moved his head so fast that Johnny could swear he heard bones cracking. He decided to put more pressure on the wound. “Is that why you offed your daddy? Did he tell you what he did?”

It was a shot in the dark.

“Shut the fuck up! You know nothing!”

Johnny hadn’t known until now. It was all clear. But he could not think of his dad now. The only thing he could do was to focus on saving Ruslan, and that was all.

“Maybe I don’t,” he said and tried to lean back into his chair as much as the ties allowed him. “Are you going to keep me like this until this show of yours starts?”

Nigel smiled, pleased with himself now. “It will be your show, Snake.” He spat Johnny’s ring moniker with disgust.

But there was something else in Nigel’s voice, and that was fear. It was something Johnny knew all too well, and he had seen it in plenty of men who stood their ground and were better people in every way than this scumbag. But fear, the great equalizer, was in the cards, and Johnny was trying to find ways to capitalize on that.

“What should I expect? How many scumbags do you have lined up for me?”

“Enough to see you down. I’ll have your pretty lover watch you bleed to death. It will be my pleasure. Put on a great show, and I might let him live.”

“You’ll let him live, or his daddy will eat your heart for breakfast.”

Nigel’s manic laughter returned. He was hiccupping, making strange sounds that even his men were watching him warily. Good. If it was any doubt in them about who their boss was, that was good.

“I might,” Nigel admitted. “But he might not be exactly whole when I’m done with him. I might take a souvenir from him, something that will remember him of knowing me, more than I’ll remember him. His pinky, maybe?” He appeared to ponder over his choice.

Johnny wasn’t scared. He knew that Nigel could be crazy enough to harm Ruslan, fuck the consequences, but he could not allow himself to feel fear over that. There was only one thing to focus on, and Nigel lucked out. All his life, Johnny had done nothing but fight. The ring was his life, and Johnny was good at surviving. Right now, he fought for something more important, or better said, someone.

His eyes didn’t look for Ruslan. His decision was taken. He stared at Nigel. “Say, Nigel, do you want that show or not? Untie me.”

“And let you have a swing at me? I’m not stupid.”

Nigel looked at him as if he was trying to read him.

“There are three men with you in this room only. And more outside, right? So I can’t do a thing.”

Nigel shifted from one foot to another. “Later. Now say buh-bye to your fiancé.”

Johnny could not avoid his eyes as Ruslan was pushed into him into an awkward position. By what he could tell, his lover was tied up, too.

“What? You don’t want to kiss him?”

Johnny looked at Ruslan only for a second. “You make sure he’s there and in one piece. Leave the rest to me. And don’t forget your fucking promise. If I win, he walks.”

“Fine,” Nigel said with an exaggerated sigh. “And if you don’t, he dies.”

Johnny could feel his teeth clamping together hard. “I thought you had other plans.”

“I changed my mind,” Nigel shrugged. “I feel like you need proper motivation. Maybe you’re right. It’s my show, after all. And no one ruins my party. Also, don’t worry. Once you’re down, you’ll see him die. I won’t let you go without knowing I kept my promise.”

Fucking crazies, Johnny thought. A slight hope was that maybe Vladimir’s goons were looking for them right now. He needed to buy time. “How long until your so-called show?”

“Are in a hurry to get somewhere? Don’t worry; you won’t be late.” Nigel laughed at his own bad jokes.

There were only a few snickers from the others. They played nice for the boss, but Nigel’s position was shaky. That was also something Johnny counted on.

Johnny stared at his hands, his focus tunneled and quiet. There were old scabs and marks on them. With his two hands, he had bought so many days for himself throughout his life. To think that it all came down to that, to his two hands.

For once, there was something precious he held in them, much more precious than his sorry ass. He would win tonight, through any means necessary. Not only his hands, his entire body, and mind would fight for that, to keep Ruslan safe.

“Let’s go.” One of Nigel’s goons gestured for him to move.

Johnny stood up and shed off his shirt.

“Trying to be a wiseass?” The man asked.

“I don’t need it anymore.”

It wasn’t like Nigel had thought about giving him some gear to fight in it. Without any extra words, he took off his shoes and his socks. The goon was staring at him like he could not make sense of what Johnny was doing.

He needed to feel the ground under his feet. Also, the fewer clothes he had on, the better. It meant that his opponent didn’t have much to grab on and put him down.

“Are you going to give me some gloves?” Johnny put his hands up.

“No gloves,” the man said curtly. “Move your ass already.”

For the last hours, Johnny had been left to his designs in a small room, and he had used it to warm up properly, get his entire body loose and ready. Everything he knew now came to help him. He might not leave Nigel’s ring alive, but he wouldn’t be defeated.

The man took him through what seemed like a labyrinth of narrow corridors. They were somewhere, under ground level. But, as he began to hear the roaring and excitement he knew so long from so many other fights, they began to climb a flight of stairs.

Johnny took in everything. His senses were all on high alert, and his mind was registering every smell, sound, and visual cue, preparing him.

He had heard before of heightened focus; something fighters felt when they were in the zone. They had this state of mind they had to thank for their biggest victories. Johnny had thought it all a bit of mumbo-jumbo. People often needed to make something magical and spiritual of the crucial moments of their lives. But right now, Johnny stood corrected. Never in his life had he felt so calm inside, ready to get through anything, be it hell or high water.

The intense light that hit his eyes the moment he was out of the corridor and into the ring area didn’t assault him like it sometimes happened. Nothing worried him now. The time could stand still, and he wouldn’t care.

Johnny put one foot in front of the other, climbing the ring, passing through the ropes, without paying attention to anything. Jumping up and down a little, he tested the ground underneath his feet. Then he searched with his eyes for his enemy.

Nigel sat on one side, apparently not particularly concerned with having a good view of the ring. He was sitting with his back against the wall, maybe knowing, on some primitive level, that he was far from being safe. Next to him, Ruslan was sitting, too, a goon keeping him. He still had that rope stuffing his mouth, and his head was hung low, his eyes staring down.

Johnny walked close to the ropes, on Nigel's side. The audience was already on their feet, shouting and throwing the usual profanities. Johnny ignored it all. "I want him close to the door. Not here."

Nigel stared at him, amused. Johnny's voice had been loud enough, but over all the noise, maybe it couldn't be heard so well. "I said," he shouted, "I want him close to the door!"

Eventually, Nigel made a sign for the goon holding Ruslan to come to him. After a short order, the man grabbed Ruslan and dragged him over to what looked to be an exit. Johnny had a good angle to see it. That was all he needed.

He nodded shortly and walked toward the center of the ring. He only had his pants on, part of some designer suit Ruslan had insisted he should wear. It would have been better to have only a pair of shorts on. Also, a pair of gloves. But it didn't matter. This way, he would do more damage, no matter the damage he would do to himself, too.

Johnny began to roll up his pants with measured moves, completely deaf to the noises around him. The promise of blood was making the spectators delirious. Johnny had no eyes, nor ears, for any of that.

Some announcer talked excitedly, probably introducing the so-called opponents. Johnny heard him say something about 'fight to the death' which made the crowd erupt. He knew whose death they were talking about. But that wasn't on his mind. It was just another thought of no consequence. It was under lock and key, and Johnny wouldn't look at it.

He waited calmly, his fists clamped down hard, by his sides. Adrenaline, pure like holy water, coursed through his veins.

The first fighter to climb into the ring looked like small time fish. Johnny understood it all now. They would seek to tire him before throwing some heavy hitters into the fight. That meant he needed to be efficient and conserve his energy.

He took in the man sent to the slaughter. Johnny could feel no empathy about what he would do. Some time ago, he had been like that. And now, for the only thing that mattered to him in the whole world, he would be that again.

The whistle was the only cue he needed. He waited calmly for the man to approach him. He was young, someone probably trying to make it up the ladder in whatever organization Nigel was running. *There would be no ladder for you to climb. Sorry, kid.*

His right fist erupted, hitting his opponent into his right temple, almost crushing the hand raised too late in defense. The young man fell to the ground as if the rug was pulled from under his feet. The noise died down. Even the announcer had trouble finding his words. Johnny walked over to

the fallen man, grabbed him by one arm, and pulled him toward the ropes. Using one foot, he pushed him down, making him fall at Nigel's feet.

"Next," he said.

Nigel's pupils were dilated. Even a few feet away, Johnny could make the white of his eyes. The man was in shock, even if he was clever enough not to admit it verbally.

Someone moved behind him, and Johnny sensed the air shifting. One fraction of a second late and he would have been hit in the neck. Just in time, he caught the attacker's stretched palm, most probably ready to apply some karate move. Without blinking, he closed his fist over the man's hand, until he heard bones cracking, and their owner howling in pain.

This one he didn't need to throw at Nigel's feet. He scurried away, nursing his crushed hand, and shrieking like a wounded animal, the moment Johnny let him free. The crowd shot to its feet, the noise deafening. Johnny searched the ring with his eyes. What would they throw at him next?

Ah, they were upping the ante. From two different angles, two men who looked stronger than the first contenders began to circle him. Johnny noted their hyena-like faces and kept his cool. Who would be first to attack? They moved a lot, trying to confuse him.

In any fight, Johnny knew well, there was a calculation of sorts any fighter had. Some kicks you can't avoid. But don't let the sum of them bring you down. He let the one to the left bruise his arm but turned on his heels just in time to hit the other square in the face, making blood shoot out of his nose like a gory fountain.

The other tried to aim for his head, but Johnny ducked fast and took his legs in one swift move. How many amateurs would they bring in? He kicked the man down into his stomach, making the eyes bulge in his head and then turn to one side heaving and coughing. This was a battle with no rules. He had no gods to keep him accounted for his actions now.

Some other men came to take away the fallen fighters. Johnny rested against the ropes, his back to Nigel. It was a bold move, he knew, seemingly ignoring his enemy like that. But he wanted to know when the real fight would begin. There was ruckus on the opposite side, and Johnny could tell some of those who had first enthusiastically subscribed to have a piece of him were having second thoughts now.

"Who else?" Johnny shouted, raising his arms.

They would send in the heavy artillery now. The sooner, the better. Ruslan's freedom hung in the balance. Nigel might not have believed him before when Johnny told him he would win, but seeing the truth might make him break his promise.

Finally, a man who looked like a real fighter, dressed up in gear to prove it, climbed into the ring. A heavyweight, Johnny evaluated him.

“I’ll fight you,” the man said shortly.

This one was a real danger. Johnny could tell. The man was sullen, not one ounce of bravado in his eyes. He was calculating, deciding his first move, not rushing in like the idiots before him.

“Come at me,” Johnny challenged him.

The man didn’t budge. He calmly assumed a stance that told Johnny right away he was dealing with an experienced fighter this time around. The only thing Johnny could see as an upside for him was that the fighter looked older, somewhere well into his forties. But Johnny had fought Martin many times while training to know that age was not automatically a drawback if the man still had his wits about him and knew how to use his experience to his advantage.

For seconds, they stared at each other. Johnny knew one of them had to move, and soon. Dragging this was not in his favor, and the other knew it. Douglas’s words rang into his mind, reminding him that he needed to step into the other’s space more if he wanted to be more efficient.

But how? The other fighter was holding his guard up, in perfect form, and was staring at him over his gloves.

“Are we going to sit here all day?” someone from the audience yelled.

Snickers and whistles poured from all directions. The crowd was booing. Johnny would not have cared for that type of pressure before, but this was different. As unorthodox as that was, he appeared to give in and moved.

As expected, the fighter dodged his move. But Johnny hadn’t put all his weight into it, so he had enough time and memento to steer clear of the kick that followed. The man’s fist met nothing by air.

Now wasn’t the time to give his opponent a breather. Johnny grabbed the opportunity and launched a kick with his left, even though he was in no position to put all his strength behind it. That was enough for the other fighter to block it.

Johnny took one step back. He was getting close to the ropes, and he knew that was a dangerous move. Suddenly, something hit him from behind. He jerked away and stepped aside so that he could see his invisible opponent.

The ugly man from before was grinning at him. Johnny had no time to deal with him. He needed to stay away from the ropes. It was a lawless fight, so that meant that he could expect anything from Nigel and his posse.

He moved toward the center where the other fighter was waiting for him. The crowd was booing, apparently annoyed with all the stalling.

It wasn't Johnny's style to be desperate. But this was the hand he had been dealt, and there was no other. He needed to use his superior strength to dominate the situation. He moved toward the other, assaulting him, tying him up, and striking him to the head while ignoring how the man's well-aimed punches rained on his sides.

Without one smidge of regret, Johnny pushed himself back enough to have the force to put into a knee to the man's belly. The man doubled over, taken by surprise, and Johnny used punches and kicks to bring him down.

Fast, fast, fast. That was all he could think of. Fighters of this man's caliber could not be easy to find. Many fighting locally were still loyal to Efige. So Nigel could not have many aces up his sleeve. The faster he got rid of such difficult opponents, the better. He also aimed at destroying his enemy's confidence and his acolytes' morale.

Caught up in destroying his opponent, he lost sight of the bigger picture for a moment. The man twisted his body fast and hit Johnny so hard and quick in the face that his head snapped back.

Johnny staggered but got back to his senses right away. However, the punch that followed almost knocked his lights out. That eye would swell. Funny thing, Johnny thought, to worry about such a thing when it wouldn't take too long for him to be dead once the fight was over.

The fight wasn't over, though. *Go away*, he told his thoughts and put his guard up once more. The next punch made him shake on his feet, but this time, he was prepared. The man before him was a good fighter, but his stamina could not be as good as Johnny's. He must have put all he got into that.

Johnny took advantage. While the man's fist was still far from withdrawing, his own shot forward like a sling, hitting the man right in the chin, making him take a few awkward steps back and fall on his back with a thud.

"Snake! Snake! Snake!" the crowd chanted now.

There was no time to celebrate. But having the audience on his side served an important purpose, and Johnny knew it. He waved toward the crowd, and then hurried to the side from where Nigel watched.

The man was short of starting to eat his hanky.

"Any others? Do you have any others?"

Nigel gestured for one of his men to come closer. Johnny felt unease creeping in. What would happen next? There was movement again, and this time, there were many people climbing the ring.

Johnny's eyes shot frantically around. Too many. There were just too many. This wasn't a fair fight, just how many fucking times did he have to tell that to himself? Growling low in his chest, he grabbed the man closest to him and head-butted him, sending him over the ropes without leaving him one chance to fight back.

One jumped on his back, but Johnny just grabbed the hands keeping him, twisting the fingers backward, and began turning around, using that opponent as a human cannonball. When he sent that one flying, taking another with him, the crowd cheered.

There were still so many. Johnny could feel his breath coming in short. There was no time to be gassing out now. He withdrew to one corner and focused on his breathing. Two men hurried toward him, but he grabbed them both by the necks, ignoring their kicks and punches and smashed their heads together, letting them fall at his feet.

The others were watching him warily. The force was in numbers, but these people were too stupid to see it, which was just Johnny's fucking luck. On one side of the ring, Johnny was standing, looking at them, taking no step toward them, but making them, nonetheless, to take one back.

The crowd was singing his nickname, urging him to finish them all off.

The row of would-be fighters broke to leave one coming forward. Johnny's could feel his temples throbbing. So there was, after all, one ace up Nigel's sleeve that he just now threw into the fight.

The cockroach. Johnny had the experience of fighting the man. However, what happened before had nothing in common with the current situation. This one was tough, and even without mind games, he was still dangerous, and Johnny knew it.

"Are you guys afraid of this bitch?" the cockroach sneered and put his guard up.

Johnny knew he needed to take him out and fast. Vallejo was no easy feat on his own, but with an army to keep his back, he could be tricky to beat.

He, too, put his fists up. There was no time to think about the pain, the raw pain coming in waves from where he hit with bare fists the others before.

"Let's get him," Vallejo spat, and the others moved at the same time.

Johnny had no time to think about his next move. His eyes set on his main opponent, he jumped. His fist connected with Vallejo's forehead. The man stood his ground, but it didn't matter. Johnny wasn't counting on that hit to take down his opponent. But he counted on bringing him down, by pushing against him with his entire body.

They were both on the floor now, and Johnny pressed hard, sneaking his hands so that he could circle the man's neck from beneath. The strong muscles under his fingers weren't giving in, but Johnny knew a thing or two about human anatomy, to find that place that no muscles could protect. His thumbs began closing down fast over Vallejo's windpipe, pressing.

The others were on him, kicking him, punching him, but Johnny didn't feel a thing. His eyes bore into his opponent, and Vallejo was starting to realize he had miscalculated. The fighter's face was turning fast into a deep red, then a tinge of blue.

Johnny had once sworn he would never go through this again, the knowledge that he had taken a life, with the utmost certainty. But he might have already crossed that line tonight, so nothing mattered anymore.

His head was pulled back sharply, and he couldn't breathe. Someone had put a bag over his head, blocking his vision, and leaving him without air.

Against himself, his body moved on its own, his grasp on Vallejo's neck waning. Soon he was on his back, and a rain of hits was pelting his entire body from all sides. He moved his hands quickly to his face, his blunt nails trying to dig into the bag over his head and tear it apart.

"Let him watch me while I kill him!" He heard someone shouting.

The bag was pulled from his head, and just then, a punch landed straight into the middle of his face. His nose had to be broken, he thought for a fraction of a second, and putting all his strength into his kick, he raised one leg fast. It hit something, and that was all that mattered. The scream that followed told Johnny it had landed where he wanted, too.

He pulled his knees to his chest, rolled and jumped to his feet. Vallejo was on the ground, grabbing his groin and bawling like a baby. Without a word, Johnny pushed aside the others around him and hit Vallejo in the head with his feet, over and over again.

At the same time, he was using his arms to push the others who were trying to get him. The man's face beneath his feet was turning into a tumefied mass, and soon there was movement only because Johnny continued to hit it.

With blood in his eyes, he turned toward the rest. In a frenzy, he began to punch and kick, without thinking, without strategizing, wanting, needing to get to the end of it all, to see them all dead, finished, at his feet.

The men around him tried to hit him, but Johnny was beyond caring about anything at this point. Each punch and kick he landed, there were sounds of bones cracking, shouts, and desperate cries.

The crowd was threatening to bring down the house. Around Johnny, there was a circle of bodies, some of them still moving, but no one else was standing.

Barely breathing, sweat and blood getting in his eyes, Johnny moved toward the ropes once more.

“Make him walk! I want to see him walk!”

“Johnny!” he heard someone calling for him desperately. “Johnny!”

He knew that voice. He knew that voice so well. Why did they let his mouth free now? It would have been better if they had just kicked Ruslan out the door with that improvised gag still keeping him quiet.

He dreaded that. But he needed that, just the same. He looked over, at Ruslan who was calling for him, the goon still keeping him. Without a word, he raised his right fist and tapped his chest. He held his fist to the heart while watching the love of his life, already so far away from him.

But the goon didn't seem to care that he needed to let Ruslan go. Johnny turned his attention on Nigel and saw him laughing.

Without a moment to think it over, Johnny jumped over the ropes and was all over Nigel. The man was like a puppet in his arms. Soon, his strength would leave him, but there was still enough for this. “Do you wanna know how I got my nickname?” he whispered into Nigel's ear while cutting his air supply. “Do you wanna know why they call me Snake?”

The man with measles marks on his face pulled out a gun and held it to his head. Johnny grinned.

“Pull that trigger, and who knows what might happen? Your boss might end up dead, anyway.”

The goon seemed to waver.

“Just make him walk!” Johnny shouted. “Make him walk!”

“Make him walk! Make him walk!” The crowd began to chant, at this point probably not knowing what it was saying, but part of a collective mind that was there only to echo the words of its champion.

Nigel was starting to flail his arms. The goon with the gun made a sign for the other holding Ruslan. Johnny watched as the man at the door pulled Ruslan away and disappeared from view.

The next second, the butt of a pistol hit him at the base of his skull. These guys had a thing for that.

The goon dragging him was strong, and Ruslan had decided to quit struggling a long time ago. But right now, there was too much at stake. The tears were drying on his face. “Just let me the fuck go already!” he shouted.

The goon laughed. “Do you really think that’s going to happen, pretty boy? The boss has big plans with you.”

“He promised Johnny!”

“No shit,” the goon replied.

Ruslan stared down. Bad thinking on them to tie his hands in front this time. Beside the self-defense lessons, Johnny had taught him many other things. Throughout that horrible match, he had silently worked on making the ties go loose, little by little.

Without a word, he stepped the goon on one foot hard. “What the fuck?” the man yelled.

Ruslan turned fast and didn’t hesitate. With both hands clasped into a tight fist, he punched the man in one eye. The goon stumbled, and Ruslan hurried, pulling one arm free, grabbing the man’s gun and hitting his temple.

Without looking back, he began running. He needed backup and needed it fast.

The long corridor led into a street, and Ruslan breathed in the evening air like his lungs had been deprived of air for hours. To his left, he noticed a more crowded street. He ran in that direction. A few passersby looked at him and moved away.

“What street is this?” he yelled at one of them.

A homeless resting against the wall yelled back at him what he needed to know. Without hesitation, Ruslan grabbed a man’s phone while the guy was still talking on it.

“Hey!” The man yelled at him, but Ruslan ran away while punching in the numbers.

“Yanis!” he yelled into the phone. “I need you! It’s Johnny! It’s Johnny!”

He collapsed next to a wall while still talking to Yanis. It would take Yanis less than twenty minutes to get there. Twenty minutes Johnny didn’t have.

Chapter Nineteen – I Never Lose

Johnny woke up to water being thrown in his face. Again. These dudes needed to vary their routine a little. They were starting to bore him to death. The thought made him laugh; he was damned sure it wasn't boredom that would kill him. His fate was sealed, so the least he could do was laugh about it.

“Why the hell are you laughing?” Nigel asked him.

“Because I won,” Johnny replied.

His entire body hurt. Well, soon he wouldn't hurt anywhere, and that, unfortunately, was no comforting thought.

“Seriously? You think you won?” Nigel laughed.

Johnny didn't like that. “Ruslan walked away free. I don't care about any other shit.”

“Really? Not even your mother? The sick one?”

“Ruslan will take care of her,” Johnny said with conviction.

“What makes you think we haven't already taken care of her?”

Johnny knew a bluff when he saw it. The personnel at the sanitarium where his mother was kept had clear instructions to let him know as soon as something happened. So he just shrugged. He and Ruslan had only been kidnapped for half a day at best. It was hard to believe that Nigel had thought Johnny's mom to be a priority during that time.

“Well, Ruslan won't take care of her, either.”

Johnny stared intently at his enemy, and now he saw no bluff. His insides turned. Could it be that it had all been in vain? “You promised, you fucking scumbag.”

“Well, he walked, but where, I didn't say, right?” Nigel said with satisfaction, but he put one hand up to massage his neck.

Johnny felt a bit of satisfaction at that. But now he could not think of that. “What did you do to him, asshole?”

“I did promise you that you will watch him die. Well, maybe I exaggerated a little. Ruslan Kent is solid gold, so I had to send him somewhere safe. You see, it would be a shame to kill him, indeed. His papa, his real papa, will pay handsomely to get him back.”

“How come you know of Ruslan's dad? We barely found out today.”

“My father dealt in secrets. This one was one of them. Let’s leave it at that. I don’t have time to chitchat.”

At least, Ruslan would be okay. Nigel wasn’t suicidal, after all. Johnny waited, trying hard to push down the bile rising in his throat. What a hero he was.

“Now,” Nigel flexed his fingers, “I believe the moment is ripe to exact my revenge.”

Johnny didn’t steel himself for the first blow, or the second. There was no point in acting tough.

“What, no comeback?” Nigel spat at him.

“I’m tied up, asshole,” Johnny mumbled, his mouth filled with blood from where his teeth scraped the inside of his cheek. “Untie me, and I’ll show you comeback.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Nigel made little sense at times. “Want to strangle me? Show me why you’re called Snake?”

“I could’ve killed you.” Johnny smiled, despite all the pain radiating now from all the places he had been hit earlier that evening. “Be thankful for Ruslan. Kill him and prepare for his daddy to make you shish-kebab.”

“Well, all in due time. I’ll teach that Russian asshole he doesn’t rule these streets. Now, where was I? Ah, I think I want to tear you limb from limb. And I mean it literally.”

Johnny would have had a witty comeback to that, but Nigel’s goons moved and untied him, only to pull him to his feet, keeping him so that their boss could hit Johnny in the stomach.

“You’re tickling me,” Johnny said.

He could not double over if he wanted, that tightly those assholes were keeping him. Making Nigel madder was not wise, but this man in front of him was no calculated killer. He could take long to bring him down. Johnny wasn’t sure he wanted it to last. Getting Nigel to finish him off fast was no cowardice in his book.

But there was still Ruslan on his mind, and knowing he hadn’t saved his lover was pulling him back. Johnny didn’t want to think that there was nothing he could do now. He knew it to be the truth; maybe he had bought time for Ruslan, and that was all. Yet, knowing also that it wasn’t enough was tearing him apart on the inside much more than anything Nigel could do to him.

What was that saying, that hope died last? He had it, and he felt stupid for it. If Ruslan’s father caught wind of this, he would rush to save his son, not him. So no one was coming for him, and he just needed to leave it at that.

Nigel was breathing heavily, with each punch. That man was a lightweight. “How is it now, huh? How is it? Doesn’t it hurt?”

“Told ya,” Johnny pushed the words through his teeth with difficulty. “Can’t feel a thing.”

“Boss, let us deal with him,” one of the goons said.

“No. He’s mine! Put him down. I’m going to break his arms and legs, let’s see if he’s laughing then.”

Johnny pushed against the two goons trying to put him down. He managed one punch that sent one of them flying, but the other hit him hard in the temple, making him fall.

And, as he fell, his imagination chose that very moment to play tricks on him. He could swear he saw the door fly open and someone coming in. It wasn’t Ruslan, though, coming for him. That would have been weird. He was supposed to be the hero, not the other way around. Still, it wouldn’t have been as weird as seeing Yanis’s face as the last thing he ever saw in his mortal life.

Johnny groaned and reached for something, without any idea what. He had a vague recollection of being in and out for a long time, with people in white getting busy around him. Where the hell was he? Some hospital? That was good news. It meant he survived.

What about Ruslan? That thought alone was enough to jolt him awake. He was still disoriented when he opened his eyes, with much difficulty. There was too much light, and it appeared that he had no use for one eye.

“Man, you look like shit,” he heard someone speaking.

His only good eye found the person talking. He groaned, trying to say something.

“Here, some water.” Yanis hurried to put a glass to his lips. “Don’t worry, you’re whole, in case you’re wondering. The nurse told me you might have problems talking, from all the meds you’re on. Man, you must be high as a kite right now.”

His tongue was heavy in his mouth, but he was starting to move it. He pointed at what he felt to be a missing eye.

Yanis took the cue. “Just a bit of TLC needed for that one. No major surgery or anything. Damn, I wish I had been there to see you beat the shit out of all those assholes.”

With some difficulty, Johnny managed to lift one hand and give Yanis the finger. Yanis gave him back a toothy grin. “Really, dude? I carried you bridal style out of there. Anya would kill me if she knew. That’s the only thing she’s got over everyone else. At least that’s what she keeps telling me.”

Johnny wanted so much to ask so many things. But one was more important than all the others. He managed to gesture for the glass of water, and Yanis helped him to it again. “Ruslan?” he asked, the name of his lover muffled and strange in his mouth.

Yanis made a face and looked down. What the hell? Johnny thought. That couldn’t be. It would have been fate’s cruelest twist for him to be all right, and Ruslan ... He wouldn’t go there. He made an impatient gesture.

“What can I tell you, man?” Yanis pushed both hands through his hair. “He came to watch you every day. Through that window.” He pointed at a side window. “Every day.”

“Where is he?” Johnny asked with difficulty.

“Gone,” Yanis said. “To Russia,” he added quickly, seeing Johnny waving desperately.

Johnny breathed out in relief. As soon as he got better, he would kick the shit out of Yanis. Maybe after kissing him first for saving his sorry ass, or before. He wasn’t particular about the order. “When? Back,” he said impatiently.

Yanis shook his head and looked down again. “I don’t know what to tell you, man. He didn’t say.”

Johnny felt his blood, as little as he must have had left, freezing in his veins. Could it be that Ruslan’s father decided to grab his son and leave, seeing how unsafe it was for him where he lived all his life? Johnny now knew he needed to go to Russia, too, somehow.

“His dad,” he said.

Yanis nodded. “Yeah, the real one. Man, I’m telling you, but don’t tell anyone. I almost shat my pants when I saw that guy. I was just saving your ass, feeling all heroic and shit, and here he comes.”

Johnny made a gesture for Yanis to continue, seeing how he fell silent.

“From afar, I thought it was Ruslan. And I was kind of pissed because I told him to wait outside and get busy calling an ambulance and all that. The guy comes closer, some scary dudes by his sides, and all, and when I’m about to talk, he just looks at me and makes me freeze on the spot. Don’t worry; I didn’t drop you or anything. Well, I wasn’t exactly carrying you in my arms, what did you think? How much do you weigh? Two hundred pounds or something?”

Johnny waved one arm impatiently.

“Anyway. He just asks, in this foreign accent, where the scumbag is, and I just point at the door behind me. My boys had been at work before, making that Nigel dude understand he messed with the wrong people. He was still there, probably rethinking his life’s priorities. So I can’t

resist, and I leave you to my mates so that I can go after him. I knew the guy was important, all dressed up like that and shit. Of course, I was still in shock seeing how much like Ruslan he looked. So I go, and I better didn't."

Yanis made a small pause, for dramatic effect, or maybe he was indeed, still shaken just recounting the events. "Johnny, my dude, I'd never seen someone executed in my life. That's also between you and me. Nigel barely has time to get on his knees to beg, and goes like 'Mr. Petrovsky', and boom, the guy pulls out a gun and sends a bullet straight through his head from up close. Then he puts one in his groin. I think I squealed or something. And Ruslan's dad just turns towards me, shrugs and says something like 'sending message'. These exact words. And he smiles. Can you believe it? He smiles at me while one of his men is busy taking his gun and the glove from his hand, packing it like it needs to be sent to dry cleaning or something."

Johnny could not say he was as surprised as Yanis. Nigel's death meant nothing to him, anyway. It was only one person he needed to hear about. "Ruslan," he asked again.

Yanis grimaced as if he was dissatisfied with having his story dismissed like that, but then reached into his pocket and took out a folded piece of paper. "He wrote you a letter."

Johnny stood still. His hand was refusing to take that letter from Yanis. There was something wrong there. Why would Ruslan write a letter? Maybe just a phone number so that Johnny could reach him, and he could have had Yanis transmit that straight to his phone or something. They had to have phones in Russia, right?

His mind was turning stupid. Right now, he feared what that letter contained, and that was weird because he was never afraid.

"Do you want me to read it to you?" Yanis asked.

The decision was taken for him. He snatched the letter from Yanis's stretched hand and hardly resisted to make it a ball into his fist. This wasn't right or fair. With careful moves, he opened it.

Johnny, there is no right way to start this, so I'm going to tell you everything that's been on my mind ever since I watched you, lying on a hospital bed, gone from the world.

I broke my promise to your mom. I failed to take care of you. And I acted stupid, like a spoiled kid when I should have known better.

My father, yes, my real one, wants me to go with him for a while. I asked him if he could keep me forever, and he said 'yes'.

I wish I had words to tell you how much I'm sorry about everything. If I hadn't been so stupid, none of these would have happened. Now Yanis tells me you're on the mend, so I decided not to come anymore. I would not bear for you to look at me, knowing what I did. That's the horrible thought I have to live with for the rest of my days. I promised your mom. And I failed her. And

you. There is no nice way to say this. I don't even have a proper excuse, just that I was pissed at my real father.

I hope that when you read this letter, you'll say 'good riddance' and go back to your life. Your mom is safe. My father insisted on moving her to another place where she could get the best care available. Don't worry about a thing; it's all taken care of. I also left you some money. I hope there's enough until you get back on your feet. It's all in an account in your name. Yanis will give you the details, too.

It's better like this. Without me, you would have never ended up like this, almost dead, maybe maimed for life. I hate to tell you goodbye, but I could only bring you pain. I know you don't care to hear this now, at the end of this letter, but I'll always love you, and I hope you'll meet someone that will make you truly happy, without ever putting you in harm's way, as I did.

Goodbye, Johnny. I'll never love again, but that's okay.

Johnny crumpled the piece of paper into his hands. This could not be. Ruslan could not do this to him. "Fucking coward," he said through his teeth.

"Yeah. That's exactly what I told him," Yanis confirmed. "I knew you would be mad. But he's a stubborn mofa when he wants to be."

"Do you know his address in Russia?" Slowly, Johnny gained more and more control over his voice.

Yanis shook his head. "His dad, the mobster one, wants to be hush-hush about everything. Or, at least, that's what Ruslan told me. He also said that he'd get in touch with me, but he didn't say when. Man, I'm telling you. He broke up with you with a letter, but he broke up with me in person. And it sucked big time."

Johnny threw Yanis a pointed look.

Yanis threw his arms to his sides. "As a friend. He broke up with me as a friend. That's what I meant. Geesh, between you and Anya, I swear that even if I take a vow of celibacy and become a monk, you'd still suspect me."

Johnny wished he could taste Yanis's joke, at this point. But nothing seemed right, and it didn't look like it would ever be again. His body didn't hurt, or maybe he couldn't feel it. But there was a claw squeezing his heart hard on the inside, not letting him breathe.

"Look at the bright side, man," Yanis said and patted him on one forearm. "You got me. You can always hang out with my buddies and me."

Johnny just nodded without even looking at Yanis. His mind was empty. How could Ruslan do that to him? Why? After all that? After putting his life on the line for him? How could he?

It was a good thing he was on meds. He was in the mood to trash the room, and maybe beat up a few people in the meantime. As he was, he could not do a thing and being so helpless fucking sucked.

“I’ll come to see you every day,” Yanis said.

Johnny waved with one hand. “Don’t bother.”

“I promised Ruslan,” Yanis replied.

“And? What’s he to you?”

Yanis cast his eyes down. “Point taken, Johnny. But you’re my friend. Whether you like it or not.”

“I don’t,” Johnny spat, knowing it wasn’t right to take it out on Yanis like that.

“Tough luck,” Yanis said back. “It’s enough Ruslan ran away to Russia. Where are you going to run away?”

Johnny knew Yanis had a point. Hadn’t he been so pissed, he would have seen how right he was. But, right now, Johnny couldn’t give a rat’s ass about anything.

Yanis didn’t insist. “I’ll come. Until you’re released. Then we’ll talk. And maybe we’ll find a way to get a hold of Ruslan. Fuck him. He can’t run away from us like that. I know, I know. I should have tied him up and kept him here until you were good. Then, if he had seen you, he would not have left you. I thought he was kidding, okay? That he’ll come back.”

“Yanis,” Johnny said. “You talk too damned much.”

Yanis grinned. “I have no idea what to do with scorned lovers.”

“For real? What about Anya?”

“Well, she’s a girl. Easier to deal with.”

“Why? Because she can’t punch your ugly mutt face?”

“If you can tell jokes, that means you’re better. I hope you’re not pissed I knew what was in the letter. Ruslan and I don’t exactly have secrets.”

“Except for where he is now.”

“Yeah.” Yanis hung his head low. “Except for that. But hey, it’s the twenty-first century. We’ll find a way to get a hold of him.”

“Be sure of that,” Johnny said solemnly. “He’s not getting rid of me. Now I need to find a place to live. And to get back in the ring.”

Yanis threw him an odd look.

“What?” Johnny asked.

“He left you the house. His. Also, like a ton of money. Well, not a ton, but plenty. Also, he made me promise I won’t let you fight anymore.”

Johnnys crossed his arms over his chest, ignoring the catheter lodged into the back of his hand. “Isn’t he full of it? What will you do?”

Yanis put his hands up. “I’m not keeping you from doing anything, man. And I told him you wouldn’t listen. Now here’s a thought. Maybe we could put you in a ring and make a fuss. You know; so that they hear it all the way to Russia.”

Johnny snorted. “I’ve never fought pro.”

“So?” Yanis counterattacked. “They have underground fights in Russia, I bet. Maybe you should go there and make a big name for yourself.”

“I thought I was on meds, not you.”

“And I thought people in love were crazy enough to do any crap crossing their minds.”

“That was your mind crapping. Maybe I still have half a brain,” Johnny joked.

Yanis laughed. “I’m glad to see you’re okay, man. And I told Ruslan I’d look after you until he’s back. Of course, he gave me a sad, puppy look, and that was all. I’m still taking care of you.”

“Now, watch it, Yanis. I might start making doe eyes at you if you continue to say sappy stuff like that,” Johnny replied.

“Stop it, man.” Yanis put his hands up. “I got enough crap from Anya about Ruslan. I promised her I’d be good.”

“Sure thing, man. Just pulling your leg.”

“Aren’t you in a good mood?” Yanis grinned.

“I got an idea. I’ll see to it. Also, yours wasn’t half bad.”

“Which one? I’m full of them.” Yanis puffed out his chest.

“You’ll know at the right time. And say, did he really leave me a lot of cash?”

“I think you’ll be able to live on that for about twenty years if you splurge. Like forty if you don’t. He practically sold everything and left it to you.”

“That’s a bit crazy,” Johnny said.

Yanis shrugged. “I thought he wanted to sell his kidneys to leave you more money.”

“Good thing he didn’t. I like him whole.”

“I bet you do.” Yanis was wiggling his eyebrows.

“You’re so damned lucky I’m like this. I’d kick your ass for this,” Johnny threatened, but without one ounce of bite in that.

“Just get well, asshole,” Yans said, and Johnny could swear he was quite affectionate while saying that.

“I will, fucker,” Johnny replied in kind.

If Ruslan thought he would just accept crappy goodbyes, he was damned wrong, Johnny thought, as he watched Yanis leave. Well, he needed to rest a little, but, after that, he would move his ass and find Ruslan. And when he found him, he would take him back, and get him to keep all his promises.

Ruslan sat at the table, the laughter and conversations around him muffled by the fact that he could not understand a thing. They didn’t speak a lot of English in that house, although the oldest son, Sergei, was quite versed in it, as he had, apparently, a passion for foreign languages, and even had a home tutor.

To say that he felt unwelcomed there would have been a lie. Ruslan’s mind had been in turmoil for the past weeks, and his decision to leave Johnny and everything he knew behind was still tormenting him. He would not go back, seeing how stupid he was and what kind of mess he could cause just by acting recklessly, but that didn’t mean that he didn’t miss Johnny like crazy.

His father’s wives, two of them, as he learned, had been pleased to see him, which had taken him completely by surprise. There was a warm atmosphere in that large mansion, despite the cold outside, and most of his siblings had been quite taken with him. Apparently, the fact that he looked so much like his biological father had made him an instant hit with them.

They were all going over backward to make sure he felt at home, so Ruslan felt guilty for being so gloomy all the time. Sergei had been quite interested in talking to him, and the three girls who Ruslan still had troubles telling them apart, as two were twins and the other was close to their age, had hinted, apparently, to their father that he should become a fashion model. There was a

lot of passion for fashion in the family, mainly manifested by the female part, which was the majority, so the girls really had a mind to drag him to some fashion shows where he could be scouted.

His father, of course, simply suggested that he could introduce Ruslan to the right people, but he had said 'no'. Seeing how disappointed his sisters were made him feel guilty twice. He had told everyone that he would prefer to continue his work in the field he chose, that of accounting. Vladimir had told him there were many things he could do, but, for now, just to enjoy being part of a big, happy family.

Ruslan had heard from Yanis about Nigel's death, but he could not bring himself to care. The fact that Vladimir could be a cold-blooded killer made it obvious why his grandfather had chosen to keep his real identity a secret.

That didn't mean he was over it. Not that he could blame Douglas of anything, in hindsight. He was in no position to blame anyone of anything. Because of him, the love of his life had been in real danger, and only fate made it possible that Johnny didn't die, and Yanis got there in time. And his father.

He sighed and placed his chin in his palm, without touching his food. Vladimir was watching him from across the table. Ruslan took his elbows from the table and grabbed his fork. There was no point in bringing everyone down with his melancholy.

After dinner, he chose the large balcony overlooking a dense forest, to nurse a drink and allow himself to be lost in thought. He was fiddling with his glass.

"You truly are mine," he heard Vladimir talking.

Ruslan half turned.

Vladimir pointed at his glass. "You like vodka."

Ruslan smiled. He couldn't bring himself to laugh. Not yet. Or maybe not ever. "I guess I should have wondered why I prefer it over other drinks."

Vladimir leaned against the balustrade and looked him in the eyes. The powerful lights illuminating the balcony, and the backyard made it easy to read into his father's eyes all he wanted to say.

Ruslan pretended not to see it. "When do you think I can start working? I know language is a barrier, but you promised you'd bring in a tutor. I guess numbers are the same in any language, though."

Vladimir shook his head slowly. "Not yet."

Ruslan sighed. “Don’t you want to save me from a life on the catwalk? My sisters are clearly bent on seeing me strut around, dressed up in fancy getups.”

Vladimir laughed. “My first born is very handsome. Everyone should see that.”

“Well, let’s just say that this type of life is not something I’m cut for,” Ruslan said dryly, but with the hint of a smile.

Any compliment coming from his father made his heart swell with pride. He wanted to keep himself from doing that, but Vladimir had showered him with his love every minute they shared. It was hard to remain gloomy and brooding when he was loved like that.

“Dad,” Ruslan said, “about that night, when my mother ran away ... Do you know why she didn’t come to you?”

Vladimir looked away. That had to be a painful memory, but Ruslan wanted to find out. “Your mother, Ruslan, was a very proud creature. I’ve never met one like her. All fire, not a drop of ice. She was almost ten years younger than me, you know? But I could not get her out of my head.”

Ruslan nodded. He was avid to hear everything about his mother.

“She knew a lot of people. Strange people,” Vladimir said and waved like he wanted to chase away flies. “From her mother’s side.”

“My grandmother,” Ruslan added. “That’s weird. How come Douglas could have a daughter? He was married to Martin, as you know.”

Vladimir shrugged. “It happened when Douglas was very young. Maybe he was confused,” he said with a small laugh. “But I’m glad he was. Because that’s how he had Melanie, and that’s how I have you, now, with me.”

“What about those strange people you’re telling me about?” Ruslan asked.

“They were like this.” Vladimir rubbed his chin in thought. “Like circus people. But with shows on stage. How do they say that? Burlesque,” he added, gesturing slowly, while images of a past life must have danced in front of his eyes.

“They were entertainers?”

“Yes, never in the same place twice. That was your grandmother, too. When she died, she sent Melanie to Douglas.”

“And how come Douglas accepted her? Just like that?”

“Your grandfather was a gentleman, Ruslan. He knew he screwed around with your grandmother. The moment fit with Melanie’s age. I don’t think he ever thought she wasn’t his. Or maybe that lawyer of his made sure to find out the truth.”

“How could he keep it from me?”

Vladimir sighed and put one arm around Ruslan’s shoulders. “He didn’t like me, son. He was right,” he added and smiled. “I was a bad boy. Who would want that as a son in law?”

“Did you want to get married to my mother?”

“Of course I did. But she ran away. We fought a lot. But we always made up. Until that last time.”

“So she ran to those people her mother knew?”

“I think so.”

“But I don’t understand. Didn’t you or papa ... sorry, my grandfather, think of that?”

“We did. But there are people in the world like sand. Like water.” Vladimir made a gesture to exemplify his words. “You can’t catch them. They don’t have an address. Melanie knew how to find them. We didn’t.”

“So she remains lost? Forever?” Ruslan asked, hating the small tremble in his voice.

“I had high hopes I’d find her, too, once I heard of you. But the old man knew nothing of her.”

“Did you talk to him? To Douglas?”

“Yes. He wasn’t happy to see me. He told me he’d give you everything to the last cent if I just stayed away.”

Ruslan frowned. “What? When was that?”

Vladimir thought for a moment. “I guess it was not long before he died.”

Ruslan could feel his temples throbbing. “Wait ... I mean, how come someone like Nigel knew of you, too?”

Vladimir raised his shoulders and then let them fall. “Words fly.”

“And why didn’t you stay away? Didn’t you promise my grandfather?”

“I told him this. That he can’t keep me away.”

“And what did he say then?”

“Ah, let’s see. He said that he’d do anything if I just left you alone. So I told him that only if he died and left you everything, I’d know that he took better care of you than I could.”

Ruslan put one hand over his chest.

“What’s wrong, son? Are you ill?” Vladimir asked.

“But you didn’t listen,” Ruslan said, his eyes now swimming in tears.

Vladimir pulled him close into his arms. “How could I do that? My son belongs to me.”

Ruslan wanted to be angry. His father’s logic was too simple, and that was why it was scary. Could it be that his grandfather ... He could not go there. No matter what his heart was telling him, he could not think of such things.

“It was not his place to give you everything. That’s my duty,” Vladimir said and pointed at himself while still keeping Ruslan close with one arm.

Ruslan rested his head against his father’s shoulder. Even if he was tall, he was still a tad shorter than Vladimir, so it was easy to do that. It was so strange to seek solace in such a strange, apparently cold man, but if he had learned something while staying there was that he could trust his father with everything. And Vladimir was a different man to his family. His children had his love. Even both his wives, no matter how weird that was. Legally, he was only bound to one. But he had managed to bring a second woman in the family, and her children and they did live happily together.

Ruslan knew this was something he had craved all his life. Vladimir was doing everything in his power to compensate. And yet, he still longed for his grandfather’s love. He still missed Yanis and his friendship. And he still missed Johnny. His life hadn’t turned as bad as he thought, and now, that he had the basis for comparison, Ruslan realized that he had been happy.

It would have been ungrateful of him to reject Vladimir’s love. His place wasn’t there, yet, he needed to fit.

And now, that Vladimir had told him about the conversation between him and Douglas, Ruslan had reasons to believe his grandfather’s passing away hadn’t been an accident, after all. He needed answers, and he needed to find them without going back if that was possible.

“Do you think I can make a phone call?” He asked Vladimir while wiping away his tears.

“Sure,” Vladimir replied. “You don’t have to ask for my permission. You’re old enough,” he added with a smile.

Ruslan smiled back. “Aren’t you going to ask me who I want to call?”

“It’s outside the country, I presume,” Vladimir said and nodded like he understood everything. “I am curious. But I respect your privacy.”

“Thank you, dad,” Ruslan said simply.

It was nothing more rewarding than seeing Vladimir’s eyes lighting up when Ruslan called him that. Ruslan had thought that it would be phony, and it would ring false, but he had taken to it right away. He didn’t feel like calling his father by his name. Only calling him ‘dad’ sounded true, and that was what it was.

Johnny waited patiently for a secretary in a pencil skirt to let him into the lawyer’s office. Mr. Young was seated behind his desk and was watching Johnny without a hint of surprise on his face. “What can I help you with today, Mr. Bryne?”

Johnny took the seat offered. “I would like to contact Martin Hoffman if that’s possible, sir.”

Mr. Young seemed to ponder over his reply for a little bit. “May I inquire what for?”

“That’s private, sir,” Johnny replied.

“Hmm,” the lawyer said in a non-committal tone. “I am in no obligation to you or someone else to provide such details.”

“His old phone number is no longer in service,” Johnny insisted. “I need to talk to him. He’s not dead, too, I hope.”

Mr. Young rested one cheek into his palm and looked at Johnny for a while. Johnny didn’t waver under his scrutinizing gaze. “No, he’s not dead.”

“Then I would like his number, sir.”

“You’re a stubborn young man,” Mr. Young commented.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Johnny replied politely. “I really need Martin’s number.”

“Ruslan Kent left you almost everything he inherited from his grandfather. Isn’t that enough?” The lawyer inquired.

“It’s not money I want,” Johnny said. “What I want is answers.”

“That’s what we all want,” Mr. Young replied. “Answers are sometimes more expensive than most things.”

“So you must know something,” Johnny said. “You wouldn’t tell me this otherwise.”

The lawyer laughed and shook his head. He took off his glasses. "I think you want to ask Martin about Ruslan and how to get in touch with him. You believe that he still left one loose thread behind and that must be Martin."

"With all due respect, sir, Martin was like a father to Ruslan. Maybe he doesn't want to have anything to do with me, but he wouldn't do the same with Martin."

Mr. Young nodded. "There's good logic behind your argument."

"Thank you, sir," Johnny replied.

"It is my knowledge, however, that, at best, Martin could send a message to Ruslan, but not talk directly."

"That's enough," Johnny said, feeling stubborn and more and more in the mood to strangle the lawyer in front of him a little, to make him spit Martin's number.

"Johnny," Mr. Young said in a voice that almost sounded paternal, "why are you so bent in getting in touch with Ruslan? I know you two were to get married, but you're young, and you have your entire life in front of you."

"You were close to the late Mr. Kent, right?" Johnny asked.

The lawyer nodded in reply.

"So maybe you know how serious Ruslan and I were," Johnny added.

"Douglas told me, yes. But I still keep to my point, and tell you that you're young and there could be others."

"Well, I don't know your life, sir, but I know for me there can't be others," Johnny said with conviction.

Mr. Young's eyebrows shot up in a bit of surprise combined with amusement, and then his face relaxed. "I have been a man of the law all my life. I guess it's easy to judge things and find the shortest way out while trying to keep to the client's interests. But sometimes what a client wants may not be what's best for him. I told Douglas so many times to tell Ruslan about his parents. Now, look where that got him."

Johnny frowned. He could tell there was something there he was missing at the moment.

"Never mind." Mr. Young waved. "This time only I will follow my gut instinct, not what my client wants," he added mysteriously. He reached for an elegant golden pen and wrote something on a piece of paper. "Here is the number. I hope it will help you get the answers you seek."

"Thank you, sir," Johnny said politely and got on his feet.

There was no point in taking more of the man's time, and he had plenty of stuff to do anyway. He studied the piece of paper on his way out and then folded it. He was about to put it into his pocket when he noticed something written on the back. Reading what was there brought his feet to a stop. He turned, wanting to ask the secretary if he could see Mr. Young again, but strangers were entering the room, clearly having an appointment with the lawyer. Johnny decided he didn't need anything more, anyway. There, he had everything he needed to know.

Johnny watched Martin walk into the café and search him with his eyes. He didn't need to do anything to draw his attention, as the man noticed him right away.

"How have you been, Johnny?" Martin asked, offering him a small smile.

"That's what I should be asking," Johnny replied. "You took off, apparently."

Martin didn't offer a reply to that. He studied the cup of coffee in front of him, his face giving nothing away.

"I need to get in touch with Ruslan," Johnny said bluntly.

Martin wasn't a man for subtleties, and neither was Johnny.

"That's not possible."

"And I say it is," Johnny said, his voice a bit strained.

Martin sighed and looked at him.

"How long have you been together with Douglas?" Johnny asked.

Even the imperturbable butler manifested a small sign of surprise at that, his eyebrows shooting up almost hard to notice, but enough for Johnny who was watching the other like a hawk.

"Let's see," Martin seemed to ponder, "maybe close to thirty-seven years?"

"And are you still counting?" Johnny leaned over the table and stared Martin into his eyes.

This time, Martin made no effort to control his surprise. "Mr. Young," he said, and his shoulders slumped.

"Yeah," Johnny said. "I thought it was all weird. Will you help me get a message to Ruslan?"

"Ruslan can't know." Martin's eyes were sad now.

"Okay," Johnny admitted. "Not my place to tell him. But I need him to hear me out."

Martin nodded. "All right. What do you want me to tell him?"

Johnny smiled. And then, he started talking.

"Ruslan, it's good to hear your voice," Martin said, as soon as he answered the phone.

"Hi, Martin," Ruslan replied and felt his heart getting smaller.

"That's such a strange coincidence. I also wanted to send you a message."

"Oh," Ruslan said. "What about?"

"Johnny." In his usual manner, the former butler was curt.

Ruslan gripped the phone tightly. "Is he okay?"

"He took up fighting again."

Ruslan cursed. "That's got nothing to do with me," he chose to lie.

"He's killing himself."

"W-what?" he stammered. "What do you mean?"

"You can stop him. Not anyone else."

"Johnny's not my problem anymore," Ruslan said, his voice catching in his throat.

Martin met his decision with silence.

"I called you for a reason," he added. "Martin, I need to know more about papa's death."

Martin remained silent again.

"Martin," Ruslan called, unsure whether the other was still on the line or not.

"I am here. Come back, Ruslan, and we'll talk."

Martin was the first to cut the conversation. Ruslan sat down slowly as he put the phone away. Like on cue, his father walked into the room.

"Ruslan," Vladimir started. "What's wrong?"

"I," Ruslan put one hand over his chest, "no, it's nothing."

"It's not nothing," Vladimir replied. "Come here. Let's talk a little."

Ruslan followed his father and sat next to him on a sofa. Vladimir took him by the shoulders and used the other hand to brush away a few strands of hair from Ruslan's forehead.

"You're thinking of him. Bodyguard," Vladimir said simply.

Ruslan moved his head away.

Vladimir continued. "I loved your mother. More than all my wives. Don't tell them." He chuckled. "They might strangle me in my sleep. But I let my pride get in the way, and she ran away. I never found her again. She was proud, too. But so beautiful. Like an angel. I lost her, and she never came back. I lost you, too, for so many years, because of that."

Ruslan cast his eyes down.

"You're melting like a candle here. You're so thin. Go back to your bodyguard. When you need me, call me. Come see me. I'll always be here. And I won't forgive you if you don't visit." Vladimir wagged the finger at him playfully. "Come. Let's plan your trip back."

Ruslan wanted to have the courage to protest. But Martin had told him to come back, too, and now he had a reason, other than running to see Johnny, to leave his new found family.

The youngest son, Giorgi, was the only one who hadn't embraced Ruslan as the rest of the family. Ruslan thought it strange to find the twelve-year-old watching him from the threshold to his room. Giorgi was looking like his father more than Sergei and his sisters.

Somehow, Ruslan understood why Giorgi didn't like him. He must have been his father's favorite, being the youngest. His position must have been threatened, in his childish mind, the moment Ruslan had come through the door. Suddenly, his doting father had another son to care about.

"Are you here to help me pack?" he asked, seeing that Giorgi didn't enter.

The boy pretended not to understand, frowning, and standing there, not moving one inch. Ruslan knew from Sergei that Giorgi could understand plenty of English, and even spoke it a little.

Instead of replying something in Ruslan's known language, he mumbled something in Russian. By the boy's stance and body language, Ruslan could tell it couldn't be something pleasant. He shrugged and turned to his task at hand.

An angry reply in Russian to Giorgi's words followed, and Ruslan turned only to witness Sergei slapping his little brother upside the head. Giorgi turned to fight Sergei, but it was clear that he was no match for the seventeen-year-old. Sergei told him something in a stern voice. Soon, Giorgi was running away, crying.

“Forgive our brother,” Sergei said in almost perfect English accent. “He’s a brat.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” Ruslan replied with a smile. “I still don’t understand any Russian, so he could sit there and curse me until he turned blue and I would still not be offended.”

Sergei laughed. Unlike his brother, he looked nothing like Vladimir. It was obvious that he took more after his mother, and his green eyes shone with intelligence. He was a good looking teenager, but Ruslan had been taken more with his personality, a bit mature for his age.

“So you’re going?” Sergei asked, entering the room. “Do you need any help?”

“I suppose I’m done with everything.”

“I’ll miss you,” Sergei said.

Ruslan turned toward his brother. “I guess I’ll miss you, too. All of you. Even Giorgi,” he added with a small laugh. “You have an incredible family here.”

“It’s your family, too,” Sergei replied. “Don’t forget that. And don’t worry about Giorgi. He’ll come around.”

“Just out of curiosity, what did you tell him that he began crying like that?” Ruslan asked.

“Ah, I told him that he has his mother, and sisters, and me, and father, while you had nothing most of your life. And that I’ll tell his mother of his behavior.”

“Is he scared of her much?” Ruslan shook his head with mirth. Sergei was too good to take his side like that.

“He’ll be in for a scolding if I tell on him. I won’t. But he needs to understand that you are our brother, too.”

“I’m glad for that. I really am,” Ruslan replied.

“So why are you leaving? Father won’t say,” Sergei said.

“I’m going to try to make some things right. Also, tie some loose ends, I hope.”

“Will you be back soon?”

Ruslan stopped for a while, thinking over what to say. “I don’t know,” he chose to go with honesty.

Sergei sat on the bed. “It was nice to have someone close to my age in this house. Now I’m left with the kids again.”

“Dad says you’ll start attending university next year. I believe you’ll have plenty of grownups around then to start missing the kids,” Ruslan said.

“Do you think that’s possible? To miss these brats?” Sergei grinned.

“I guess so. They’re good kids, by what I can tell.”

“Yeah, good thing you don’t know any Russian.” Sergei bounced a little on the bed. “You would have run away screaming by now.”

“Except for Giorgi, do I have anyone else to worry about?” Ruslan asked, laughing.

“I guess you would start feeling embarrassed about how much the girls are gushing over you.”

“I know,” Ruslan replied with a small sigh. “They’re all hell-bent on seeing me a model.”

Sergei snorted. “Not only that. They want to marry you.”

“Marry me?” Now Ruslan was surprised.

“Yeah. So that you won’t be so sad anymore. Well, father didn’t tell them anything about how you like guys.”

Ruslan looked at Sergei. Could that be a problem with people in that family? “And he told you?”

Sergei shook his head. “I just noticed how you look at some pictures on your phone. I wasn’t peeking. It happened.”

“Is it awkward or uncomfortable for you that I’m gay?” Ruslan asked. “Would it be for others around here?”

Sergei shook his head. “No. Not for me, or others. But the girls might start to ship you with some famous guys.”

“Ship me?” Ruslan asked, a bit surprised.

“Don’t ask.” Sergei rolled his eyes. “You have no idea how much slash fanfiction these girls are into. Of course, father knows nothing. He would tell them to study more instead of doing that all day long.”

“Why didn’t dad say a thing?” Ruslan questioned.

Sergei shrugged. “He’s a private man. Most of the time, he assumes so is anyone else. It is hilarious how he talks to each of us and thinks that we’re sharing some big secrets. Not everyone is as mysterious as him.”

Ruslan could understand that. It was obvious why Vladimir didn't want his family to know about his dealings. Maybe his wives knew, but the kids were clearly kept in the dark. Then, it struck him; that was one secret he shared with his father. Seeing what the secret was, it shouldn't have been a cause for feeling warm inside, the way he felt, but that was how things were.

"Thank you for telling me this, Sergei. I really do appreciate it."

Sergei nodded solemnly. "Are you going back to that guy? The one in the pictures on your phone?"

Ruslan smiled. "You said you weren't peeking."

Sergei looked away, a bit embarrassed. "I guess I was a little surprised and I looked a little more."

"It's okay. I don't mind," Ruslan replied.

Sergei got to his feet and came to embrace him. It was a bit unusual to have so many people interested in what he was doing, what he was thinking, and who he was thinking of. Apparently, it came with the territory in a big house like that, with so many siblings.

"Just don't forget that you have us, too," his brother said.

"How come you're not jealous of me, like Giorgi?" Ruslan asked with a rueful smile.

"I am old enough to understand that father loves us all the same. Well, maybe not the same. Giorgi is such a brat for a reason, and I do think father is to blame since he loves him so much."

"You're a pretty smart kid, Sergei."

"Hey, I'm going to university next year. You can't call me a kid."

Ruslan laughed and shook his head. "I must admit you are different from what I was imagining. All of you."

"Different in a good way, right?" Sergei cocked his head to the side and grinned.

"Definitely in a good way," Ruslan said with determination.

Sergei seemed more than pleased with that reply and left the room whistling a happy tune. Ruslan could tell that he would miss everyone a little, and maybe even a little more.

"Man, I thought we were just pretending, you know? Spread some rumors and that," Yanis protested, as soon as they got out of the car.

“And what’s wrong with a little action?” Johnny shrugged. “Plus, I need to stay in shape.”

“In shape? I bet Ruslan would like to have you back with all your internal organs in place,” Yanis said, with a snort.

“Have I lost a fight so far?” Johnny asked. “And don’t worry, Ruslan likes me best like this. I need to remind him of who I am.”

“Just when I was hoping you’d start overeating and become fat and unattractive,” Yanis joked.

“Yanis, tell Anya that she can start braiding your hair. That’s chicks’ talk,” Johnny said back.

“What? Is my hair too long?” Yanis pushed his fingers through his hair.

Johnny shook his head. “And you’re supposed to be the straight dude?”

Yanis punched him in the shoulder. “Shut up and fight, Snake. Don’t lose, ‘cause I bet a ton of money on you.”

“Don’t worry. I never lose,” Johnny said, as he sprinted up the stairs into the building in front of them.

Chapter Twenty – Baby, You’re A Fighter

Busy with the flight back, and getting readjusted to the different hour, Ruslan hadn’t had much time to think of all the troubles expecting him at home. Home. That was a strange word. Officially, he didn’t have one anymore since he had given his house to Johnny, and he had no plans of getting back there.

The problem was that he couldn’t keep himself from thinking about his former lover. Martin had promised him that they would talk about the circumstances of Douglas’s death, but that had been the only conversation they had.

Now his head was full of questions, and the most nagging one wasn’t related to his grandfather and what might have happened to him. Ruslan knew, deep down in his heart, that he could not go there, and nurture any foolish hope. At this point, it was all in his head, and he needed to keep himself distracted and not let that glimmer of hope get in the way.

That brought him to what felt like an equally pressing matter, which was Johnny fighting his life away. Ruslan knew he had no right to think of him at all, but he couldn’t stop himself from feeling. By running away, Ruslan had thought he would accomplish that. What he felt was the total opposite.

The hotel room he had reserved over the phone before landing was as non-descriptive as any other accommodation of the kind. The lack of familiarity of the impersonal setting was getting to him in a way he could not completely understand.

As a teenager, while struggling to survive together with Yanis on the streets, he could not bring himself to think of such things. There was no point to miss a home when they hadn’t had one.

Yet, now, Ruslan felt what most people must have experienced when in a strange place away from home. At first, he had just blamed it on missing his father’s home in Russia already, but he knew that was a lie he was telling himself. Even if he did miss everyone back there, especially his dad and Sergei, the feeling he had when he thought of his new family was mellow and subdued.

Nothing like the red iron pressed raw against his heart. Ruslan knew well what that was all about, but from the moment he had finished that letter and given it to Yanis to forward it to the rightful recipient, he had told himself that that door was closed on both his feelings and his heart.

It was his mind, however, going places where it wasn’t supposed to. He needed to keep his promise and stay away. Even if that meant ripping his heart in two, and let it bleed while thinking of Martin’s words about how Johnny was killing himself in a ring, somewhere.

He tossed and turned, incapable of sleep. The room service food was probably worthy of the most pretentious palate, but it tasted like paper in his mouth. He tried the wine, but that tasted too sour, too.

Ruslan decided to get out of bed and stop fighting the jet lag. Maybe he could get out a little, walk the familiar streets for a while, and clear his head. There was time to call Martin tomorrow, and now he could use this time for himself.

Only for Johnny, there was no time. Where was he now? What was he doing? Had Martin exaggerated? It was hard to believe. Martin was the most objective man he had ever known; there was no possible way he wasn't telling the truth.

Ruslan took his coat and walked outside. Putting one hand in his pocket, he grabbed his phone and took it out. For a while, his fingers hovered over the screen. He knew the phone number by heart, but maybe there was no longer someone at the other end of the line. Maybe Johnny had changed his phone number, just like Ruslan had.

There was only one person who knew he was coming, and that was Martin. It had to remain that way, no matter what he thought or what he felt. He owed it to himself, but most of all, to Johnny. Without a doubt, his former lover didn't want to see him, after the last words they exchanged before being kidnapped and dragged to that awful place.

For a moment, back there, he had doubted Johnny. For that, he couldn't find forgiveness in his soul. But Johnny had been above the situation, knowing how to play Nigel, how to make him dance to his tune so he could find a way out. And for whom had that way out been? For him, Ruslan. Not one moment, Johnny had thought about his life, about himself, or even about his sick mother.

He had walked into that ring, knowing that he might not get out of there alive. Ruslan could still his heart throbbing painfully, only remembering that night. Johnny hadn't looked at him, not directly, his eyes just gliding over him. Despite all that, he had only thought of Ruslan and no one else.

Johnny had been magnificent that night, Ruslan thought. Every beat of his heart had gone to him, every moment Johnny had seemed down pure torture. And, in the end, he had made it and had Ruslan walk away, free. It didn't matter that the goon accompanying him had had other plans. It was only because of Johnny that he knew how to fend for himself.

He put the phone back into his pocket. If Johnny was fighting again, it was his choice and not Ruslan's place at all to intervene. He had given up on the right to have a say about what Johnny did or didn't, and he had done that because he had no right.

The fact that Johnny fought couldn't have anything to do with him. He had been a fighter all his life, Ruslan told himself. Of course, he had left him some money, so finances couldn't be an issue, but Johnny did what he knew and liked.

Again, there was no point to intervene.

But what if - Ruslan's brain began to wander - it was because of him that Johnny was on a self-destructive path? It was his duty to see him and tell him that he shouldn't do that.

Ruslan shook his head. What was he thinking? Johnny must have hated him for what he had done. If there had been any chance for any feelings to survive, they must have been destroyed when Ruslan had abandoned him.

So, it couldn't be anything else but wishful thinking and a terribly wrong sense of entitlement on his part to think that whatever Johnny was doing had anything to do with him whatsoever.

Still, did he really not care? He did, but what could he do? He took out his phone and this time dialed the well-known phone number. For a while, he waited while the ringtone played in the background, each repetition making him nervous. Maybe Johnny didn't care about answering private numbers.

The beep let him know he was sent to voicemail. He put back the phone into his coat. There was no place in Johnny's life for him now. Whatever choices Johnny made, they were his to make.

The city hadn't changed much, Ruslan thought, as he stepped in front of a store window. He didn't see what was in front of him, as his reflection, with shoulders slumped, and deep shadows on his face were what he was staring at.

In the end, he had settled for walking around the block, without going too far from his hotel. In a way, that felt as if he kept an invisible thread to everything that was supposed to pull him back from making other bad decisions.

Tomorrow, he would see Martin and ask him the questions he wanted to ask. And then, he would just hop on another plane and fly back to his family, the only one he had in the world right now.

With a deep sigh, he turned and walked directly into someone. "So sorry," he mumbled and tried to pass by the person he had unintentionally bumped into.

"No shit," the reply came.

Ruslan's eyes shot up. "Yanis," he said, feeling his breath catching in his throat. His best friend wasn't exactly someone he wanted to meet.

Yanis had been quite clear about what he thought about Ruslan moving to Russia and leaving Johnny behind. And him. They hadn't talked since then.

"Are you back? And what the hell, not one phone call? Don't tell me you don't know how to use a phone anymore? And what did you eat in Russia? You look like supermodels ready to faint on the catwalk."

Ruslan shook his head in mirth. Yanis had no idea how close he was in surmising that. "That's exactly what my sisters had in store for me."

"Your Russian sisters? So they decided to starve you to death so that they could make money off you?"

"Yanis, I swear, sometimes your mind is full of crap. They just thought I would make a great fashion model. And nobody starved me. Actually, they begged me to eat. And they had great food, in case you're thinking of other crap now."

Yanis caught him by the shoulders. "I missed you."

Ruslan looked into his friend's eyes. "I missed you, too."

"You're a fucking liar," Yanis replied, but there was no bite in his voice as he said that. "Russia is not on the moon. Or didn't your daddy let you make phone calls? Does he live in a dungeon or something?"

"No," Ruslan protested. "Seriously, Yanis. I didn't call because --" He trailed off without offering an explanation. He didn't have one.

"Yeah, you're an ass. I thought so," Yanis concluded. "But now that you're here, let's hang out."

"I am still jet-lagged, and I don't think getting drunk is a good idea."

"Bullshit. You can drink anyone I know under the table. Plus, if we don't hang out now, when will we? I bet you already have the ticket back in your pocket. By the way, how come you're here?"

Ruslan chose to be vague. "Some unfinished business."

"And then you're going back?" Yanis questioned.

"Yes," Ruslan said the truth.

"That's fucked up, man. Do you even know any Russian? Say something in Russian."

"Stop testing me. No, I don't know any Russian."

"You've been gone for months. How come you haven't learned anything?"

“I was busy,” Ruslan replied, feeling a bit clipped.

“Let’s go, and you can tell me all. Unless, of course, it was some mafia business you’re talking about.”

“Cut it out, Yanis,” Ruslan said and punched his friend playfully into his shoulder. “I see that you want to get me drunk, whether I like it or not.”

“Hey, I just want us to talk as friends.” Yanis put his hands up in surrender. “Like the prick you are, you left and never called. C’mon, I know a place.”

Since their dealings during the time when Ruslan had been adopted by Douglas had had to remain a secret, they didn’t have a preferred watering hole. It was just some drinks, and he owed that to Yanis.

The feeling that he was out of place in that city was starting to wear off. It must have had something to do with meeting Yanis.

“So you practically moved from one mansion to another? Man, the way rich people live,” Yanis said, as Ruslan finished talking about his home in Russia.

“They were all very welcoming there, but it took quite a while to feel like it was home.”

“What does your daddy do? Does he do normal stuff, like other people?”

Ruslan glared at Yanis. His friend’s fascination with Vladimir was bordering on annoying. It seemed like it was all Yanis wanted to talk about. “Yes. He’s just like everyone. Actually, he’s quite a good father.”

“That’s good, I guess.”

“So tell me about you and Anya. Any plans to expand the family?” Ruslan elbowed his friend suggestively.

“We sure have those. I got an idea! You must be my firstborn’s godfather.”

“Yanis, do you want someone who lives on the other side of the planet to be your kid’s godfather?”

“Why not? You’re loaded.” Yanis shrugged and made a sign for the waitress to come by with more drinks.

Ruslan felt a little bit of a buzz. He usually held his liquor well, but he had lost so much weight lately, and he hadn't cared about eating enough, that even the few drinks they had were getting to his head, regardless of his natural tolerance.

"I think you should ask someone else. I'm not planning many trips back here," Ruslan said.

"All right. Maybe I'll ask Johnny."

And here came the topic of conversation Ruslan had tried to stay away since he met Yanis in the street earlier. He grabbed the glass in front of him and drank half of it in one gulp.

"What? Aren't you going to ask me about him?"

"No," Ruslan said stubbornly and stared into his glass as if it could offer him the right answers.

"You really don't care, do you? Damn, I never thought I'd tell you this, Ruslan, but you're kind of a major asshole. That guy fought like a fucking champion, just to save your skinny ass."

Ruslan revolted. "My ass isn't skinny. You should know."

"Hmm," was Yanis's immediate reply. "I do. And I also know that you did a number on Johnny by running away."

"I didn't run away," Ruslan protested. "It was the wise thing to do. And what do you mean by that?"

"By what?" Yanis suddenly pretended he was mentally challenged.

"By what you said," Ruslan said sternly, but his words were a bit slurred. "How did I do a number on Johnny?"

"All he does, every day, is fight. Nothing else. I can't even talk to him."

"Why is he fighting? He could not have possibly spent the money I left him."

"He's not touching that."

Ruslan's heart sank. He had the confirmation that Johnny was mad at him still. "Well, he should. I left everything to him for a reason."

"Yeah, but the problem is that you left. Man, I'm telling you. Maybe it's not my place --"

"It's not," Ruslan cut his friend's speech in half.

"Okay, then it is. Go talk to the guy. Say goodbye properly. Don't be a basic bitch."

"Wow, does Anya know you're stealing her vocabulary?"

“You know what I mean. You owe it to the guy. His lungs are not in good shape, you know? The doctors told him not to fight anymore.”

“And? I thought I left you in charge to keep him from fighting,” Ruslan replied.

“And how am I supposed to do that? He’s like two hundred pounds of muscles and bones and right now, full of piss and vinegar. He’d go through me like this.” Yanis illustrated his words by punching his open palm.

Ruslan sighed. “I told him everything I wanted to tell him when I left.”

“In a letter. Like a fucking coward. That was what he said after he read it,” Yanis said.

“I guess he’s right. I couldn’t stand him hating me and looking at me, knowing what I did to get him there.”

“Bullshit,” Yanis replied. “You’re scared to commit.”

“Who? Me? You’re not one to talk,” Ruslan shot back.

“Hey, I bit the bullet, and I’m married now. Anya knows everything about me, where I am, what I do, all the frigging time.”

“Well, you didn’t place her in mortal danger, so there’s no room for comparison,” Ruslan concluded. “I think I had enough to drink. Could we call it a night?”

“Let’s stop by my gym. The boys will want to see you, and I also want you to see what I did with the place.”

“Did you renovate it?”

“Of course I did. You left me some cash, too, or you don’t remember that?” Yanis joked.

Ruslan shook his head. “All right. But after that, I seriously need to crash. There’s somewhere I need to be tomorrow, and I don’t plan on having a pounding headache and bloodshot eyes when I wake up.”

“C’mon, it’s just a little detour. Then I’ll call you a cab.”

Yanis stood up, and his phone pinged. He rubbed his chin and smiled as he read whatever text he got.

“What was that all about?” Ruslan asked.

“Just Anya.”

“Maybe you should go home to her.”

“Nah, she’s staying with some friends, and I’ll go take her home later. Let’s go.”

Ruslan followed Yanis without another word of protest. He was a bit too tired to fight with his best friend right now. Plus, he would be gone again soon, and maybe these were the only times when they could hang out.

Ruslan stopped dead in his tracks the moment he entered Yanis’s old gym. It wasn’t the fact that the place looked like new, but what was going on inside that made him do that. Annoyed beyond means, he turned toward Yanis. “What the hell? Since when you’re hosting fights?”

Yanis grinned and pushed him, making him walk. “It was a surprise.”

“Well, consider me surprised enough. Now, I should go home and sleep.”

He had sworn off watching any fights or contact sports of any kind since that night when he witnessed Johnny fighting to save his skinny ass, as Yanis bluntly put it. He could not stand one moment watching men trying to beat the crap out of each other.

Yanis cared not one iota about that and now had one arm hooked over his shoulders, and was forcing him to walk until they reached the front row. A few guys from Yanis’s gang stood up to make enough room for them and welcomed Ruslan with pats on the back and warm words.

“Is there some big fight tonight?” Ruslan asked, feeling restless, and barely keeping himself on the seat.

“Yeah. As you can see, we have a full house. Business is going well.”

“I’m glad for you,” Ruslan said through his teeth.

“Well, your money was put to good use. If you ever come back, there’s a share I keep for you.”

“I’m only visiting, Yanis.”

He didn’t have time to protest more, as the fighters for tonight’s match climbed into the ring. A jolt went through him, and Ruslan stood up. Yanis caught his hand, dragging him down. “You should stay and see,” his friend told him.

Ruslan stared at Yanis, trying to read his eyes. “Did you plan this?”

Yanis was still holding one of his wrists into an iron hold. “I think you should quit being a fucking coward, and watch what you made of him.”

“Yanis, I can’t look at him,” Ruslan said in a begging voice.

“If you could leave him as you did, I think you can look at him one more time.”

“I thought you were on my side.”

“I am,” Yanis said solemnly. “And that’s part of it. Just watch him fight.”

Ruslan had a mind to force himself free out of Yanis’s hold, but he knew well he couldn’t be a match for his friend, especially now when he was still a bit under the influence of alcohol. As his eyes were drawn to what was happening in the ring, he felt completely sobered up, though. Yanis was right. Since he was the one who had done this to Johnny, he had to watch.

He felt his heart grow smaller, as he took in his former lover. Johnny looked good, and not many would have suspected that only months ago, he had been in a fight for his life. Yanis said his lungs were bad, and that wasn’t easy to see, but in a way, that made things more dangerous. It meant that Johnny could ignore his health issue, and continue to fight like nothing was wrong with him.

Johnny’s eyes traveled over the audience, as always. Ruslan still remembered that. He had asked Johnny about it one time, and his former lover had just told him jokingly that he was scouting for hot guys he could fuck after the bout.

Was that what he was doing now? Johnny must have had plenty to choose from. Ruslan had been drawn to him, that first time they had met, and the man’s animal magnetism was more powerful than ever.

Ruslan let his eyes travel over Johnny’s strong body longingly. How many times had he taken all that he had for granted? How many times had he kept his lover into his arms, thinking that nothing and no one would ever tear them apart? It looked like he only needed to search for obstacles close to home. In the end, he was the only one to blame for all that had happened.

He couldn’t look away. He knew it was a mistake and one for which he would pay dearly, but his gaze remained on Johnny, his mind filled with so many moments when they had been together, happy and in love.

Ruslan raised his head enough for his eyes to meet Johnny’s dark ones. His breath caught in his chest, and he froze on the spot. Under the furrowed thick brows, Johnny’s eyes were cold and distant.

As they were supposed to be. What could he expect? But Yanis was right; he needed to see this through, and maybe, just tell Johnny there was no point in doing that, in throwing his life away, for the sake of someone who wasn’t worth it.

The referee’s whistle made Johnny’s eyes move away from him. Like the deadly weapon he was, the fighter came down on his opponent.

Ruslan needed to close his eyes and let this pass. But he couldn't do that, his entire being drawn to the rippling muscles on Johnny's back, the old wounds still there, to how the man's punch flew whipcord fast from his shoulder like a sling, to the thin layer of sweat on his dark skin.

He drew one big inhale and kept it until he felt dizzy. There was no way he could look away. If this was the last time he ever saw Johnny, it had to be in a ring. That was how they met, and it would be how they would finally go separate ways, in the end.

Johnny hated him, and Ruslan wanted to listen to every single word his former lover needed to throw at him. Maybe then he would have closure and be able to move on and live his life.

He kept his breath when Johnny fell to the ground. The fighter seemed to breathe with difficulty as he pulled himself together. The crowd was booing, making Ruslan cover his ears. They had no right to do that; they didn't know what a wonderful man was fighting in that ring, tonight.

It was clear that Johnny's first round of attacks had left him almost breathless, and was losing more and more. Ruslan wiped the tears on his cheeks with the back of his hands, feeling angry and helpless, just like that time.

The other was backing Johnny into the ropes, and Ruslan knew as much that wasn't a good place to be. "Johnny!" he yelled and shot up to his feet.

Apparently, it had been the wrong thing to do because Johnny seemed startled for a fraction of a second, and his opponent managed to strike him and send him down.

The referee started to count. Ruslan ran to the side where Johnny lay. At some point, Yanis had let go of his wrist. "Johnny!" he called.

The cold dark eyes stared at him.

"Get up," Ruslan demanded in an urgent voice, his tears now flowing freely down his cheeks.

"Why?" Johnny asked.

Over the deafening noise, Ruslan could only make what Johnny said by reading the movement of his lips. "Because you always win!"

His words were met with a blank stare.

"Because I'm not worthy of this," Ruslan yelled at him.

"Try harder," Johnny mouthed.

The count was closing to an end.

"Because I love you," Ruslan managed, more like a whisper.

Johnny grinned and pushed himself to his feet. Ruslan didn't return to his place and just stayed there, watching as Johnny went back to the fight.

No other round was needed. The next time the referee counted, Johnny's opponent remained on the ground.

"Do I have to guard the door, to make sure that you'll go see him and not run away again?" Yanis asked.

"Tell me where and I'll go," Ruslan replied, still wiping his eyes.

After the match, Johnny had disappeared, and now Ruslan waited. Yanis gestured for him to follow.

Johnny had lived plenty of his life like this, in old gyms and the ring. Ruslan could not help but think how much he had changed Johnny's life, complicating it, and even putting the man he loved in danger's way. Whatever Johnny had in store for him, he would take it like a man.

"I think I'll do this alone," Ruslan told Yanis as soon as they stopped in front of a door.

"Are you sure?" Yanis smiled at him.

"You're enjoying this way too much," Ruslan replied. "I have a mind to take you inside with me and keep you as a punching bag for Johnny. I bet he wouldn't hold back just because it's you, not me."

Yanis grimaced and pretended to tremble in fear. "I'll leave you to it. Just tell Johnny I'll meet with him later."

"You can just talk to him directly as soon as I finish here."

"I have no idea how much time your makeup sex would take," Yanis replied. "And I'm not one to bother people when they're fucking."

Despite the turmoil in his soul, Ruslan laughed. "You have a very vivid imagination, Yanis. There will be no such thing."

Yanis shrugged. "Don't complain tomorrow that you can't sit or walk."

Ruslan shook his head with mirth. "Just go away. You'll have Johnny all to yourself later."

He turned toward the door. With Yanis gone now, his courage was fading away. But it was now or never. He put one hand up and started knocking.

"Come in," a rough voice said from inside.

It was strange to feel so nervous, but Ruslan could feel his hand sweating, slipping over the door handle as he let himself inside.

Johnny was sitting on a chair, and it looked like he was caring for some scrapes on his knuckles. A single look for him made Ruslan stop in the door.

“Come in and close the door,” Johnny ordered curtly.

Ruslan obeyed and moved slowly toward his former lover. The room smelled of Johnny’s sweat, so familiar it was making him tremble. He knew that scent so well, how comforting it had been for him so many times.

“I --” Ruslan started.

He jumped one step back as Johnny stood up, taking his entire field of view. He walked backward, not fast, but matching each of Johnny’s steps, until his back hit the door. Johnny raised one hand, and Ruslan stood there, like a deer caught in the headlights.

If Johnny wanted to slap him, Ruslan would still forgive him. It was his right, after all, after everything he had been put through by someone who was supposed to care for him and love him above all else.

But the hand raised didn’t descend on him to hit him. Instead, it pushed his hair gently behind one ear and then moved slowly to cup the back of his head and pull him close.

“Pretty,” Johnny said lovingly, and closed the distance between them, making the long months spent apart disappear into the air like mist.

Ruslan keened softly as Johnny kissed him, a bit too roughly maybe. Johnny’s hands were everywhere now, touching him, pulling at his clothes, while their mouths devoured each other. He couldn’t resist; his body was singing under the calloused fingers, searching for skin, dragging long lines over it, wherever they could find it.

When Johnny hiked him up against the door, he had no choice but to lift one leg and wrap it around his lover. Johnny helped him with the other, never letting go of his mouth, kissing him until they were both out of breath.

Johnny put his hands under Ruslan’s ass and caught him into a tight embrace. He walked with him in his arms like that across the room, until they found the bed and fell on it.

“Johnny,” Ruslan called as he pulled his mouth free with difficulty and kept his lover’s face into his hands to look at him.

The coldness in the dark eyes was far gone now; instead, now they were filled with fire, and Ruslan was afraid, but still daring to look into them from up close. "We should talk," he whispered.

"No," Johnny replied. "I'm done talking to you."

What was that supposed to mean? Ruslan couldn't ask, as his mouth was taken once again. He had no idea how, but he was half naked now, panting under Johnny's muscular frame. A jolt of pleasure coursed through him as Johnny pushed his shirt away, reaching for his nipples with rough fingers and a hungry mouth.

This wasn't right, but it felt too good to deny it. Ruslan knew he must have sounded like an animal in heat, no longer in control of his voice, or even of his body. His bones were like jelly, his entire being like putty into Johnny's hands that were deftly pulling him out of his clothes.

The coolness of the air against his naked skin when Johnny stood up just a little to pull away his pants felt real, and for a moment, he wanted to protest. But Johnny was all over him again, pushing his legs apart, and pressing his crotch against his.

Would it be a sin to let go? Ruslan's thoughts were a mess, and he allowed his body manipulated into position. Johnny was quick to keep him in place as if he were afraid Ruslan would bolt out the door if left for just one moment to move or breathe on his own accord.

He kissed back with all his might when Johnny's lips reached his again. He kissed his lover like he never kissed anyone before, and let his hands wander on the broad shoulders, and down the scarred back which he loved so much.

"Don't move," Johnny said and got up.

Without the other's weight to keep him grounded, Ruslan felt the familiar restlessness from before coming in full force. He pushed himself up, but a stern look from Johnny made him stop.

"Are we really not going to talk?" he asked and circled his knees with his arms as if he tried to protect himself from something he could not entirely understand.

"I've talked to you every day in my head since you left," Johnny replied. "I had enough of that."

Ruslan swallowed nervously and looked away. The hurt was there; not the hate, that wasn't it, and what he felt coming at him in waves from his lover wasn't that, either. There was only love there, and it was all-engulfing, in the way Johnny kissed him, touched him, and looked at him.

He buried his face into the crook of his elbows, trying to shield himself from the wave of emotions washing over him, like a broken dam. Johnny came closer and pushed him gently on his back.

Familiar fingers were probing his body, preparing him, a bit impatiently, and Ruslan was thankful for it. He hadn't had sex in so long, he might just break. But Johnny must have known that, as his fingers moved a little more gently, and Ruslan could feel his body opening up for the only one who was allowed to be there.

He still bit his bottom lip hard as Johnny pushed inside him. Ruslan could feel the physical hurt but wanted to laugh at himself at the same time. He must have forgotten how big Johnny was, in every aspect of his body. Now his muscles were getting reacquainted, and it was no easy feat.

But the pain was dull, fading away like all that had felt wrong lately, taking with it everything Ruslan had ever worried about. This was his lover, penetrating him, making him feel, doing things to him that no one else could.

Johnny grunted above him as he moved, a bit abruptly. Ruslan could feel a hand in his hair, pulling hard, and whimpered softly. The harder Johnny took him, the more yielding he was. His lover imposed a rhythm that was maybe too fast, too demanding, but Ruslan couldn't bring himself to care.

Rough lips were taking his, biting them, licking them, pushing and pulling. His mouth was penetrated just like his body, and Ruslan wanted more and more of that. The friction was insane, and he longed to touch himself, but couldn't with Johnny on top of him like that.

He could feel the other's hard abs pressing against his cock, and with the pressure mounting from inside his ass, he couldn't last anymore. His blunt fingernails dug into Johnny's back as he moaned into the kiss they shared.

Johnny slowed down, feeling him. If asked, Ruslan couldn't say how Johnny could do that, always feel everything happening to him. He caressed the sweaty shoulders, inhaling the familiar male scent.

Johnny pulled away, and Ruslan looked at his engorged cock that looked even larger than what he remembered. "You didn't --" he tried to say, but he was hushed by his lover who climbed the bed, embraced him, and made them both roll over.

"Move," Johnny ordered and slapped his ass.

Ruslan threw his lover a sideways glance.

"Don't you want to apologize? Do it like you mean it, pretty," Johnny added with a grin.

Ruslan laughed and shook his head. It was easy to grab Johnny's cock and align it with his ass. Descending on it was a bit challenging, as the angle was making the other's cock push deeper than before. Ruslan could feel his breathing stop for a second or so.

Johnny pulled at his spent cock hard. "Ride me, baby. Or did you forget how?"

Ruslan couldn't believe it, how they could be like that as if they hadn't spent one day apart. His body didn't agree, but it wasn't that important. Ruslan began moving, getting into the rhythm that both he and Johnny knew and loved so much.

But Johnny didn't seem in the mood at all to let him lead, even if he had asked for that just earlier. Instead, he pulled Ruslan to him and began to pound into him hard from below. Now Yanis's joke about not being able to sit or walk the next day made perfect sense. Ruslan knew he would feel whatever was happening at the moment and not only the next day.

Johnny had a hand in his hair again, apparently fascinated with it. During his time in Russia, he had let it grow too long, as he couldn't bother to cut it or do anything else except for routine grooming. It made it easier for Johnny to hold on to it, and use it to control Ruslan.

There was no need for that, as Ruslan couldn't want to be anywhere else on the entire planet. Yet, he felt that was reassuring for Johnny, his own way to express what he was feeling.

The cock in his ass was a fantastic thing, larger than ever, deeper than ever. He was hammered like a sex doll, and he couldn't complain. If Johnny wanted to use him until he broke, he wouldn't mind.

"Let me see you, pretty," Johnny said as he finally let go of him a little. "Move into my cock like you always did."

His lover's voice was breathless, and Ruslan could tell that he might be close. He began moving rhythmically, squeezing Johnny's cock with his ass as hard as he could.

Johnny reached for his face with one hand and pushed his thumb into Ruslan's mouth. Guided by instinct, he began sucking on it. "Yes, like this, baby, like this. Suck on it and milk my cock with your sexy ass."

Usually, Johnny wasn't a big talker in bed. But right now, his words were driving Ruslan crazy with renewed want. His own cock was slapping against his belly as he moved faster and faster. Mercifully, Johnny grabbed hold of it and began pumping it with his other calloused hand.

This time, they fell together, down the path of no return, their moans and grunts and words they had been meaning to say to each other now found and told. Johnny freed his mouth and his cock to grab his hips and hold him down as he pushed himself off the bed as if he wanted to be one with Ruslan forever.

He was also the one to pull Ruslan close and cradle him into his arms. Exhausted, they fell asleep, or, at least, that was what Ruslan could tell, as his eyelids dropped, heavy with tiredness. The worries of the day before were long gone.

It wasn't the same when he woke up with what seemed to be the first rays of the sun, filtered through the windows. He made a move to get up, but Johnny was holding him so tightly that he couldn't budge a limb. "Johnny," he whispered. "I need to go to the bathroom."

Johnny blinked slowly as he woke up, too, and freed him. Ruslan limped as he climbed out of bed, and winced when he felt the pain in his backside. Without a word, he headed for the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

A look in the mirror was telling him all he needed to know. He was a total mess. When the hell had he become so gaunt, though? Yanis was right, after all, and his dad, too. He had lost too much weight.

But that wasn't the only shock he needed to face as he took his reflection in. His hair was a bird's nest, his lips were swollen and red, and there were marks on his chest and shoulders that he couldn't remember how they landed there.

On top of everything, though, he felt like a fraud. What kind of man was he? Johnny wanted him back, but was it the right thing? Could they allow their attraction and lust to get to their heads so quickly?

Ruslan turned the water on and splashed his face. He would take a shower later, at the hotel. For now, no matter how right Johnny's drying sperm on the inside of his thighs felt, he needed to go back there and explain to the other why he couldn't stay.

Johnny was fully awakened now and was sitting on the edge of the bed, still completely naked. Ruslan let his eyes wander over that magnificent body with longing, but caught himself in time.

"Johnny," he started. "I should go."

"Where?" Johnny asked, his eyes trained on him. "Didn't I make things clear enough last night?"

"We had sex, but we didn't talk," Ruslan replied. "All that I said in that letter is still true."

"No shit," Johnny interrupted him.

Ruslan sighed. "Look, the fact that we fucked doesn't change a thing. I still put you in danger, and I could never forgive myself for it."

"I don't care. If you want to be forgiven, you are." Johnny stood up and began walking toward him.

Ruslan pushed his hands against Johnny's muscular chest to stop him. "It's not that easy."

"What's not easy? Did you find yourself a lover in Russia or something? Call him and tell him to piss off."

“Don’t be ridiculous. What lover? I’ll never be with anyone again.”

“Funny thing. I’m thinking the same,” Johnny said and put both his hands on Ruslan’s ass.

“Johnny, you need to move on. Plus, you need to stop fighting. Yanis tells me your lungs are bad.”

“So? Make me. You want me to stop fighting, be the one to do it.”

“All right. Here I am, telling you that. Don’t fight anymore.”

“Then come back. Keep an eye on me twenty-four-seven. It doesn’t work any other way.”

“Johnny, are you serious? It’s your life we’re talking about,” Ruslan protested.

“What did you tell me, pretty? Yesterday, when I was kissing the floor in that ring, and last night, when I came in your ass?”

Ruslan looked away. Johnny freed his ass only so that he could tip his chin and make him look him in the eyes. “You told me that you loved me. Come on; say it again.”

“I do love you, Johnny. But how can that be enough?”

“So you made a mistake. Big deal. Who doesn’t? It wasn’t your fault that Nigel dude was a fucking creep. I heard he paid for it.”

Ruslan shook his head. “I need to go, Johnny.”

He passed by Johnny so that he could start dressing up. Whatever happened last night shouldn’t have. It was a mistake to try and take back what he did.

But where the hell were his clothes?

“Have you seen my pants?” He turned and asked Johnny.

The man had a satisfied grin on his face as he was crossing his arms over his chest.

“I’m serious, Johnny. I need to go.”

“Then walk naked out of here.”

“Johnny,” Ruslan warned.

He was in no mood for games.

“I threw them out the window,” Johnny said matter-of-factly.

Ruslan hurried to the window and looked down. He saw nothing. “Stop pulling my leg and tell me where my clothes are.”

“Some homeless took them. Sorry, pretty, but you’re not leaving here unless you want to walk around in the buff.”

“All right.” Ruslan threw his hands to the sides in exasperation. “What do you want?”

“I want you to go back to bed, sit there, and say only what you need to say.”

“And what’s that?” Ruslan asked, crossing his arms over his chest, too.

“Something like,” Johnny seemed to ponder, “how much you love me, how you want to marry me, and how you’ll only do what I say from now on.”

Ruslan bit his lips hard. This wasn’t the right moment to start laughing like a crazy person. “And why would I do that? You’re just a good-for-nothing fighter.”

“Look who’s all teeth and claws now,” Johnny said. “I thought you were here to apologize.”

“I am! I mean it. Johnny, what good could you see in me? I talked shit to you just because I was pissed. And then got us both in trouble.”

“And? Do I look like you hurt my feelings or something? Don’t worry; anytime you talk shit, I’ll turn you with your ass up, and you’ll learn to shut up.”

Ruslan could feel laughter bubbling in his chest. “I can’t believe you’re serious, Johnny.”

Johnny made the distance between them disappear in a single step. “I am. Like deadly serious. You don’t know who you are, pretty,” he said, caressing Ruslan’s cheeks gently.

“I am ... someone who’s not worthy of you,” Ruslan said softly, leaning into the warm caress.

“And I said that’s not who you are.”

“You fought for me, while I just stood there, watching.”

“But you got rid of that asshole who was supposed to take you who knows where,” Johnny pointed out.

“Because you taught me how,” Ruslan replied, his voice meek.

“Because you’re a fighter, baby. Can’t you see? So all I’m asking is fight for me, too.”

Ruslan raised his eyes to look into his lover’s. “Are you sure that’s you want, Johnny? Aren’t you afraid I could put you in danger again? You must know by now who my real father is.”

“I don’t care about that,” Johnny said and caressed his cheeks slowly. “And what makes you think I haven’t been in danger all my life, anyway? I got high, I got beaten, I broke bones, and who knows what else. What makes you think my life was any good before you?”

Ruslan wished he could have the right answer to that, anything to keep Johnny safe from now on. “You’re the one who’s a fighter, Johnny. Because of me, that’s ruined, too. Is it true that you shouldn’t fight anymore?”

Johnny nodded. “I don’t care about that, either. All fighters have one fight that’s like the most important in their shitty lives. I lived through mine. I lived to tell the tale. And there’s no one else in the whole world I’d fight for. Do you get it, pretty?”

Ruslan could feel his cheeks getting wet again. Johnny wiped them with his rough fingers, and Ruslan grabbed them so he could kiss them. “I think I do. I can’t believe it, that someone would care for me so much.”

“I’m lucky to be that someone,” Johnny said. “Say only this: you’re mine forever.”

“I’m yours forever,” Ruslan whispered back.

The kiss that followed was the sweetest they had ever shared in their lives. Johnny pulled him close, letting his hands travel down Ruslan’s back.

“I don’t think I can fuck again just yet,” Ruslan said and pushed Johnny back playfully. “I am completely wrecked. On top of everything, I don’t have any clothes. Wait, did you really throw them out?”

Johnny nodded and grinned. “I thought it would take longer to make you understand me.”

Ruslan stopped and gasped theatrically. “Don’t tell me I’m really supposed to walk around here naked?”

“We’ll find a way,” Johnny replied, catching him and pulling him close again. “So we’re not fucking? How about I suck you off?”

Ruslan smiled and was about to reply to that when a knock interrupted them.

“Get into the bed and pull a blanket over you,” Johnny ordered as he went to get the door while grabbing a pair of shorts on his way.

“How are you two, lovebirds?” Yanis walked into the room, in his usual confident strut.

Ruslan rolled his eyes and dropped on the bed.

“Hey, I told you to stay covered,” Johnny said sternly and adjusted the blanket over Ruslan’s naked body.

“It’s not like I didn’t see him naked ever,” Yanis protested.

That earned him a quick punch to his shoulder from Johnny.

“Ouch, that hurt,” Yanis said and began rubbing his shoulder.

“Consider it a warning.” Johnny pointed a finger at him to make himself clear.

“Sure, sure,” Yanis agreed quickly. “So when is the next big fight, champ? By the way, here’s your share.” He took out a wad of bills from his pocket.

“Next big fight?” Ruslan asked, now feeling pissed.

Johnny looked down and then threw a sideways glance at Ruslan. “Sorry, man. I’m hanging in the gloves. Husband’s here, and he doesn’t like me doing that.”

Yanis joked. “Are you sure, man? You shouldn’t let your better half order you around.”

Johnny snorted. “Like you’re not kept on a leash. Should I call your wife and ask her when should you be at home tonight?”

Yanis shook his head and grinned. “So you two are good?”

Johnny nodded. Ruslan pushed himself up on his elbows and glared at Yanis. “You played me.”

Yanis put his hands up in surrender. “Hey, I’m the one who knows how to do that, right? And I told you. I’m on your side.”

“Sure, sure.” Ruslan waved. “And now I have no clothes.”

“How that happened?” Yanis asked. “Never mind. I don’t care about your gay sex games.”

“Shut the fuck up, Yanis,” Johnny said, but he was smiling. “Find another headliner, though. This one,” he pointed at himself, “is no longer available.”

“I’m happy for you, man.” Yanis nodded. “You too, Ruslan. And now you’re back for good, right?”

“As soon as I get some clothes, I might change my mind,” Ruslan replied.

“Then you’ll be naked a long time,” Johnny said and climbed the bed, to press Ruslan into the mattress with his body.

“I’m pretty sure I didn’t want to see you getting freaky first thing in the morning,” Yanis commented.

“Are you still here?” Johnny asked over his shoulder.

Yanis shook his head. “Ruslan, make sure this asshole doesn’t forget we’re friends now.”

Johnny waved at him. “Yeah, yeah, fucker, go away now.”

“Are you two still calling each other names?” Ruslan glared at Johnny this time.

“We do it with love now,” Johnny explained.

“Oh, okay,” Ruslan said. “I didn’t think I’d live to see the day.”

“Well, it was all because you ran away,” Yanis said this time.

A single look from Johnny was enough to make Yanis head for the door. “I got it, I got it. I’m on my way, and don’t you two forget who brought you back together.”

“We’ll hear of this for a very long time, won’t we?” Ruslan said with a sigh.

“I think so,” Johnny replied and shrugged. “But I don’t mind.”

Johnny watched his lover looking around, a bit disoriented. Having Ruslan back seemed unreal, so he was tempted to reach out and touch him, to make sure he was there. There was so much happiness in his heart right now that he couldn’t breathe. “What are you looking for, pretty?”

“Hopefully, you didn’t throw away my phone and my wallet, too, right?”

“No. I’m not that crazy,” Johnny replied. “But you know you can’t go anywhere,” he added, hoping that Ruslan couldn’t read the slight tremble in his voice.

Ruslan looked at him with eyes filled with love. “I won’t. I’ll never do that again. God knows you’re crazy to feel for me after everything, but I think I’m a complete egoist and I will take what you’re giving me.”

“Give me this day, Ruslan,” Johnny asked. “Don’t call anyone and don’t go anywhere.”

Ruslan walked over to him and climbed into his lap. Circling his shoulders, he looked him in the eyes. “Did I really succeed to make you feel afraid of something, once in your life?”

“You can bet your sweet ass you did. Funny, though, I didn’t feel too much afraid until I got you here, with me.”

“So, it was a plan all along?”

“I couldn’t let you do that to me. You’re not the selfish guy here, pretty. I am. The moment Yanis gave me that letter from you, I felt like there was suddenly no ground under my feet. I

knew it then. That I can't live without you. Assume responsibility now. Marry me, and make an honest man out of me."

Ruslan smiled at him. "I can't see myself anywhere else, now that I'm here. I thought I would be able to stay away, to let you live the life you deserve, but it looks like I can't do that. Not when you look at me like this, and when you tell me all these words."

"I mean it, baby. I want you to be mine forever."

"I am yours. Be aware; once I put that ring on your finger, there's no turning back. You'll be mine forever, too."

"I bet on it." Johnny kissed his lover deeply. "No running away anymore, okay?"

"And where should I go?" Ruslan said softly. "My heart is here with you."

They kissed for a while, lost in the sensation. Ruslan was pliant under his hands, and when he had seen how tight he was the night before when they fucked, Johnny had been happy. There had been no one else, and that meant Ruslan still wanted him.

"So did you fuck some asshole over there?" He asked as Ruslan pulled himself away just so they could breathe.

"Seriously, Johnny, I basically lived in the woods somewhere all this time."

"Good. That's good. Your dad knows how precious you are. How come he let you go, though?"

"You'd be surprised. He encouraged me, told me that I missed you and that while I was trying to tell myself the opposite. Even my brother Sergei thought I missed you, and he doesn't even know you."

"Ah, now you have a lot of brothers and sisters. What are they like?"

"They're pretty cool. But I guess I was a Debby Downer, all my time there. Still, they welcomed me with open arms. My sisters had a mind to make a fashion model out of me. And, according to Sergei, marry me."

"Oh, shit," Johnny said. "Good thing I put Martin to call you."

"You put Martin to call me?" Ruslan seemed surprised.

"Yeah. I told him I needed him to send you a message."

"I was actually the one to call him. On a delicate matter. But it's true that he said it was a coincidence and that he wanted to call me, too."

"What matter?" Johnny asked.

“There is just something that doesn’t add up about papa’s death. I need to ask Martin about it.”

Johnny looked away. He knew about that, but he wasn’t the one to tell Ruslan about it. Still, it was weird not to say a thing. “Pretty, there’s something you should know.”

Epilogue

The man had his back turned, watching something intently across the vast expanse of water. The waves crashed against the stony shore, but it didn't look like he minded. He was wearing warm clothes, and the weather, cloudy and bent on nothing good, didn't seem to faze him.

Johnny was holding Ruslan's hand in his, and he could feel a small tremble in the long elegant fingers as they marched through the pebbles that made little crunching sounds underneath their feet.

The cold fingers coiled inside his palm, and then released him. Johnny stood back on purpose, letting Ruslan break into a sprint, making pebbles rise as he ran toward the man on the shore. The man didn't seem to notice, and Ruslan stopped at a fair distance from him.

Only then, Johnny quickened his pace. He took Ruslan by the hand, making his lover half turn and look at him with grateful eyes. Together, they walked toward the final point of their current destination.

"Papa?" Ruslan said hesitantly.

This time, when Johnny let him go, Ruslan didn't stop. Instead, as the man turned, he lunged forward, landing into his grandfather's arms.

"Russy," Douglas said gently.

Ruslan pushed his head into Douglas's shoulder and began crying. Douglas caressed his head with a slightly trembling hand. "Oh, Russy." His voice was filled with love and Johnny felt, for an instant, like an intruder.

But Douglas's eyes landed on him, and they were warm, letting him know it was his right to be there.

"Why did you leave me?" Ruslan asked between sobs.

"I thought I did it for you. Forgive an old fool," Douglas continued while still caressing Ruslan's head. "I had your love and thought that was the only way I could still have it. I was an egoist, after all, and nothing more."

"You were," Ruslan replied petulantly. "You left me all alone."

He sniffed and let Douglas wipe his cheeks with a handkerchief as if he was a little kid. Johnny could tell Ruslan enjoyed it, the care and love his grandfather showed him.

"I didn't leave you alone, Russy. You have Johnny. And your real father."

"Were you afraid of him? My real father?" Ruslan asked, looking up, into Douglas's eyes.

“It wasn’t fear.” Douglas shook his head. “But guilt. I knew I couldn’t protect you. These young beasts,” he added with a sigh. “I heard of Nigel. I know it must be against everything I taught you, but I feel relieved that he’s no longer among us. I knew your real father could offer you the protection I couldn’t.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Ruslan said. “And I don’t care about anything else. But why didn’t you tell me you were my grandfather?”

“For the same reason,” Douglas replied. “I thought, in my foolishness, that I was protecting you when I was doing nothing else but protecting myself. Maybe I feared you would hold me accountable for your mother’s disappearance, and all your suffering during those years I couldn’t find you.”

“But you looked for me,” Ruslan said.

“Always. Never stopped. I looked for your mother, too, but she’s nowhere to be found. For years, I feared the worst.”

“Do you still fear?”

Douglas caressed Ruslan’s hair slowly. “I have you here. It is a good time to let go of some of the hurt. Not all of it. It will be with me forever, how I didn’t hurry to stop her the moment rushed through that door, thinking that I didn’t love her. You’re here to ease my burden, and for that, I am grateful.”

“Will you come back?” Ruslan asked.

Douglas looked around. “It’s quiet here. I left you everything. Is it too much if I want to enjoy the quiet?”

Ruslan shook his head slowly. “I won’t tell a soul.”

“You can tell your father. He’ll understand. I know he isn’t the man I ever wanted for my daughter or the father I wanted for my grandchild, but I know he loves you. That’s enough for me.”

Martin approached solemnly, and Johnny turned toward him. “I have tea and cookies ready. They’re getting colder.”

Johnny could understand a thing or two from what Martin wasn’t saying. Here, in this remote place, Douglas and Martin could be themselves. They did deserve it.

Douglas took Ruslan by the shoulders, and they began walking. With a smile, he touched Johnny’s arm.

They all fell into the same pace and walked toward the house. Johnny felt the quiet all around them, as they moved through the misty air now burdened with the humidity brought from the ocean. “We’ll come to visit,” he found himself talking.

Douglas turned toward him with a warm smile. “I hope you do. Johnny, I’m thankful you’re here, and that you were by Ruslan’s side, during hard times.”

“I will always be, sir,” Johnny said with determination.

His words were met with a small laugh. “You know you can call me Douglas, Johnny. We’re family, after all.”

Ruslan pitter-pattered to the bed, his feet naked, and stopped in front of it.

“What is it, pretty?” Johnny straightened up and pushed himself up on his elbows.

“I can’t believe it. I have everything now.”

“You do?” Johnny smiled and threw his lover a look full of meaning. “I can bet you have way too many clothes on.”

Ruslan laughed, throwing his head back, and exposing his neck. Johnny moved fast and grabbed him, sinking his teeth into the flawless skin.

“Ouch,” Ruslan protested. “There’s not long until the wedding. It would be a shame to wear a large scarf to hide love marks. Especially since the suit I chose for the ceremony wouldn’t work with one.”

“So don’t wear a scarf,” Johnny said. “I’m thinking about giving you more love marks, as you call them. Then everyone will know I own you.”

“So possessive.” Ruslan giggled, as Johnny pulled him to the bed and began pushing up his t-shirt, which was the only thing he was wearing. “You don’t have to rub it in, you know? It is clear as day that I’ll be the kept husband.”

Johnny threw his lover a questioning look.

Ruslan rolled his eyes. “I’m practically broke. I don’t have a job and, as for money --”

Johnny bit the soft lips spouting all those crazy words. “Well, that’s good. ‘Cause now I know you can’t leave me. And you know,” he joked, “everything I have is yours. For real.”

Ruslan glared, but his lips were twitching. “I can see how you’re enjoying this.”

“It was your move to leave me everything. Don’t worry; I’ll take good care of you. You know, right?”

“I do,” Ruslan replied, and this time he was no longer joking.

Johnny knew Ruslan wasn’t the only one who couldn’t believe this was real. The way his lover, soon-to-be husband, was looking at him, was making his heart ache. It wasn’t from some imagined pain, though; it was from feeling too happy.

“Do you think it’s possible to die from too much happiness?” he asked. Ruslan smiled fondly and then burst into laughter. Johnny frowned. “What?”

“Are you getting a bit soft, Snake? Should I let you in the ring, once in a while, just to make sure you keep in shape?”

“You don’t have to say it twice. I can get Yanis to schedule some bouts. He won’t say ‘no’. The fucker loves the money I could make him.”

Ruslan made a sour face. “There is no way I’d let you.”

“So, were you just teasing me? Don’t say you don’t feel the same. Aren’t you as happy as me?”

Ruslan brought him close and kissed him hard, leaving him breathless. “I am happy, Johnny. And you’re right to ask if one could die from too much happiness.”

“Forget about stupid questions. There’s much living to do. And many things I want to do with you.”

“Like what? I thought we tried all the positions possible,” Ruslan said with a laugh.

“All my life, pretty, I thought the ring would be all for me. And maybe some fucking on the side. I had no dreams beyond surviving. That until I met you. Then I knew what my biggest dream would be.”

“Really?” Ruslan teased. “I can’t imagine what could be.”

“To be with you, for as long as I could. You see, I couldn’t let you leave me. I would have gone to the end of the earth to find you.”

Ruslan touched his cheeks gently. “It is forever, Johnny. This, what’s going on with us. You give my life sense, with your love and care, and understanding. I know now what they say about love, and how it is all true: I know you, and you know me, and it is so much that it’s like we’re both the same. Damn, I suck at this confession thing.”

“You could use some practice,” Johnny teased in turn, now.

He silenced his lover with a long, lingering kiss. Ruslan spread his legs wide, trapping him between them, and hooking them together at the small of his back. Johnny had lost count how many times they had done it through the night.

It was easy to find his way inside Ruslan's pliant body. His lover welcomed him with a shiver and a barely audible sigh, an expression of how satisfied he was.

"I want you, Ruslan. I want you to be with me forever," he said.

"Forever," Ruslan echoed his last word and pulled him closer.

They were moving slowly now, their bodies fitting so well. Ruslan's breath was captured into his mouth, and he was breathing, too, only through his lover's lips.

It took them until the first rays of sun began sneaking through the curtains for them to reach completion.

They lay in pleasant silence, as they tried to regain their breath.

"I think I know how to confess, Johnny. It's simple, really," Ruslan began talking, and it was like he was laughing breathlessly at each of his own words. "I love you."

Johnny laughed, too, and turned to face his lover. Ruslan would always be his life, and now he knew he would be happy forever. "You're right, pretty. Nothing else beats these words."

"So," Ruslan glared at him through his eyelids, "why aren't you saying them back?"

"I am more of a man of action than of words," Johnny said with pretended self-importance. "How many times did I prove myself to you last night? With my cock in you?"

"You pig!" Ruslan grabbed the pillow from under his head and smacked Johnny in the face with it.

Johnny grabbed the pillow and threw it over his shoulder, making something fall and break with a loud, frightening sound. Startled, he tried to get up, but Ruslan grabbed him and pulled him back to bed. "Where do you think you're going? You still haven't replied properly."

"Aren't you worried that I might have broken some expensive vase or some shit?" Johnny questioned.

"It's all yours. Why should I worry?" Ruslan pointed out.

"That's right. Now, where were we? Ah, I think you wanted my cock in you again."

"Hey, my ass will be in stitches," Ruslan protested.

"Then how could I prove myself to you?" Johnny asked.

“Just say it,” Ruslan asked.

Johnny kissed him hard. “I love you, Ruslan. Will you be my husband?”

Ruslan giggled. “So formal, I like it.”

“You didn’t answer,” Johnny said impatiently.

“Seriously? Do you need an answer to that? All the invitations have been sent.”

“Still,” Johnny insisted.

“All right,” Ruslan said with a sigh. “Yes, I will be your husband. And don’t forget that I’ll, sort of, say it three times. Here, with friends,” he counted on his fingers, “then, with papa and Martin and your mom, and then with my dad and all the family in Russia.”

“I doubt they would all want to hear us say it,” Johnny replied to that with a smile. “The way I see it, there will only be parties and lots of booze.”

“Well, it comes with the territory, I guess.”

“And a lot of people. And that’s why I want to hear you say it all now.”

Ruslan smiled and caressed his face. “My husband, Johnny ‘Snake’ Bryne. Let me introduce myself. I’m Mr. Bryne. Don’t you know my husband? He used to be a hell of a fighter. He’s more of an entrepreneur these days.”

“What are you doing, pretty?” Johnny laughed.

“I’m practicing. Seeing how I’ll be your husband forever, I need to make sure I slip into the role as fast as possible.”

“Do that,” Johnny agreed and kissed him again. “Now let me practice my part of the deal.”

“But my ass --” Ruslan whined, too theatrically to mean it.

“You have other delicious bits about you,” Johnny replied and sank lower.

“No, come here.” Ruslan urged him to stay where he was. “This is where you belong.”

As he fit his body over his lover’s lithe form, Johnny could think that was a fantastic confession, too. He belonged now, and he belonged where he wanted more than anything else in the world.

THE END