Of Sound Mind

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Summary

Doktor promised to come with Heavy to Russia after the war. Not all promises can be kept.

Notes

Heavily edited. Sorry to anyone who liked it better before.
Chapter 1

One day I will build big cabin for us in woods in Russia, and we will have two goats and your birds can come and it will have chimney and shed and office for you. We grow old together in the snow.

The war ended abruptly. Blutarch Mann died very suddenly of malfunctions to the machine that kept him alive. Whether or not the failure was foul play was heavily disputed, but it didn’t really matter. The war was over.

When the head surgeon signed on for a one-year contract with Redmond Mann, he’d intended to use it only to start setting down roots to earn an American citizenship. Coming from the tail end of one war in his own country into another war in America wasn’t ideal, but it was the best way to make sure he would be able to stay.

He hadn’t expected that he would meet another man in a very similar situation, and that they would both sign on again after their contracts expired to avoid being deported. At least, that was the official story. The contracts came in three levels. One year, five years, and ten years. The longer the contract the higher the pay, and the pay wasn’t anything to scoff at even if you only stayed for a year. But that was because not many people even made it one year. The two men decided they liked it there and signed on for ten.

They didn’t even get to finish their contracts when the war ended and Redmond decided he didn’t need mercenaries anymore now that he’d won, and everyone was paid and dismissed.

“Six years,” the medic hums to himself in his office while he packs away his uniform for the last time. He’ll keep it for posterity, and to remind himself of the fearsome man he was for this stretch of his life. And maybe he’ll put it on for fun later in life, assuming it will still fit. All around him, nurses were bustling to gather their things before heading off to the train station nearby that would ferry people all over the country.

The nurses are almost all gone by the time he leaves his bedroom, bed stripped and curtains drawn. He’s never going to see this bedroom again. He turns the light off and takes a moment to look across the clean operating theatre. He runs his palm across the metal exam table with a fond smile. But he can’t stall for too long, he has a train to catch and a life to start somewhere else.

Misha the heavy weapons guy comes to the medic's office as soon as he finishes packing his bags. He hasn't been this excited since the first time he got to take his gun, Sascha, out on the field. It's a very similar feeling, knowing that from today forward nothing is going to be the same for him, even if it is for entirely different reasons.
Because the war is finally over. He never thought he'd be so glad to see the fighting end. But he and the medic had made a promise to start a life together when the war was over and now, after years of looking forward to it, the day as finally arrived. All that's left is to get his doctor and head for the train.

But Erik's office is empty when he gets there. The medic is no where to be seen, either in his private quarters or performing last minute surgery. His drawers have already been emptied and his bed stripped and even the picture of the heavy that he kept hidden in his desk is gone.

"Nurse," Misha says, calling the one of the young women left to take inventory. "Where is doktor? Where are doktor's things?"

The nurse's expression grew puzzled. "Oh he left already. I saw him leave with his bags a little while ago. Did you need him for something? Did you have an appointment? A few boys have come to see about getting some scars taken care of before they head home to their sweethearts-"

"No." he says, cutting her off with a shake of his heavy head. His chest feels tight and cold. The doctor would not have left without him would he? Maybe he went ahead to get tickets for the train? There's no way he could have forgotten their promise...

"Thank you nurse. Is nothing. Wanted to say goodbye is all." he says shrugging. "I go. Goodbye."

He doesn't wait for her reply before he heads out the door. The medic must be at the train station. He probably wanted to make sure they got tickets before they were sold out. He's very smart and thoughtful that way.

But when Misha gets there there's no sign of his beloved doctor. He searches the crowds for the familiar face but sees only other fighters, soldiers and engineers and demomen, a few scouts and even a spy he thinks. But no medic. No medics at all, actually.

"Maybe got stuck at base?" he thinks aloud, turning back to the car still waiting for him. Maybe the doctor had gone to find him like he had gone to find the doctor and they had missed each other, maybe he is thinking the same thing that Misha left without him. That Misha forgot their promise of a new life together.

Maybe. But maybe not.
He misses the train. Scouring the base takes hours, and while several lingering mercenaries claim they saw the doctor with bags in tow, none of them remember where he was going.

*We will have chickens, and a donkey. I will hunt for us and cook.*

*Oh, ja? Can you cook?*

*Can I cook? Doktor, please.*

With every minute that passes without locating the missing doctor, the heavy’s chest feels tighter. The only solace he gives himself is the fact that he doesn’t see a single medic, so perhaps his is not the only one missing. He sees nurses, and a few scattered men in every other class, but not a single medic. Maybe they were all called for a last-minute meeting, or something.

But the hours pass and there's no sign of the medic. No one has seen him or knows where he might be, to anyone's estimate he left hours ago. He certainly isn't in the building.

Misha starts to feel sick. The doctor wouldn't have left him. He would never... But Misha was the one who had suggested they live together after the war. He'd always seemed more excited about it than the doctor. He'd made all the plans for them. Maybe the medic had only been indulging him all this time because he liked having the larger man there to warm his bed.

That thought sends tears to Misha's eyes but he refuses to let them spill. He will not cry over a man who never loved him.

He does another half hearted walk through of the base but still finds nothing. There's no denying it now. The doctor had left without him. He'd been abandoned.

*And how vill we afford such a nice cabin?*

*You have home office, be doktor for locals who cannot make it to hospital.*
With a heavy heart he gathers his bags again and calls for another car to the train station. He can't stay a minute longer. He can still go home at least, go home and try to forget.

He has sisters he can take care of. Sisters and an aging mother. He’ll take up vigil with them again. He doesn’t need a stupid tiny coward doktor. Too coward to even tell the heavy that he didn’t want to come with him to his face.

The train station is almost empty by the time he gets there. The doctor still isn’t there, and there was no sign of a wreck on the only road from the fort to the station. At this point, a disaster is the only thing that would stop the giant’s anger. He could forgive a car accident.

He’s never hurt this bad before. He climbs onto the train with a heavy heart. The doctor sure was convincing. He’s been using Misha for years now. He’s just been convenient for the man. Misha is angry that he ever let himself believe the doctor loved him. He should have known better when he learned how cold and detached the man was from everyone else. That kind of man doesn’t fall in love. At the very least, certainly not with a big, fat, dummkopf like himself.

They had two spots reserved on a boat for the next morning. They were going to stay in a hotel room tonight and make love one more time before the long boat ride home, because it would be too dangerous for them to try it in such close quarters on the ship.

Misha accidentally breaks a window on the train in his anger. This is the last time he will ever let anyone take advantage of him.

The bed in the room he takes is too big and too cold. He sleeps on the couch. It reminds him of the too-small cot in his room that he almost never slept in because he would share the medic’s large bed. That makes him even angrier. He doesn’t sleep well.

The next morning, it’s raining. He puts all of his belongings in plastic bags inside his duffel bag so they won’t get soaked and he catches a taxi to the docks, where his ship home will be loading within the hour. The ship he should have been on with the doctor. He almost breaks the window in the taxi, too.

The walkway up to the boat looks too long. He’ll be walking up that for an eternity. Maybe he actually died and this is his hell, he thinks, as he looks up the gangplank. He’s doomed to walk for
eternity up a metal walkway that won’t ever reach the boat he was supposed to board with his lover.

He starts to walk. His feet feel heavier than his heart.

He reaches the top when he hears a voice call out, “Heavy!”

He turns around to see the familiar form of Miss Pauling sprinting down the dock. Her face is flushed and she seems a little out of breath, as if she’d been running for some time.

“Misha!” she calls out again when he doesn’t move towards her. She’s waving a few papers over her head, another ream clutched to his chest. “Misha Petrovich!”

“What?” he asks, pain making him cold and snappish, as she makes it to the bottom of the walkway, clutching the railing and panting.

“I know what happened to the doctor!” she calls up the gangplank.

“Are you coming, buddy?” someone from the boat calls. “We’re shoving off in five minutes; we need to pull in the walkway!”

"Doktor left. Took his bags and left without me," the heavy says gruffly, causing the lump to rise into his throat again and causing more tears to well up in his eyes, threatening to spill. "If you run all dis way to tell me you run for nothing. I know."

“We don’t have time for this!” she calls up to him. “They’re going to hurt him! I’ll explain on the way!”

“Hey, pal,” a hand claps down on Misha’s forearm. “We need to raise the plank.”

Misha pulls away from the man so hard the sailor nearly falls over. The heavy almost drops his bags in his rush to get back down onto the sturdy dock.

"Who?” he demands, grabbing the small woman by the shoulders and shaking her. "Who hurt my doktor? Take me there. Now."
She doesn’t explain yet. She sprints down the dock, looking behind her a couple times to make sure he’s still following. Her hair is a mess and she looks like she hasn’t slept all night, like she’s about to drop, but she’s still running for him. For the doctor.

Her cab is still waiting at the front of the docks and she barks directions before Misha can even close the door all the way.
Lobotomy. The word made Misha shake.

“Redmond ordered it on all the medics,” Miss Pauling explains breathlessly while the taxi speeds through the streets of New Mexico. She flips through the papers on her lap and hands one to Misha. Beneath a diagram of the human brain is a lengthy contract, and at the bottom, Redmond’s extravagant and loopy signature.

“He didn’t want the doctor’s technology being released to the public. He was the one who developed the serum and built the gun. Take a left here!” the taxi leaned and Misha has to put his hand against the window to keep from falling on top of the small woman. “But he can’t kill his own mercenaries, so he’s having them all brain-deadened and shipped home. But your doctor, Erik Fleischer,”

She rifles through the papers again and hands Misha another. Hospital orders with the doctor’s name coldly stamped into place.

“He doesn’t have a home. So they’re going to just dump him in Cadence Manor psychiatric hospital as soon as the procedure is done. He’s the very last to go under, whether that’s because Mann has a sick, ironic sense of humor or because he’s fighting the hardest, I don’t know. Knowing him there’s a chance he could have already escaped and we might find him on the road,” she closes her eyes for a moment just to breathe, tries to bring herself off the brink of hysteria by playing with the hem of her purple skirt. “The doctor performing the procedures doesn’t actually work at Cadence, and I’ve been having a hard time pinning down any information on him. He’s stationed there just to get his work done and then he’ll leave again and the longer it takes for me to track him down the harder it’ll be to find him. When we get there, you’ll have to find Dr. Fleischer and hopefully we’ll get there in time to stop this from happening. I’ll try to find the doctor who’s been doing this.”

"We will get him. If they try to hurt him. I will kill them." Misha says, his voice like steel, cold, solid and unyielding. There's no doubt he'll follow through on his threat if he needs to.

They’re going to lobotomize his doctor. They’re going to strap down the most brilliant man possibly on Earth and take his brilliant mind because of money. They’re going to take his doctor away and there's every chance when he finds him there won't be anything left to salvage. They'll pay for that. Even if he can't touch them he knows they'll all burn in hell for what they've done.

Please, he thinks, praying for the first time since he was a small boy, Let him be alive if nothing else.
Miss Pauling falls out of the car in her haste and slices her hose open. Her knee is bleeding but she keeps running. By the time they both arrive, panting at the front desk, and hurriedly ask to claim one Erik Fleischer, the nurse at the desk informs them that he’s currently being “taken care of” on the top floor.

They take the stairs because running, at this point, is faster than the elevator. She steps right out of both of her shoes and leaves them behind on the stairs. They reach the top floor and go running in opposite directions to check as many of the operating rooms as possible as quickly as they can.

He can’t move fast enough. He throws open doors like he’s going to tear them off the hinges, and every empty room he sees makes him quake harder. He’ll tear down the building if he has to, he’ll stop every single one of them, he’ll bar the doors and make sure nobody can leave. His hands shake and sweat and his heart pounds so hard he can taste it. It feels like he’s been ubercharged, like the very walls are made of paper and he could crash right through to find his doktor.

Down the hall he hears a faint whisper, barely loud enough to echo through the metal and concrete hallway.

“Oh, God, no.”

Misha swears the giant baboon heart in his chest stops. Or maybe it's just beating so fast he can not longer feel it. He turns and barrels down the hall, crashing towards the operating theatre where he can see Miss Pauling standing.

He gets to the door and sees Erik, strapped down and unmoving, his eye half open and unfocused, as if he's been sedated. There are several nurses around him, bustling without regard to the pair at the door. He has a bandage strapped down over his right eye, stark white in contrast to the crimson patch spreading slowly in the middle.

They’re too late.

Misha has come close to dying before. He’s been in the infirmary, close to his last breaths, dying on the sterile table of Erik’s theatre. He’s been so close, he’s even drifted once, in and out of the everlasting whiteness and peace. Dying had never hurt as badly as this.
His knees fail him. He clings to the doorway and stares at the doctor. He can’t even breathe. He can’t find enough strength to draw breath. If he could, he would wait to suffocate right where he stood, and die. Instinct takes over and he sucks in a breath and the fire ignites. He lunges to take a nurse in either hand, he wants to hurt them all, but Miss Pauling grabs his arms and stops him with a shake of her head.

“It’s not their fault,” she whispers, her voice cracking with pain and exhaustion. “They just work here. They don’t know what they’ve done.”

“Is this man family of yours?” one of the nurses asks, her tone kind despite the atmosphere in the room.

Miss Pauling looks up from where she leaned up against the wall, and lifts her glasses to rub at her eyes. “Oh, yes, he,” she clears her throat and stands up straight. They didn’t get there in time to save him, but she’s not about to let him waste away in some mental hospital for the rest of his life. “He’s my father. I have orders.” She rifles through the papers in her hands with shaking fingers and hands the falsified information to the nurse.

Misha doesn’t know what to do. When he’s scared or in pain, for the last several years he’s been trained to make other people hurt, too. He would spray bullets or crush skulls with his hands or slice through flesh and bone with brass knuckles the size of meat cleavers. He doesn’t know what to do when the fight is taken out of him.

Miss Pauling looks over her shoulder at Misha without a trace of the sparkle that usually lightens her eyes. She mouths the words ‘I’m so sorry’ before disappearing around the corner. With the commotion died down, the heavy has a chance to look down at his doctor.

His exposed eye is half-open and unfocused, unblinking. His lips are slightly parted, face pale, dark hair messed. His glasses are missing, his visible eye seems sunken in. He doesn’t even look at Misha. He doesn’t seem to be looking at anything at all.

"Doktor," Misha says softly, gently touching his lover's hair where the bandage doesn't cover it. "Oh doktor what have they done?"

The tears he's been holding in for two days come back with a vengeance now and he can't hold them back. "I will take care of you. Will never leave you again. Will never let them hurt you. I am so sorry doktor. Should have protected you better."
The other nurses take Erik away to be cleaned and dressed and it takes all of Misha's self control to step back and let them wheel the unresponsive man away from him.

He should have known it would have taken severe brain damage to keep Erik away from him.

When he makes it back to the lobby on heavy feet, Miss Pauling is already there signing papers, shoes back on her feet. She fixes her hair between signatures, paying for the chair that they would take the medic home in, and waves the heavy over. Misha falls into a nearby chair, hurting profoundly. He would have preferred that the doctor had run away from him. At least he would be healthy and well. Misha preferred anger and betrayal to this.

Erik is wheeled out to them in a chair a few minutes later, dressed in a very simple white button down and dark brown slacks, black slippers on his feet. His legs are limp to one side, his hands folded in his lap at unnatural angles, and his head tipped over the back of the chair. He looks like a corpse.

“Now, are you sure you want to take your father home?” a doctor asks Miss Pauling for what is probably a third or fourth time. “He’s just had a very serious procedure. It’s not easy taking care of the brain damaged. We’re a lot more equipped to take care of him, and we will.”

But she doesn’t get the chance to respond, because Misha overhears and responds first.

"We will care for him." He almost shouts. He gets up and takes the chair away from the nurse, as if to prove his determination. "He will be home where his daughter and I will give him all the attention hospital can not. Will be loved at home. Not here."

The nurse steps back hastily and the doctor raises his hands in defense. “You win,” he laughs nervously. “Here’s information on lobotomized patients,” he hands a stack of papers to Miss Pauling. “He’s all yours.”

Misha pushes the chair outside and the door closes behind them. They stand side by side in silence for a long while, staring out as the morning sun climbs higher in the sky.

She doesn’t know what to say. She can’t even look at him. She’s having a hard time breathing. When she finally turns her head to look at Misha, she sees his puffy eyes and defeated expression and almost loses the will to speak.
“I’m so sorry,” she says, barely above a whisper. “I tried.”

“Is not your fault. Is more than I could have asked for,” Misha responds tiredly, staring down at the medic. “Thank you for trying.”

She doesn’t know what else to say. She leans back against the door and takes off her glasses to rub at her eyes. “I guess this is better than dead,” she murmurs, and looks bitterly down at the packet of papers she’d been given.

"Da." Misha agrees sadly, looking down at his former lover. "Is better than dead. Alive always better. I think. I hope."

She helps load him into the car though Misha has no idea where they are going to go now. He has no home here and can not possibly take Erik back to Russia like this. Getting passage there had been hard enough before, it will be impossible now.

"Why do you help us?" he asks Miss Pauling, deciding the problem of where to stay can wait a few more minutes. "Why you go to dis trouble?"

She sits tiredly against the back seat. The poor taxi driver is having a hell of a morning, it seems, but he’s still waiting and driving. Misha is thankful. Smiling, exhausted, she gives the driver one more set of directions, and sags into the leather.

Reaching into the inside breast pocket of her blazer, she pulls out a small, well-worn black and white photograph of a young woman and hands it to Misha. The upper corner is torn and there’s a smudge of pink lipstick along the edge, and a greasy fingerprint at the bottom. The woman is grinning so wide that her eyes are crinkled up, with freckles dark on her nose and cheeks and a gap between her front teeth.

“We have to stick together,” she says, trying to be as vague as possible so she doesn’t tip off the driver.

Misha looks at the photo then at Miss Pauling before handing it back with a nod. "I understand. If I could ever return favor I would. You have been very kind. More kind than I would expect from anyone. I will make it up to you."
“Don’t worry about that yet,” she says, taking off her glasses and folding them in her lap. “For right now, I want to close my eyes and nap until we get to my apartment. You two can stay with me for as long as you need, until you figure out where you’re going next.”

Misha sighs. "Thank you. Again. You are surely saint. If you believe in saints. If not then you can be angel, da?"

“Da,” she smiles, but doesn’t open her eyes. Misha doesn’t move a muscle the whole ride home after she slides over sideways and falls asleep on his shoulder.
“It’s not very glamorous,” Miss Pauling grunts as she drags Heavy’s bag – which, as it turns out, very heavy – and shoulders open the door to her apartment. It’s on the fifth floor, and the elevator has been out for more than two weeks, so Misha carried the unresponsive doctor up the stairs with the wheelchair folded flat and tucked under one arm. “But it’s home.” She slides Misha’s bag into the hall closet just to get it out of the way for the time being and lifts one cat under each arm so they won’t be underfoot.

“Bring him to the study,” she says to the giant, edging around him to take the wheelchair from him and set it against the wall. She scoots around him again and leads him through the small but spaciously organized living room, past the kitchen, and down the hall to the bedrooms. One of which has been modified into a personal study, rife with bookcases, a messy desk, and an actual personal computer standing like a mountain in the corner. She hurries to the far wall, where there’s a daybed, and shoves pillows out of the way and pulls back the blankets so Misha can lay down the doctor.

“It’s good enough for now,” she frowns while Misha piles pillows under the doctor’s head and around his shoulders to keep him as comfortable as possible. “I’m going to go call a few doctors to find a specialist. See if we can get him any help.”

Misha nods and takes a seat on the floor beside the bed, taking the doctor’s limp hand in his own. "Thank you, again. I will pay for doktors. And will pay rent while we stay. Will not take advantage of kindness."

“Dont pay rent,” Miss Pauling forces a smile. “Redmond covers it for me. But thank you for the offer. You can go grab the green chair in the living room and bring it in here for you.”

Misha almost laughs. "No. Chair will break. Will not break your things. I will help with cooking and cleaning if not paying rent."

He can't stop looking at the doctor on the bed. He almost doesn't recognize him. His doctor is never so dazed and unresponsive. Seeing him like this now it feels like someone has wrapped right metal bands around Misha’s chest that are slowly getting tighter until he won’t be able to breathe.

"You think doktors can help him? Make him well again?” he asks quietly, not sure he wants an answer.
Miss Pauling grinds her teeth in silence for a few seconds. She looks down at her feet and blows air out her nose. “I don’t think so,” she says quietly. “But we can hope for a miracle.”

A miracle. As if they haven’t had their fair share of miracles already. It's a miracle they survived this long. It's a miracle they were never caught together. It's a miracle Miss Pauling got to him in time. It's a miracle they both got to Erik in time. They've had too many miracles already.

"Da. We can hope. One more miracle." Misha sighs. "We have been lucky so far."

She rushes off to the wall-mounted telephone in the kitchen to make some calls, leaving Misha alone with the doctor.

He’s completely dead, it seems. Unmoving. His eye is still open, unblinking. He doesn’t even seem to be aware that he’s alive. His hand is limp in Misha’s, fingers curled like he’s asleep. He might as well be, it’s impossible to tell.

His hand twitches. Misha sits up excitedly, but it seems to have been a muscle spasm, because the doctor remains completely immobile.

New tears well up in Misha's eyes. His brilliant, beautiful doctor has been reduced to little more than a living corpse.

"I am sorry doctor." he says in teary Russian, pleading his lover to understand somehow. "I should have protected you. I promised I would never let anything happen to you but I let them hurt you. I'm sorry."

Misha doesn’t know how long he sat there talking quietly to the doctor, petting his hair and humming to him, but he feels a hand on his shoulder and Miss Pauling is there, telling him it's dinner time.

He feels flushed and embarrassed because he’s been almost as unresponsive as the doctor. He said he would cook but he was so focused on Erik that he sat in one place so long she made dinner for him.

“I don’t know how we’re going to keep him fed,” she presses her lips together as she looks over the medic. “Tomorrow I’ll try to get my hands on an IV bag. We’re going to need to register him with a
hospital somewhere to supply us with nutrient solutions, at least until he’s recovered enough to eat on his own.”

"I feed him. Soup and oatmeal." Misha says sternly. He's not going to let Erik waste away on nothing but IV fluids. "You have oatmeal? And cinnamon? Doktor likes cinnamon. If he can still taste it. Can he taste?"

“I’m sure he can,” Miss Pauling nods as the giant man levers himself to his feet. “He just won’t be able to appreciate it yet.”

She apparently took the liberty of putting their dinners on the coffee table in her living room, considering the chairs at her kitchen table appear to be antiques made of sticks and string.

“I read the whole packet,” she says, taking the stack of papers from the table and handing it to Misha. “If you want to read up too, it might help you understand what he’s going through. Right now, he’s basically a vegetable. But eventually, that should change. He’ll recover. By the end of the week he should be able to move a little bit. He’ll be able to turn his head and lift his hands. If you try to feed him he should swallow on reflex, but it might be a little bit messy. For now, just try to be gentle with him. And don’t be too hard on yourself, either.”

"Will he remember anything? Will he ever be a doktor again?" Misha asks, the flood gates opening now and words pouring out in slow faltering english. "Will he know his name? My name? Will he speak? Is he in pain? Will he be able to play violin again? What is he now? He is my doktor but he is not my doktor. What am I doing with him now?"

“Whoa, slow down,” Miss Pauling puts her hand on Misha’s arm and hands him a tissue box in case he needs it. “I don’t think he’ll ever be quite the same, but everyone who gets this treatment recovers differently. Eventually he should speak again, and I’m sure he’ll remember you someday. But you have to be patient with him. As for whether or not he’s in pain… I can’t say. It’s impossible to tell. I can try to get my hands on some painkillers and you can crush them up into soup or oatmeal just in case.”

"My job was to protect him." Misha mutters, wiping tears from his eyes. "I am a failure. I thought he left. Hated him for leaving me. He will never forgive me."

“I don’t think he’ll ever blame you,” the woman shakes her head and pushes the big man’s dinner towards him to encourage him to eat. “I’m sure when he recovers, he’ll blame Redmond. He might be too weak to ever go after him, and I’m not supposed to encourage violence against my boss but technically if you ever want revenge, that’s who you should direct it at. He didn’t just do this to Dr.
Fleischer. He did it to all of his medics. Every single one. That’s 76 men, lobotomized and shipped home."


He gets up and takes his plate into the small kitchen where he carefully moves the contents into tupperware containers for later and starts cleaning up. "I would read what doctors gave you but English is not very good. Can barely read children's books."

“I can read it to you, she says as the large man starts to make oatmeal for the doctor.

She reads out of the packet while he mixes cinnamon into the warm oatmeal, and warns him to mix a little more milk into it because it’ll be easier for him to swallow if it’s thinner. She follows him into the study with her own dinner, taking bites occasionally while she reads to him about recovery rates and expectations.

She reads to him about how his brain will slowly rebuild and how he’ll always have a gap and will have memory problems for the rest of his life, how he’ll shake sometimes and might get scared occasionally. Misha feels his eyes get hot several times while she reads, but he doesn’t cry because he has to keep his vision clear in order to feed Erik.

He’d propped the doctor up on several pillows so it would be easier for him to swallow. Miss Pauling was correct, he swallowed on reflex when Misha spooned oatmeal into his mouth. It was heartbreaking to watch.

There was a time the medic would be too wrapped up in his work to eat. His dinner would be beside him, grown cold a long time ago by the time the heavy comes into his office. He might have had the intention to eat, but he got absorbed in his notebooks and forgot. Times like these, Misha would threaten to spoon feed him. The medic would laugh and pick at his cold dinner and tell Misha ‘zhat vill be zhe day.”

He never wanted it to be like this.

Misha wiped the doctor’s mouth with a napkin any time the oatmeal didn’t make it all the way inside.
Anger bubbled in him at the indignity this poor, distinguished man has suffered.

About three quarters of the way through the bowl of oatmeal he stops and sets it aside. Erik never ate much at once and now he has no way of knowing if he’s overfeeding the doctor and making him sick. It's a risk he doesn't want to take, knowing there’s every chance he could choke on his own vomit if he were ill. It's safer to stop now and heat up the rest on the stove later.

He carefully wipes Erik’s mouth and cheeks clean and holds a cup for him to drink a little water and clear anything that might have been left sticking to his throat before laying him back down on the bed.

"Am I selfish?" he asks Miss Pauling. "I am. If he could see himself he would want to die. I keep him alive for selfish reasons and selfish hope. He would never want to be like this."

“He’ll be thankful once he recovers,” she says gently, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Do you want me to collect some blankets for you to sleep in here? You’re welcome to sleep on the couch otherwise, if you can fit.”

"I will sleep on floor," Misha answers. "Next to him. We promised to spend nights next to each other. Will not break another promise. Even if he does not remember."

“You can sleep in the bed with him,” she nods to the small day bed. “There wouldn’t be room for you to lie side by side, but he could lay on top of you.”

"He might roll off and crack open skull. Or I could squeeze him too tight. Or he might wake up and not know who I am or where he is. Floor is safer. For him and for tiny bed." Misha says with the hint of a smile.

She retrieves a small mountain of pillows and blankets and bids him good night with a promise of being down the hall in case he needs anything. She seriously doubts he’d wake her up, but she has to offer.

Left in the silence that night, Misha has time to think. He wishes he couldn’t think at all, and suddenly understands why people become alcoholics. Not being able to think would be blissful right now. He has nothing but his thoughts to keep him company, and the silent creak of Erik’s unsteady breathing.
He wonders how close they were to saving him. Five minutes? Twenty minutes? An hour? He doesn’t think it makes a difference because he couldn’t save him either way. But somehow it would sting a lot more if the procedure had been completed just moments before he arrived.

The next morning, he’s awake by the time Miss Pauling is up and moving. She lets him know that she does still work for Redmond, although for the time being her goal is to work her way soundlessly into his network, retrieve the names of every medic, and send money to their families to compensate their lobotomized loved ones.

Misha told her that this was too dangerous, and that if she was caught, she would be killed for it. If they killed Erik’s mind for money, they would certainly kill her. She tells him there’s no way he would be able to stop her.

“I’ll be back at six,” she tells him. “The market is right down the road to the right, less than a block away, if you need to get anything. I left the number for my personal office phone next to the phone on the wall in case you need to call me. Don’t forget to dial the extension, or you’ll have to ask for me through the secretary, and we want to try and keep as few people knowing that you’re staying with me as possible. That might raise suspicion if it gets up to Redmond. If you call and it’s not safe for me to talk to you right away, I’ll say something inconspicuous and hang up, but I’ll call you back as soon as I can. Alright?”

"Da. Is good plan." Misha says, walking her to the door. "I will do some cleaning while you are gone. Dishes from last night and laundry. Whatever needs to be done. We are not freeloaders. If I have question I will call."

He watches from the window to make sure she gets to her car alright before going back to Erik who is still asleep. Or his eyes are closed. He changes the sheets that were soiled during the nights and changes Erik out of his clothes before cleaning him off in the shower and putting him back to bed and getting started on breakfast.

A few times during the day he almost cries thinking how this could be their life from now on. Erik stuck in bed, dazed and silent for the rest of his life. But he quickly pushes those thoughts away. His doctor is strong and he will recover. He has to.
The first day is the hardest. The first, full day of taking care of Erik. He should be healthy right now. They should be on the boat headed to Russia. He’d be leaning over the railing watching the water churn, and complaining about the cold. Misha would tell him that it’ll be even colder where they’re going. He’d laugh when the doctor scrunches up his nose and curses at him in German, but he’d know that he’s secretly excited.

Erik can’t even talk. The next time Misha goes in to see him his eyes are open but he doesn’t look at the big man. He doesn’t respond to his voice. Misha tells him stories about his sisters – sisters that Erik would have met.

Miss Pauling comes home at six like she said and frowns when she finds Misha’s dinner from the night before still in the Tupperware, untouched.

“You haven’t eaten in more than a day,” she tells him sternly, like a mother. “You can’t take care of Dr. Fleischer if you can’t even take care of yourself.”

"I am big man. Late dinner will not hurt me." Misha says, feeding Erik tomato soup. "He has needed help. Shower, breakfast, changing, lunch. He needs clothes and maybe bedpan. I cleaned and flipped mattress and washed sheets but bedpan would be easier and less smelly."

“I brought plenty of things home,” she says, “But it’s heavy. I left it on the street, I hoped you’d come with me to get it.”

"I will get it. You stay with him?” Misha asks, holding out the bowl of soup and the spoon. "Do not want to leave him alone."

She takes up Misha’s vigil by the bed, bringing over her desk chair, and holds the soup in her lap with a sigh. She never interacted with Dr. Fleischer personally, but she monitored him just like she monitored the rest. She knows what a great mind he had.

He not only discovered the serum that provided the healing rays they lobotomized him for, but he designed the gun that would administer it to injured comrades. Nobody knows how the Blu’s got their hands on the tech, and she can’t help but wonder how Redmond is keeping a lid on that, if he was willing to brain damage his own medics, she doubts the Blu’s are safe either.

She wonders how many families waited excitedly for their sons, brothers, fathers and husbands to come home when they heard the war was over, only to receive a vegetable in the mail. It boils her
Misha comes back to the apartment a few minutes later with the heavy bag Miss Pauling brought home from work. He brings it right into the study and takes back the bowl of soup to resume feeding Erik.

"You show me what you brought while I feed doktor?" he asks, kneeling at the man's side again.

She talks him through all sorts of equipment and what they’re used for, she helps him situate the bedpan, and doesn’t say anything when she sees his lower lip quiver for a moment. She knows it hurts him to see the doctor in such a state.

She brought an IV stand anyway, promising that Misha can keep feeding him anyway. She offers a catheter, and lets the heavy think it over when he seems hesitant, and continues talking him through how to use the blood pressure cuff and what the readings mean.

“I was in nursing school before I dropped out when – ” she clears her throat. “Before I started working for Redmond. So if you have any questions on what to do with any of this stuff, just ask me.”

"You are angel." Misha says through his tears. "You should never have to do this for us. We will leave as soon as he is well enough to travel. I will start finding place for us tomorrow."

“Don’t worry about it,” she pats his shoulder. “I would have done anything for someone to come along and save her.”

It was a simple statement, but it made the heavy’s heart clench. She smiles and leaves the room, leaving him with questions he probably won’t ever ask. When she comes back, she’s lugging a heavy-looking hassock. He scrambles to pick it up for her before she hurts herself.

“Stole it from the office,” she laughs when he looks it over. “Years ago. I liked it. They never even noticed it was gone. It’s been holding plants in my living room. I think you could make better use for it. It’s plenty strong enough to hold you.”

"I do not want to take your things." Misha tries to refuse. "I am happy on floor. Is luxury next to some places I have slept."
She sighs dramatically. “I won’t be able to sleep at night knowing you’re on the floor. Take the hassock or I’ll be forced to stay awake all night, tossing and turning, worrying, and then my job performance will suffer, and I’ll be fired, and I’ll lose my apartment – ”

“I will take it,” Misha cuts her off, trying not to smile.

“Besides, you’re not going to sleep on it,” she drops the exaggerated expression. “Just sit on it during the day. I promise, the potted plant isn’t going to notice it’s on the floor now.”

Misha actually smiles a little. "Then yes. I will take it. Thank you again. Would you like me make dinner now? I make good stew."

“Stew.” She hums. “I don’t think I’ve ever actually had stew. What goes in it?”
The days pass in monotony. Misha’s emotions fluctuate between three things only. Anger, sadness, and exhaustion.

The first day that he comes in and the doctor’s head has turned to the side since he left the room, he drops the cup of water he’d been carrying. The glass shatters and water spills everywhere and he’ll take the time to be upset about that after he talks to the medic.

Erik is still unresponsive. He just managed to turn his head to the side. An enormous accomplishment, Miss Pauling assures Misha while he fumbles through an apology for breaking her glass. She doesn’t even care, she’s much happier with the fact that he moved, and in only five days.

She tells Misha that he should take the man out at some point, because he’ll get bed sores if he just lies there all day every day. The heavy is reluctant, he doesn’t want anyone else to see Erik like this, but he knows that the fresh air would do him some good. He’ll take him for a walk, he decides. Just around the block, in his wheelchair. He’ll appreciate the sunshine and movement in his own, quiet way.

When he passes by the market, he sees a display of dishes in the window and he smiles. He’ll buy an extra glass for Miss Pauling, to replace the one he broke, he decides. She’ll be pleasantly surprised. But there are steps leading to the door of the market, four of them. It’s to keep the store from flooding when it rains and the street fills up, but it isn’t very wheelchair friendly. He can’t just carry Erik up the stairs with him, either. And the glass won’t be a surprise if he has to ask Miss Pauling to watch the doctor while he goes out to get it.

“Wait here,” he says, mostly to himself, as he nestles the chair safely beside the stairs. “I will only be one minute.”

The glass isn’t even as expensive as he expected it would be. Everything was so much more expensive in the town near Redmond’s base, because the fighting was so close and the mercs were paid so well, all of the prices inflated so that they could get more out of the well-off fighters.

“Just this?” the woman behind the counter asks. The name on her tag is the same as the name on the front of the store, Linda.
“Da. You own shop?” he asks, trying to make friendly conversation.

“I do,” she smiles. “Well, my husband owns the lease, but he works elsewhere. I stay here and run the roost. It’s very exciting.”

“You are impressive woman,” he says as she wraps the glass to keep it safe.

“Oh, you,” she waves a hand at him. “I don’t think I’ve seen you around before. You look pretty hard to miss. Did you just move in?”

“I am with friend, visiting other friend,” he nods to the window where the top of Erik’s head and wheelchair can be seen.

“Oh, the poor dear, what happened to him?” she asks as she tucks an extra bag around the glass.

“Hurt in war,” Misha says. He doesn’t really want to go into it.

“That gravel war? I heard it’s been going on for decades,” Linda stands on her tip toes to try and see Erik better. “Is he okay? I think something’s going on out there.”

Misha hands her the money for the glass idly, staring out the window. The blinds are low to keep the glare inside the shop to a minimum, but there is some kind of commotion going on outside. In a panic he leaves the glass on the counter and rushes to the door.

He freezes in the doorway when he sees a group of four kids, all younger than ten at least, laughing and jeering and throwing rocks at Erik.

"Get away!” He shouts as he rushes towards them. He's like an angry bull, barreling towards the children with every intention of making them fear for their lives.

The kids scatter like roaches, screaming in terror and dropping their rocks. He would track them all down and murder them if they weren’t children. He won’t forget their faces. A few people gasp and stare after the children are gone, but he can’t bother with them as he turns his attention to the doctor. He seems mostly unharmed, save for a small bleeding cut on his cheekbone – they threw rocks at his
head.

“Oh my lord,” Linda breathes, holding a hand to her heart. “Is he okay? Did they hurt him? Those boys throw pebbles at my windows all the time, but I didn’t expect this. I’ll have a firm talk with their mothers.”

Misha can’t say anything. He gives her a mournful look and a grateful nod, but he’s too afraid that he would bellow in Russian in his anger and frighten the woman if he tried to speak. She was too kind to experience his wrath, even if it was second hand. She hands him the glass he forgot on the counter and promises him that if he ever comes back, he can bring Erik’s wheelchair right into her shop if he can carry it up the stairs.

He can’t thank her enough, even though he’s still fuming he tucks the newspaper wrapped glass next to the doctor in his chair and starts to wheel him home, shooting angry looks at anyone who dares to look at them for too long when they pass.

Back in the apartment he sets Erik up in his bed, sitting up on some pillows so he can at least look out the window if he wants to turn his head that way and starts cleaning the small cut.


He’s not supposed to take the bandage off for a week, two more days, but if he’s blinking, he’s going to want to blink both eyes. It’s probably close enough. Besides, the children probably threw rocks at his head because of the bandage and obvious head injury. Without it, maybe nobody would know what was wrong with him.

But that was a futile wish anyway, he finds out, when he removes the bandage. The medic’s right eye socket is darkly bruised, with a very obvious puncture wound near the corner of his eye. It makes Misha angry and sick at the same time.

He checks for more blood from the rocks before carefully replacing the bandage with a clean one. Erik won’t be moving that eye any time soon. And Erik he knows would prefer the bandage over the bruising. He always took such good care of his appearance. That’s why Misha brushes his hair every day even though no one else is going to see him inside the small apartment.

Cut cleaned out and bandaged he returns to the daily routine of laundry, dishes and cooking. During his downtime he unwraps the glass he bought for Miss Pauling and is glad to see it’s undamaged
from before. He wouldn't have been able to go out and buy another and he's always hated wasting money. Probably because his family had so little to spare when he was growing up.

When Miss Pauling returns, he decides to fib about the cut, because telling her that he’d looked away and Erik fell over and knocked into the window frame was less embarrassing than telling her he almost murdered a group of eight-year-olds.

She was over the moon when she found the new glass in the cupboard and even drank from it when she took her dinner in the study with him and Erik.

“He’s actually blinking?” she smiles at the doctor as his eyelid makes a few slow but deliberate blinks. “That’s good news. He’s already doing much better than the average lobotomy patient.”

"He has always been above average." Misha says proudly. "There is still much bruising under the bandage but maybe it is getting better. If he is going to recover it will be rapid. He is so strong. Don't you agree?"

“I don’t really know him, but I’m sure you’re right,” she nods. “Oh, I finally got a doctor’s appointment for him. It’s hard to get anyone to see a lobotomy patient because it’s widely believed there’s no helping them. I already got tomorrow afternoon off so I can come back here and take you.”

Misha spends most of the next morning fretting over Erik. He gives him an extra long shower, making sure to clean every inch of the medic’s body thoroughly so the doctors know he's being taken care of. He feeds him the entire bowl of oatmeal and even spends some time trying to style his hair the way Erik always wore it. It's not perfect but it’s better than the combed flat look he had been settling with.

The time to leave for the appointment can't seem to come soon enough. A few times he even checks to make sure the clocks haven't stopped because time seems to be passing so slowly. But finally Miss Pauling and her car arrive to take them to the hospital.

They get there and check in and too soon the doctor's are coming to wheel Erik away. Misha tries to come with him but is firmly told that he is not family and is not allowed in the examination room.

"But I am care taker." he argues. "I can answer questions. He is blinking. He can not tell doktors that."
"I'm sorry sir," the nurse says, gesturing him back towards his chair in the waiting room. "Family only. The doctors will be able to see him blink and he'll be back soon I promise."

Miss Pauling gives the big man a suffering look as she’s allowed in, following the previous pretense that she’s his daughter. He feels a little better knowing someone who cares about Erik is in the room with him. She doesn’t care about him like he does, but it’s better than just the doctors.

Waiting rooms have never bothered him this much before. He’s never spent much time in waiting rooms. Growing up, his family never had enough money to get to a doctor’s, if they ever needed one, the doctor would have to come to them, or they wouldn’t get one at all. He didn’t spend any time in waiting rooms until he joined Redmond, and he would be injured and wait for his turn with the medic. And even that was before Erik discovered the healing serum.

Before, being in that waiting room meant getting to see the medic, and sneak a few kisses while his wounds were mended. Now, it’s keeping him apart from Erik.

He tries to be hopeful, but when Miss Pauling comes back out with the doctor half an hour later, the nurse pushing Erik in his chair, her eyes are shiny and her cheeks are red. She meets Misha’s eyes and shakes her head slowly.

Misha's heart sinks and there's a pain worse than any bullet that settles over his chest. She doesn't need to say anything. Neither do the doctors. That headshake was all he needed. There's no hope. Erik is most likely gone forever, even if he does regain basic movement and speech. His lover is gone forever.

He holds back the tears until they get back to the apartment and he gets Erik settled in front of the window again. He presses a soft kiss to the man's head before leaving him with Miss Pauling and locking himself in the bathroom so he can finally let go without either of them seeing.

She pretends not to hear him. She wants to busy herself with something, but she knows that Misha won’t be happy if she makes dinner for them, so she sits by Erik and apologizes quietly to him. She apologizes for the fact that he ever signed on with the horrible Redmond Mann. She apologizes for what happened to him, and that she couldn’t be of any more help. She apologizes for not finding out earlier and stopping the whole thing. She apologizes until she’s hoarse and only stops when she feels Misha’s hand on her shoulder, and she realizes that her lap is wet with tears dripping down her face.

“I’m sorry,” she apologizes one more time and wipes her face with her sleeves. “I’m just so
frustrated. I wanted to save him. I wanted to save just this one. My whole job has always been to sit idly by and just watch while you all kill each other, I wanted to save just one.”

"You save his life." Misha reminds her. He settles down on the floor next to her and Erik. "You found me and we save him. He is alive. If I had not left you might have found me and we could have saved his mind. It is my fault. I left him."

“He’s alive, but he’s not living,” she says breathlessly, gesturing at him. “He’s just… existing. And they said they can’t fix him, they can’t even help. They said – ” she sighs. “They told me to let them kill him because it would be more merciful.”

Misha’s face goes blank as he processes her words. Kill him. It would be more merciful to kill him. It’s nothing he hasn’t thought before, watching Erik struggle to even turn his head and keep food in his mouth. It was painful to watch.

"I can not." he chokes out finally. "I can not kill him. Maybe would be better for him but I can not. I can not let him go Miss Pauling I will not survive it. He is everything to me."

She nods, still wiping her face. “I know, I know. I told them it wasn’t an option.” She stands up, sniffing loudly to try and clear her voice. “I’m not giving up yet,” she says resolutely. Grabbing for her bag, she sets it on the desk and flips through it, pulling out a folder. “I finally got the name of the doctor Redmond had lobotomize all the medics. It’s his personal doctor, Hermann Young. I found where he lives, too.”

"I would like to go beat him to tiny pulp but I can not leave Erik behind and risk getting shot." Misha says. "He is not your responsibility. He is mine. I will not leave him behind."

“I thought you might say that,” she says. “And besides, I found out he has a wife and three daughters younger than thirteen. But I can find a much more subtle way to ruin his life.”

Misha nos. "Da, that is good. Make him suffer. Maybe ruin marriage if you can. He does not deserve happiness. He does not deserve love. He has taken too much to ever be happy."

“She doesn’t know that he did it, either,” she scowls as she looks over the folder. “His family is completely oblivious. If I expose his treachery to them, I would hope destroying the minds of more than 70 men would be enough to make her want to take their children away. If it isn’t, I’ll have to come up with something else.”
"You could fake affair." Misha suggests. Erik turns his head towards him so he reaches out and takes the doctor’s hand as he always does, a left over reflex from when they were lovers. "Affair always ruins couples. Even if do not split immediately there is doubt that lasts forever."

“I could fake an affair with a man,” she sneers down at the folder, and Misha really gets an idea of what she’s capable of. She’s no gentle flower of a lady, that’s for sure. “It doesn’t even have to be true. You know as well as I do that all it takes is suspicion. They always believe the word of the heterosexuals over anyone else.”

"I know." Misha says softly. "I remember. It is cruel but he deserves cruel punishment. Can you do it?"

She smiles at him. “I’ll destroy him,” she says. “And I’ll do it quietly.”

Misha smiles back and gives Erik's hand a squeeze to remind himself why he's agreeing to this. For a second he thinks he feels Erik's fingers twitch in his but he's sure he must have imagined it or it was just a muscle spasm.

"If anyone can do it, it is you." Misha agrees. "I trust you to get revenge for us."

She stops at the door and leans against it with a sigh. “I’ve been protecting you two for years,” she mutters. “You don’t know how much of the base was monitored. I was in charge of looking over the archived footage to search for any rulebreaking. When I saw the two of you – I saw how you looked at him, and how he would smile,” she shakes her head and clears her throat, holding the folder to her chest. “I erased any footage of the two of you together. Anything that would be suspicious. From prolonged eye contact to lovemaking. I knew the both of you would be killed for it. I couldn’t let that happen.”

"I never knew. I don’t think he did either." Misha says mournfully. "If we had we would have repaid you. We would have found somewhere else to go or at least a way to make up to you. I am sorry we never had chance to do something for you."

“You not knowing wasn’t an accident. You two had enough to worry about without always looking for cameras, too. I just had to do my job really well and cracked down really hard on thieves and betrayals and friendly fires so it looked like I was taking care of business. I didn’t do it because I wanted payment. I did it because nobody did it for me. He’s going to recover one day and he’s going to remember you and he’s going to love you and eventually everything will go back to normal and
you’ll have the life you should have had before Mann took it away.”

Misha’s smile is sad and brittle, like he might fall apart if he holds it for too long. "Is nice dream. But doctors say he will never remember. He may learn to speak, may walk and smile again. But will never know who I am or how much he loves me. You were there, you know that."

Her own smile falters. “Yeah, well they also said he wouldn’t be moving by now, so obviously they don’t know what they’re talking about,” she says shortly, but she’s not mad at Misha. “He needs a doctor like himself. Dr. Fleischer would know what to do. He wasn’t afraid to go around the law and outside the box to solve problems.”

"Maybe he is still trying." Misha says, his smile a little softer and a little more genuine now. "I think he might be trying to hold my hand,” he says, looking down at Erik’s twitching finger tips. He can see that they are moving, if only a little. "I do not think he knows what he is doing. Or why. But he is trying. I think."

“Of course he is,” Miss Pauling puts her glasses back on. “I have some arrangements and phone calls to make and an affair to plan.”
Two days later, she comes home with the news that Young’s wife bludgeoned him severely with his own golf trophy when she got the news that he’d lobotomized 76 men. He was so messed up that he was moved to intensive care, but they weren’t even sure he’d survive. Miss Pauling swooped in as soon as she got the news and relocated the woman and her daughters.

Misha looked like he might jump over the moon. "Maybe he will live. Maybe he will be bed ridden and quiet for the rest of his days too." he says bitterly. "He will have to live like doktor and other medics for rest of his days."

He goes to Erik to tell him the good news. He knows Erik can't hear him but he thinks maybe deep down somehow he understands and maybe he's a little happier knowing he's been avenged.

He decides to celebrate by taking the doctor out again. He vows not to leave his side for a single second, this time. Nobody will throw rocks at him this time, not with the hulking behemoth of a man beside him. And if someone is so bold, he can shield the doctor with his own body.

The park sounds nice. It’s a bit of a walk there, so he takes a taxi instead, folding the medic’s chair into the trunk and setting him in the back. It’s sunny and warm with a nice breeze, and the moment Misha sets the doctor down in his chair, he closes his eyes. For a moment, the heavy thinks he just fell asleep, but when the breeze falls still and his eyes open again, he realizes he was just enjoying being outside.

Misha finds a sunny spot near a few trees where he parks Erik’s chair and starts unpacking the lunch he’d made for them. It's not exactly a picnic, nothing romantic like they might have had during the summer in Russia near their little house but it's nicer than spending another day cooped up inside the house.

He feeds Erik first, a simple chilled carrot soup Miss Pauling had helped him pick out and make the night before, before settling in to his own mountain of sandwiches. When he looks over at Erik, something he’s gotten into the habit of doing every few seconds, he can almost fool himself into thinking the other man looks happy.

Every few times he looks up at the doctor, his eyes are closed, enjoying the breezes as they pass, Misha thinks. He’s slumped in his chair like always, but he looks a little more alert. The heavy’s heart soars when a flock of birds goes flying past, tweeting loudly, and Erik slowly turns his head to
try and look. They’re long gone by the time he looks over, but the gesture makes Misha’s chest tight.

It feels like nothing can go wrong. Despite the fact that so many things are wrong already, a calm settles over the both of them. Misha takes out a book of Russian fairy tales that he’s had for years, but every time he asked to read one to the doctor, Erik would always tell him he’s too busy, “later” he’d say. They always thought they’d have more time.

Misha has no way of knowing which stories the doctor would like to hear, so he starts with his favorite, and then his second favorite. He skips his third in favor of his other-third favorite. His voice gets a little sore, but he drinks water and keeps reading to fill the silence. The medic is so quiet it burns his ears. After minutes filled with nothing but the sound of his own voice and the occasional tweeting of birds, when he hears a new little noise it makes him flinch. He turns his head to look at the man. He's looking directly at Misha, and he realizes the little noise came from him. It was barely more than a hum, he probably didn’t even open his mouth, and it died in his throat, but it’s the first noise he’s made at all in more than a week.

“What?” he kneels in front of the man’s chair.

“Mh.”

He doesn’t say anything. Unsurprising. He can’t really say anything. But it’s a milestone that Miss Pauling had told Misha the doctor shouldn’t be able to cross for another couple weeks.

Misha wants to shout with joy, wants to pull the doctor into a tight hug and tell him again and again how proud he is for even something so simple. But he knows better than to cause a scene in the middle of the park. That can wait until they get home and he tells Miss Pauling the good news. He read two more nursery stories to him. Erik apparently decided to take a nap part of the way through the second one, but Misha doesn’t mind. He takes a few minutes to enjoy the sunshine before packing up the rest of their things and walking Erik back to the road where they catch a taxi home.

Miss Pauling looks like she might cry when the heavy tells her that the doctor made a noise. “I brought this home for you,” she takes out a sturdy plain black notebook and big pencil that is probably meant to be a joke for children, but is the perfect size for the big man’s hand. “It’s his progress journal.” She smiles and peels off the sticker on the front. “I already took the liberty of writing in when he was hurt, and every major highlight since then, like when he started moving his head. It’s technically a calendar, but you can use it like a journal to record his recovery.”

"This is good idea." Misha says, taking the book from her. "I will write in it every time there is progress. He is well ahead of schedule already. I have hope he will speak before year is out."
“You should write even if he doesn’t. Fill every single day with *something*. Even if it’s just to say that he hasn’t stopped blinking. That way if he wants to look at it ten years from now, he can see how well he recovered.”

Misha nods. "Will write every day. Twice a day maybe. Will keep records doktor will be proud of someday."

It feels almost frivolous when he writes things like “tried to chew” or “lifted fingers” over the next couple days, and just gets embarrassed when Miss Pauling has to write it again under his blocky handwriting in English. It only reminds him that the medic shouldn’t even be in this position.

Sometimes, when nothing is going on, Misha will close his eyes and day dream about where they should have been by now. They’d still be on the boat today, huddling for warmth below deck. Or on the surface, laughing at how red the other’s nose has gotten. He knows he shouldn’t think about these things, because it only hurts more when he opens his eyes and returns to reality.

One quiet day, when he moved the doctor from his bed to his wheelchair in front of the living room window to soak up a little sunlight, he decides to take the bandage off for good. The bruising is less, but his eye is still bloodshot. He squints at the light, so Misha pulls down the shade a little bit to cover just his eyes.

That’s when one tear runs down the side of the doctor’s cheek, from the covered eye.

It might have been because it was covered for so long, and the air just made it water.

It could have been because of the light in his eyes.

But it could have been because he knew the bandage coming off meant he was making real progress.

Misha gently wipes the tear off the doctor's soft cheek with the pad of his thumb. He's getting a little stubbly again and Misha knows he'll have to ask Miss Pauling to shave him again. It's one thing he's never allowed himself to do, afraid he might accidentally use too much pressure and cut the doctor.

"You will get better," he assures the doctor. "And I will take care of you until then. Please do not cry."
Misha paces anxiously in the living room. The doctor has been made presentable, sitting in his chair with a pillow propped up behind his lower back to sit him up a little bit straighter. His hair is styled the way he used to do it, his face shaven and free of cuts. Misha doesn’t know where Miss Pauling learned to be so wieldy with a straight razor.

“I called in a favor,” she’d told him. “I can’t be there when he arrives, so you’re going to have to let him in. You might recognize him, but don’t freak out.”

This man wasn’t a doctor. He didn’t know how the human body was supposed to work. But, according to her, he knew how to replace parts that don’t work anymore with new ones. He might not be able to fix Erik, but he might be able to do something for him.

He was supposed to arrive six minutes ago. Misha is wearing his nicest shirt – which just so happens to be his old RED uniform shirt. It’s much better made than his other shirts. Most clothing that comes in his size isn’t very durable, because the people who make them think there are so few people so large, they shouldn’t bother. Apparently, Mann Co. didn’t adopt the same ideas.

He finally hears someone coming up the stairs. That blasted elevator is still out of order, and Misha is starting to think the building isn’t ever going to get it repaired. The man is wearing big boots, Misha can tell that much already. He must be very big. He can hear some strange rattling – it sounds like he’s carrying a lot of things. He must be very strong. Maybe he’s being too hopeful, thinking that this man can do something for the doctor. But in his experience, big guys get stuff done.

He almost doesn’t give the man time to knock before he pulls the door open. He eclipses almost the whole hallway, so he’s surprised when he doesn’t see anyone at eye-level. In fact, he doesn’t see anyone at all until he tilts his head down so far his chin almost touches his chest.

The man has to be 5’5” or maybe even shorter. He’s wearing big boots alright – big cowboy boots. He’s got a massive toolbox tucked under his arm, painted blue, but the paint is old and worn off in a few places. The cowboy hat on his head gives him the illusion of being taller than he is. He looks kind of familiar…

“Mornin’,” the man drawls, pulling off a pair of sunglasses and setting them over the brim of his hat. “Dell Conagher. I’m here for the Kraut.”
"What are you doing here?" Misha asks, close to growling. He holds the door tightly in one hand, ready to slam it shut in case his other hand does not soon find a suitable weapon. "Miss Pauling would not call you."

“Contrary to what you may think, that li’l miss monitored and looked after both RED and BLU. An’ I owe her a favor. She said they scrambled the Doc’s eggs and wants me to take a look at him. But if you’d prefer, I can just be on my way,” the engineer hoists the toolbox higher on his hip when it starts to slip down. “I’d appreciate it if you’d make up your mind quick though. This thing’s a mite heavy.”

"You can not fix doctor." Misha says, the rage leaking out of his voice and being replaced by a heavy sadness. "No gun or machine can fix brain. There is not even medicine that can help."

“Maybe not, but I might be able to do somethin’ for him. Can’t know that unless you let me see him.” He sighs and lifts the heavy metal box onto his shoulder to keep it from slipping. “Look, pal, we ain’t enemies anymore. BLU don’t exist now. You ain’t a merc anymore either, and the Doc definitely ain’t.”

Misha is still for a moment before he nods and steps aside to allow the engineer into the small apartment. He takes the heavy box from him and leads the way to where the doctor is staring vacantly out the window. "If you hurt him I will rip you in half. Like tiny man made of tissue paper."

Dell rolls his eyes but doesn’t say anything. He opens his tool box and pulls out a small device.

“What is thing?” Misha hovers.

“Elbow room, please,” the engineer says idly as he plugs in the cord and the device whirs to life. “It’s a hand-held x-ray.”

“You are pulling leg!”

“You’re all the way over there, I can’t even reach your leg,” Dell says good-humoredly while he fidgets with a few of the dials and a small four-inch screen blinks to life. “I had a slow weekend last year when I messed up my pelvis and Doc Clifford – ah, the BLU medic said it’d be a better idea for me to let it heal slowly, so he set me up with one of them magic medicine guns for three days, and I had nothin’ to do. So I took apart his x-ray machine and found out how it worked, and how to make
“Why don’t you sell it to doctors?”

Dell raises his eyebrows at the other man. “They fried Fleischer just for knowin’ the stuff in them medic guns. I don’t even wanna think what’d happen to me if I started tryin’ to sell stuff like this.”

"Could sell to Redmond. So he sell to doctors." Misha suggests, sitting down in his usual spot next to Erik, barely stopping himself from taking the doctor’s hand. "He gets technology you get royalties. Is different than miracle cure Erik put in medic gun."

“I don’t really wanna go sellin’ Redmond anythin’,” Dell waves the small device over the doctor’s head several times. “Even if he weren’t my old enemy, he’s the one directly responsible for two dozen coffins.”

“Coffins?” Misha repeats, aghast.

Dell looks over at him. “Didn’t Pauling tell you? Twenty-three of the men Redmond had gobsmacked died.”

Misha shakes his head. "Did not tell me. I have been too busy with doktor to ask about others. Did they die from surgery? Or were they killed? How did you learn what happened?"

“Turns out when you mash a needle around in someone’s frontal lobe, complications can arise,” Dell says bitterly. “This ain’t the last medic I’m gonna visit. Redmond finds out he’s gonna get my goat.”

"You have a goat?" Misha asks, clearly surprised. "Why would Redmond want goat? Goat milk make good cheese but goat is not very valuable."

Dell looks up slowly from the display. “It means he’ll kill me,” he clarifies. “He had these men boffered for a reason, he won’t want me tryin’ to fix them.”

He turns the display to face Misha after a moment. “See that big black spot? That’s the big puddle of mush where his frontal lobe should be. Eventually it’ll grow back, but it won’t ever be the same.”
Brain cells don’t grow back, but brain tissue does. I’m here to try and replace brain cells with somethin’ mechanical.”

"That will require surgery. You will need to cut open brain or find way to insert through nose or ear. You can not do surgery, you are not doctor.” Misha argues, taking Erik’s hand out of fear. He doesn’t even care that Dell can see. He can always kill him if he threatens to go to the police.

“You’d be surprised what I can do,” Dell says, and takes off the big leather glove he’d been wearing, to reveal a fully articulate mechanical hand that shouldn’t even exist with today’s technology. “Besides, there’s still a hole from the last jab to his noggin. I don’t even gotta guess.”

"He is already making progress. Maybe he does not need mechanical cells." Misha says nervously, shifting a little closer to Erik as if he's going to put himself between the doctor and the engineer. "What will mechanical cells do if I let you put them in his brain?"

“Well,” the engineer sits back on his haunches with a sigh. “Not much of anything, until he heals. It’ll just make the difference between how much he can remember as he recovers, how much of his motor skills he’ll be able to retain versus how much he’ll have to relearn, it’ll help the language center of his brain, too. The Broca-whatever. That’s in the frontal lobe. They don’t usually mean to mess it up, but it’s in the general area so it’s usually caught in the crossfire.”

"He will be able to speak? And understand?" Misha asks hopefully, his defensive posture visibly relaxing. "But still won't remember who we are?"

“Not yet he won’t, but some day,” the engineer nods and pulls out a vial and giant needle. “Or, if you’d prefer, I can inject a little somethin’ else of my own design. They’re like tiny li’l robots that’d work to restore the brain matter a lot quicker than he could heal on his own. I’ve tried putting them together, but they always attack each other when they’re combines. I can’t figure out yet how to have them target dangerous or dead cells without targeting one another. It’s hard to work on tech so small! It’d definitely kill him if we tried to use both. On their own though, they work. Would you prefer lettin’ him heal at his own pace, but keepin’ a little bit more of his old self than he would, or heal quicker, but risk losin’ some of him?”

"I would wait years to keep as much of him as I can," the former heavy answers, his tone leaving no room for argument.

It's not something he even needs to think about. That's the reason why he's been keeping Erik alive rather than doing the arguably merciful thing and letting him go peacefully. That's why he reads him stories and tells him about the home they will have in Russia someday when he can bear to think
about it. It might not be much but he will keep as much of his beloved doctor as he can no matter what the cost or how long it might take to get him back.

Dell raises his eyebrows at the man again.

“You know. Because. He deserves it,” Misha amends quickly.

The engineer hums suspiciously, but doesn’t say anything. He sticks the needle through the top of the vial and sucks in a very precise amount. He squirts a little bit out and taps the needle to get out the air bubbles. To the heavy, it just looks like water. But this water will, apparently, help the doctor considerably.

“You may wanna look away if you’re squeamish,” Dell teases as he grips the back of the doctor’s neck with his mechanical hand to keep him very still.

Misha might not be squeamish, but he didn’t want to see the needle enter the corner of Erik’s eye socket. The squishing sound is enough to make him feel sick. When he hears the doctor suck in a sharp breath, his head snaps up. “You’re hurting him!”

“What, did you think this would be comfy?” Dell says as he slowly injects the solution into the gap in the medic’s brain, the ghastly four-inch needle completely sunken into his head.

"Should have told me it would hurt him. I could have given him medicine to dull pain." Misha accuses. He gives Erik's hand a reassuring squeeze and feels the doctor's fingers twitch against his palm, as if he's trying to squeeze back.

Wishful thinking, as always. But he likes to imagine that Erik's small little movements are reactions to the world, rather than accidents of an unresponsive mind. And maybe today he has a little more hope than he had yesterday.

"How will I know if injection is helping him? Or if makes him worse?"

“It ain’t gonna make him worse,” Dell says with a huff. “My tech don’t fail. Unless it gets shot. But if he gets shot in the head his death ain’t gonna be cause’a my tech. You ain’t gonna know if it helps, really. Ain’t no way to know. Can’t compare to what he would’a been like if I didn’t give him the stuff.”
Misha gives an annoyed huff. "I do not know why I am trusting you. You could be injecting poison. Or tiny bombs. Or something to control his mind. Maybe you work for Redmond and want to make sure Erik stays like this."

He pouts for a minute before sighing. "I suppose I have no choice. Is done now and before any hope is better than no hope, da?"

Dell scowls at the bigger man as he slips the needle out of Erik’s eye socket and holds a cotton swab there, taping it in place quickly. “I told you, we ain’t enemies anymore. I don’t got a grudge on either of you. I got more of a bone to pick with the spy on my own team than I ever had with you. I never even met you on the battlefield.”

"Lucky for you. You would be dead." Misha says with a smirk. "And now good for us. If your robots help him. What is wrong with spy? You need me to pay him visit I will. As thank you."

The engineer gives a hearty chuckle. “Nah, he’s just a kook. Sapped my sentries a couple times cause I always beat him arm wrestling.” He wiggles the mechanical fingers. “I cheated, but I mean, those sentries were on his side.”

Misha can't help but laugh. "Never liked spies. Spies do not care for sides. Take things very personal, like little babies. Does not matter who you are they get even somehow."

“You ain’t kiddin’,” the engineer packs up his tool box. “Keep that puncture wound clean, and if any of the stuff leaks out of his head don’t freak out, that’s pretty normal. Just wipe it up and put pressure on it to try and stop the leak. Got any more questions before I take my leave?”

"No thank you." Misha says, showing him to the door. "Thank you. I am sorry for earlier suspicion. Was unfair of me."

“You’re the one wearin’ your old uniform, friend,” Dell points out, thumbing in the direction of Misha’s shirt with the tool box nestled up on his shoulder. He turns around with a wave over his shoulder and starts to whistle ‘Comin’ Round The Mountain’ as he heads down the stairs. Misha turns almost as red as his shirt as he realizes the awkward choice in wardrobe he made.

The pain of the injection seems to have worn Erik out. When Misha come back his eyes are closed and his head is hanging to one side. He's not quite asleep yet, Misha can tell by the way he's
breathing but he's awful close.

Misha smiles. Like this it's hard to tell there's anything wrong with Erik. He looks almost exactly like he did when he worked too late and started to nod off at his desk in the barracks. It's a sad reminder of where they used to be but for a moment Misha is able to forget how far they still have to go.

He lifts Erik into his arms and carries him back into the study. It only takes a few minutes to change Erik back into his pajamas and tuck him into bed but by then he's pretty sure Erik is completely asleep. With a smile he decides to take a chance and bends down to give him a soft kiss on the cheek.

“Hey, sorry to barge back in, but I forgot my – ” Misha breaks the kiss and whirls around to see the engineer had returned. He stands up a little straighter when he sees the two men. “Glove.”

"If you say anything, to anyone," Misha growls, advancing on the engineer until he's got him crowded against a wall. "I will kill you. I will tear you apart limb from limb."

Dell lifts his hands up. He may have a lot of tech, but he’s nothing compared to the raw strength of the man hovering over him.

“Relax, buddy,” he laughs. “You don’t gotta worry about a thing. I got a fella back home of my own.”

Misha takes a step back immediately, relieved smile spreading across his face. "Oh. I did not know. I am sorry for threat. But must be careful. Can not let anyone take him away from me. You understand?"

“I understand completely.” the engineer takes a deep breath to calm himself down after the near-death experience. “I feel quite the same way about mine. I probably shoulda told you from the start that I knew. Miss Pauling told me about you fellas’ situation. Sorry for the fright.”

He starts to leave again, but doesn’t make it halfway down the hall before he stops and pokes his head back into the room. Misha has sat down beside the doctor and has his hand in his lap, petting his palm and fingers. He leans against the jamb and sighs, thinking about his lover back home.

He tries to imagine what he would do if his own guy had been brain-mashed. If he had to take care
of him like this. It makes him realize how much he takes for granted. Everything from chewing to sitting up to making eye contact, he doesn’t even think about it. He bets the doc would give just about anything for those things back.

“You know,” he starts, and the giant flinches a little, thinking the Texan had left again. “Sorry. I was just sayin’, this ain’t really a safe place for you two to, you know, be. In the middle of the city, bunch’a people around all the time.”

Misha nods. "I know. Were almost caught already. First day I forgot to close curtains. Got too used to privacy of doktor's rooms on base. It is hard to adjust. But it is all we have."

Dell scrunches his face up in thought and crosses his arms over his chest. “Well. I got a cabin. In Georgia. Used to go there in the summer to go fishin’ before this whole war hullabaloo. Probably not gonna be spending much time there now that I got a guy to live with in Texas. It'll just go to waste if nobody lives there. Out in the middle of the woods, twenty minutes from town, closest people livin’ nearby are fifteen miles away. Shame, it’ll just fall apart. Sure wish someone could live there an’ take care of it.”

"I am very good at repairs." Misha says with feigned thoughtfulness. "Used to fix up house for mother and sisters in Russia. If you are really in need maybe I could keep cabin in good shape for you. Fresh air would be good for Erik too I think. If you agree."

“Gosh, you’d do that for me?” Dell smiles as he slips the glove on over his mechanical hand. “Well, shoot. You sure are a good fella. You probably don’t have a whole lot to pack up but I’ll come back tomorrow for you two, around noon. Hope you don’t mind trucks. If you’re too big for the cabin you can sit in the back or somethin’.”

"I do not mind trucks. And might be better to lay him down on something in the back to keep ride from shaking him too much." Misha suggests, looking down at Erik.

He looks back up at Dell after a moment with a sad smile. "Thank you. You are good man. Better than I think at first. Better than most I've met. If we had been on same side in war I think maybe we would be friends."

“I think we still can,” Dell shrugs. “I gotta go now, though, my guy is gonna get restless if I don’t call him on time. Be ready at noon tomorrow.” He tips his hat at the heavy and then he’s gone.
Misha sits back in shock. He really had been looking for a place for them to go, but he didn’t expect one to literally fall into his lap. Out in the woods, where Erik doesn’t have to worry about stone-throwing children or men who will tell him he should be in a home or anybody to see them hug through the windows.

"Will be like home in Russia." he tells the sleeping doctor. "But with less snow and no goat. Yet. But it will be ours. Our home. Like we said we would have."
Chapter 7

Chapter by HarveyDangerfield

Chapter Notes

I sure hope you guys like Texas Toast because I sure do

When Miss Pauling comes home, Misha invites her into the study to share the news, and she’s very surprised to hear that they will be moving out, and so soon.

“No give me any warning or anything,” she teases. “The place is going to feel a lot bigger without your giant presence around. You’ll call, won’t you?”

“Da. Whenever there are changes. You will know all progress.” he promises. “And you can visit if you get time off. You can be guest for once.”

“Time off,” she laughs. “Right. I’ll find some time to visit. Maybe you’ll get to visit Mr. Conagher, too. You’ll probably like catching up with your old teammate.”

“Teammate? What teammate?” Misha asks. He knows Dell was not on their side and he did not know anyone else with the same last name who was on their team either. “He was not with Red.”

“Oh, no, he –” she pauses. “He’s – he didn’t tell you? His lover. You know him. Well, sort of. I don’t think he knew anyone on RED personally. You remember the head Pyro?”

Misha pales, remembering the maniac who set things on fire without discretion, who seemed not to care for the difference between friend and foe when he really got going, who delighted in the slow burning deaths of those around him.

“Da. I remember.”

“He’s left the gas mask and flame thrower behind. I’m pretty sure he chops wood for a living, now. He doesn’t really have to, considering Mr. Conagher is so well-off, but it’s in everyone’s best interest if he stays busy.”
“Do you know everything?” Misha chuckles.

“Old habits,” she smiles at him.

"You would make very good spy. Or politician." Misha teases. He finishes folding the last of Erik's clothes and packs them into the open suitcase. "I make dinner now. We will have last meal together."

“Last sounds so final,” she feigns seriousness. “I’ll mourn your loss.”

Dinner is made in haste. It seems everything Misha is doing tonight, he’s doing quicker than usual, as if he thinks if he gets everything done quicker, noon tomorrow will come sooner.

Despite the speediness of its preparation, it’s no less delicious. He promised her he’d make her borscht before he left, and it’s just their luck that she finally remembered to stop by the store to get the beets and other necessary ingredients tonight. Even Erik seems pleased by the change in the usual mild soups Misha feeds him, because he actually opens his mouth voluntarily. He writes it in the journal.

She wakes up a little earlier than usual the next morning to bid them goodbye, because the next time she comes home, they’re going to be gone.

“Don’t forget to call,” she says, slipping the number for her apartment and office phones into the front pocket of the heavy’s bag. “I’ll miss the company. Maybe I’ll get a cat to fill the void.”

He completely shrouds her in a hug, and she gives the doctor a friendly kiss to his forehead, but then she has to leave or she’ll be late.

Misha goes through the usual morning routine except for getting Erik dressed so early in the day. Usually he leaves him in his pajamas until he's ready to move him into the living room or take him out to the park or for a walk.

He also can't stop checking the bags. They can't afford to leave anything behind. All of Erik's things are absolutely necessary and can not be forgotten. His IV bags, his bed pans, his vitamins and medications all can not be replaced with any kind of ease. If he forgets anything they will not have it
again for weeks at least.

It’s only nine AM. If he keeps fretting like this for the rest of the morning he’ll fret himself to death before Dell even arrives. It’s early and a little chilly for a walk, but he wraps Erik up in a coat and covers his legs with a blanket and hopes it will be enough to keep him warm.

He decides to visit Linda. She’d been kind, and maybe he can buy something else to leave behind in Miss P’s apartment to thank her one more time. The sun is low and the breeze is cool, but Erik seems content. When they reach the store, Misha’s heart warms up at the sight of a wooden plank that had been laid down over half the stairs in a crude ramp.

Erik’s chair glides up over the wood and into the store with ease, and the little bell jingles as they enter.

“You put ramp,” he says when Linda comes hurrying out from the back of the store at the sound of the bell.

“Oh, hello again!” she beams, edging behind the counter. “Your friend got me thinking about how other folks might have a hard time getting up here and it just broke my little heart. You’ll be glad to hear I talked to the mothers of those boys. Turns out, their mothers talked to the sheriff, and he has all four of them washing my windows for the rest of the summer, once a week.”

Misha smiles at the thought of the young hooligans washing windows for their crimes. “Is good news,” he says, patting the doctor’s arm. “I am sure Erik is happy to hear news, too. For now, I need help. I want to buy gift to thank friend for letting us stay. I have never shopped for young woman before.”

“I’ve got just the thing,” Linda beams.

He leaves the store with a lavender teapot. He noticed that Miss Pauling’s kettle was old and rusted, and this new one will bring a splash of color to her beige kitchen. He sets it up on her stove with a frown. She has no ribbon for him to tie on it, and he can’t write in English well enough to leave a note, so he just scribbles a smiling face on a piece of paper and tucks the corner under the kettle.

When noon finally comes, he’s already been ready for hours. He opens the door the second he hears those heavy bootfalls coming up the stairs, and they’re out in the hall before Dell even makes it all the way to their floor.
“Well then,” the Texan puts his hands on his hips when he sees them more than ready. “I guess we’ll just take off then.”

Misha locks Miss Pauling’s apartment with the spare key that she gave him and insisted he take with him so he’ll know he’s always welcome back. Dell carries the wheelchair for him and insists on taking the bag too so that nothing will impede the big man’s hike down the stairs with the doctor cradled against his chest like a child.

“I installed a few extra belts in the back seat last night,” Dell tells him when they make it out the front door, and the heavy lays eyes on his cherry red truck. He can’t help but laugh at the color as the engineer opens the back door. “We can strap him in nice and gentle and he won’t jostle around. Some of the roads to get to the cabin ain’t paved and it probably wouldn’t do him much good if he bounced right off the seat.”

"Da. Keeping him on seat is preferable." Misha says, holding the doctor a little more tightly.

They get down to the car and Misha reluctantly settles Erik in the backseat before stepping aside to let Dell strap him in. He knows how the new belts work and can keep Erik safe and secure but Misha can not stop himself from checking the tightness of the straps twice more when he's done, while he sets up a bed pan just in case.

“So you gonna keep pawin’ at him or are you getting in?” the Texan teases. The big man shakes the shocks when he settles in, but suspension holds and he closes the door. “Now, it’s gonna take us more than one day to get there,” Dell says as they both strap in and he turns the engine over. “And since we have to pass right through Texas to get there, I hope you don’t mind if we stay the night at my place. Angel misses me.”

"His name is Angel?" Misha asks. He'd never bothered to learn the pyro's name. He doesn't think anyone did. Most people were too frightened to get close to him, much less have a conversation. As if they would have even been able to understand him through the mask, anyway.

"He will not hurt Erik will he?" the heavy asks. "I am sure he is not always like he was in war but he was... scary."

“He’s actually pretty gentle when he don’t got matches or a lighter in his hands. He’s pretty well medicated now. I take care of him just like you take care of yours,” the engineer signals to pull into traffic, and then they’re off.
The drive is very long and monotonous. They fill the silence with idle conversation. Dell goes off explaining exactly how he made the replacement cells that will eventually fill the void in the medic’s brain. The Russian doesn’t honestly understand a word of it, but he encourages the engineer to continue whenever he goes quiet with a simple, “And then what?”

And then Dell says “I’ve always wanted to know how your gun worked, that thing is a marvel of engineering,” and that opens the floodgates. Miniature robots that act like brain cells go right over his head, but guns – that he knows.

At first he gave the standard speech, but then Dell asked for more detail, and he was jubilant. Nobody ever cared enough to hear more about Sascha. If he wanted to know how she worked, he’d tell him alright, right down to the dirty little details.

It felt almost intimate talking about her inner workings, especially to a man who could replicate her if he was paying attention closely enough, but it seemed like he was genuinely interested in how she worked, rather than taking notes in his head to make a copy.

“How did you two meet, anyway?” Dell asks, looking at the doctor through the rearview mirror. “I mean, well how did your relationship start?”

"Well we met first day when I had to have physical. Officers thought I am too overweight to be good fighter so doktor had to look me over.” Misha starts with a fond smile. "He finished exam and went to yell at officers for wasting time. His time too valuable for stupid examinations when it is clear I am more muscle than fat. It was first time someone defended me.

"I did not see him much for a while. He did not come to meals, preferring to eat in office alone while working. Next time I saw him I had been shot very badly. Needed surgery and I remember before they put me under he spoke to me in Russian. Just a little to keep me calm but was more than I had heard since leaving home. I thought it was the most beautiful sound in whole war.

"Found out later that he had just made his formula for medic guns and used me as test case. I did not have so much as a scratch on me when he was done but he insist on keeping me in hospital for days to observe. He came to my bed every day to check on me. We spoke in Russian and German when we both knew the words. He told me all about formula and I remember thinking man with this much genius is wasted in army.

"After that we were friends. I brought him meals so he would remember to eat and kept an eye out
for him when he went into field. He never mock my size or my english. I think that is when I start to love him.

Did not realize it until one day out in field when he was saving scout. Blu sniper shot him. Missed his head but got his shoulder, close to neck. I saw his blood and next thing I know I am carrying him back to base, getting sprayed with bullets from all directions. Was wonder I was not killed. Got him to operating room where he called me dummkopf and kissed me.” Misha finishes with a laugh. "It is also wonder no nurses see us."

“Well, that’s a lot more dramatic than I expected,” Dell laughs as he starts up through a gated community.

“Where are we?” Misha looks around at the fancy houses.

“Well we definitely ain’t in Bee Cave anymore,” the engineer smiles. “Only people who talk about small towns like they’re magic is people who ain’t never been to small towns. We’re in Peony Springs. Stupid name, but it’s pretty secluded. I live up on the hill.”

“The hill?” Misha leans down to look across town at the big white house up on the hill in the distance, at least three stories high. “Why do you have such big house?”

“Blutarch paid me a fortune,” Dell says, driving slowly to wave at neighbors and avoid hitting children. “Figured I had to put it somewhere. Got a full staff an’ everything. Tryin’ out this whole rich living thing ‘till I get bored of it. Don’t gotta worry about the staff, neither. They’re all used to me and Angel.”

When they pull up to the big house, Misha’s door is opened by a young woman who doesn’t look him in the eye. A young man offers to carry his bag, but he assures them he can carry it.

That’s when he sees someone standing in the doorway. He ducks away when he realizes that he’s been spotted.

“My. Come on out,” Dell calls out to the hiding man. “You know these guys. It’s your heavy and doc.”

The man peers around the doorway again. The heavy doesn’t know what to make of him. He looks
so normal. He expected someone deformed, maybe not even human, with blackened skin and no lips. Instead he’s met with the slightly scarred face of a man who looks timid at least, wary at best. His hair is buzzed as short as it will go, green eyes under thick eyebrows are wide as he takes in the sight of his former teammates, freckles spotting his high cheekbones, even darker than his already tan skin. He scrunches his small mouth to one side and sniffs.

“¿Crees que me recuerden?” he asks, his voice a lot deeper than Misha would have expected. The only time he ever heard the man speak was through his mask, and it was so muffled at that point nobody could ever understand a word.

“Of course they remember you. Well, Heavy does. The doc’s a li’l tuckered out. He’s gonna go right to bed,” Dell says, stepping up onto the porch to put his arm around the man’s shoulder and drags him the rest of the way outside.

"Is nice to see you Angel." Misha says as he approaches with Erik cradled against his chest. He would say nice to see him again but he's never actually seen Angel before. "Doktor would be happy to see you too if he were awake."

The pyro’s eyes are quick as he scans over the two men. “Same,” he says, clearly making an effort to be polite.

“He don’t speak English very well,” Dell rubs the man’s back. “He understands it great, but his brain-to-mouth don’t work too well. If you need me to translate, I will. Let’s get the doc settled down and then you fellas can… catch up.” He looks between the two of them, pretending he doesn’t notice how awkward they feel about one another.

"Da. That sounds nice." Misha says.

He lets Dell lead them through the mansion to a large empty bedroom with two double beds waiting for them. He pulls back the covers and looks away while Misha changes Erik and tucks him into the luxurious bed.

"You did not tell Angel what is wrong with doktor." Misha says when he's sure Erik is settled. "Why?"

“He has enough nightmares without needin’ to know about people jammin’ needles into other people’s brains,” Dell says, dropping Misha’s bag on the other bed. “As far as he needs to know, car
rides make him sleepy. Car rides make Angel sleepy.”

He looks over the doctor with a frown. “There’s something wrong with Angel’s brain too, but not in the way the quack’s head is messed up. His brain has always been wired wrong. Nobody knows what’s wrong with him, or why he won’t stop talkin’ about rainbows. But he’s on medication now. Keeps him pretty calm.”


Dell tips his hat down to cover his blush. “Yeah, well, he needs me,” he mutters, and clears his throat. “You ever had barbeque? Not like the junk they tried to pass off at the bases, but the real deal. Cause that’s what the gals are makin’ tonight.”

"Have not. The experience I had on base was not very good." Misha says with a shrug. "Do you have soup for Erik if he wakes up? He can not chew yet."

“Angel makes this real good soup outta beans and stuff. I bet he’d be thrilled if you ask him to make it. Might wanna tell him to go easy on the spice though. Crazy kid’ll burn your mouth right outta your head with spices if you don’t ask him to be light-handed.”

"I do not think Erik likes spicy food. Food in Germany is not very spicy." the heavy says. "I do not like spicy either."

Dell laughs as he leads the man down to the kitchen, where Angel is hovering over the girls shoulders. None of them seem put off by his presence, which makes Misha think they must not know what he was like before he was medicated.

“Hello again,” the pyro says, taking a seat on the edge of a table and swinging his feet. He looks like he’s in his late twenties at the very least, but he acts like a teenager. "Is el médico comfortable?"


The pyro’s face brightens up and he jumps off the table, clicking his heels together. “I can make soup,” he declares.
“Gals, think you can make some room for Angel?” Dell asks, taking a seat at the table while the young women in the kitchen consolidate their cooking to leave a stove open. “Whoa there, bud, go easy, okay?” he tells the younger man when he reaches for a jar of red flakes. “Doc don’t like it spicy. You can add it to your own if you want some.”

The pyro mutters in Spanish, sliding the jar back onto the shelf.

"He has weak stomach." Misha says, standing awkwardly behind Dell. "Doctor is older than you and I. Spicy food makes his chest and stomach hurt."

“Sit down, would’ya? You’re makin’ me nervous,” Dell gestures his chin across the table. Misha sits across from him in the plush chair. It holds his weight without a problem.

The conversation that fills the kitchen is light-hearted. Dell encourages the girls to sing a song, and they sing a round of “Go Down By The River” that could’ve made Misha cry. He introduces the gals to Misha – Denise, Hazel, Yolanda and Belle. They each take the time to shake his hand.

They ask if it is true that he was enemies with Mr. Conagher, and say that he’s the most civilized enemy they’ve ever met, that’s for sure. Belle says “Good morning, thank you,” in Russian, the only words she knows, but Misha compliments her on her pronunciation.

“Do you know anything about Mr. Muerte?” Yolanda asks. Her accent is the same as the pyro’s.

“She’s the only one he really talks to,” Hazel says in a gentle voice. “And even so, he doesn’t ever talk about himself. Mr. Dell’s too much of a gentleman to tell us anything about him.”

Angel sticks the tip of his tongue out at the girls, but his eyes hide a smile.

"We do not know each other well. But we did fight on the same team in war." Misha answers them. "But we were both busy. Too busy to get to know each other."

That thought gives him pause. He hadn’t had much time to get to know more than a few people and they had all been on his side. Finding time to away from the fighting to get to know an enemy seems impossible.
"How did two of you get together? Does not seem possible, fighting on opposite sides." he asks, looking between Dell and Angel.

“That’s actually a funny story,” Dell laughs.

“No le digas a él!” the pyro exclaims.

“I gotta tell it, he told me a story,” the engineer smiles at his lover. The younger man exclaims something and throws a cloth napkin at the Texan, his cheeks red. “Angel’s got this thing for music. But not just any kind – he likes guitar, and banjo, and fiddle and stuff. String instruments. Just so happens, I play the guitar. One night I was playin’ out at a camp I made on account’a the other guys were driving me up a wall, when out of the blue, this li’l firebug creeps up on me. Glad I hadn’t set up a sentry like I’d originally planned, or it woulda blown his head off before he got within thirty feet.”

“Usted está diciendo mal,” the pyro mutters.

“Oh, I’m sorry, cinders. You think you can tell it better?” Dell grins, and tosses the napkin back at him.

“Keep going,” Angel sniffs.

“He just walks up to me like we’ve been friends for years and sits down on the other side of the fire. Puts his head in his hands like a kid and I’ve already got my gun out but he don’t even got a weapon on him, so I guess I just keep playing. Dunno what got into me, but I just kept playing for the goofy kid. He took his mask off to hear better and he just…” he clears his throat. “I dunno, something about his face. He looked way too innocent to be in a war. Few days later he took a couple’a bullets from my turret and stopped breathin’ and I guess instinct kicked in. We shared a moment or whatever and I felt like it was my responsibility to save him. Got him breathing again and sent him in the direction of a medic. After that, he was attached to me like glue.”

“No durante la batalla,” the pyro crosses his arms and leans against the counter next to the stove to stir his soup idly.

“Nah, he was always too smart to stick to me durin’ the fighting. But I calibrated my turrets not to shoot him. All he had to wear was a certain kinda magnet, and since all the other engineers used my
“Tech, if he was gettin’ shot, it wasn’t ever gonna be by me. Miracle the wacky kid survived at all. I guess he was head of his class for a reason though.”

"He was best pyro we had." Misha nods, smiling broader than he has in weeks. "That was very nice story. He just happened to hear your guitar, almost like destiny. You are lucky to both survive war and have home together now."

“Both our contracts were almost up when the whole thing went to hell in a handbasket,” Dell shrugs. “We woulda been out within weeks if it hadn’t ended so suddenly.

“You thought I was the best?” Angel asks.

“You were head of your class, weren’t ya?” the engineer nods at Denise as she hands him a beer.

“Doesn’t mean best. Means I lasted longest,” Angel screws his mouth up to one side.

"Of course you were best. I would not have been afraid if you were anything but best. Do you fear second best demoman or best demoman?" Misha asks. "Who is worse, best spy or third best spy? You were best and I respect and fear you for it. As I respect and fear doktor."

Angel stands up a little taller. “Él me respeta.”

“Good job, sport, you want a sticker?” Dell’s nose crinkles with his grin. The pyro sucks his lips into his mouth to try and hide his smile while he fakes a scowl at the older man.

Misha, as it turns out, is a big fan of barbeque. He has seconds and thirds only when Dell promises him that he has more than enough money to afford big meals daily. He takes the pyro’s soup to his doctor only when he’s tasted it discreetly to make sure it won’t burn him.

At the engineer’s suggestion and with a little bit of help, they move the two beds together. The heavy might not sleep directly with him or touching him at all, but it’ll be a blessing just to share a bed with him.

“Holler if you need anything,” Dell tells the big man as he settles on the edge of the bed after the sky
has gone dark. Angel sneaks up behind him and wraps his arms around his waist, nuzzling his nose unashamedly into the side of the engineer’s neck. “Ah, but, you might wanna knock first.”

Misha offers them a sad smile. It's not that he isn't happy for them. Anyone can see how much they love each other and seeing them together warms his heart. But it's also a cruel reminder of all that has been taken from him and Erik. They should not be pushing two beds together in another's home, they should be making love in their own strong bed in the home he built for them.

He wishes them both good night, silently promising himself he will not go to them that night, even if he does find himself in need of something. Seeing them together, happy and sleep tousled might be more than he can take.
Chapter 8

Chapter by HarveyDangerfield

The “cabin,” as it turns out, is really more of a house. The only thing cabinlike about it is the fact that it’s made of logs. It’s two stories, with a spacious bedroom downstairs, room adjacent with a toilet and a standing shower. Dell tells him that it would be easy to put a plastic chair in the shower for the doc to sit on while he gets better. The bathtub is in the upstairs bathroom, along with the master bedroom and another spare room that is empty now. He used to stash his fishing equipment in there, but he tells the heavy that he’s free to fill it with whatever he wants.

Downstairs is monopolized by an open-floor plan, complete with a brick fireplace, chandelier made of deer antlers, a bear rug and big glass sliding doors to the “back yard” which is just what Dell calls the entire forest, apparently. The lake is within sight, but it would probably be a ten minute hike or more to get there. Erik wouldn’t be visiting on his own feet for quite some time.

“My old man built just about everything in here,” Dell says proudly, hands on his hips. “The antler thing, though, I made that. Well, he helped. Maybe more like I helped. Anyway, everything in here is yours now, for as long as you need it. One year, ten years, I don’t care. It’s yours.” He hands the keys to the front and back doors to the bigger man. Erik is seated in his chair facing the glass doors, looking out over the best view he’s had for weeks.

Misha moves in all their things but saves the unpacking for later when the doctor has gone to sleep. That finished he takes Erik on a short tour of the house, hoping to familiarize him with their new setting. He wheels him around the downstairs before carrying him to the second floor to see the rest of their new home.

"Is bigger than home I would build. But is nice house," he tells Erik when he brings him into the smaller bedroom upstairs, the child’s bedroom beside the master bedroom. "Will be your room. I know I promise we sleep next to each other every night but maybe having own room will be better for now. I will be in next room over, so we are still next to each other. Just with wall between."

Erik’s eyes started tracking movement a few days ago, and he watches Misha now while he tucks him into bed. Every day, he seems a little more alert. His eyes are a little wider and clearer. He opens his mouth a crack like he’s trying to speak, closes and opens it again, but he can’t make a sound.

“Shh, doktor. It is okay,” he soothes the weary man. “Rest. Car ride was very exciting for you.”

The medic’s eyes close almost immediately, and Misha stays with him until his breathing evens out
and he’s deeply asleep. He doesn’t have to worry about anyone seeing them all the way out here, so he leans down and kisses him on the cheek. He sits back and looks around. Nobody is peering through the window, nobody is at the doorway. Nobody is around at all. They’re completely alone, for miles.

So he leans down and gives him another kiss. And then another, and a fourth. He covers the sleeping medic’s cheeks and forehead and chin, kissing him in all the places he hasn’t been able to. He leaves Erik’s lips alone for the time being, preferring to wait until he’s well enough to willfully consent to a real kiss. But his cheeks are fair game.

The next few days are almost exciting. Misha gets them unpacked overnight and the rest of the week is spent exploring the new house. The kitchen is bigger than Miss Pauling’s and Dell must have called ahead because it’s fully stocked when Misha gets around to checking the cupboards.

He decides that since there's room there’s no reason not to push Erik's chair up to the dining room table and feed him there rather than in bed. He thinks Erik approves of the idea from the way he opens his eyes a little wider and eats a little more eagerly.

Every day he can take Erik out of the house into the wooded backyard to let him sit in the sun and enjoy the fresh air while Misha cleans inside, keeping a watchful eye out the window just to be safe. He doesn’t have to worry about always being right next to the doctor here because no one is going to hurt him. It’s almost like paradise.

The day that he comes to wake up the doctor and he’s rolled onto his side by himself is the day that Misha thinks he could sprout wings and fly. (It’s also the day that he makes a note to buy a grate to put against the side of the bed to make sure he doesn’t roll out in the night.)

After a blissfully humdrum week, the heavy wants to go into down to check out what it’s like, but he realizes that he doesn’t have a vehicle. Thankfully there’s a phone book under the wall-mounted phone in the kitchen, but it’s so old that he has to call three different taxi services in order to get one that actually still operates. Erik is looking much more alert today, even turning his head occasionally to put against the side of the bed to make sure he doesn’t roll out in the night.

He buys a simple but sturdy light blue truck while he’s in town, and immediately takes it to a mechanic’s shop to put together something that will help the doctor stay upright in the passenger’s seat. They fashion a harness at a modest price that keeps the medic sitting up comfortably, even though it takes quite some time. When they finally finish, Erik is looking very tired, dozing off in his chair. Misha thanks the mechanic for his time and patience, and drives home in his very own vehicle. Exploring the town will have to wait for another day.
Now that they have a truck they can leave whenever they want so there's no need to make plans or worry about being able to pay for taxis or how long they can stay out. The world is open to them to and explore whenever they want.

A few days after their first trip into town and the acquisition of the truck it starts to rain. Rather than keep Erik cooped up all day with nothing to do Misha decides to take him to the movies. The plan goes off without a hitch. They get their tickets to a nice calm romance and waste a few hours in front of the screen. Erik doesn't even fall asleep, he keeps his eyes on the screen except for the few times Misha lifts his cup to give him some water. The heavy doesn’t know how much of the movie he actually watched or understood, but he seemed to enjoy it, so he thinks it might be a weekly trip for them to take.

During one of their outings, they pass by a display of television sets in a window, playing a show Misha had never heard of. He wouldn’t have thought about it, but the doctor was staring intently at the screens, and even turned his head to try and keep it in his sights when he was pushed past it.

Misha didn’t ever think he was going to buy a TV in his lifetime, but the noise seemed to keep Erik company nicely when the heavy had to leave the house to do work in the back yard. Even when it only played static, the doctor seemed more at peace. It’s hard to gauge levels of inner peace in a man who never speaks, though.

If there’s anything in all of this that Misha hates the most, it's the silence. He’d give anything to hear the sound of Erik’s voice again. Once upon a time it was hard to get him to shut up, unless he was working, in which case it was all, “I’m vorking! Geh weg!” He was always such a talkative man, chattering about his latest discoveries, discussing science and mathematics with men whose IQ’s were lower than their height in inches.

Some people considered the medic’s voice quality to be grating, but to Misha, there was never a sweeter sound. To hear him call out to him on the field, “Move, move! Schnell! Get behind ze cover!” meant that he was safe. He had his doctor with him.

When the doctor’s voice would get rough after lovemaking, Misha loved that too. He would be hoarse and a little crabby but very content, and the heavy knew that his complaining was in good humor.

But his favorite was when Erik was just waking up, and his voice would crack and slur with sleepiness. He would be so calm and happy and undisturbed, his hair a mess, and his voice would creak and betray his mortality. He always seemed so human in those moments.
He dreams about his voice a lot. Sometimes he could see him too but most of Misha's dreams were overwhelmed by Erik's voice. He supposed that was normal. He hadn't heard the man he loves speak since the day before he left the base for the last time and on top of that hasn't had anyone but himself to talk to in weeks. It makes sense that he would dream of the doctor's beautiful voice. But it only makes the rest of the day filled with blank unanswering stares a little harder.

It’s raining when it happens. Pouring down, miserable rain. Big, fat drops the size of mosquitoes threaten to soak the heavy to the bone if he steps outside for even thirty seconds. It’s definitely a stay-home day.

Misha is upstairs, cleaning around Erik’s bedroom. It collects dust a little quicker than the other rooms because he keeps the man’s windows closed as much as possible since his room doesn’t face the sun until it starts to set, so he doesn’t get a breeze and get chilled. He’s talking idly to the doctor – really more like to himself – and he approaches his bedside to pet his head.

He starts to walk away to go put the dusty rag away, and suddenly he’s stopped. By a hand, holding his wrist. His chest clenches tighter than its been in weeks.

Misha looks down at the strong hand loosely clinging to his large wrist as he turns back towards the doctor. He's almost afraid to breathe, afraid he'll somehow disturb the hand on his arm like its a butterfly that accidentally landed on him on a warm summer day. Because he knows if it moves, if he loses this chance, he'll never get another.

"Doktor," he says softly, kneeling down beside him and dropping the dust rag. He knows he shouldn't expect an answer but when something like this happens he can't help but hope.

The medic’s mouth starts opening and closing again like it’s been doing for quite some time. He’s never managed a sound since that day at the park, and has long since surrendered to the fact that it must have been a fluke.

But then a little garbled noise leaves the man. Just a little choked sound, and Misha rushes to sit him up a little bit more so his airway is less constricted.

“Wh-”

“Speak, doktor. I am here.”
“Who… are you?”

Misha can feel his heart shatter in his chest. All the joy that’d built up, waiting for Erik to get those few syllables out drains away leaving him cold and hollow, a perfect shell waiting to be filled by the grief he knows is going to flood him as soon as he gets out of this room and away from those wide imploring eyes. He’d almost prefer an unending silence to those three words.

He realizes Erik is looking at him expectantly, waiting for an answer. He looks lost and confused and so very unlike the doctor Misha knew and loved. The doctor who knew and loved him was well and who is truly gone, miracle cures and false hopes be damned.

"I - I am Misha." he answers, trying not to choke on his tears. "I am friend."

The doctor nods and drops his grip from Misha’s wrist, but it’s clear he doesn’t really understand. He might not even remember anything that happened over the past few weeks. He might not remember yesterday. He might not even remember today.

“Do you want me to stay?” Misha asks, throatily. He has to hold back.

Erik doesn’t say anything. He closes his eyes.

Misha waits until his breathing evens out before all but running out of the room and into his own. He makes sure to make a note in the notebook about this new step Erik’s taken before falling onto his bed and crying like a big baby.

He’d hoped, stupidly he realizes now, that if Erik spoke again the first thing he’d say would be his name. That he’d somehow know him and remember their relationship. It was too much to want but the confirmation that it’s all gone is hard a hard realization to place on his already strained heart.

The desire to throw himself off a cliff is very strong now, but he can’t abandon the doctor now. If he did, he’d go back into a home and probably be killed. Or Miss Pauling would have to take care of him again, and she’s done enough for them.

He has to put aside his selfish wants and desires. Taking care of Erik was never about him anyway, it was always about the needful medic. He’d do anything for him. Including give up all hope that they would ever be together again.
And maybe he’s being a little preemptive. Dell had said he would remember things eventually. Maybe he just has to suffer through the hurt for now, and then he’d remember some day. Years from now. He has to hold out hope, or he might just melt into a puddle of sad and waste away.

He gets up to call Miss Pauling and tell her the news. She's excited for Erik of course but seems to realize how much Misha is hurting and sets aside a little of her excitement to try to comfort him. She assures him that Erik's memory might seem gone now but he's recovering so rapidly that it's very likely he'll start to remember things soon.

He wishes it would reassure him. It might be easy for her to hold out faith for that, but she hasn’t been the one watching Erik’s mind decay and she didn’t know first-hand just how brilliant and sharp he used to be. He’s little more than a vegetable now, when once Misha would have argued he’s the smartest man on the planet.

His next call is to Dell to keep him updated as well. He's even more sympathetic than Miss Pauling and also offers his hopes that Erik will recover soon and recognize Misha before too long.

Once that's all done Misha's too emotionally worn out to do anything but check on Erik one more time before crawling into his big empty bed and falling into a fitful sleep.
Chapter 9

Chapter by HarveyDangerfield

The doctor doesn’t speak again for days. The next time he does, it’s only to ask Misha who he is again. The giant man can only wearily remind the frazzled doctor of his name, and assure him that they’re friends.

He asks three more times over the course of the next two weeks. Misha wishes he could get used to it, but it hurts every time.

The curious thing, it seems, is that the doctor’s accent is missing. The heavy used to love that sharp, commanding tone. His words now are sluggish and without any accent at all. It doesn’t sound like anything Misha has ever heard. It’s not German and it certainly isn’t American. It’s just slow and dull, like his tongue is too heavy for his mouth.

Dinner is usually taken in silence. Misha has been encouraging the doctor to relearn how to use a spoon, but progress has been slow. He almost always drops it, and doesn’t even seem to realize he has. And if he doesn’t drop it, he can’t usually muster the strength to lift it again after he’s put it down in the bowl of whatever thin food Misha has made for him.

Today, though, he doesn’t seem to want to eat. He’s never refused a meal in all the weeks he’s been recovering, but he keeps swiveling his head away from the insistent heavy.

"Must eat." Misha insists again, getting tired of repeating himself. "You must eat. Need strength for getting better. Soup is good. I have some too, see?" He lifts his own bowl to show Erik. "You like this soup. Eaten it hundred times."

“No.” he says, clearly. Misha almost drops his spoon.

“No? You don’t want soup?"

Erik looks down at his lap. The heavy sighs with frustration and lets his forehead clunk against the tabletop.

"Want different soup? Or cheerios if you think you are up to chewing?” Misha suggests without lifting his head. He’d gotten the cheerios earlier in the week since Erik had been getting more active and he thought he might want to try something a little more solid. The cheerios seemed like a good
choice because it's impossible to choke on a cheerio.

“No.”

“Ughhh.” Misha clucks his forehead against the table again. “You must eat.”

“Outside.”

He tilts his head enough to look at the man out of the corner of his eye. Erik is looking out the glass door at the back yard. He lifts his head a little more. “You want to eat outside?”

The doctor doesn’t speak, but he also doesn’t look away from the door.

Misha sighs and gets up. He wheels Erik’s chair out the door into the yard where the sun is shining on the soft grass through the leaves of the tall trees all around the property.

He gets the chair settled before going back for Erik's soup, hoping now he'll agree to eat.

Sure enough, the doctor doesn’t fuss now. He eats calmly, doesn’t even reject Misha’s attempt to get him to hold his spoon. He doesn’t hold onto it too well, but he does try.

Halfway through his bowl of soup, it hits him. This is the first real initiative the doctor has shown. The first time he’s ever refused something, or made a real request. This is the first time he’s showed any awareness of his surroundings. He knows the difference between inside and outside. It’s such a simple but important distinction that so many people take for granted.

He decides to try a simple test, to see how much Erik recognizes and can decide for himself.

"Would you like watch television again tonight?" he asks after Erik swallows another mouthful of soup. They watch almost every night so he's sure the answer will be yes, if he gets an answer. But it's better to start with an easy question, rather than something complicated.

The doctor looks at him and his eyebrows twitch together like he’s seriously thinking about it, or
maybe he’s just confused. He doesn’t speak again, but he nods, and that’s enough of an answer. Speaking is probably exhausting, anyway.

Days sometimes pass between his attempts to speak. They’re always small things, like he’ll ask Misha to read to him, or he wants the volume on the television louder, or he wants to go outside. But the heavy considers every single word a victory. Whenever the doctor speaks a new word, it further proves that his memory is coming back.

His words are slow and clumsy and creaky and sometimes he’ll get tongue tied and upset, and Misha will be there to hold his hands and whisper to him until he stops groaning and clicking his teeth.

Within another few weeks, he’s speaking in short sentences. His accent still isn’t there, and Misha silently hopes it’ll come back one day. He doesn’t speak a word of German anymore, when he used to switch between his first and second languages two or three times a sentence. Curious, that when he started to speak again, it would be in English.

Along with his speech, he’s also taking leaps and bounds in movement. One night he asks for his spoon and only drops it twice. It frustrates him when he does drop it, and he’ll reach for it with little angry noises, but Misha just picks it up for him again. He’s not sure if he’s going to miss feeding the doctor, or if he’s more proud of the fact that he’s starting to learn how to feed himself.

Frequently, he’ll come into his room in the morning and he’s struggling to sit up, or he rolled over onto his stomach in the night and he’s distressed trying to get upright again. He’s thankful that he installed the mesh grate at the side of the bed, because some mornings he comes in and the doctor has rolled over and he’s pressed right up against it.

He starts leaving the medic to shower by himself in the mornings. He still helps him get unchanged and helps him into the chair they set up where everything is within easy reach but once the water is on he turns his back until Erik calls for him or he knows it's time for him to get out. He would wait outside but he's not sure he'll hear Erik from all the way out there and doesn't want to take the chance in case something happens. But Erik seems to appreciate the trust Misha is showing by letting him wash himself and for now it's more than enough.

He also starts asking for Erik's input on the days meals and what he's going to wear. Simple questions like "this pair of socks or this pair" and "is chicken soup good tonight" are easy enough for the doctor to answer with a nod but he seems more engaged and alert when Misha asks for his opinion.

Sometimes, rarely, but sometimes, Erik asks to be alone. Misha doesn’t really understand why, but
he’ll indulge him for a short while. He doesn’t find out why he keeps asking until around the fifth time he asks to be alone, while he’s outside in his chair enjoying the waning sunlight after dinner. The heavy promises to come back out for him soon, and goes inside to wash dishes.

Not a lot of things can really scare Misha.

He was scared of the pyro on his team, but after seeing him so happy and relaxed and human in Dell’s home, he’s not even sure he’s scared of him anymore.

He’s scared of the nightmares he sometimes still has of the Gulag, and he’s scared that his family might end up there again someday, an he might not be able to protect them.

He was scared when he and Miss Pauling were running through the hospital while Erik was minutes away from death.

Not a lot of things scare him. He’s too big and too strong and he’s seen too much.

But when he hears a crash and a loud cry from outside, terror grips him. He doesn’t even turn the water off at the sink where he was washing dishes before he’s running outside, barely taking the time to open the sliding door. He would have crashed right through it if it wouldn’t have exacerbated the situation.

The doctor is lying on his side on the grass. His chair, which had been settled firmly into a patch of gravel that Misha laid out weeks ago to give his wheels something to really stick into, was on its side. The doctor was futilely trying to push himself up onto his arms, but he can’t even lift his own body weight. It looks like he was trying to stand when he toppled over, leaving his palms and elbows bleeding.

Misha has him in his arms in seconds. He bypasses the chair still lying on its side and carries Erik right inside, setting him gently on the couch. He gets the first aid kit and a wet clothe from the bathroom and brings it back to where Erik is lying on the couch, still bleeding.

"Why did you not tell me?" he asks as he cleans the wounds on Erik's hands and elbows. "I would have helped. Would have helped hold you while you walk. You could have been hurt very bad. Could have broken bones. Could have been stuck on ground if I had not heard."
Erik doesn’t speak. He keeps his chin tucked in and his eyes closed. He seems to be pretending to be asleep. He doesn’t wince when Misha rubs alcohol on his cuts. Misha wants to yell at him and shake him, scared and shaking and upset. He’s not angry, but he’s terrified. What if he tries to get up at some point and falls over worse? What if he kills himself in the middle of the night because he tries to roll over the barrier at the edge of his bed and he cracks his head open?

He can’t expect the doctor to understand why he has to keep still and safe. He barely understands the difference between chicken and tomato soup. Which doesn’t help to ease Misha’s fear any.

He continues babbling, telling Erik again and again what a stupid thing he did and how he easily could have died. None of it is getting through and at a certain point he’s pretty sure he’s speaking complete nonsense but anything is better than silence when he’s cleaning up Erik’s blood.

He finishes disinfecting and bandaging the wounds before he realizes he’s crying again. Tears have been steadily running down his face since he started thinking about how much worse Erik could have hurt himself, his fear seeking some kind of outlet.

The doctor’s eyes are open again when he looks up, and he quickly mops up his face before he sees. He turns his head to look at Misha, and then opens his mouth to speak. The heavy goes very quiet, because more often than not, he speech is scarcely above a whisper.

“I can’t see,” he says hoarsely.

Misha sucks in a breath, a sharp pang of fear making his chest ache. "Did you hit head?" he demands, his voice hoarse. "I will call doctor to come see you. Do not move."

He tries to leave for the phone, but the edge of his shirt is grabbed and he stops.

“I can see. I can’t – can’t see,” Erik says slowly. He blinks rapidly like he’s trying to clear his vision.

"You have something in your eyes?” Misha asks. He lifts the wet clothe and uses a clean corner to gently wipe away any dirt that might have gotten in Erik's eyes.

"Is better?" he asks when he's done, leaning over Erik to try to see into his eyes.
The doctor shakes his head and rubs at his eyes clumsily with bandaged palms. “Can’t see,” he says again. “Can’t see.”

Misha is still confused for a moment before he realizes Erik can’t see because he isn’t wearing his glasses. He hasn’t been wearing them since they got him out of the hospital, it seems odd that he’s bringing it up now. But maybe he’s only now realizing he can’t see clearly.

"I understand," he tells Erik. "You need your glasses. I will get you new pair."

He’s not sure how. He’d have to take Erik to see an eye doctor and Erik will need to answer a lot of questions. Maybe the hospital has his old pair and Miss Pauling will be able to get them.

He phones her, but she calls him back later the same day telling him that according to the hospital, he showed up without them. This means they’re either gone for good, or they’re with the rest of his things, which Redmond confiscated.

The idea of an eye exam makes Misha nervous. He’s sure it would overwhelm the poor man, but he can’t answer questions about his eyes for him. He wonders if he should just let him suffer without his glasses. It might be a little cruel, but what does a man like him really need clear vision for? He isn’t reading or writing, he doesn’t even really look at the television when they watch, preferring to listen.

Of course, maybe that’s because he can’t see it.

He decides to at least try. Erik might appreciate it. Actually being able to see things might even jog his memory. If he can’t see, that means he hasn’t seen anything since they left the hospital. Misha’s gut twists with shame. How could he forget the man wears glasses?

The exam is fairly standard. The doctor is patient and calm, and doesn’t get annoyed if he has to ask a question six or seven times before Erik finally understands and responds. He warns Misha that the results still probably won’t be exact, but it’ll be as good as they can get until he becomes more lucid and can answer the questions better.

The heavy is more than grateful, even though the eye doctor tells him it’ll probably be another four to six weeks before the glasses finally come in.

It's a start at least. He calls Miss Pauling again to see if Erik's exact prescription is in a file she can get.
to but with no luck. It's not there anymore, if it ever was. So for now they have to settle for the less than perfect lenses.

Misha has to explain to Erik again and again why he can't see. The doctor doesn't seem to understand or remember that he needs glasses, all he knows is that things don't look right. When he does understand Misha's assurances that they have something coming that will make it easier for him to see he seems pleased but he's quick to forget and they have to have the conversation all over again.

He’s grateful that he’s a man of patience. Repeating himself over and over gets tedious, but he still prefers it to Erik not speaking. Even if his voice isn’t quite back to normal yet, it’s better than silence.

Eventually his vocabulary stretches into longer sentences, but he’s still disoriented most of the time. The bruising around his eyes is long healed, and the puncture wound closed up into a scar weeks ago. The cuts on his hands and elbows heal up, and from the outside, he looks normal. He starts sitting up straighter on his own and doesn’t drop his spoon anymore. His words are still clumsy at times, and he still can’t stand, but he hasn’t tried to stand since his fall, so Misha thinks they’ll get to that at some point.

The next time the big man looks at a calendar to try and mark the days to when the glasses might arrive in the mail, he sees it’s nearing the end of September. The war ended in May.

Four months is a long time. By now they would have had their house in Russia built and stocked for winter, with plenty of straw and hay to keep the goats warm and feed set aside to keep the chickens alive through the winter. Instead they're in Dell's cabin, waiting on a pair of glasses and celebrating every time Erik manages to string together more than two sentences.

At least they do have something to celebrate, Misha reminds himself. Erik has been making amazing progress. Maybe in a few years they can reconsider that home in Russia, if Erik keeps improving like this.

Erik has another doctor’s appointment, where they ask Misha if he’s sure the German was actually lobotomized. “He’s recovering way too quickly,” they say. “Maybe they didn’t do it right.”

If you ask Misha, that’s a blessing.

“He shouldn’t even be talking yet,” they say. “Most people are still in a vegetative state at this point.”
They call him a miracle of medicine. He refuses their request to keep him in the hospital to monitor his progress. “It’s for the common good!” they say. “The common good is that I don’t crush doktors,” Misha replies.

By the end of the month, Erik crosses another new milestone that had Misha breaking down in tears.

“Look!” he called one day while Misha was making soup – while Erik was certainly getting better, he wasn’t quite ready to start eating solid meals, so thicker stews with soft vegetables were becoming the norm;

“Look at what?” Misha laughed when he turned around, and gasped when he saw Erik moving his own wheelchair. He only moved a few feet, tugging clumsily at the wheels, but he moved.

Misha fell to his knees in front of the man and hugged him tightly, praising him in Russian. Erik just rested his hands on the giant man’s shoulders.

Misha installs a ramp up the front steps so Erik can wheel himself out to get the mail every day. It’s his only chore, but it seems to bring him joy, even if there’s only a newspaper or magazine about hunting to bring in.

It’s a Tuesday when he wheels back into the house with a box on his lap.

Misha knows they haven’t ordered anything lately. He doesn’t like placing orders from magazines and everything they need can be bought in town. Which means it can only be one thing.

He sets aside the dishes he was cleaning to take the box out of Erik’s lap. He opens it carefully, knowing Erik can’t do it himself. Inside the box are Erik’s brand new glasses. The frames are thicker than his old ones but other than that they look almost perfect.

"I will put these on you now," he warns Erik before placing them on the doctor's face, careful not to poke him. "Tell me if you see now."

Erik blinks a lot and looks around rapidly like he’s seeing everything for the first time. Technically, he is. Everything looks new to him, and exciting. He keeps blinking quickly, as though he’s afraid
his sight will go away if he stops. He reaches up and fondles the stems, slipping them down his nose to look around at the blurry world again, and then slips them back up, and when he can see, he smiles.


He stops when he looks up at Misha. The smile on his face disappears and his brows draw together.

“Wait.”

He reaches out and touches the heavy’s face. His hand feels so much thinner and feebler than Misha remembers when it cups his cheek. His other hand joins the first, and he holds Misha’s head in his hands like one might handle a small animal. He smoothes his palm over the man’s bald head and strokes his knuckles over his stubbled jaw.

The giant thinks he might just melt altogether. Erik hasn’t touched him voluntarily much at all these past few months. He didn’t realize how much he’s been missing physical contact until just now. He lets his eyes slip closed to enjoy it, but then the doctor speaks again.

“I know you. Who are you?”

The heartbreak isn’t quite so painful this time. Maybe he’s just gotten used to it. Maybe it’s because Erik is touching him in a way almost like he used to. Maybe it’s that Erik does seem to recognize him, at least a little. Somehow it doesn’t hurt as much as it used to.

"I am Misha. Your friend," Misha answers carefully. "Good friend. You know me from long time ago."

“Misha,” Erik says. It’s the first time he’s actually said his name out loud. “Misha. Misha. I know you. Misha.”

He must have said the heavy’s name a hundred times that night. He doesn’t mind. He doesn’t get tired of hearing it. Although, eventually, it does stop sounding like his name. It even stops sounding like a word.
“Goodnight, Misha,” he says when the big man puts him to bed. It makes him smile.

What he doesn’t expect is for him to call out to him by name the next morning.

“Misha!”

The giant almost doesn’t register it. It wakes him up, but he thinks it might be an echo from a dream.

“Misha!”

No, that definitely came from the room next door. He throws his covers off and almost trips over himself in his haste to get to the next room over. He throws the door open and Erik is sitting up in his bed.

“I wanted to make sure,” the doctor says slowly. “I didn’t forget.”

Misha grins at him, relief and pride and joy shining out of his very large face. "You did not forget. I am so proud of you. You remember name all night. I am so happy for you. We will have special breakfast to celebrate."

Erik eats pancakes like he’s never had them before in his life.
The medic is definitely getting more independent. Almost frighteningly so. There will be days that Misha gets out of bed to find that Erik has dragged himself halfway to his wheelchair before giving up in the middle of the carpet and went back to sleep.

Misha starts folding up his wheelchair at night. He doesn’t have the strength just yet to unfold it. Hopefully by the time he does, he’ll also be able to understand that he shouldn’t.

It takes weeks before he’s finally speaking in more coherent sentences, even though he’ll still stumble over his words and sometimes hit the nearest object in his frustration over being unable to think of a word, but he’s improving every day. Misha is careful not to leave anything breakable within easy reach of his outbursts. He’s clearly getting restless, though, and the heavy decides it’s time to start teaching him how to walk again. He takes him out into the backyard on a nice day, to a spot where the grass is thick and soft so if he stumbles he won’t hurt himself.

"You remember when you try to walk?" he asks when he's got the chair braked. "You did not ask for help and fell. This time you have help and will not fall. You are ready to learn now I think but I will help you. When you learn to walk can help me with house work. You will like that, da?"

Erik doesn’t say anything. He has a look of intense concentration on his face when Misha lifts him up by the armpits and holds him around the waist. His grip is firm on the doctor’s slim hips. Being immobile and living on a diet of soup has caused him to lose quite a bit of weight. His legs are half as thin as they used to be, bony and always a little crooked. He can tell that the doctor would crumple in an instant if he let go.

He takes a few shaky steps with Misha’s help and stands up straight for the first time in months. The tip of his tongue is visible through his teeth, his brow furrowed heavily in rapt attention.

“Let me try,” he says after several successful minutes with Misha as his training wheels. The heavy is reluctant, but lets go. He keeps his hands hovering in position, however, just in case he stumbles. Erik stands upright for just a handful of seconds, wobbling and swaying, but the moment he tries to put his weight on one foot in order to lift the other, he collapses into Misha’s arms with a sound of frustration. “Okay. I’m done trying.”

"You want take more steps with me holding you? Or are you too tired?" Misha asks, helping Erik back into his chair to rest. He looks pale and a little worn out. "Maybe you need nap now. We can
try more tomorrow. Did very good for first day."

“"I want to sit down,” the doctor says, clutching the arm rests of his wheelchair like he’s afraid it’ll float away.

Misha brings him back into the house and they sit on the couch together and watch Erik’s favorite program. Or at least, it’s the one he always pays attention to the most. He falls asleep leaning against Misha’s arm, and eventually slides over to rest his head in his lap.

The next day they practice walking again. Misha doesn't let go of Erik at all this time and he manages to walk away from his chair and back before he needs to sit and rest. They try again the day after that and after that, Erik getting farther every time. He doesn't try to walk without Misha's support again but he does stand on his own for a few minutes, careful to stay perfectly still.

The practice does him good, but he wears out very quickly. He never speaks when he’s on his feet, instead focuses on putting all of his attention into moving his feet. By the end of the week he’s taking almost fifteen steps away from his chair and fifteen back before he passes out on the couch for a couple hours.

Erik doesn’t like to be disturbed when he’s napping after they practice walking. If Misha ever accidentally wakes him up, the doctor will shout into his pillow or toss his head around and moan pathetically or try to hit the heavy. Misha isn’t built for stealth exactly, so he’ll work around outside the house while the medic naps.

He dodges a wayward hand one afternoon when he wakes up the doctor to tell him they need to go into town to go food shopping.

“No,” Erik says firmly.

“We need to,” Misha tells him gently. “We need food.”

“I want to stay,” Erik mumbles, turning his face into the pillow.

"You can not stay home alone." Misha replies. "I know you are tired. Will make special dinner to make up for waking you. But shopping is important. Please."
“No,” Erik says into his pillow. “I want to stay.”

Misha sighs and puts his hand on the doctor’s shoulder to try and rouse him, but he receives a gentle smack to his ribs.

“No,” he says again and turns over to face the back of the couch.

Misha chews his lip, considering his options. He could make Erik go. But then Erik will be cranky all night and will make things even more difficult later. Or he could leave him. It's a short drive into town and back and he knows what he’s getting from the store. He won't be gone more than forty minutes. Erik will probably sleep the whole time...

"You will promise to stay on couch?" he asks finally. "Stay there and will sleep?"

“I’ll sleep,” Erik says like he thought up the idea himself. He gropes for the blanket that had slipped down around his hips, before Misha pulls it up for him and kisses the side of his head. Erik’s fingers catch the stubble on his chin in what could have been a gentle caress or either a light smack.

He sits back and waits a few minutes until the doctor has fallen back to sleep before leaving.

Misha hurries to the market, ignoring at least one stop sign to get there faster. He gets vegetables and bread and butter, various types of stock to make broth for soup, cold cuts for sandwiches, another box of cheerios for Erik and even some ice cream as a special treat to show the doctor how proud he is of how hard he's been working. He decides to stop and grab a book from the book store too so he has something new to read to Erik at night when they're done watching television. Now that Erik is becoming more aware he's starting to get tired of the same old stories.

Satisfied and only a little behind on time Misha loads up the car and goes home, praying Erik hasn’t woken or accidentally rolled off the couch.

To his surprise, the doctor is on the porch, in his chair, with his hands folded in his lap and the blanket tucked awkwardly around his legs. Misha’s first instinct is to panic, what if he got hurt, what happened? He rushes out of his truck, leaving the groceries behind, and when he gets closer, he sees tears in his eyes.
“Are you okay? What happened? Are you –”

“I couldn’t find you,” the doctor is shaking a little bit in his chair. Misha can’t tell if he’s cold, or scared, or both. “I couldn’t find you.”

"I went to store. I told you, you say you can stay behind." Misha says nervously. He had told him he knows he did.

He starts nervously retucking Erik's blanket, fussing over him to make him comfortable and reassure him of his presence. "I needed to get food. Tried to tell you to come with me. I would not leave you, I promise. Never leave you."

“I couldn’t find you,” the doctor repeats. “I couldn’t find you.”

It breaks Misha’s heart. He takes Erik into his arms, careful not to squeeze him too tight, and the medic sags comfortably into his hold. It’s clear now that Misha overestimated Erik’s short-term memory.

"Will not leave again. Never again." the heavy promises, murmuring into Erik's hair. He holds him for a few more minutes before settling him back down into his chair, making sure Erik is as comfortable as possible.


Misha pushes him back into the house because he's sure the man is too exhausted to move himself, and Erik doesn’t fuss and demand autonomy like he normally does. “You can’t read English well,” he says suddenly, and the heavy freezes in his tracks.

How does he remember that? How does he remember a small detail like that, but he can’t even remember that Misha went to the store?

"No," he agrees after a moment. He wants to ask how he knows but he doesn't want to make Erik nervous. "Do not read English well. But I am getting better. Will get even more better if I keep reading, da? Or do you want to read? I can hold book for you."
“You read,” Erik tells him. “I’m hungry.”

Misha laughs and sets right into making dinner, but he keeps looking back at the doctor, where he sits patiently at the dinner table. He still doesn’t understand how the man’s memory works, and he doesn’t know if he ever will.

“It’s too quiet,” Erik says suddenly.

"I will turn on tv." Misha offers. He can leave the soup for a minute to go find a station they both like. It's not as if there are many to choose from. And if he can't find something there then he'll turn on the radio.

"I will put you in living room until dinner is done?" he offers, giving the soup on last stir before stepping away from the stove.

“When I couldn’t find you, I was lonely. It was quiet,” Erik says, either ignoring Misha’s question or just not registering it.

Misha stops next to Erik's chair, thinking. He knows how quiet the house gets. How lonely. He hated that feeling when Erik wasn't speaking but he hadn't thought about how the silence would effect Erik now that he's begun to communicate again. It's probably scary, having everything quiet and being so alone when you don't understand what's happening around you.

Misha thinks about what he could get to keep away the silence while he wheels the man into the living room area. Back at the fort, even when Erik was completely alone in the middle of the night, he still had his birds, and they were never silent. There was an ever present rustling of feathers and gentle cooing, even as they slept. Those were probably taken along with the rest of his things. It burns Misha to think about it, but they were probably killed.

“I don’t want you to go,” Erik says, breaking him out of his thoughts. Both of the doctor’s hands are holding one of his.

“I have to make dinner,” he smiles and smoothes his free hand over the medic’s hair.
“I don’t want you to go,” Erik tries to clarify.

Misha smiles and takes one of the doctor’s hands, giving it a gentle squeeze. "I promise you I will never leave you. Never go away for long. Never. Will stay with you as long as you want. Cross my heart. It is big heart too, big enough for big promise."

Erik moves one hand from Misha’s wrist to his chest to feel his heart beat. His expression is serious, like he’s gauging the capacity of his heart for making promises. He doesn’t say anything else, and lets his hands drop into his lap.

By the time the heavy is finished with dinner, Erik fell asleep in front of the TV.
Chapter 11

Chapter by HarveyDangerfield

The next morning Misha gets Erik ready for a trip into town. They have lunch in a small diner called Weatherby's that Misha has found to be friendly towards Erik and where he knows the doctor likes the soup. That done he takes him up the street towards their real destination, the pet shop.

The shop is too small for Erik's chair to make it through the aisles and all the barking from the dogs they keep in the back to be adopted is too loud and will frighten Erik if he tries to take him inside. He sets him up outside in the shade under the shop's awning before going inside.

There are a lot of birds to choose from. More than Misha knows what to do with. He asks for help in finding a bird that will be easy to care for but sings and makes plenty of noise all day. He eventually settles on a canary for now until Erik is ready for something that requires more handling and contact.

Erik is smiling at people who walk by when Misha comes back out, and sets down the small bird cage in the man's lap. His mouth falls open as he looks at the tiny moving yellow bird.

“What’s this?” he asks. “Where’d you find it?” He puts his palms on the cage and sticks his fingers through the bars to try and touch the bird.

"Bought it. New friend for you." Misha says happily. "He will sing all day for you. Does not like to be held much though. You can pet but do not take out of cage. But now house will never be quiet. You will always have friend around no matter where I am."

Erik doesn’t look away from the bird for a second all the way home. He follows it with his eyes and smiles every time it makes a noise. He holds onto the bars of the cage tightly so it won’t rattle in the car and tries to pet the anxious bird through the bars, but it’s always just out of reach of his fingers.

Misha continues to remind Erik over the next few days that he needs to name the bird, and Erik will always say that he’s still thinking, and that he’s waiting for something to “come to him.” He seems convinced that the name will just fall into his lap.

He spends more time looking at the bird than he does at the TV, now. He’s more entertained by its constant flitting around, and feeds it seeds through the bars, smiling when the little yellow bird takes them from his fingers.
“Archimedes,” he says one day, when they’re outside. He has the cage on his lap, staring down at the little bird.

Misha was hanging laundry out on the line when he spoke, and he drops the shirt he was pinning up. He turns to look at the man, slowly, afraid to startle him if he whips around too quickly.

“What?”

“I think it’s a nice name,” Erik says, wiggling his finger through the bar to pet the sleepy bird’s neck. “I don’t know… where I’ve heard it. Maybe the TV. I like it.”

Misha knows Erik doesn’t remember his doves, even Archimedes, but somehow the name has stuck with him through all of this. Or maybe it’s just a sign of more of the doctor's memories returning, slowly trickling into the empty spaces in his mind. Either way Misha is so happy he could cry.

"Da. Is very good name. Is perfect name for little birdie." Misha says with an approving nod. "You should tell him his new name. See if he likes it."

“You are Archimedes,” he tells the bird. It doesn’t wake up, but he’s confident it likes the new name.

After remembering his favorite dove’s name, even though he doesn’t realize he remembered it, Erik’s recovery rate seems to skyrocket. The next day he takes two steps unsupported before falling back into Misha’s arms, and the day after that he responds to a yes or no question with “ja” instead of yes. He doesn’t seem to be making any major breakthroughs, but Misha records everything in the journal religiously. His accomplishments are just as frequent as his tantrums, however. The only thing that seems to calm him down when he’s started shouting and throwing things is Archimedes.

The bird goes everywhere with him. Everywhere. It almost gets a little tiresome, having to explain to Erik that he can’t bring Archimedes into town with him, and then he has to deal with the doctor’s insistence that if Archimedes can’t go, neither will he.

Archimedes sleeps in his room with him, on the bedside table. He sits on the toilet seat when he showers. He comes outside and sits on the stacked firewood when Erik practices his walking. He sits on the kitchen table when they eat, and in his lap when they watch TV. Misha cracks a joke that Erik likes the bird more than him, and offhandedly, Erik says,
“No, I like you more.”

But Misha has to excuse himself to regain his composure, because it almost made him cry. He’s never cried so much in his life before this life-changing event.

Along with Erik’s accent his propensity for chatter seems to be making a come back. Every day he seems to get stronger and has more and more to say. Most of it is nonsense, questions he doesn’t care about answers to, comments on the food Misha made for lunch or dinner, sometimes remembering when a meal was better the last time he had it and sometimes forgetting he’s ever had it before. He talks to himself, to Misha and to Archimedes whenever he can, everyday seeming to be more and more confident in his voice.

One morning Misha hears him singing in the shower. A song he doesn’t understand, and then he realizes, it’s because he’s singing in German. When he asks Erik about the song, he doesn’t seem to remember singing at all.

It takes another four weeks before Erik is officially on his feet, walking by himself. He’s not about to go running any marathons, and he still prefers to sit and wheel himself for now, and he’s nowhere near ready to tackle the stairs, but he’s on his feet.

He still stumbles sometimes and takes advantage of the many surfaces in the house to keep him upright, but every day that he practices walking, he gets stronger. He also complains about his feet hurting more, but it’s idle protests because he never talks about it much or asks for it to stop. Misha supplies him with ample foot rubs anyway.

Now that he’s more mobile, Misha finds himself a little bit less panicked. Sure, this means he’s got a million more chances to fall, but it also means he’s getting strong enough that he could handle a fall without breaking apart into a pile of sticks upon contact with the ground.

He does fall, more than once. He falls in the shower when he tried to stand off the plastic chair and he tried as much as he could to climb back on, but the more he struggled the more tired he got until he gave up and sat down beside the chair and called for Misha. The giant was gentle with him, picked him up and dried him off. The giant was always gentle with him.

He fell in the kitchen, once, and bruised his collarbone pretty badly. He cried out for Misha’s help, but as soon as he started to come over and tried to help, Erik said that he wanted to get up by himself and smacked Misha’s hands when he tried to help.
“I can stand!” he shouted, but fell again.

Misha doesn’t know what to do with Erik’s tantrums. He doesn’t ever seem to be aware that he’s hurting Misha when he flails his limbs at clumsy angles, trying to get a grip on something. He doesn’t understand that he hits Misha when he’s trying to get his legs and arms under control. When he does get things right he always looks to the heavy for praise, and Misha gives it willingly.

As he slowly regains his mobility, he’s impossible to contain. He’s curious about everything, and asks more and more questions every day, sometimes so quickly that Misha doesn’t even have the chance to answer between them. Soups are officially off the menu now that Erik is getting stronger. Anyone who talks that much certainly has enough jaw strength to chew. He’s not about to go grilling steaks, but meals with more substance become the norm on the kitchen table.

Erik likes standing behind Misha to watch him cook, peering around his big arms and asking more questions about the food, and what it’s going to taste like, and if he’s had it before.

One night they decide to eat their dinners in front of the television, and with Erik’s short-term memory and self awareness improving, it’s easier for him to get involved in the stories on the set. “I Love Lucy” didn’t have the most complex plot in the history of mankind, but Erik could at least remember Lucy’s name now.

“Luuucy! I’m hooome!”

Erik puts down his fork as he watches Ricky kiss his wife and frowns.

“Misha, why don’t you have a wife?” he asks suddenly.

Misha frowns into his mashed potatoes. It's not the sort of question he's ever thought he'd have to answer. It makes sense that Erik is curious about it but if he had thought about it the heavy would have prayed that it would never come up.

The problem is that Erik doesn't remember their relationship. If he remembered even a little he would understand that Misha has no romantic or sexual interest in women, never has. But he has no clue and there's no way he can explain it now. Trying to explain something like that will only confuse Erik, if it doesn't outright disgust him.
The only thing for it is to lie. There's no way around it, as much as the thought of lying to the doctor more might unsettle Misha's stomach.

"I have never had chance to marry," he answers. "Never found woman who would want me. Too big and too slow. Not make good husband."

“Ridiculous,” the doctor declares. “You would make a good husband.”

Misha thought it was cute on the couch. He thinks it's less cute the next day when Erik asks a group of young women at the park if any of them would marry his friend. He turns bright red and ushers him away, with the girls giggling behind them.

"I can not have wife now." he tells Erik in the car on the way home. "Do not want wife and do not have time for wife. Especially girl I do not know. I have you to take care of. Is more important than any wife."

“Am I your wife?” Erik asks innocently enough, looking out the window. But when Misha starts to splutter, he turns to look at him and reveals the mischievous smile on his face.

Misha's spluttering quickly turns into a playfully annoyed grimace. "You are naughty boy. No dessert for you tonight for being bad. Bad boys do not get ice cream."

Misha gives him the ice cream anyway. He’s a sucker for those big blue eyes.
Misha’s eyes open. It’s still the dead of the night. His room is pitch black. He hears a crash, and frightened tweeting. Goosebumps raise up on his arms. Erik must have knocked over Archimedes’ cage. Did he imagine the –

“No! Noo!”

He hasn’t moved that fast since he heard Erik fall out of his wheelchair. He hears Erik thrashing in bed and goes to his side, only to receive a fist to the jaw that he didn’t see coming in the dark. It stings a bit but after spending six years getting shot at, it’s nothing he can’t handle.

“Doktor! Erik please!” He exclaims, trying to pin Erik's arms to his side so he can hold him until his fear passes. Another fist hits his shoulder before he manages to get the other man under control.

Erik securely in his arms he starts whispering soothing phrases into his ear and rocks him gently, hoping to ease Erik into a more calm state before he hurts himself.

Finally the medic stops thrashing, but his heavy breathing makes way immediately for scorched-throat sobbing and full-bodied trembling. He grabs onto the sides of Misha’s pajama shirt and presses his face into his neck.

“He – he – they – in my eye – they – in my eye – hurts – ” his words are broken by violent sobs. His toes curl and his hands clench into fists and he wets the bigger man’s neck and shoulder with his tears.

Misha’s throat tightens up and he holds Erik a little tighter. That's one thing he doesn't want Erik to remember, ever. He hopes the dream won't stick with him, that the memory will have faded by morning and he'll forget all about it.

"No one will hurt you." he whispers softly, letting Erik cling to him. "No one hurt you. Safe, safe here with me. Never let you hurt. Never let anyone take you, I promise. No one can hurt you when I
am here. Even if they try to fight me I am too strong for them. Will not hurt you, promise.”

Erik sobs himself exhausted, but as his tears wane, Misha’s grow. He tries to hold them back, he doesn’t want to cry on Erik. He doesn’t want him to know how much his nightmare affected him.

“Don’t go,” Erik whispers, almost asleep. “Stay tonight.”

Misha sighs and nods. He gently disentangles himself from the doctor who is quickly falling asleep again but is still clinging to his shirt.

"Will be back. Just need blankets and pillows. Will be back." he says, easing Erik’s hand off his shirt.

He wishes he could stay in Erik's bed with him and hold him all night to keep him safe but he knows better. Erik might thrash more in the night and is even more likely to fall and hurt himself if Misha is taking up so much of the bed. Instead he settles himself in a large nest on the floor and resolves to rethink their sleeping arrangements in the morning.

He moves Erik’s bed into his room the next morning while he eats breakfast. His room is bigger, and the doctor's bed is smaller, lighter and easier to move. Erik is exhausted and doesn’t even notice that Misha isn’t there with him the next morning. Archimedes is on the table to keep him company while he moves the bed, along with his small dresser and wheelchair. He doesn’t know what he’ll do with the spare bedroom now, but he’ll figure that out later.

Telling Erik about their new shared room doesn’t seem to sink in. The man nods dimly and keeps scratching at his eye, which healed long ago, but seems to be bothering him again. Or at least, Misha hopes it’s just bothering him. He doesn’t want to think that he remembers the nightmare. But he hasn’t said a word since he woke up to either confirm or deny Misha’s fears, and he doesn’t want to remind him just in case he did forget. It’s a queasy sort of helpless situation for him to be in.

The rest of the day is awkward. They keep to their usual routine, Misha trying to keep everything as normal as possible until bed time when he’s sure he’ll have to explain the change again. But despite the normalcy there's a tension in the air around them. They don't talk much. The television seems too loud when Misha puts it on while he's cooking lunch. Even Archimedes isn't as energetic as usual, probably because he's still recovering from the shock of last nights fall.

Misha knows it’s possible it’s all in his own head. Erik might not be noticing any tension. He’s probably tired from his nightmare, even if he doesn’t remember it. But the quiet creates a sense of
anxiety that makes the heavy's skin crawl.

By bed time, Erik finally understands their arrangement. He doesn’t seem to mind. He falls asleep in minutes, and doesn’t have any more nightmares that night.

Next morning, he seems fully recovered from his bad dream. He stops touching his eye and stars chatting again. Either he’s found a way to cope, or he’s blissfully forgotten. Either way, Misha is happier for it.

He hugs Erik every chance he can get, just to remind him that he’s safe with Misha. There’s no one bigger or stronger who could protect Erik better than him, but words are useless. He has to show him, and all he can do is hug him nice and tight. Feats of strength might scare the doctor at this point, and that’s the last thing he needs.

The question “why do you keep holding me?” comes out of nowhere and almost knocks him right off his feet. They’re sitting on the couch, watching TV, Misha’s arm around his shoulders on the back of the couch. His thumb was rubbing idle circles into his collarbone without even realizing it.

Because I love you.
Because I want to save what we were.
Because I used to touch a thousand more times than this everyday and I want to remember.

Answers rush through the heavy's head. He's a tactile person, always has been. His need to hug and kiss and snuggle used to drive Erik crazy. He was always pushing him away and complaining about how needy the bigger man was. But they both knew he didn't mean it.

He hadn't thought about how Erik might feel about his touching now. He wanted to reassure him and himself that they still had a connection but he hadn't stopped for a moment to think that this new Erik might not want to be touched.

"I am sorry." he says, pulling back his arm. "Will not hold you anymore if you do not want."

“It’s not bad,” Erik says hurriedly, grabbing for his arm and pulling it back into place. “I want to know why.”
"Because..." Misha flounders for an appropriate answer. "Because hugging is nice. Make people feel good. Want you to feel good so I give you hug. Makes me feel good to give hug."

Erik nods like he’s considering it. He doesn’t say anything else for the rest of the program.

When Misha is cooking dinner, he feels arms wrap around him from behind. In an instant, it’s like he’s transported back in time. He’s cleaning Sascha on a table in Erik’s office and the doctor gets up from his work at the desk to stretch and puts his arms around him and rests his cheek on the big man’s shoulder blade and Misha turns around and kisses him.

He snaps out of the daydream, but the arms are still there. He can feel Erik’s cheek against his back. He looks down, and his fingers are laced together in the center of his chest.

"What are you doing?" he asks, laughing a little to hide the tremble in his voice. "Must be more careful. Could have touched stove and burned hands."

“I’m checking,” Erik says, sounding thoughtful. “You were right. It does feel good.”

Misha smiles a little sadly and lays one large hand on Erik's linked ones.

"Good. Am glad you feel good. Can hold me any time you want. But be careful around stove, da?"

“I’m not burned,” Erik says, but he doesn’t seem to be letting go any time soon.

From that point on, the doctor hugs Misha a lot more often. He’ll even request them sometimes, saying that he doesn’t feel good, and wants to. The heavy will never turn down an opportunity to hold his doktor, especially since he’s started holding back.

Watching TV, Erik will pick up Misha’s hand and put it around his shoulders if it isn’t there already. Catching a little sunlight outside, Erik will ask Misha to stop making home improvements and to just come stand with him at the edge of the yard so he can lean into him.
“You’re warm,” he’ll comment. It reminds the heavy of the time when Erik would complain in the middle of the night and throw their blankets off, saying that he’s much too warm, or “zhis is nonsense!” and Misha would threaten to take him to the showers because “crabs need to be put in water.”

“Insulated,” he’ll say in return.

This new interest in physical contact marks what seems to be a sort of turning point for them in Misha’s eyes. Erik’s progressing in leaps and bounds now. He still doesn’t remember much but his ability to retain information and make new memories is superb. He’ll recount what happened on television shows that Misha missed because he was cooking or cleaning or working in the garden with amazing detail. He can summarize what happened in a previous chapter of a book Misha read and even starts to develop favorites amongst their small library. He’s more communicative too. Not just talking and babbling away about nonsense anymore. He makes up stories, and tells jokes. Not very good ones but Misha laughs long and hard anyway because he loves the way Erik’s face lights up when he does.

He walks around the house too. He still goes slowly on the stairs and Misha prefers to be with him just in case but he doesn’t need to carry him all the time anymore. He bathes himself without Misha in the room or even right outside the door in case he falls. He tires more easily than he did before everything happened but his stamina is returning fast and Misha couldn’t be happier.

Soon Misha thinks maybe he should do something to reward Erik’s hard work and celebrate how far he’s come. Usually a special occasion is marked by a trip to the movies or maybe a long drive out of town just to get away but this time he thinks Erik deserves something even more special. A whole day away, somewhere new to do something he’s never done before, now that he knows he’ll be able to appreciate it.

It’s actually Erik who gives him the idea.

“How come we never go there?” he asks one sunny afternoon. Misha was re-hanging the clothesline after it was taken down by a stray branch in the storm. Erik is standing a few yards away with a glass of iced tea in his hand, and he’s pointing in the distance.

“Go where?” Misha asks, wiping his hands on his pants as he comes up behind the smaller man. He’s pointing off into the distance, at the edge of the lake visible from the yard.

“We’ve never been there,” Erik says, and sips his tea. “It looks nice.”
"Did not think of it." Misha admits, crossing his arms over his chest, his expression thoughtful. "Could go there. Could go for whole day. Bring food for picnic. Maybe help you swim a little?" he suggests teasingly.

He can't help but laugh at Erik's disgusted grimace. He's never been much for swimming, never saw the point beyond saving your life if it was necessary and the feeling seems to have stuck around.

"Or," he suggests. "We fish. Dell left fishing equipment here. Maybe catch something for dinner? Have fresh fish, very good. Yes I think this is good idea. We go Saturday, da?"

“Saturday,” Erik nods, and sips his tea again.
Chapter 13
Chapter by HarveyDangerfield

The doctor doesn’t once forget their date at the lake for the rest of the week. He even reminds Misha Wednesday, Thursday and Friday at dinner. Misha laughs and thanks Erik for reminding him. He hasn’t seen him this excited about any one thing since he bought Archimedes for him.

When Saturday morning rolls around, Erik wakes up before the bigger man and climbs up onto his much larger bed to wake him up. Misha almost pulls him down under the covers on instinct, barely managing to contain himself before embarrassing them both in a sleepy haze.

Erik helps pack excitedly and even helps Misha load the big canoe over the back of his truck. In fact, Misha carried the whole weight of the boat, but he lets Erik think that he helped. The picnic basket is well packed, as well as a cooler full of ice that the fish will go in to keep it fresh until they get home. They pack the newest book along with towels in case Erik wants to put his feet in the water.

“Come on!” the doctor calls, leaning out of the passenger seat window of the truck. Misha is still on the porch, locking the door behind him and loading Erik’s wheelchair in the bed of the truck just in case he gets so tired that he wants it. “I told you not to bring that thing,” he says, screwing his nose up in a frown when Misha ducks into the driver’s seat.

"If you are tired it will be good to have." Misha says as he turns on the car and pulls out of the driveway. "And if not, good for pushing cooler of fish. Cooler will be heavy. You can push so I don’t have to carry back to truck. Give me break for once."

Erik is still frowning but there's a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth that makes Misha laugh.

They get to the lake in a little over an hour and in no time at all have their spot set up at the edge of the lake. Misha lays out the blanket and lets Erik fuss over making it perfectly flat while he unloads food and fishing equipment from the car. The canoe they’ll save for later, after they eat and he's taught Erik how to use the fishing pole and bait.

As the sun climbs in the sky, people come and go. The lake is public property, after all, even though the signs say “swim at your own risk” with no life guards on duty. Parents bring their children, but they always stay clear of the two men. All the better, Misha thinks. He didn’t come to the lake with his doktor to make new friends.
Erik sits on a rock that puts his head a little higher than Misha’s so he can look over his shoulder while he teaches him how to bait hooks.

“That doesn’t look comfortable for the worm,” he says, and the bigger man laughs.

“Worm cannot feel,” he lies a little bit. He doesn’t know for sure, but he doesn’t think anything without a face can feel.

Erik nods even though he really doesn’t understand. Misha teaches him how to hold the pole and tugs on the string a little to give him practice jerking the line to hook a fish.

"And you use here to reel in fish." Misha says, pointing to the reel. "Is easy. Hard part is waiting for fish to bite worm. But when we get fish I will show how to skin and gut so we can eat it."

He hands the pole to Erik and tells him to wait while he packs up and gets the canoe so they can go out on the water. He expects he’ll be doing all the rowing but that’s okay. Today is for Erik to enjoy himself, not to have to work.

The doctor cries out the first few times the canoe wobbles, “it’s going to tip over!” but Misha always rights it and laughs at the older man’s frown. They row out into the water and the sun is warm, but the sunscreen Misha covered Erik’s face and arms with boasted absolute protection.

Fishing is tedious, Erik finds out. They fill the silence and monotony with chatter. Misha talks about what he’ll do with the fish they catch, and how they really shouldn’t take more than four. The doctor shares his theories on where he thinks the plot of the book they’re reading will go, and then suddenly, his line tugs.

He jerks back so energetically that he smacks Misha over the top of his great bald head and the canoe almost tips over, and Erik’s lap is soaked when a good-sized trout flops onto his lap. He screams and throws it off, and it flops on the floor of the canoe.

Misha lifts the small hammer he brought with them and immediately stuns the flopping fish with a blow to the head. Once the fish is still he lifts it and shows it to Erik.

"Do not be scared." he says, holding out the fish. "Fish will not hurt you. Fish was scared at being out of water that is why fish flop in your lap. Now fish is dead and we can pack for later, see?"
Erik stares at the fish with wide eyes, looks up at Misha, back down to the fish, and then back up at Misha.

“Wow,” he says, and then laughs, and Misha laughs too, rubbing his head where Erik’s pole had whacked him.

Misha packs away the fish in the cooler and helps Erik re-bait his hook before they cast their lines again.

They're out on the water for another hour and a few interested nibbles at their lines before they catch another fish. This time they get lucky though and they both catch one in the span of twenty minutes, two smallmouth bass joining the trout in the cooler.

Another forty minutes pass without another bite and Erik announces that he's bored. Three fish is enough for one day especially since Erik still doesn't eat much. It's plenty for dinner at least and Misha is starting to worry about the pinkness of the doctor's skin. Getting back to land seems like a good idea before they both get badly burned or fall asleep from boredom.

It’s close to three in the afternoon when they get back to shore, but Erik is still reluctant to leave. He takes his time packing and even hides a few things so it takes longer for the heavy to collect them, but he doesn’t get angry at Erik. He could never be angry at Erik.

“I’m not tired,” the medic tells him defensively when Misha says they’ve been there for most of the day. He’s clearly lying, because he dozed sitting up in the boat twice, and once while Misha was reading to him, and he’s swaying a little bit where he sits in the grass, but he’s so pleased to be out in a place he’s never been that he’s either ignoring it or he doesn’t even notice. “I want to stay.”

“I only brought lunch,” Misha says, rattling the ice in the cooler. “We have to go home to eat dinner.”

Erik is about to retaliate with the suggestion of a campfire when a child wanders close to them. She looks about four or five years old with big wide eyes and pigtails, wearing a little striped bathing suit.

“You’re really big,” she says to Misha. The giant man recoils in surprise. It’s not often he’s approached by children.
"Da." Misha says, a little taken aback. He isn't sure what else he can say. He is big. Very big, by most people's standards. From the little girl's view he's sure he's a giant. "And you are very small."

Recovering from his surprise he crouches down in front of the little girl so he isn't towering over her. "Where is your family little girl? Are you lost? Do you need help?"

“If I eat my vegetables and drink my milk will I be as big as you when I grow up?” she asks, completely ignoring his question. Erik peers curiously around the man’s shoulder, but he doesn’t approach or attempt to communicate with the child. He seems intimidated.

Misha looks over the girl's head, scanning the groups nearby to see if any of them look like they've lost a child. He doesn't see anyone who looks like they might be searching for her, but he also doesn't see anyone who looks like a parent watching her.

The best thing to do he decides is just to try to keep her from wandering off and hopefully a parents or sibling will come get her soon.

"Da." he answers. "Must eat lots of vegetables. And eat all the dinner your mother gives you. I finish all my dinner every night when I was little and grew a foot taller every year."

The girl’s mouth drops open. She climbs up onto a log and locks her ankles together while Misha goes back to packing.

“Are you from Usha?” she asks after a few moments of silence.

Misha nods, while he folds up their picnic blanket and packs it away with the dishes from lunch. "I am from Russia. Lived there long time ago. Came to U.S. on trip and stayed for warm winters. Too much snow in Russia. Snow sometimes so high it goes over my head!"

“No way!” she cries. “Your head is too tall!”

Misha laughs, but he doesn’t have the chance to respond.
“Rhonda! Rhonda, oh my god,” a frantic woman comes over, wearing a long dress. Her hair is full of flyaway silver strands, and she looks exhausted. “Rhonda, what have I told you about wandering away?” she scolds sharply, grabbing the child’s wrist. “I’m so sorry, gentlemen.”

"Is no trouble." Misha says, offering the woman a smile to try to soothe her nerves. "She did not get in way. Just asked questions. I am glad you find her. Must have been frightened."

The woman’s expression grows sour and she stands up straighter when Misha speaks. She doesn’t say anything else, tugging at the girl’s wrist.

Erik was about to comment on how odd he thought the woman’s behavior was when he heard the woman speak to the child in a hurried whisper.

“I told you to stay away from the commies, Rhonda. They’re dangerous, alright? They’re dangerous. He could have killed you.”

Misha’s warm smile disappears into a pained look as he turns away from the mother and child. He knows members of the town talk about him behind his back. They say he’s a Soviet spy or some kind of communist radical. But he's never heard it in person before.

It's a ridiculous assumption and if that was all she had said he probably could have shrugged it off. What really hurts is her assumption that he would hurt a CHILD. The idea that somehow because of where he was born or what his political affiliations might be he would hurt her little girl like some kind of monster makes his chest ache.

He wasn’t going to say anything. The mother was just trying to protect her child. Her fears weren’t completely unfounded, but if a Soviet were going to come to America they would hardly settle down in smalltown America and buy a vacation home.

He knows how dangerous his country can be, first-hand. He doubts she does, but he doesn’t blame her fear. He wasn’t going to say anything.

Erik, apparently, didn’t have the same idea.

“Hey!” he calls out. The woman shoots upright from where she was whispering to her child, a few yards away. “Yes, you! My friend is not dangerous!”
"Is alright Erik," Misha says, placing a hand on Erik's shoulder. Whether it's to calm him or restrain him he hasn't quite decided but he's not giving it too much thought. "She has right to opinion. That is what America is about, da?"

“It’s not an opinion if it’s wrong!” Erik shouts, pulling out of Misha’s grip, which would have been a feat worthy of praise before his accident when he was stronger, but now it was just shy of impossible. “My friend’s name is Misha and he wouldn’t hurt that girl if it would save his life!”

The woman crowds the child behind her, taking a step back.

“I don’t know what a ‘commie’ is but I know that he’s not dangerous,” he continues, head held high. “Misha is the kindest, gentlest, most compassionate man I know! If you are going to go through your whole life judging people only on how they look, on what size they are, you won’t make a lot of friends!”

The louder and more upset he gets, the shorter and sharper his syllables become. His cheeks are red and his eyes are shiny, the girl is hiding and the mother has sucked her lips into her mouth in shame, but Misha doesn’t notice any of those details because Erik’s accent is coming back.

"Erik," he says a little more firmly when the man stops to draw breath. His tone silences the German’s angry tirade and turns Erik’s attention back to him. "You have said enough. We go home now, da? Go home and have dinner. Let woman be wrong."

He doesn't give Erik much room to argue. He tosses the last of their items into the back of the truck and leads Erik to the passenger seat before going to his own side. He gives the woman a nod, almost a thank you, before climbing into the car himself.

"You say very nice things. Warm my heart. Thank you." he says when they pull onto the road, breaking the silence that filled the car. He hopes to get Erik talking again to see if the accent was an accident or if it's really coming back.

Erik puts his face in his hands in the truck and rests his forehead on the dash to cool it off. He shakes his head and wipes tears from his eyes before sitting back up and looking out the window.

He takes a deep breath. “I feel sick,” he says quietly. His words are still shorter and breathier, and higher in his nose, like it used to be. “And my tongue feels funny.”
Misha rubs his back with one large hand. He knows Erik has worn himself out from getting so worked up and as soon as he relaxes will fall fast asleep.

"That's alright. Tongue is fine, is accent is all. Nothing to worry about, do not fight it. Is good sign." Misha assures him.

“I have an accent?” Erik looks over at the other man. “Since when? Ach.” He grimaces and lets his tongue hang out of his mouth. “I can’t stop it.”

"You had accent long time ago. Forgot about it. Now you are remembering." Misha explains. He can't stop himself from smiling. Erik finally sounds like himself again and it's another step closer to having the doctor back to how he used to be. If he could he'd start dancing in the street.

Erik does fall asleep. Within minutes, he’s slumped against the window of the truck. He’s crabby when Misha wakes him, and he doesn’t fuss when he carries him to the couch and covers him with a blanket.

“Danke,” he mutters when the covers are pulled up to his ears. He doesn’t even seem to notice that he said it in German.
Chapter 14

Chapter by HarveyDangerfield

Erik’s accent comes back in full. Maybe even a little stronger than it had been. Or that could just be because the heavy hasn't heard it in so long. He's gotten so used to Erik's voice without accent, it takes a little while to adjust to the German again. But he's more than happy for the change.

Erik also starts remembering German words. Sometimes he speaks only in German, seeming to have forgotten in English completely for short periods of time. Misha can't do much more than nod along with him then and try to follow with the little German he knows to encourage Erik's memory. If he's starting to remember his native language it can't be too much longer until solid memories start coming back to him too. At least that's what Misha hopes.

Along with the accent comes some of his old personality habits. Like his need for alone time and independency. Misha is reluctant to leave him alone because of past minor accidents, but he keeps reminding himself that Erik is almost completely mobile now. will still be days where he feels tired and he just wants Misha to push him around all day, but the heavy doesn't mind. He's still on his feet most days, and he's capable of a lot more.

Like cooking. He stands very near to the stove and almost always asks to help now. Misha will let him mix things or stir pots, but still does the majority of the work, and the doctor seems to be content with that. When he spills or burns something he'll shout and Misha will have to stop him from overturning the pans, and remind him that everything he's done so far has been good. He'll suggest that the doctor go sit with his bird, but Erik usually calms down and asks for another chance. Misha would give him a thousand chances.

When he wakes up one morning and he smells something burning, alarm ripples through him, but it doesn’t smell like the house burning down. It smells like… burnt bread? He wraps his giant robe around his body and creeps down the stairs as quietly as he can. He’s not meant for stealth.

"Scheiss!" he hears from downstairs, along with a clatter of a pan. “Dummer Ofen!”

Misha finishes descending the stairs and turns the corner into the kitchen where he can see Erik standing by the sink, running water over his hand. Behind him is the stove with a pan of something sitting on top of one of the burners, grey smoke rising from its black, burned contents.

"Are you hurt?" Misha asks, approaching the doctor. His hand is red as if he accidentally touched the hot pan and burned himself. "Let me help."
“No!” Erik bats away his advances. “Go back to bed. I’m making breakfast.”

"You know you are not supposed to cook fingers with food, right?” Misha teases, taking Erik’s hand to examine his burn. "Does not look too bad. Let me put medicine on it then I will go back to bed."

“I can do it,” the medic jerks his hand away. “I can do zhis alone.”

He turns away from the other man and leans over the stove with his hands on either side, gripping the counter. His shoulders sag and he sighs.

“I thought I could do it,” he says, turning the burner off. “I’ve watched you do zhis a hundred times. I should be able to do it.”

"Cooking is harder than it looks. Took me long time to get good. Ate many meals that should have gone in trash." Misha says gently, assuring him. "I am proud you try. Is good to try. You will get better.”

Erik takes his glasses off and sets them on the counter to scrub at his eyes. “You always cook for me. I vanted to do it just vonce for you but I ruined it,” he sniffs loudly and puts his glasses back on. “I don’t feel good. I want to feel better.”

That’s code for ‘hug me now please.’ Misha learned that weeks ago. He doesn’t hesitate for a second to pull him into a big bear hug that the doctor melts into without pause. He sighs and rests his cheek against the bigger man’s shoulder. “I’m sorry I burned breakfast,” he mumbles into his robe. “And I made the cabin smelly.”

Misha rests his chin on the doctor’s head and gives him an extra little squeeze. "You will get better. I will teach you to cook if want and you can make breakfast another time. In mean time you will air out cabin. Alone. You can open windows to get rid of smell while I make breakfast. This is fair, da?”

Erik smiles and rubs his nose on Misha’s shoulder to hide his sniffle. “I can do zhat,” he nods. “In a minute. I don’t feel all the way better yet.”

He doesn’t wriggle out of the heavy’s hold for another minute at least, comfortable in the safety and
warmth of his arms. He fixes his shirt and busies himself with throwing open all the windows. The morning is cool, and a breeze carries the smell of burnt food up and away.

“Teach me,” he says after Misha has cleared away the burnt food, and he laughs.

“Da, alright. I will teach you.”

He’s secretly very glad for the opportunity to stand right behind Erik and hold his hand in his own much bigger mitt to teach him how to successfully flip an omelet. Their bodies press together and the doctor even leans into him a little bit, and everything feels normal for an instant.

But it falls apart when the triumphant omelet only serves to upset the doctor.

“Zhat vhas so easy,” he complains, his fingers shaking as he sits at the table. “Vhy couldn’t I just have done zhat? Vhy am I so useless?”

"Not useless. Never useless." Misha corrects him. He's almost scolding him as he serves the omelet and he suspects his harsh tone is the only reason the medic starts eating.

He gets himself some cereal, not feeling up to another omelet, and sits down at the table with him.

"You are untrained. Do not know how to crack eggs or flip omelet or do many other things. Not yet. You will learn. Takes time. But you will learn." Misha says again. "I will teach you. My mother taught me and I will teach you."

“I am useless!” the medic’s voice cracks and he pushes his plate away after only a couple bites. He feels sick and hangs his head in his hands. “I don’t do anything. I do chores, but you could do zose without my help anyway. I only do zem because if I didn’t I woud do nothing at all.” He snifflies a little and presses the heels of his hands into his eyes until he sees shapes, his glasses making a hike up his forehead. “You take care of me and I don’t even know vhy, I don’t even – ” his voice cracks again and his shoulders start to shake. “I don’t even remember you.”

Misha pushes his bowl away and gets up to stand behind the doctor. Gently he wraps his arms around him and holds him tight, hoping the other man didn't see his tears.
"You do not remember now. You will though. Will remember everything soon." Misha whispers. "Will understand someday. I do everything for you because it makes me happy. You make me happy. This is not nothing. Is everything. Without you I have nothing. Would have no reason to be here."

He holds Erik a little tighter and lets his tears fall into the medic's hair. "Do not say you do nothing. You do not know but what you do is most important to me."

The doctor holds on tight to Misha’s arms and his glasses tumble off his forehead and clatter to the table and his tears make the big man’s forearms sticky but he wouldn’t give up the embrace for the world.

“Es tut mir leid,” he mumbles. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

He doesn’t know who Misha is. He knows Misha cares about him. He knows he loves him. He doesn’t know why, but he does. He can put that much together. He doesn’t remember him and he doesn’t even know where they are. He doesn’t have the capacity right now to understand much beyond what is happening directly to him as it’s happening. He can’t reason where they are, or where they’ve been, or why. It’s terrifying, and it makes him want to shut everything out and only focus on Misha’s big, strong, safe arms.

“Vhen vill I remember?” he asks, pressing his eyes into heavy’s forearm.

"Soon. You learn more everyday. Everyday you get closer to remembering. But do not push. Push too hard and will get sick. Will forget again." Misha warns him. He remembers Miss Pauling reading to him, telling him not to put too much pressure on Erik to remember too quickly. If he put too much strain on his mind before it was healed he could end up hurting himself more.

He can't stand that thought of losing everything they've accomplished. They've come so far in such a short time, to lose any of that progress would kill him. Erik is talking and reading again, he walks and laughs and smiles again. He might not remember Misha and he might not love him like he used to but its closer to what they had than he had ever really hoped for.

The doctor doesn’t speak at all for the rest of the day. Not a single word. Misha tries to get him to talk, but eventually he surrenders and only asks him simple yes or no questions that he can answer with a nod or head shake.
He doesn’t speak until the next day. And when he does, it’s only to ask to stay home while Misha goes to the market. The big man is hesitant to leave Erik alone after he’s been sullen and quiet, but it’s hard to get him to do anything these days when he sets his mind against it.

So he makes up his mind to be there and back in a flash. The doctor still has his bird to keep him company if he gets sad, and his short term memory has improved in leaps and bounds since the last time Misha left him home alone.

He gets only the essentials. All the other things he can get another time, when Erik will agree to come with him. Altogether, with the drive back, he’s gone for maybe forty minutes. Certainly the fastest he’s ever been to the market and back.

Pulling back into the driveway, he sees that the front door is open. Odd, considering it’s kind of a chilly day. He brings the groceries in and calls out to the doctor, but he gets no response. His stomach clenches and he holds his breath. There’s no sound in the house at all, save for Archimedes’ tweeting.

Forgetting the groceries on the counter Misha searches the whole house, his heart bounding away in his chest harder and faster with each empty room he finds. Erik isn’t just ignoring him, he’s nowhere to be found. The house is empty except for himself and Archimedes.

He checks outside next though he knows it will do him no good. Erik isn’t in his chair outside or standing in the sun, staring up at the sky like he sometimes does when he’s deep in thought.

He’s nowhere on the property at all.
Misha runs to the phone and calls the police. Erik hasn't been taken against his will, there's no sign of a struggle. But even if he's just wandered away he has very little sense of direction and almost no self preservation instincts. He could be hit by a car or robbed on the street or he could get lost and freeze to death over night.

He explains the situation to the police who agree to alert their officers and keep an eye out for him. That done Misha jumps back into his truck and heads back to town, keeping a careful eye on the sides of the road to make sure Erik isn't lying hurt in a ditch.

He parks his car in town and goes to Erik's favorite diner with no luck. Next he tries the grocer, the movie theatre, the bookstore, the general store and even the post office. No one has seen him.

It's nearing four PM and he’s so scared he’s about ready to start tearing through peoples homes looking for him. He keeps in contact with the police, and they rove the town, but either he’s not there at all, or he’s been moving around so much that he’s at a constant counterpoint to the officers.

And then it hits him. What if Erik wandered off into the woods? What if he’s out in the middle of the forest, alone and hungry and lost and scared and he doesn’t know where he is or how to get back?

The woods are accessible from almost anywhere in town and the surrounding neighborhoods. Erik could be anywhere by now.

Distraught Misha goes to the only place left he hasn't looked. The park. Erik doesn't really like the park when he has nothing to do. He'll sit and listen to Misha read if they've brought lunch and a book but he prefers to do things while they're in town. When Misha had asked him why one time he'd replied that if he wants to sit outside and do nothing he can do that at home. But at this point Misha is willing to try anything before directing the manhunt into the woods.

When Misha sees him, he almost doesn’t believe his eyes at first. He thinks he’s too lucky, there’s no way that God is this merciful.

He’s sitting on a bench looking very, very pleased with himself. He’s holding half a hot dog in one hand, and his sweater is inside-out. He has a small smudge of ketchup on his chin and he looks very worn out, but happy. Watching the ducks on the pond with a content expression, he doesn’t even
notice the bigger man until he’s ten feet away.

“Misha,” he turns to look at the other man and greets him with a smile. He doesn’t seem to register the heavy’s red face or terrified expression.

Misha approaches him, growing angrier with every step he takes. He gets within arms length and grabs Erik by the shoulders and lifts him right off the bench. He shakes him. Once, hard enough that he drops his hotdog. Then again and again as if he can shake some sense back into him.

"Do you know how scared I was!" he shouts, eyes clouded with tears. "I thought you ran away! Thought you might be hit by car or get into fight or get lost! Thought you might be dead in ditch on side of road! Maybe lost in woods and would never find you! Do you know what I do if I lost you?! Did you think at all about how scared I would be?!"

He's still shouting and shaking when he blinks away the last of his tears and can finally see Erik's face. The doctor is terrified, looking up at him in such horror that Misha releases him quickly enough to make him lose his balance.

"Sorry. I am sorry. I thought you were gone." he says more softly, taking a step back. "I was so scared."

The doctor takes a few hurried steps backwards and stares at Misha like he’s seeing him for the first time. Was Misha always quite that big?

Silence hangs between them thickly for a second. Misha takes a half-step forward and reaches out, he wants to apologize, he wants to do anything to get that look off the doctor’s face. But he freezes in place when Erik takes another step backwards in haste, keeping distance between them.

The medic’s mouth hangs open just a crack, too startled to close it. His glasses were knocked slightly askew, but he doesn’t reach up to fix them. He’s like a deer, frozen in place like he thinks Misha won’t see him if he doesn’t move.

"I am so sorry." Misha says miserably, taking a step back again. "Sorry, sory sorry. Did not mean to hurt you. Would never hurt you. I was so scared. You were gone. Just gone, no note, nothing. Did not even close door. I thought I lost you again. I am so sorry goylubka. So sorry."
“I – ” Erik takes another step back. His expression slowly bleeds from fear to sadness, and his body shrinks down from the pose he’d assumed – ready to flee if Misha took another step for him – instead looking like a wounded animal, small and weak. He tugs at the bottom of his sweater and takes another half-step back, his legs shaking. His eyes fill with tears and with one blink, they go rolling down his cheeks. “I wanted to go out alone,” he says, his voice wobbly. “I wanted to prove I could.”

Misha wants to go to him and take him into his arms and hold him until all the pain leaves his voice. If anyone else had made Erik cry like this he would beat them senseless. But all he can do is curse himself again and again for scaring his beloved doctor.

"I am sorry." he says again, holding out a hand. "You can go out. Of course you can go out. Whenever you want. But would be nice if you let me know. Leave note maybe. And you must close door. We could have been robbed with door open like that. You understand? I just want to know when you are leaving so I do not get scared when you are not home. Would you like it if you woke up from nap and I was not there?"

The medic shakes his head and he looks at that hand. He felt safe with that hand, those arms, but now a little red flag starts to wave. Misha never scared him before. It makes the doctor realize just how much smaller he is than the other man. He doesn’t make a move towards the hand.

“I wanted to surprise you,” he says, his arms slowly rising, and he hugs himself. His bony fingers disappear into the material of his sweater sleeves. “I wanted to surprise you with what I did.”

Misha’s hand slowly lowers back to his side and he feels new tears in his eyes. "I will be surprised when you tell me. Surprise is good if you had come home to tell me. But I came home and you were not there and I thought you were gone. I did not know what happened."

“I went to zhe school,” Erik says warily. “Zhe college.”

Misha’s brows furrow. He knows what school the doctor means, there’s a university in the edges of the next city over, but it’s almost a half hour drive away. “The college? How did you get there?”

“I took zhe bus,” Erik fishes into his pocket and takes out the stub of a bus ticket, stamped twice; round trip. “I walked down zhe road away from home and zhen a nice woman saw me and let me ride in her car to zhe bus stop. I brought money to buy a ticket and lunch, and I went to zhe school and asked them to put me in a class. And zhen I came back. All by myself.”
"You enrolled in a class?" Misha asks. He knows he should be more concerned about Erik riding in a car with a stranger but that's something they can talk about later when he isn't so frightened.

Besides, Erik taking initiative and enrolling in a class is great news! Too great to worry about anything else.

"This is great news! Is best surprise!" Misha says with a grin. "I am so proud! What sort of class is it?"

"I don’t know, it doesn’t matter, I wanted anything," the doctor says, looking a touch more relaxed when he gets a good reaction out of the bigger man. “I can’t pronounce it. It’s about… thought. Behavior. It starts with an s, I think."

"Psychology?" Misha ventures curiously. It seems like a pretty tough class for Erik to take, especially without being able to prove he's taken any classes before or even gone to high school.

"Ja, zhat’s it," the doctor nods, his expression still tense. “Sigh-coal-o-gee. I even got a book.” He nods over to the bench, and Misha turns to see a bag leaning up against the side with a single book in it. “I zhought maybe I could read to you for vonce. Are you… mad at me?"

"No no. Not mad. Was not mad before. Was worried about you and scared. Made me act scary because I was scared." Misha assures him. "Will love to have you read. Reading gives me headache."

"If you’re not mad at me, can I come home?" the German asks hesitantly, and Misha knows that it’s because right now, he honestly expects to be told no.

Misha hangs his head with a heavy sigh. "Of course you can come home. You can go home and I stay away if want. I am terrible person for making you think can not come home. Should be asking you for permission."

Erik takes a few hesitant steps, and once he’s sure Misha isn’t tricking him into coming closer so he can grab him again, he slowly, hesitantly reaches out and takes one of Misha’s great big hands in both of his.

“You can come home,” he says softly, running his thumb over the back of the giant hand. Maybe it’s
not quite as big as he thought it was. “I vant you to come home.”

"Da?" Misha asks. He turns over his hand and holds it open, giving Erik the chance to take it if he wants. “Thank you. I will make special dinner to celebrate your new class.”

The doctor doesn’t hesitate to take the other man’s hand. His fear is seeping out of him, replaced by warmth. He doesn’t completely understand the heavy’s fear, but he knows he’s not angry, and that is important. He feels something pull in his heart, something that makes him feel hot in the face and very happy, even after Misha has let go of his hand when he sees a couple of people walking towards them in the distance.
Chapter 16

Chapter by HarveyDangerfield

I would like to remind readers that this story takes place in the 1950's and warn you about upcoming homophobic speech and slurs. If that kind of thing really freaks you out, you may want to skip it or stop reading.

Birthdays never appealed to Erik. When he was a healthy man with an intact mind, he never saw the point. Celebrating the fact you haven’t died yet? That should be done every single day, not once a year. Making a big deal about the day you were born – the credit should be given to the mother, not the child. The child didn’t do a damn thing.

He never liked birthdays, and he never let Misha celebrate his. He would give his lover a gift on his birthday, because even if his own was just a bitter reminder of his mortality, he wasn’t so sour that he refused to participate in other people’s birthdays.

Plus, the fact that his birthday was on December 18th, so close to Christmas and the big celebrations that the mercenaries had in the base, didn’t help anything. He knew even if he suddenly did care about his birthday, nobody else would. Misha might. Misha would. Misha was probably all he needed. It didn’t matter.

He never liked birthdays.

But that was before. This year, when Misha asks him if he wants anything for his birthday, he’s thrilled.

“Books!” he’d said, before revising it to “A blank book! I vant to write my own!” but that changed to a record player and then he finally settled once and for all on wanting a telescope.

Christmas was a well-decorated holiday, he found. When they went into town, he was always so excited and pointed out everything. The frost patterns on the big windows, the lights on the trees, the wreaths on shop doors and the snowflakes on his sleeves. He wasn’t exactly a Grinch before, he would attend the holiday parties on the base for an hour or so before sneaking away with cake and egg nog. But this level of wonder, Misha never saw on him unless he was making some kind of gruesome discovery in the lab. To see him grinning through a window at a moving train set, fogging
up the glass with his breath, to see him throw a snow ball, or compliment the baker through the door for how good her holiday spice cake smells, it’s like he’s watching the years melt off of the doctor, and his youth returns.

He seems better than ever. If you didn’t know what he was like before, you’d think he’d never had an ill day in his life. His strength returned twofold, and he often had more energy most days than Misha did.

The only thing that didn’t return was his memory.

He made countless new memories, his short-term memory almost fully repaired. He could remember dozens of random facts from the psychology text book that he pored over from cover to cover. He could list the states in alphabetical order and memorize recipes after only trying them once or twice. But his memory never returned.

Perhaps it was for the best, Misha thought. Maybe he never needed to remember. It pained him that it meant the memory of the relationship they once had wouldn’t come back, but if it would keep all the horrific memories of what he used to do to people, in how many pieces they would leave his operating theatre, maybe it would be for the best.

He’s not sure what those memories would do to this Erik. This Erik who joins carolers on the street and who puts frosting on his own nose when they make gingerbread cookies. If it wasn’t so grisly, Misha might almost think that the accident did him some good. Nobody as happy as the doctor is could possibly be suffering.

Their cabin is warm and cozy with a fire always going in the fireplace and blankets all over, always within reach in case one of them got cold. On at least two occasions Erik had wrapped the Heavy in a few blankets insisting he needed to take better care of himself. But in spite of this they spend more and more days in town. Erik has a long list of recipes he wants to try that constantly sends them out looking for ingredients and with the Christmas displays up they spend hours just window shopping, even if they’ve already seen the shops a dozen times.

They wind up earning themselves a bit of a reputation around town. Misha doesn't think there's anyone left who doesn't know them, even if most don't know their names. Everyone knows the Russian giant who helped get Little Danny out of a tree when he'd climbed too high and couldn't get down. And everyone knows his shadow the ever gleeful if not somewhat crazy German who likes to randomly compliment people. Usually it's something Misha likes. It's nice when people wave or say hello on the street or offer Erik an extra little bit of hot apple cider because he liked it so much. It's like they're really part of the community, like he and his family had been in his home in Russia before they were forced to relocate to the Gulag.
Sometimes though he was afraid they were getting too involved. He could see people whispering behind their hands and looking at them. Some openly sneered and steered their families away from Erik and Misha, even crossing the street to get away from them. He tried hard to keep some space between himself and the German when they went out but there was nothing he could do if Erik grabbed his arm to drag him somewhere or show him something. All he can do is hope that none of them become suspicious enough to call the police.

Not that he and Erik are doing anything to be arrested for. They certainly don't have a sexual relationship; not even a romantic one anymore. As far as anyone can tell they are only friends. And they can't prove how guilty of loving Erik Misha is without proof.

Christmas came and went gracefully. Miss Pauling came down for a couple days to visit, seeing as she didn’t have anyone to celebrate with. Erik didn’t remember her at all, but it took him only four hours to declare that he liked her, a lot. She’d been there for less than two days when they got a call from Dell, inviting them up to spend Christmas in his great big house. When he heard Miss Pauling was with them, he only insisted harder that they come.

The doctor didn’t remember being there at all the first time they were there, and everything was new and exciting. The pyro remembered him, but they didn’t talk much, anyway.

Dell invited a fair few of his old team mates over that Christmas, too. It was strange for Misha, to be celebrating with so many people who used to be his enemies, one of which he actually recognized as the head of the heavy class for the BLUs, an enormous mammoth of a man with dark, dark skin and a voice so deep it almost made Misha seem alto. He was friendly, though, and had no hard feelings.

The top BLU medic was there, too. He’d heard what happened to Erik, but never sent his condolences because they were, technically, enemies; despite the fact that the German always had the proclivity to share medical discoveries with him for the sake of progress. Misha understood and thanked him quietly, when Erik was busy listening to Dell play his guitar near the fireplace with the others.

While he was there, Misha met and befriended the head of the BLU Soldier class, whom was referred to lovingly as “solly” by the rest of his team. He was a little wacky, and very loud, and very passionate, but he was easy to get along with and the way he told stories was so funny that Misha shook the rafters with his laughter. They got along so well that they traded phone numbers in order to keep in contact.

Everyone traded presents on Christmas morning. Not everyone had a gift for everyone, but most of them didn’t even expect gifts anyway. Miss Pauling had apparently commissioned matching sweaters
for Erik and Misha, red with little zig-zagged stripes of white, green and gold across the chest and shoulders. Erik was over the moon, and put it on immediately and thanked her, even though he still didn’t remember her. He thought she was just a wonderful old friend of Misha’s.

When he traded presents with Misha (he’d gone into town alone one day to shop for him, and even remembered to leave a note on the door) he cried. Misha did buy him a telescope.

Erik spends weeks staring through that telescope, hours a night. He developed a semi-permanent ring around his eye because he pressed it so tightly to the edge in his enthusiasm. Misha bought him a book about star charts and he shared every constellation he found in the sky. Sometimes Misha would wake up in the middle of the night to find Erik in his pajamas, sitting on the little stool he uses as a seat behind the telescope, and he has to usher him back into bed or else threaten that he’ll make him sleep in Misha’s bed in order to keep him there.

His capacity to retain information was astounding. The heavy thinks it probably has to do with his previous bank of memories being wiped clean. There’s so much space to fill. And the fact that he’s filling it with stars and recipes and psychology is so much more positive than his previous well of experience with ghastly medical trivia and experiments bordering on Frankenstein.

The doctor excels in his class. His teacher is actually younger than him, but he doesn’t seem to mind. They become good friends, and even have him and his wife over for dinner a few times.

Sometimes, the urge Misha gets to sweep Erik into his arms and shower him with kisses gets to be overwhelming. He hasn’t kissed him once since he first brought him into their new home, and that was more than seven months ago. Sometimes, the heavy thinks it would be worth it to do it, and deal with the consequences after. He never does, but he gets so lost in his daydreams that he’ll spill whatever he was cooking or drop his book or trip, and Erik will help him and say, “let me take care of you.”

New Years was spent alone at home, the two of them warm under their blankets on the couch, each reading his own book until midnight when they shared a glass of champagne and a hug that Misha wished could have been a kiss. They had been invited to Dell's place again but Misha had thought it would be best to leave them alone and let Dell and Angel have their new year's kiss and following celebrations without worrying over guests.

The spring semester at Erik's college starts and he enrolls in an astronomy class along with another psych course. He loves to learn and comes home bursting with knowledge that he shares with Misha while he's cooking, and over dinner. The house gets lonely during the hours when Erik is at school but Misha reminds himself it’s for the best and he shouldn’t try to keep the doctor all to himself. He deserves, even needs human contact. If Misha is a little jealous of the friends Erik makes he never says anything. It must show though because Erik regularly tells him he's his favorite.
All of the friends Erik makes are younger than him, usually by more than fifteen years. Of all his friends, the eldest is a woman named Holly, and she’s twenty-six. They occasionally come over for dinner, too, but mostly stick with Erik when they’re there, discussing the classes and Misha notices the way she sometimes puts her hand on the doctor’s thigh. He doesn’t like it, but he can’t tell her to stop. Only Erik can, and he doesn’t.

Misha can't stay in the room sometimes when she starts touching Erik. He finds an excuse to leave. Kitchen needs to be cleaned, laundry to be done, there's a book he needs to return to the library. Anything to get away from her hands on Erik where his hands belong. He used to be able to touch him like that. And knowing that now she can and he can't makes him want to go get Sascha and introduce the two of them.

But he can't. He can't do anything but watch as weeks go by and winter melts into spring without Erik telling her to stop, that he doesn't like that, that her hands don't belong that far up his body. All he can do is make sure the two are never left alone. There's always more of their friends at the house and in the room with them when it becomes too much and Misha has to escape. That at least gives him some comfort. They can't do anything with other people in the house. Holly seems like a good girl. She wouldn't risk her reputation like that.

That doesn’t stop her from giving Erik a kiss on the cheek before she leaves one day. Misha doesn’t talk much that night, too afraid he'll say what he's really thinking instead of what he's supposed to say.

She’s taking advantage of him, Misha knows. He’s too kind to know that she’s trying to seduce him – he probably doesn’t even know what seducing is, at this point. He’s forgotten almost everything, and if he relearned that, it certainly wasn’t from Misha.

Erik is too kind to her. He goes where she goes, he listens to her, and he never hesitates to tell her when her hair looks nice or her blouse matches her eyes. She must think she’s something special. She probably has daddy issues.

Misha has never thought such spiteful things towards someone, and it will shame him, right up until the next time he sees her tug Erik’s arm around her waist.

When she asks him to come to the park with him right after class, he says he needs to call Misha first to let him know that he’ll be late. But she distracts him, “You’re a grown man! You don’t need to call in he’s not even your family. Come on, I heard the ducks’ eggs all hatched.” You don’t need to say ‘ducklings’ twice to get Erik to follow, apparently, because he trails after her like a puppy.
She tries to hold his hand, but he says that it’s still chilly even though spring is coming, and he’d prefer to keep his hands in his pockets, thank you.

“Don’t you like me?” she asks sorrowfully at the edge of the pond.

“Of course I like you,” Erik says quickly. “Why do you think I don’t like you?”

"I know you like me," she says, exasperated. "You like everyone. But I want you to really like me. You know, like the other boys like the other girls. Unless... you don't like girls like that?"

Her tone is suddenly low and suspicious, her eyes narrowed as if she's inspecting him under a microscope and there's a tinge of disgust in her voice when she speaks again.

"You're not one of those perverts who doesn't like girls right? That commie hasn't corrupted you has he?" she demands. "Because if he has we can report him. We can get you help before it's too late."

“What?” Erik stands up straighter. He still doesn’t know what a commie is, but he knows that whenever people say that about Misha, they aren’t saying it to be nice. “What do you mean pervert?”

"You know. Those homosexuals," she says the word in a whisper, like it’s the sort of word polite people don’t ever dare say. "Men who like men like they’re supposed to like women. Sometimes even... get in bed with them, you know what I mean? There's a whole chapter about it in our psychology textbook. It's a mental disorder, you should look it up and consider moving out of that house."

Erik frowns. Misha sometimes tells him that he’ll make him sleep in his bed if he doesn’t stop getting up in the middle of the night. He remembers when he asked if he was Misha’s wife, and the way the big Russian got all flustered. His cheeks turn pink.

“I don’t know what that is, but I don’t think Misha is one. He’s the best man I know. He’s taken care of me for a really long time now and I don’t ever get in his bed.” He shakes his head and stares down at the ducklings thoughtfully. “He’s my best friend.”

She watches him for a moment then nods. "I believe you. I'm just worried about you. You should
A wife would be better."

“I don’t want one,” Erik says honestly. He doesn’t know how to be anything other than honest. She doesn’t seem happy with this answer, but she doesn’t push it, for now.

When he comes home, Misha is in a tizzy. He apologizes for not calling to say he would be a little late and immediately locks himself in the study (which they converted from the spare bedroom months ago) saying he has lots of homework to do.

He locks the door, and opens his textbook. Holly had been so hesitant to talk about it, he’s sure Misha would get angry if he found out he was reading about something so secret and bad.

“Homosexuality is the abhorrent practice by men and women, entering sexual relationships with members of the same sex,” he reads in a low whisper. He’s always retained information better by reading it out loud.

He reads the whole chapter in one sitting. About how homosexuals are depressed and angry people trying to overthrow the government. It makes his stomach churn, but at least he knows for sure Misha isn’t one of them. He’s definitely not sad all the time, and he doesn’t have any mental problems. He’s the healthiest, nicest, sweetest man the doctor knows.

He jumps when Misha knocks on the door. “Doktor? Are you still in here?”

“I am,” the medic says quickly, slamming the book shut and unlocking the door, opening it a crack to peer up at the bigger man. He looks so… normal. He looks back over at the book and then back up at Misha. He has to know. “If I ask you a question… do you promise not to get mad at me?”

"Of course,” Misha answers. "As long as you ask while you wash up for dinner. Dirty hands are not good for eating with. Will make you sick. Wash and ask, go. Dinner is getting cold."

The doctor washes his hands in the sink downstairs, chewing on his lips while he tries to think of how to phrase his question. “Holly thinks – ” he starts, before deciding that’s much too blunt, and he reprises. “I was talking with Holly, and – ” he clears his throat and turns off the sink with a sigh. “I read something. In my book.” He picks up the towel and turns to face Misha at the table, but he doesn’t look him in the eye. “Vell, she told me to read it. It’s about something called a… homosexual.” He sucks his lips into his mouth, his cheeks turning pink.
Misha pauses for a second in the middle of setting down Erik's plate. He should have known letting Erik take psychology would lead to this. America still considers homosexuality to be a mental disorder. So does most of the world though he knows of some places that are moving away from those sorts of ideas.

"Da. I have heard of them," Misha says cautiously, setting the plate down and moving to his own chair with his own plate. "Is not usually talk for dinner table but if it is for your education is okay. Come sit."

The doctor sits. “You’re not… vone of zhem, are you? Zhe book says zhey’re very bad, and Holly thinks you are. I told her you’re not.”

"Book is not always right," Misha says casually, even if the conversation is making him sick. "I am not but I knew men and women who are. In Europe many places do not think it is mental disorder. Denmark. And Germany where you are from did not think it was bad until evil men told people everyone who was not like them was bad."

“Evil men?” the doctor inquires.

Misha quickly changes the subject. The last thing they need to talk about over dinner is the Third Reich. Especially since the doctor was forced to join their cause. Erik only ever told him the story once, how he agreed to join them for only two reasons. For the sake of medical discovery and progress, and because if he didn’t he was sure they would find out somehow that he was homosexual, and they would lock him away with the rest.

Holly seemed skeptical when Erik told him that he spoke with Misha about it and Misha said he wasn’t a homosexual. She asks him out that weekend, officially, but he politely declines, saying he’d prefer her as a friend to a wife. She stops speaking to him after that. It makes Erik very sad. Misha redoubles his efforts to keep him happy, and as it turns out, all he needs are more hugs.
The Medic doesn't cope well with loss. He doesn't understand what he's done wrong. He can't talk to her because she turns her back on him. He can't ask Misha because he makes it clear he doesn't like talking about her. He can't figure out what went wrong. His palms itch and he finds peace with his eyes closed. His trusting nature shrivels. He stops talking to strangers on the street, his other friends stop coming over. It breaks Misha’s heart to watch him shrink away from people, and it hurts worse every time he gets a little flutter of hope because in those moments, he seems like the old Erik again.

He’s conflicted between wanting Erik to stay happy and blissful and carefree, and wanting the old Erik back. He shouldn’t wish that level of bitterness and anger on anyone, least of all the person he loves most. But when he sees the man push his glasses up and sneer at any young woman who looks even remotely like Holly, a queasy little flutter settles in Misha’s gut because the fire in his eyes looks just the way it used to.

Misha starts trying to find ways to get Erik’s mind off what happened with Holly and get him moving forward again. He wants him to smile again, like he used to, and come home bursting with news about his day and his new friends like he did before. He wants him to laugh as loudly and freely in public again, not just when they're closed away in their cabin alone. It's nice that Erik still laughs and smiles with him but Misha feels selfish every time he starts to feel a little proud knowing its all for him.

Since the weather is still nice and Erik has been going into town more and more often by himself Misha decides it’s a good idea to get him his own transportation. The long walk to and from the bus stop in town is tiring for him and dangerous alone at night and the buses are unpredictable anyway. Misha would come get him himself but Erik refuses to be dropped off and picked up like a child. So Misha goes out one day and comes home with a brand new bicycle to surprise the doctor.

At first, the medic didn’t seem to know how to ride it. He wobbled nervously and Misha was always there to catch him to keep him from tumbling onto the gravel drive. He takes him out to the road where the ground is smoother to teach him. He does fall in the grass once, curses at the bike and kicks it. Misha picks him up again and encourages him to try again. It turns out they aren’t lying when they say you never forget how to ride a bike because as soon as he’s going, he’s riding like a champion.

The exercise does a world of good for his mood. He comes home almost as happy as before, but Misha will still find him occasionally muttering to himself in German. He locks himself in that study more and more often. Sometimes he’ll be in there for hours and he snaps at Misha when he comes knocking to ask him if he’s hungry for dinner or to encourage him to stretch his legs. Misha takes it in stride because it’s the same kind of thing he used to hear from the doctor, but then he’s conflicted.
all over again, unable to decide if he likes the old Erik or the new Erik more. And that just makes him feel sick.

When the big final exam starts to approach, the doctor locks himself away more and more. He’ll even actually lock the door, barring Misha’s entry, and shout at him to go away in irate German when he asks if the medic would take a break just for a little while. He knows the doctor has to study because the test is so important, but he’s still afraid of what Miss Pauling told him back when they were living with her – if he strains his mind too much he could, essentially, pull a muscle.

He can usually lure Erik out for a quick snack at least once a day and maybe talk him into some sleep but it's always a fight. Erik yells and complains about how Misha doesn't understand the stress he's dealing with and how he would never make it through finals with that sort of attitude. He doesn't have time to sleep doesn't Misha understand that?

Misha continues to insist, through the yelling and the insults until the fight goes out of Erik and he can lead him away from his desk into bed for a few hours. But the closer they get to Erik's final exams the louder and crueler the abuse becomes and the more worried Misha grows over how much Erik is straining himself.

Once upon a time Misha could take the abuse. The Heavy was used to it, because Erik was always like that. He would yell and get angry and even sometimes shake or hit the man. But Misha took it in stride one, because it didn’t hurt and two, because he knew the medic would always be remorseful after and kiss away the half-formed bruises.

But now, it stings a lot more. The doctor has been so nice, so pleasant, so far from himself; the yelling feels like brands on Misha’s skin. He doesn’t know how to react, if he should defend himself like he once did because that defense is often what opened the medic’s eyes to how to he was treating him, or if he should just take it because Erik might not even know what he’s doing.

It's two days before finals and Misha isn't sure Erik has gone to bed once. He hopes he's been sleeping at his desk but there's no way to tell. His bed is made when Misha goes to sleep and when he gets up in the morning and the door to the study is still locked. At this point, even if he was sure Erik's head was normal he'd be worried about him making himself sick working so hard.

Misha lets it go until dinner time. He avoids the study all day and keeps the noise level down so Erik has peace and quiet to do his work. But by dinner Misha can't let it go on any longer. He finds the keys to all the rooms in the house and lets himself into the study.

"You must stop," he says, "Need to eat and sleep. Will make yourself sick if you keep doing this."
Erik looks personally offended by Misha entering the room without permission. His hair is a mess and it’s clear he hasn’t shaved in a few days. His eyes are ringed red and there are books and papers covering almost every surface in the room.

“Nein, get out,” he mutters, stooping over a book again and flipping the page. “I have to pass zhis test. My head feels like a sieve, I keep forgetting things, I have to keep studying until zhe test.”

"You will forget more if you keep awake. You need to rest your mind," Misha argues. He comes closer so he’s leaning over Erik. He places one hand on the man's shoulder. "Come eat. Take a break. Sleep. Will feel better and will remember more. Please."

“I have too much vork to do. I’ll eat in here.” It was so like him. Erik would always eat in his office. Or at least, he would say he’d eat in his office, but his food would be cold by the time Misha got there. It made the heavy’s eyes crinkle as he looks over the medic. It seems so normal, like they were one step away from Misha picking the man up and snuggling him into the bed.

"You have to. Or you will be sick on day of test and will not remember anything," Misha says, softly. He lets go of the doctor's shoulder to grasp his chair and pull it back from the desk a little, just to put some space between the man and his books. Getting him to let go of his work is the hardest. Once he's done that the rest will be easy.

“Leave me alone.” Erik stands up out of his chair and starts to stack a few papers. “I’ll sleep later. I can’t fail zhis test. I can’t fail zhis test! Zhese classes, it's all I have!”

It feels like a blow. “What about me?”

“What about you?” Erik barks, slapping the edges of the papers together.

With a sigh Misha reaches to take Erik’s books and put them away for the night. Sometimes the doctor could act exactly like a stubborn child. If that's what he wants then that is how he will be treated. "Is for your own good." Misha scolds, putting the books on top of the bookshelf, out of Erik's reach. "I will give them back after dinner. Now you eat.”

“Stop!” the doctor reaches for the books, only to receive a firm hand to his chest, gently pushing him back.
Something in Erik breaks. Misha has never physically restrained him. Instinct lashes out and he reacts. His hand stings with the blow he lands to Misha’s face before he even realizes what he’s done. He sucks in a breath and stumbles a step back. Blood springs up from small cuts left behind by the doctor’s nails across Misha’s cheekbone. He covers his mouth with his hand and stares down at the traces of crimson on his nails. He feels dizzy, weightless, nauseous.

Erik has hit Misha before. It isn’t the first time he’s even drawn blood. Misha should have expected this at some point. He should have seen it coming. It shouldn’t hurt. Misha raises a hand to his cheek and takes it away, his fingers wet with blood. Not much, no more than a cat scratch would draw but its there, red and wet on his finger tips.

He doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t yell or laugh at the sad excuse for an attack. He doesn’t scold or try to use Erik’s attack as proof that he is too tired and is losing himself. He just silently hands back the doctor’s books before leaving the study.

It shouldn’t hurt so much, he tells himself as he goes to the bathroom to clean the cuts. Normally Erik would do this for him. Once upon a time when Erik would hit him he’d take his hand and sit him down while he got out the first aid kit and took care of the small wounds. But this Erik isn’t like that. He’s gotten back all of the old Erik’s anger it seems but none of the compassion that came with it. He should know that. He should have known if he pushed too hard he would lose Erik. It shouldn’t make him cry.

The doctor sinks down into his chair slowly, the books on his lap. He looks down at them, and suddenly they don’t matter. He shoves them off his lap, pages tearing and dog earing, but it doesn’t really matter. He scrubs the blood off his nails on his thigh, but it doesn’t wear off. It dries and flakes, but his nails are still stained.

When Misha comes downstairs, bandaid on his cheek, the doctor is hunched over the sink, scrubbing at his hands. Misha draws nearer and he sees that his hands are bright red, the water is letting off steam, and tears are dripping down Erik’s nose and cheeks in rivers.

"You are hurting yourself," Misha says softly. He's still a few feet behind the doctor, not wanting to get too close and have him lash out again. If he had found him like this before he would have turned off the water and wrapped him in his arms to assure him it was all alright. But now he's not sure he can. "Water is too hot. You will burn yourself. Please stop."

“It’s still on me, it’s still on me!” Erik shouts, his hands shaking under the water so badly that it flings droplets out of the sink. His glasses tumble off his nose into the sink, but he doesn’t stop to pick them up.
Misha does move forward now. He picks Erik's glasses up from where they've fallen and turns off the tap, stopping the water. "There is nothing on you. Your hands are clean. Red and hurt now but clean," he says, placing the doctor's glasses back on his nose. "Nothing left to wash away."

Erik looks up at him, face as wet as his hands. His eyes are wide, searching, and they zero in on the bandaid on Misha’s cheek.

“I – I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” he reaches halfway up to touch the bandage but pulls his hand away before he makes it. “I’m sorry, Misha, I’m so sorry.”

Misha smiles a little and pulls Erik into a tight hug. "Is okay. Does not even hurt. I am strong man. Been hurt more than this before. There is no harm done. Do not cry Erik, please."

Erik sobs. He’s so overtired, bordering on hysterical, his hands and head ache, his eyes burn, and his nose hurts where his glasses press into the bridge against Misha’s chest. He wraps his arms around the giant man’s waist as far as they will go and holds on tight, rubbing his face into his chest.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he repeats over and over, clutching his shirt in his fists. “You’re important, you’re so important, more important zhan zhe books and zhe class, you’re most important to me.”

Misha is crying again, but they’re happy tears this time. Maybe Erik does still love him, at least a little bit. He rests his head on Erik’s hair and holds him a little tighter. "Thank you. You are important to me too. Most important. I did not want to make you angry. Just want you to eat and sleep. Do not want to lose you again."

“Let’s make dinner,” Erik mumbles into Misha’s shoulder. “And zhen I could use a nap.”

Misha is bursting with happiness. If getting a little cut is what it’ll take to get Erik to take care of himself, then he can cut him every time. He goes to bed without a fuss, early too, and Misha promises that he can go back to studying as soon as he wakes up.

In the middle of the night, Erik wakes up with a whimper. Fading memories of hitting Misha rattle around in his head. It wasn’t memories of today, either, he remembers hitting Misha more than once. Or maybe, they aren’t memories, and it was just a bad dream. His hands shake and he reaches for his glasses beside his bed, but in the dark he just knocks them onto the carpet with trembling fingers.
“Misha,” he whispers out to the giant lump on the queen sized bed on the other side of the room. He doesn’t stir. “Misha,” he whispers again, slightly louder, and still gets no response. He’s asleep.

Erik creeps out of his bed, heart hammering. He blinks away the foggy visions of striking Misha, drawing blood, in his dream he had a saw and red rubber gloves that frighten him to think about. He stands right beside the giant’s bed and whispers again, “Misha.”

Misha wakes with a grumble that sounds like a small roll of thunder. He turns over in bed to find Erik standing beside him looking lost and confused and scared. Instantly he's fully awake, sitting up in bed ready to take on whatever threat has frightened his doctor.

"What is wrong Erik? Are you hurt? Did you hear something downstairs?” he asks.

“Bad dream,” the doctor whispers, shifting his weight from foot to foot. “I’m scared. Can I get in zhe bed vith you?”

"Da. Of course," Misha says, shifting over as much as he can to make room for Erik next to him. He pulls back the blanket so Erik can slide in beside him. "Do you want to tell me about dream?"

Erik shakes his head and cuddles up beside the giant man. “No. I just vant to sleep. I’m sorry for vaking you.” He pillows his head on Misha’s bicep and curls up against him with no shame, and closes his eyes.

Misha wants to wrap his other arm around Erik's waist and pull him close. He wants to hold him tight in his arms and feel him breathing against his chest. He wants to hold him like he used to.

He doesn't. He can't. This isn't like that. Erik is seeking his help as a friend. A good, close friend who he trusts with his life. He's only letting Misha see this sensitive side of him because he's so scared. Misha won't betray that trust to relive old memories. He won't take advantage like that.

But he can't fall asleep again. Not when he's this close to everything he's ever wanted. He won't let himself, afraid his body will betray him in his sleep and he'll wake up with Erik struggling to escape his embrace.
Chapter 18

Chapter by HarveyDangerfield

Chapter Notes

Warning to readers about mentions of WWII and Nazis in this chapter. Trigger warning Nazis? Is that a thing? In case it isn't painfully obvious, I'm not Jewish and have no experience with they oppression they faced. If anyone is, and would like to give input on how to improve the interaction between Erik and the boys, I am all ears.

Erik passes his test with flying colors. He gets the second highest score in the class of 97, and his professor invites him back for a student award ceremony. When he calls Misha with the news, the heavy is overjoyed and says he’ll take him out to dinner at a restaurant to celebrate.

Erik says that’s okay, because the award ceremony is combined with a student dinner. It’s already three PM and the ceremony is at seven, so he’ll just stay at the school and waste time in the library until it’s time to attend. Misha promises to be there.

It’s a good thing the doctor loves to read, because he spends the next four hours doing nothing but. He pores over book after book, soaking up information tirelessly. He finds a book of old religious and cultural symbols, and one looks very familiar. He traces his finger over the right angles, but for the life of him, he can’t figure out where he’s seen it before.

He reads a few paragraphs on the symbol that seem eerily familiar, like he had a dream about it a long time ago. He tries to ask the librarian for a book with more information on the subject, but she tells him that she’s sorry but she can’t help him.

Before he can argue, he sees the clock on her desk. If he stays any longer, he’ll be late for the ceremony. He makes a mental note to visit again later and politely demand the book of information before quickly leaving the library.

The auditorium is full of students and their families. Erik is ushered back stage to a table where the students are picking at dozens of plates of snacks and desserts while the ceremony sets up, and he peers through the curtains. There’s Misha, crushed uncomfortably into one of the tiny red velvet chairs in the front row. He waves at the partially hidden medic before he’s pulled back behind the curtain by one of the professors.
Erik wins an award for being the most committed student in both classes he attended. He almost cries on stage, and can’t stop smiling at Misha.

“If not dinner, then breakfast to celebrate. Tomorrow,” Misha says while they’re driving home. Erik is sitting in the passenger’s seat, tracing his fingers over the ribbons he won in the fading light of the sunset.

He looks up with a smile. “I have my astronomy class tomorrow morning. Lunch? At Weatherby’s. I can meet you there on my bicycle.”

"Da. Lunch is good. And we will go shopping for special present for passing classes." Misha agrees, still beaming proudly at the doctor. "Get you something special. Not just more books. Something you do not have dozens of already."

Erik scrunches up his nose. “I don’t want anything else,” he thinks for a moment. “Can I pick out a cook book?”

"You want to cook more?” Misha asks, happily surprised. "Da we can get you cookbook. Can get you ingredients and spices and all sorts of things for you to cook."

They hang Erik’s ribbons over the fireplace after pressing them into glass to keep them safe. The medic helps make dinner for Misha, but when it comes time for bed, he seems reluctant. He sits on the edge of his bed, legs dangling over and kicking lightly at the sheets with a frown as Misha settles into bed. He stares at his feet and sighs.

“Come now. Time for bed, Erik.”

The doctor looks up to protest, and he sees the blankets on Misha’s bed lifted over his arm to make room for him. Erik’s face brightens instantly and he strides across the room in three steps to fill the empty spot in Misha’s bed.

He doesn’t have any nightmares that night.

The next morning, Erik can barely focus. He didn’t need to study nearly as hard for his Astronomy final, because the information came so naturally to him, much more than the tricky psychology. He keeps staring out the window day dreaming about lunch with Misha. They’re going to his favorite
diner. It’s owned by a young pretty woman named Mary with hair the color of new pennies who always smells like pancakes and calls him “sweetie.” They go there once or twice a month, and it’s always the doctor’s first choice when they eat out.

He usually buys the hush puppies and catfish, but this time he might trade out the hush puppies for fried green tomatoes. He might even order a coke instead of coffee, he’s not sure. He answers a question every few minutes between his daydreamings. When his thoughts aren’t occupied by the lunch he’s anticipating, it drifts back to that strange symbol with its sharp angles and broad swirl. He doodles it in the margins of his paper with a frown, but always erases it. He can’t seem to draw it right. He wants to go visit the library again and hopefully there will be a different lady to help him find a book about it, but he doesn’t have time today.

The bike ride makes him even hungrier. He hitches up his bicycle in front of the diner and heads inside, greeting Mary with a smile. He doesn’t look at the other patrons as she gives him a table, and promises to keep an eye out for Misha. She gives him a cup of coffee while he waits.

His attention span is limited, and bendy straws are only so entertaining. The napkins don’t hold origami shapes very well, either. There’s a little pen and scratch pad on the table, and he decides to practice drawing that symbol again. After all, if he can perfect it, he can ask for a book on it using it as an example.

Soon the entire sheet is covered with lopsided attempts at recreating the symbol. He can’t seem to get it just right. The angles are always off or one leg is too long or too close to another. It’s never quite right. But he’s getting closer.

Erik is so engrossed in his work that he doesn’t notice the group of young men who come into the diner, talking loudly and laughing amongst themselves. He’s seen the group around before and knows they have a reputation for getting into trouble but they’ve never bothered him before. He’s too easy a target for the rough group who prefer starting fights in bars and chasing girls to picking on old men.

That doesn’t stop them from pausing as they pass his table though, one of the group noticing the drawings and bringing it to the attention of the others. One by one they each catch a glimpse of Erik's doodles and fall silent.

It's the leader who speaks first. He grabs the notepad from off the table, wrenching it away from Erik to hold over his head. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" he demands loudly. "Do you think this is funny? Is this some kind of a joke?"
Startled, the medic drops the pen to the floor. He looks up at the group, his chest feels tight and his throat clenches. These boys are notorious for sliding in and out of the overnight cells of the jail in town.

“Was meinen sie?” he asks, drawing himself to a stand. Sitting down while they crowd his table is making him very anxious, and he’d much rather face them head on. He’s taller than all of them, and it helps his confidence to look down at them. Heat starts to pool in his stomach, like a small fire. His fingers twitch and his hands curl into fists on instinct. His chest muscles tighten in anticipation, and his head feels a little fuzzy. It reminds him of how he felt right before he hit Misha, and he wonders if he’s going to hit these boys too. “Is zhere a problem gentlemen?”

"You hear that!" One of the boys towards the back shouts, jabbing a point towards the medic. "He’s speaking German! Who let a Nazi live in this town?"

"He's not staying." the leader growls. He grabs the front of Erik's shirt and pulls him forward so he's right in his face. "My brother died killing Nazi scum like you. And you think it's funny to sit here in his home town and draw this crap. You're not gonna get away with that kind of shit here. Not while we're around."

Erik has to clench his fists tighter because instinct is telling him to hit him more than once.

“What’s happening here?” Mary suddenly barks, coming up to the group and nudging her way right in the middle to keep punches from being thrown, holding out a hand between the medic’s chest and the hooligan.

“I think they’re cursing at me in a foreign language,” Erik says once she gets the boy to let go of his shirt. “Vhat’s a Nazi?”

“Look what he was drawing,” another young man shoves the pad at Mary. She keeps her hand up against the leader’s chest to keep him from lunging at the medic while she looks over the pad. She frowns and looks up at Erik. “Dr. Fleischer, why were you drawing these?”

"Because he's Nazi scum and he needs to learn a lesson." the young man beside the leader says. He shoves Erik out from behind Mary so the others can grab him.

Together the group manhandles the doctor away from Mary and out the door, throwing him down the small set of steps so he lands hard on the ground. The follow him and start to form a ring around
their victim, effectively cutting him off from the assistance of any passersby.

“I’m calling the police!” Mary shouts from the doorway, clutching her towel.

“The police won’t care about an SS retard!” one of the boys jeers back.

Erik tries to stay calm. Some part of him is whispering *get them hurt them make them suffer* and it’s starting to scare him. If he had a weapon he’s not sure he’d be able to curb his instinct. He slowly rises to his feet, tucking his glasses into his shirt pocket to hopefully keep them safe.

“Stop,” he says firmly, his fists creaking and his knuckles popping. “I don’t vant to fight you.”

The men sneer and start to close ranks around him, getting within easy punching and kicking distance.

"You don't have a choice," one of them laughs.

"You can fight or sit there and take it like the scum you are but we aren't going anywhere," another adds.

They're about to start raining down blows when Misha's truck pulls into the parking lot. The car has barely stopped when Misha is jumping out of the driver's seat and rushing forward. He can see Erik over the boys heads and he easily pushes through them to get to the doctor.

"What is happening? Why are you hurting him?" he demands, standing in front of Erik like a huge guard dog.

“Zhey are angry with me,” the medic steps beside Misha and puts a hand on his forearm. He survey the group, already feeling safer, and the fire in him that was close to burning him up starts to die.

“*You’re protecting* that Nazi bastard?" the leader snarls, brave in the face of the colossal man. “People like him are the reason my brother is dead!”
"He is not Nazi!" Misha shouts. It infuriates him that they would even think that-- because of what? Because of his accent? A long time ago Erik had told him about his stay in a camp. They'd been together in bed listening to the rain and Erik whisperingly told him about how his parents had been killed by Nazis, about his extended stay in a camp, about what being a kapo meant and what he had to witness. It makes Misha sick, that they would think the only people hurt by Nazis were Americans-- Americans who didn't even get involved until they were worried they might be next.

"You are all cowards. Coward baby men who think six against one is fair odds. I will give you proper fight." Misha snarls. "You want fight him you fight me first."

“I don’t vant anvone to fight!” Erik protests.

His words fall on deaf ears. The leader pulls out a knife and lunges. Misha doesn’t have time to think, his body acts before his mind can even catch up. The pain of a small knife is nothing compared to what he’s been through, anyway. Barely a bee sting.

The blade digs into his side, damaging muscle and tissue and fat, but Misha is much too big for the little blade to do any serious damage. He raises his hand to deal a return blow, knocking the knife from his body like a pine needle, when the scream of a siren sounds down the road.

The boys try to scatter. Misha grabs the leader by the back of his overalls to keep him from taking off, lifts him right off his boots. Blood soaks through his shirt and down his pant leg, but he'll attend to that after the ruffians are dealt with.

The officers step out of their car, and Misha is surprised to see them pull their guns.

“Sir,” they say, loudly and firmly. “Put down the knife.”

Misha turns and sees Erik holding the bloody knife. He keeps one hand holding tight to the gang's leader and extends the other towards the doctor.

"Erik you must give me knife. Give me knife or drop it so we can go home. You want to go home, da? We will go home soon but you must drop knife," he says softly.

Erik’s mouth is closed but his eyes are wide. He looks at the officers and then back at Misha, and then at the officers and at the gang leader. His fingers flex on the knife handle and he looks straight at
Guns. Something in him pulls towards the guns. He remembers… something. They’re familiar. Out of nowhere, he wants to hold one. He wants to feel the weight of the officer’s pistol on his palm, tease the trigger with his finger. He wants to –

“Erik,” Misha’s voice is louder this time, firmer.

“Sir, we won’t ask you a second time! Drop the knife!” the cop shouts.

Erik’s eyes narrow at them, and Misha’s blood runs cold.

"Doktor stop." Misha begs. He touches Erik's arm, hoping to snap him back to reality before he gets them both killed. "Can not do this. You have to stop now. I need your help."

The medic drops the knife like it burns him. He stares down at it and backs away so quickly he almost trips and falls. He looks up at Misha with fear in his eyes, and the officers lower their guns, and rush forward to arrest the boys.

They stare at the medic warily and mutter to one another, trying to decide whether or not to arrest him. They know about the old German who lives in the woods, everyone in town has at least heard of him. He’s never caused any problems before, unless they count his giant Russian attack dog scaring the pants off a few people. They know the ex-doctor is a few clowns short of a circus, and he didn’t hurt anyone, he didn’t even threaten anyone. The Russian, on the other hand, is freely bleeding from the young men’s attack.

“Misha,” Erik whispers to the bigger man, trying to close his hand over the wound. “I don’t know what happened, I’m sorry, you’re hurt, I’m sorry.”

"You were scared. Those bad boys scared you. Do not need to be sorry," Misha says. He smiles and lightly bats Erik's hands away. "Can not drive home with you holding me. Will get home and take care of cut. Then will make you lunch."

He answers the rest of the policeman’s questions and promises to bring Erik to the police station tomorrow to get a full statement. They offer to call an ambulance but Misha refuses, already leading Erik over to the truck.
Erik doesn’t speak the whole ride home. He stares down at his hands when he’s not staring at Misha, but he doesn’t say a word. He asks to help clean the Russian’s wound when they return home, but Misha says it’ll only take him a moment and locks himself in the bathroom.

The shirt is ruined, which is unfortunate, because Erik told him a long time ago that he likes the way he looks wearing green. He discards it and wets a washcloth to wipe away the blood. The bleeding has already almost completely stopped, and as deep and angry as the pain might be, it’s nowhere near life-threatening.

On him. On Erik, it would have killed.

He cleans away the blood, now grateful for the pain and the sting of the soap. If he hadn’t been there or if he’d been a few minutes later Erik would have been the one that punk stabbed. He would have gotten there to find Erik bleeding out on the sidewalk while those men beat him. If he hadn’t taken the knife Erik would be dead.

He puts down the washcloth and starts looking for the rolls of bandage he knows they keep in the bathroom. He should probably stitch the wound but his fingers are too big to hold the tiny needle. A bandage will have to do.

On him. It’s only because it was him and not Erik that they’re both home right now. If Erik had gotten himself stabbed that’d be the end.

It’s a terrifying prospect and he can’t believe he hadn’t realized before just how dangerous Erik’s lack of memory is. It could have killed him today. How could he have ever not wanted the old Erik back when not having his memories puts him in this kind of danger? He feels sick just thinking about it.

Coming back down the stairs after all the adrenaline has worn off hurts a lot more than going up. He clutches his side and starts to make a mental check list of all the things he’ll need to get from town tomorrow to keep from getting infected.

Alcohol, clean bandages, a needle, antibiotics, gauze –

His listing jerks to a halt when he finds the medic at the dining room table with his forehead on the wood grain, glasses tossed lazily beside him and his fingers folded over the back of his head. He’s breathing hard, as though he’s in pain, and Misha panics thinking he could have been hurt before he
got there to stop the majority of the fighting. Here he is concerned about his own minor stab wound when the doctor could be in pain, or even internally bleeding!

"What is wrong?" Misha asks, hurrying over to Erik as fast as the pain in his side will allow. He lowers himself to the floor to kneel beside Erik's chair so he can inspect him. "Did they hurt you? Are you bleeding? You did not say anything in car. I could have helped sooner."

The doctor lifts his head slowly and looks down at Misha. His hands are shaking and his face is wet.

“I almost… I wanted to hurt zhem. I wanted to hurt zhem, I came so close- I was going to- I got angry und scared and I was going to- oh, Gott.”

Misha smiles a little sadly and gently wipes away the tears on Erik's cheeks.

"That is normal. People want to hurt bad people. They tried to hurt you so you want to hurt them. Is circle of life. Survival of fittest, da? You do not want hurt good people like Mary or me?" Misha asks

“I didn’t just vant to hurt zem, I wanted to- Gott, I wanted to- I don’t think I can say it. I can see it, like… almost, memories. Like I have- I think I have dreams about… murdering people.” He speaks the last words in a very low whisper, clutching feebly at his trousers. “Zhey are zhe worst dreams I have, gruesome, awful dreams. I am vearing zheze awful rubber gloves und I carry a saw und- ” he sucks his lips into his mouth and covers his face with his hands. “I wanted to do very bad things to those men.”

Misha doesn't know what to tell him. He wants to tell him to put it out of his mind, that it doesn't mean anything and he would never do anything like that. But he could never lie to Erik like that. Even when he desperately wants to. He can omit the truth but he can't flat out lie to the man he loves.

But he knows he can't tell him the truth either. Knowing all the horrific things he's done will break the sweet fragile man he is now. It's best to let him remember in his own time.

"You are not bad man," Misha finally says. "Bad dreams and bad wants but you are not bad man. I have done bad things and I am not bad person. You are good. Better than good you are best. Do not cry Erik, please."

The medic has horrible dreams that night and creeps into Misha’s bed again. He doesn't seem to
have nightmares when he’s wrapped up in a big bear hug. Their trip to the police station is brief, Erik’s statement is taken and they don’t make him stay. He seems exhausted afterwards, falling asleep in the truck home and deciding to take a nap that lasts through dinner. He has worse nightmares that night, so bad that he falls out of bed yelling. And the next night they are worse and then the next, until Misha starts inviting him into his bed preemptively at bed time to try and keep the terrors away.

The nightmares exhaust him and leave him weary, cranky and very, very jumpy during the day. He’s so drained that he breaks a glass and cuts his hand fairly badly, bad enough that they have to wrap him in a towel and take him into town to the doctor.

Upon seeing him, however, he’s turned away. He’d been working with Erik for months now, almost a full year, but Misha should have expected him to turn the medic away after what happened. The doctor was, lamentably, Jewish. It was useless, trying to explain to him that Erik wasn't a Nazi. It was enough that he was German for assumptions to be made.

Misha has no choice but to try and teach the medic how to sew stitches, but he passes out from the pain, and the heavy can do nothing but bandage his hand as tightly as possible, binding his fingers together to try and put pressure on the deep cut.

When Erik drifts to sleep on the couch and almost suffocates Archimedes in his cage while he was petting him, Misha knows he has to do something. Erik can’t keep functioning with these awful nightmares plaguing him. They aren’t going to stop, there’s no end in sight, and his subconscious has no shortage of grisly and dreadful memories to flicker into his mind while he’s asleep. The only hope is to harden Erik’s gentle demeanor so that the dreams don’t frighten him.

The only way Misha can think to do this is to push Erik more towards his old self. The dreams are memories that Erik can't hold on to. If they can get the memories to stick then maybe the dreams won’t be so scary.

So Misha starts trying to trigger memories. He gets books on medicine out of the library and leaves them around hoping the doctor will find them interesting and something from his old career will come back. He plays his favorite music on their record player, slow waltzy carnival tunes and dramatic orchestral pieces with snare drums and cellos. He finds another of his old uniform shirts from the war and wears it around the house. But nothing seems to work. Erik bypasses the books, asks for the music to be turned down and only compliments how the heavy looks in the tight teeshirt. Nothing seems to have the reaction that Misha is looking for and the nightmares only get worse.

After a week Misha decides more drastic measures need to be taken. Nothing is working, he thinks, because none of it is Erik’s. They need Erik’s things for him to remember. They need his books and his music and his violin and his old clothes. But all of that was locked away when the war ended.
But Misha knows a few people who might be able to help him get some of it back.
His first call goes to Dell. They’ve only been friends for a little over a year, but he decides to at least give him the opportunity. The Texan is overjoyed at the thought of donning his old fightin’ boots and taking his newer sentries out for a spin. They were a little useless blowing up milk bottles and hay bales anyway.

He promises to give a few calls to any of his old team that might be willing to bash some skulls, and says he’ll keep the heavy informed. A day later, he calls Misha with the news that he got the scout from his team to join in on the action. And, that apparently he wasn’t the only person with wandering loyalties, because he’d been traveling the country with the RED sniper.

Misha remembers him. They weren’t terribly close but when they sat together in the mess hall, they always ended up laughing so loudly other tables would shout at them to keep it down. He wonders if the sniper still has his old hat. He and the scout were in Philadelphia, but they were already making the trip down.

The BLU soldier also hears the plan and signs on the growing roster for the recon mission to Redmond Mann’s den of iniquity. The BLU heavy apologizes for not being able to join in, but when Misha hears it is because he is expecting a child and preparing for a move to Paris, he completely understands.

He tries to contact other members of his own team but finds that he wasn’t close enough to many of them and had no way to contact most. The demoman apparently had fallen into such a drunken stupor that his aim would have done more harm than good, and the spy was much too busy with his new wife to offer his services to a doctor he never got along with in the first place. He has no way to contact the scout or the soldier, and had even less of an idea where the RED engineer is, but he highly doubts that two engineers would have gotten along, anyway. They probably would have feuded over whose technology was superior.

It’s not a huge list of people, but it’s better than nothing.

Erik is very interested when people start showing up. Misha greets Dell and Angel affectionately, giving them both hugs. The engineer awkwardly returns it but Angel, apparently, loves hugs, and takes that as a sign that he can hug him whenever he wants. Originally, the engineer and pyro weren’t even going to come, seeing as the group had to pass through Texas to get to New Mexico anyway. But when Angel heard the news that everyone was gathering at Misha’s, he wanted to make the trip out, and he didn’t have to flash his big puppy eyes more than once before he had Dell caving like a house of cards.
The soldier shows up next, coming from DC alone in an armored vehicle that more resembled a tank than a truck, but it would do the group a lot of good for what they were doing. Erik greets the soldier fondly, remembering him from Christmas, and asks what the big truck is for, but everyone is so swept up in plans that he’s completely ignored.

A little put off, the medic goes and locks himself in his study, hoping Misha will notice his absence and come to find him. But he’s so involved in maps and strategies that Erik doesn’t understand, that he doesn’t even know he’s not there. When Misha is this busy, usually Erik will take himself into town, but he doesn’t feel safe going out alone right now, so he decides to re-read his favorite chapter in his psychology text book instead.

The scout and the sniper show up the next day, around noon. Erik is beginning to wonder if they’re having a party when Misha greets the sniper with a handshake and regards the scout with a laugh. He’s still not paying much attention to the doctor, and he starts to feel jealousy well up in his throat and turn his chest cold. It feels like he’s eaten rocks and they’re sitting heavy and cold in his stomach. Even meals are hectic with the group poring over maps, and bed time happens so swiftly; Misha tires himself out during the day and he falls asleep so quickly that the medic doesn’t have a chance to speak to him.

Sniper and Scout, whose names Erik learns are Jack and Jim respectively, sleep in the spare bedroom downstairs. Jane the soldier sleeps in his big truck, while Dell and Angel camp in the living room. The cabin feels very crowded, and Erik spends most of his time during the day hidden away to avoid contact with so many people. Angel will occasionally seek him out when he starts to get overwhelmed by the company, but the language barrier keeps them from communicating too much.

On the third night, Misha doesn’t come to bed at their usual time at ten o’clock, so Erik sits up and waits. He climbs into his bed and waits for him to come. He waits past eleven and then twelve, but he still hears him talking downstairs with the other men. With a heavy sigh, he rolls out of bed and puts on Misha’s robe. It swallows him up almost completely, and he comes down the stairs. He approaches the group slowly, standing around the kitchen table which has been piling higher with papers over the last few days.

“We leave tomorrow morning,” he hears Misha say.

“I’ve got plenty of guns,” Jane grins proudly. “I’m a collector!”

“We’ve got enough firepower to rattle the roof, that’s for damn sure,” Dell says, reaching over to wrap an arm around Angel’s shoulder, who has occupied himself by flicking the sniper’s lighter open and closed.
“So now that we’ve dotted all our t’s and shit, can we go to bed?” the scout yawns and stretches his arms over his head. “We ain’t gonna do jack shit tomorrow morning if we can’t even roll outta bed, ya know?”

“Are you going somewhere?” Erik’s panicked voice comes from the doorway, and all the men turn to look at him. He’s clutching the robe closed around his body, glasses off, face red, and he’s looking straight at Misha. “Vhat is going on here? You haven’t told me anything!”

"You are right." Misha says reassuringly. He comes around the table to stand in front of the doctor, offering him an apologetic smile. "I am sorry. Should have told you more but I did not want you to worry." He takes the sides of the robe and pulls it more securely around Erik and ties it shut, effectively swaddling the man like one might a distressed child. "I invite friends because we have important job to do. To help you with nightmares. We are going to get things that belong to you but were taken away. I cannot tell you more now. It is too dangerous. I am sorry I have been so busy. Am trying to help you. Should have told you more."

The doctor crosses his arms and scowls at everyone. “I don’t like zhis. I don’t vant you going anywhere. It’s like you’ve been missing. You’ve been here, but you haven’t been here. I haven’t spent any time vith you in days.” His arms drop and he looks down at his feet, curling his toes on the hardwood floor. He leans in a little closer and stands up on his toes, putting his hand on Misha’s shoulders to steady himself, and whispers, “Between you and me, I don’t really like all of zhese other people in zhe house. I’m jealous.”

Misha grins. He leans his head down to whisper in Erik's ear. "I do not like it either. Will be happy when they leave. But is important that we go for now. When I come back, will make up to you for being gone. I promise. We will have whole house to ourselves and will spend all day together. Every day until you are sick of me."

Erik grins and knocks his cheek against Misha’s chin. “Alright, buttering me up,” he looks down and pushes gently at the man’s chest, dropping back down onto his heels. “I don’t know which things you are going to get. Are zhey in storage? Vhy do you need guns?”

"We are going to get things that were taken by very bad men," Misha explains, taking a step back from the doctor. "Will be very dangerous. This is why we have guns."

Erik’s small smile fades. “Vhat if you get hurt? Vhat if I never see you again? I can’t live alone, I don’t know how. I don’t vant you to go. Make zhem go. You stay.”
Misha leans forward and kisses the top of Erik's head. "Must go. They need me. But I promise, if I am in danger I will use them as shields. Will come home to you. I promise."

Erik grabs hold of the heavy’s face in both hands, keeping him from pulling too far back from the kiss. Their faces are inches apart, the doctor’s eyes search Misha’s face desperately, wanting to believe he’ll be safe.

“Ahem,” the scout suddenly coughs from the kitchen table. Erik releases the heavy’s face, turning pink rapidly. “Jesus, at least buy the dude a drink first,” scout scoffs. “Do you really gotta fag up the joint? We’re sittin’ right here.”

"We are only friends," Misha says sadly, turning back to the others. "Very good friends. But now is not time for this. Now we sleep like you said. Have big day tomorrow and I am tired."

He nods to the rest of the group and comes to stand beside Erik. "Others will clean up. We will go to bed now? Is past bed time. For you and me."

Erik nods and looks behind him twice to make sure that Misha is following. He spends all of thirty seconds on his own bed before climbing into the heavy’s. It feels appropriate to keep up the pretense of considering his own bed before sleeping in Misha’s. They turn on their sides to face each other, Erik’s head resting on the bigger man’s arm.

“Vhen vill you be back?” he asks in a whisper, lifting his face to look the heavy in the eye. They’re so close that he almost has to cross his eyes to see him.

"Will be back in a week." Misha answers just as quietly. He lifts a hand to gently stroke Erik's hair. "I do not like to leave you for so long. You will be lonely. I will take you to Miss Pauling’s house on the way. You can stay with her until I pick you up. You will like that da?"

The medic seems to relax instantly. “Ja. I vas afraid you vere going to leave me alone,” he scoots a little closer, folding his hands together, the only barrier keeping their bodies from pressing together. “Can Archimedes come? I need to take care of him.”

"Da. Of course," Misha says. He wants to wrap his arms around Erik and hold him against his chest. He wants to hold him close enough to be able to remember what it's like over the next week while they’re apart. He's hugged Erik plenty since he brought him home but he hasn't held Erik, really held him, in so long that if he goes away and doesn't even have the casual embraces anymore he's scared
he'll forget what it's like altogether.

"Will think of you," he promises, in place of the embrace he wants. "Will think of you every day while I am gone. I promise I will not forget you or leave you."

Erik presses his forehead against Misha’s shoulder. “But what if something happens to you?” he whispers. “What if I never see you again? I can’t live without you.”

"Will see me again. I promise." Misha assures him. He gives in to his desire and drapes an arm over Erik so he can hold him tight. "Nothing they can do will stop me. Even if hurt me I will come back to you. Will never leave you."

Erik’s cheeks are burning, but he doesn’t cry. “If it is so dangerous it doesn’t matter how much you want to come home. Zhey can stop you. I can’t live without you, Misha.”

“I know, I – ”

“I can’t live without you, Misha,” he lifts his head and looks him in the eye.

"I know." Misha says solemnly. "I know. I cannot live without you. I thought I lost you once. It almost killed me. Will not do the same to you. Never. I will never leave you. Will never let you hurt like that. Will not let you suffer." His arm tightens around Erik a little more, like he's scared he'll be torn away. "But I must go. I have to. For you. To help you. That is my job. My job is to make you happy. That is why I must go and I come back. We will come home. We will live here and you will have no more nightmares. We will be happy."

Erik feels safe in Misha’s arms. Nothing in the world can touch him when he’s all wrapped up like this. He doesn’t know why they didn’t think of this sooner. The one thing that makes Erik feel better more than anything in the world is a big hug from Misha, so why didn’t he think of sleeping and hugging at the same time?

He lowers his hands so he can snuggle a little closer, and he feels warm. He closes his eyes for a moment, and then opens them again to check if the heavy is falling asleep. He’s still looking down at the medic, and this pleases him. He’s fairly sure that Misha’s blue eyes on him are the reason the sun rises.
“Can ve get rid of my bed?” he asks softly. “I vant to sleep here from now on.”

Misha chuckles, his voice even slower than normal as exhaustion starts to settle in. "Da. When we get home. Will move bed back to guest room and you will stay here. Will share bed every night for as long as you want."

He closes his eyes with a content little sigh and gives Erik one last squeeze, as if sealing his promise with his whole body.

"Will be first thing we do. But now we sleep. We have long day tomorrow."
Chapter 20

Chapter by HarveyDangerfield

The soldier wakes up first, but the scout wakes up crankiest. He loudly complains about their early rise and downs two cups of coffee. The sniper is much more easygoing in the mornings, it seems. Or maybe it’s just because he always looks exhausted, so it’s impossible to tell the difference.

Dell and Angel rouse from the living room floor when everyone starts to chatter in the kitchen. Misha decided to let Erik sleep as long as possible while they loaded up everything they would need into his and Dell’s trucks and Jane’s tank, as well as a bag of things for the medic. A few books, enough clothes to last him the week, his favorite wash cloth and aftershave, and bird seed.

He’d just come back inside to wake Erik when he hears the rapid thump-thump-thump-thump of the doctor’s feet coming down the stairs. He barrels around the corner and catches himself on the counter in the kitchen, looking frantic. He sees Misha and charges him. The force of his hug would have knocked over a lesser man.

“I woke up and you weren’t there, I thought you left without me,” he pants, wrapping his arms around the heavy’s shoulders, standing up on his tip toes.

"Sometimes I think you do not trust me." Misha says, wrapping his arms around Erik in an answering hug. "You do not have much faith if you think I leave without you. Especially after I promise to never leave you."

“Wanted to let you sleep. Got everything packed and made you breakfast while you were sleeping," Misha says. He had managed to make some hardboiled eggs that Erik could easily bring on the road and eat on the way. "Did not mean to scare you. I am sorry Erik."

Erik sniffs. “I wasn’t that scared,” he looks away, his cheeks bright red. “I left my glasses upstairs.” He scurries away before Misha can say anything else. By the time Erik is washed and dressed their miniature army is packed and ready to go. Misha is waiting with Erik’s breakfast and coffee when he comes back downstairs and helps him load Archimedes’ cage into the truck so the bird will be safe and comfortable during the long ride.
Dell leads the way with Misha’s truck right behind, and Jane’s obtrusive tank following close behind. The trip is long and they have to stop more than once when all the sitting makes Erik very stiff, and he needs a break to walk around. By nightfall everyone is sore and stir crazy and cranky and a little sunburned, but the sight of the engineer’s house is enough to shut up at least the Scout.

It almost feels like Christmas again, Erik thinks, when they’re all seated around the living room. They’re tired, despite the overall lack of activity over the day, but content to sit around while Dell stokes a fire and his staff brings the mercs dinner. He has more than enough bedrooms for everyone, but the group is so tired that they all fall asleep in the living room in piles.

It leaves them a little stiff in the morning, but hot coffee and bacon thick as fingers puts everyone right. Erik doesn’t seem happy at the prospect of another whole day of driving, but there’s nothing to do about it. He hitchs Archimedes’ cage into the back of the truck again, sure to scatter enough feed on the floor of the metal to feed him for the whole drive.

“Where did you meet these men?” Erik asks unexpectedly after a couple hours of sleepy silence and leisurely conversation. “You’ve never mentioned how you know them.”

"Worked together. Sort of." Misha answers. It’s the truth, even if it is vague. "Worked with Angel and Jack. Dell worked with others. Worked with them for long time. That is why they help."

“So they are friends,” Erik looks out the window at the rearview mirror at the tank behind them. “Why do your friends have automatic weapons? Or rather, why are you friends with the kind of people who have automatic weapons?”

"Did work for military." Misha shrugs. Not a lie. Not exactly. It’s close enough to the truth that he doesn’t feel guilty saying it. "Some were more eager to hold on to weapons than I was."

Erik raises his eyebrows. “Why doesn’t it surprise me that you were in the military?” he laughs and shakes his head. “I don’t know what I thought you did before this. You obviously weren’t a school teacher or a banker.”

The afternoon in New Mexico was very warm. The medic leans as far away from the sun as he can, trying to avoid being sunburned, and complains about the dryness of the air. Mish promises him that Miss Pauling’s is air conditioned, but Erik laments that that does him very little good right now.

They pull into the little town and the doctor suddenly goes very quiet.
“Have I been here before?” he asks quietly as he looks out the window at the shop fronts and the park as they pass it. “This place looks familiar. I think I have dreamed about it.”

Misha smiles and nods. "You have been here before. Little more than a year ago. We stayed with Miss Pauling when you were sick. Very, very sick. You will not remember because you were asleep most of time we were here."

Erik frowns and starts to scrub at his right eye under his glasses. “I don’t remember being sick,” his frown deepens and he shakes his head. “I don’t – I can’t remember. Why can’t I remember – ach.” He folds over in his seat and tucks his forehead against the glovebox. “I don’t vant to be here, I don’t like it. It feels like I’m sleeping, I need to wake up.”

"You are awake." Misha says, rubbing Erik’s back with one large hand to soothe the scared man. "Awake and safe. You can not remember because you were delirious when you were here. Was like being in dream. Like sleep walking."

“I vant to go home. I don’t like it here,” the doctor repeats. He doesn’t sit up for the rest of the short drive to Miss Pauling’s apartment.

Misha pries him out of the passenger seat and coaxes him into the building. He can’t help but laugh when he sees that the elevator has finally been repaired. He carried Erik up and down those stairs so many times while he was ill, but now that he’s finally recovering they fixed the elevator. He knows it doesn’t have anything to do with them, but it feels like a little insult to injury they didn’t need.

He elects to take the stairs anyway. Elevators have always been a little finicky for him considering his weight. When the medic sees that Misha won’t take the elevator, he decides he won’t either, and tails behind him on the stairs.

“We’re gonna wait out here,” Dell tells them at the door of the apartment building. “Be quick as you can. We don’t wanna be doin’ this thing at sundown.”

“Da. Will be quick,” Misha promises before disappearing around the corner. Miss Pauling is waiting at the door when they get to the top of the stairs.

“They fixed the elevator,” she nods to the metal sliding doors.
“I know. Wanted to take stairs,” Misha says, offering the small woman a hug.

“Hello again Dr. Fleischer. Do you remember me from Christmas?” she faces the other man with a smile.

“Of course I remember,” he scoffs, sounding a little affronted.

“His things are all in this bag,” Misha sets the doctor’s bag down just inside the door of Miss Pauling’s apartment. “I will be back for him in just a few days.”

“Would you like to come inside, doctor?” Miss Pauling steps back with a smile to give the medic room to enter.

He peers into the apartment queasily. He both remembers and can’t remember the long hallway and small living room and partitioned kitchen. It makes his skin crawl as he steps inside the hallway, and he sets his jaw firmly.

“Will be back for you,” Misha promises at the doorway, and puts a hand on Erik’s shoulder.

The medic flinches when the door clicks shut.

“I’ll take you to where you’ll be staying,” Miss Pauling offers a little ways down the hall. Erik picks up his bag in numb fingers and takes heavy steps down the hall. She opens the door to a small study and his stomach ties up in knots when he sees the small day bed inside. He drops his bag. She couldn’t have even hoped to stop him. He turns on his heel and tears out of the apartment, leaving the door open in his wake, and takes the stairs down two and three at a time, almost stumbling, catching himself on the railings as he flies around corners.

“Misha!” he calls, his voice echoes down the stairs, frightened and angry and determined all at once.

The giant stops at the doorway of the lobby, puzzled. When he sees Erik leaping down the stairs, he
rushes forward to catch him in case he falls, but he doesn’t.

“I changed my mind,” Erik says breathlessly, grabbing onto Misha’s wrist with both hands as if he could possibly physically stop him from leaving. “You can’t go, I won’t let you.”

Misha gently pulls his wrist out of Erik’s grip and takes the man by his shoulders, gently rubbing the tense muscles with his large thumbs.

"I must go. Do not want to, but must. I will come back. Will come back for you soon and we will go home and will have no reason to be apart again." Misha assures him, bending a little so he can look Erik in the eye without looking down on him. "When I come back no one and nothing will keep us apart again. Swear on my heart."

He pulls Erik into a tight hug and allows the other man to cling to him for a moment before pulling back.

"Will be back soon. So soon you will not even notice I am gone," the heavy says with a smile.

“I love you.”

He says it without thinking. He grabs onto Misha’s arms like he could hold him in place forever. His face is serious and his grip is strong.

“You – ” Misha starts, words choked.

“Yo, Mushu!” scout shouts from the trucks. “We’re waitin’ on you, colossus!”

“If you don’t come back I vill never forgive you,” Erik lets go of Misha’s arms.

"Will come back." Misha promises again, walking backwards towards his truck. He can't tear his eyes away from him until he has to climb into the driver's seat. He spares Erik, the love of his life, one last look before he starts the engine and pulls away.
His heart is pounding in his chest and in his ears and he can barely breathe until the apartment building is out of sight. Erik loves him. He loves him. He said so himself. Misha never thought he'd heard those words again and now they ring in his ears like church bells. Even if this mission does kill him he will not mind because he will die loved by his doktor.
“Are we sure doktor’s things will be inside?” Misha asks. They’ve parked half a mile away from the old RED base which, by the looks of it, is still very active. It’s been converted from a mercenary base into another factory, according to Dell.

“No,” the sniper speaks up first, looking through his scope at the base. “But if the stuff ain’t in there, we’ll be able to find out where it is.”

“The chances are his things ain’t inside,” Dell clarifies, tipping his hard hat down to shield his eyes from the bright afternoon sun. “Chances are the stuff is wherever Redmond is. But we’ll be able to find out where he is in there.”

“So are we gonna smash the factory workers or what?” scout asks impatiently, unwrapping a square of bubblegum.

“Not unless they attack first,” Dell says, knocking the kid’s hat off his head. “If we can walk in peacefully we’re gonna. Fight to protect yourself, not to kill.”

"Could have used spy." Misha says a little ruefully. "Spy would get in, find information and come back out. Would be much easier. Much less unnecessary fighting." He can't help smiling at the end of his sentence. "But if we must fight, we will fight and win! Let us go!"

“Here,” the soldier suddenly shoves his rocket launcher at Misha.

“Why do you give me this?” Misha questions as he manhandles the launcher, trying to figure out how to hold it.

“Because there’s no way your giant fingers can fit in the finger guards of the other guns!” soldier barks as he doles out weapons from his tank. “Just take it, son. I’ll make due with my shovel.”

“Hey, this shotgun is a lot bigger than the one I used to have,” scout grins, weighing the gun in his hands. “How does it look? Does it make me look tough? Heh, yeah it does.”

The sniper rolls his eyes and gets up off his belly, closing the cap to his scope. “Get in the tank,” he mutters, smacking the back of Scout’s head.

Misha tests the weight of the weapon in his hands. It’s much lighter than what he’s used to but it’s not like the puny guns he's tried to use before he built Sascha and his other guns. It's solid enough in his hand and he's sure he can do plenty of damage with it.

They all pile in the tank and Jane drives them up to the factory gate. There’s a small intercom, and the fuzzy black and white image of a woman who looks very bored flickers on the screen.

“Names?” she asks nasally.

“Uh, we’re here for an appointment with Redmond Mann,” Dell ventures, leaning out over Jane in the driver’s seat. “We’re uh – weapons developers.”

“An appointment with Mr. Mann?” she drawls and slowly scans a clipboard. “In what room?”

“Actually hopin’ you could tell us that when we got inside, little miss,” Dell chuckles. “Plumb
forgot.”

“Mr. Mann doesn’t have appointments here,” she says, snapping the papers on the clipboard. Dell flinches, she’d been testing them and they failed. “Please leave.”

Dell sits back in his seat with a sigh. “Plan B, Solly.”

“Plan B!” Soldier shouts and with a click of a button, a missile launches out of the top of his truck and blows the gates open. “I thought you were supposed to be a genius, Engie!” he laughs as he barrels through the warped metal and onto the factory runway. “Couldn’t even figure us a way in without relying on my guns!”

“I will ‘genius’ your head right through that windshield if you don’t shut up and drive!” Dell counters, keeping a hand on his hardhat so it doesn’t fly off.

"Do not fight each other!” Misha commands. "Space is too small and besides," He nods to the guards now pouring out of the factory, guns raised. "Need energy to fight them."

Jane takes out the first row with the front of his truck, flattening them to the ground, and skids to a halt.

“Remember the plan!” Dell shouts while the soldier starts to disengage the doors at the back. “Buddy system! Don’t lose your buddy!”

“Come on, buddy,” Sniper smirks, wrapping his arm around the Scout’s neck as the doors open, and they jump out guns blazing.

“Go, Solly,” Dell boots the soldier’s backside to urge him out the door. “Don’t lose sight of Heavy. I’m stickin’ with Angel.”

“Roger!” Soldier grabs Misha’s arm on the way out and drags him along with. “You have one chance to stand down, boys, but even if you run I will probably still shoot you!” he shouts to the guards, who have split in half, one group running off to chase the much-too-fast scout.

The guards guns don’t lower. Jane smirks.

“Leave no man alive!” he shouts and raises his shovel over his head.

Misha just grins and raises the rocket launcher. He aims at the largest cluster of guards and pulls the handle. The end of the rocket launcher explodes with sound and Misha braces against the kick back.

In front of them the ground at the guards feet explodes and they go flying, some still whole others losing limbs and chunks of flesh. It’s not as satisfying as turning people into swiss cheese with Sascha but Misha takes a certain pleasure in the blood stained crater left behind.

It’s only been a year since the war ended, but he can’t believe how much he missed this. Soldier flies around like gravity doesn’t affect him, severing heads with the sharpened edge of his shovel and bowling them at the other guards.

When the Pyro climbs out of the back of the tank with his rubber suit and mask back in place, Misha takes pause. “Soldier! Duck!”

Both of them hit the deck as a gout of flame sprays out of the mouth of Pyro’s flame thrower, sending guards scattering on fire, screaming with the last of their breaths. He shouts something, muffled behind his mask, and gives the others a thumb’s up. Somewhere in the distance there’s a
crack, and a guard’s head explodes with the pressure of a long-range rifle shot.

“Come on, guys!” the scout shouts through the grated walkway above their heads. “Too slow! I’m gonna find Redmond first!”

“It ain’t a race!” Dell shouts, but the kid is off running again. “Alright guys, split up,” he turns his attention to the others. “Remember to use the walkie talkies I equipped you with. Station 1 is mine, station 2 is Heavy and Solly, scout’s got 3 and Sniper’s on 4. We got this in the bag, fellas.”

He and the pyro disappear around another corner, leaving Soldier and Misha in the loading bay. More guards are bound to show up at any second.

"Forgot how much fun this is!" Misha shouts, grinning from ear to ear.

More guards come running into the loading bay, firing before they even have eyes on their targets. Misha takes out most of them with another rocket. More come after them and Soldier takes the lead, caving in skulls with his shovel while Misha struggles to get another clear shot. The guards have scattered now and it's hard to find a spot to shoot that will take out more than one or two of them.

The groups spread out, covering as much area as possible. The base has been rearranged a little bit, most of the old merc’s rooms were converted into storage, and the rest had their walls taken out to make room for worker’s quarters. The mess hall was converted into a room of conveyor belts and crating machines, and the courtyard a maze of boxes ready to be shipped all over the world.

Trotting through the base, Misha comes across a very large room that used to hold warheads, and finds a belt pumping out exact copies of Sascha, and his blood boils. Redmond had produced dozens of his weapon design to give to the other Heavies because his gun had been better than anything they’d had so far. But it looks like he’s mass producing them to sell to hundreds of people.

“Hey, isn’t that your gun? Sarah?” Soldier asks, pressed up against the glass window overlooking the room.

"Sascha!" Misha yells. He lifts the rocket launcher and fires through the glass and at the machine pumping out the copies of his beloved gun. He isn’t going to let just anyone own his Sascha, even if it was just a copy.

Soldier ducks away from flying metal chunks laughing. “Hell yes! Shoot the thing!” he encourages. “Hey look, I think that’s the planning room!”

There’s a small room off the side of the gun shop with blueprints tacked on the wall, visible through the open door. Misha recognizes them as his original blueprints, complete with his signature at the lower corner. And sitting on the table is the original Sascha. She’s clearly been taken apart and put back together, and some of the parts have been replaced, but when he picks her up, he feels complete again.

“Take back tiny rocket launcher,” he practically throws the gun at soldier, who leaps to catch it. “I have my girl.”

A spring returns to his step that hasn’t been there in over a year as he and the soldier jog through the base, mowing down anyone who gets in their path. Occasionally they’ll see a head pop open in a red spray and wave into the distance where they know the sniper is covering them.

They’ll hear the scout whoop every now and then, shouting “BONK!” or “Oh my god, where’d your head go?! Fuckin’ flyin’ brotha!”
Somewhere in the distance a sentry beeps loudly when it catches the movement of approaching guards, and they hear the screams of men mutilated by high-speed bullets, faster even than Sascha can fire.

It feels like the war never ended. They’re right back in the BLU base (or, he supposes, RED in the case of some of his BLU counterparts) and searching for the enemy intelligence. It’s as though nothing has changed. None of the lies and pain and slow recovery and shouting matches and fear of the last year has even happened. Misha feels awake and alive in a way he hasn’t in so many months, it’s as though he hasn’t taken a single breath in a year, and his lungs have just opened him and allowed him to breathe.

They move deeper and deeper into the base, checking rooms as they go. They find more machines producing more weapons and take them all out, usually through explosives. Normally Misha wouldn’t take much pleasure in destroying machines but knowing that he’s destroying the property of the man who hurt Erik makes it infinitely satisfying.

They still haven’t found Erik’s things but each new door brings them closer to finding the right one or at least some information on where to go from here.

“I think I’ve got somethin’ mates,” Sniper’s voice crackles over the walkie talkie. “Top floor, near the back. Looks like some kind of an office. It’s empty, but – wait – ”

There’s a loud scuffling, like static, shouting, and then two gunshots, and the line goes dead.

"He needs help.” Misha says over the radio. "Scout can get there fastest. Go help sniper, rest of us go to room on top floor."

“On it!” Scout shouts, sounding a little panicked.

Soldier slows his gait in order to keep in step with Misha, anxiously jogging forward and back so he won’t lose sight of his buddy. They round a corner at the top floor and find Scout administering some clumsy first aid to the sniper’s shoulder, who sits propped against the wall of the hallway. Dell is up against the door, Pyro anxiously shifting his weight from foot to foot and waving his flamethrower at the wood.

“It ain’t Redmond inside,” Sniper mutters. “Looks like someone high up, though. Bloke in a suit. Might know where Mann is. He don’t got any way out, he’s cornered. Clipped him with a bullet, probably freaked him the hell out. He’s armed, obviously,” he gestures to his bleeding shoulder with his chin. “He’s gonna shoot on sight. Can’t kill him or we might never find out where Redmond is.”

"I will go," Misha says. He adjusts Sascha so she's more comfortably situated on his side. He knows he promised Erik he'd come home but he brought them all here, it's his job to take the risk. "If I die find doktor's things. Bring them to him and tell him," he stops, afraid to say it. He looks at Dell who he knows will understand. "You know what to tell him."

“I got the bastard if he tries to run,” Dell nods solemnly, and deploys a collapsible sentry, patting it as it beeps away and swivels to look for enemies.

“Pop him one for me, would ya?” Scout snarls at the door. “I’d do it myself but I gotta make sure this dumbass don’t bleed out.”

"Da.” Misha says with a grin. "Will do that."

He takes a deep breath and lets out a feral shout as he rushes through the door. It breaks open easily under his weight and he propels several feet into the room. There is a man in a suit behind a desk
holding a gun that he fires as soon as he sees Misha. The bullet is of a larger caliber but the man has poor aim and rather than his Misha anywhere fatal the bullet embeds itself in his leg.

Misha doesn't let it slow him down. He keeps moving forward and swats the gun from the man's hand with ease. Unarmed now the well dressed man tries to flee only to be stopped by the Russian's very large fist.

The heavy feels a knife dig into his side and it flares up the pain of the previous stab wound he’s been trying to ignore for the past few days. He twists the man’s shirt in his hand, but he drags the knife up and slices him open in a way he’s never felt, searing pain soul-deep.

Misha throws him and he crashes into a big glass-covered painting, showering glass shards down on him. He scrambles for the gun desperately, but Misha knocks him away with one bloody hand, the other trying to keep some pressure on his wound.

The man tries to scramble away again and Misha does the only thing he can think to do to keep the man still while he's bleeding out and can't use both hands. He knocks the guy out. It only takes one hard blow to the head to send the man crashing to the floor.

"Is safe!" he calls to his comrades. "Come get puny man."

They strap him to his own office chair and Dell sets his mini sentry on the desk facing the man directly. Soldier stitches up Misha’s wound with surprisingly deft fingers, sewing in an x-pattern to keep his skin pinched together.

“"You are good at this,” he comments, barely even squinting at the pain of the needle.

“I've had to stitch myself up more times than I can count. Sometimes with nothing but a splinter of wood and the sinew of my dead enemies!” soldier proclaims as he ties off a strong knot.

The man mumbles and the group turn their attention to him, pyro standing guard at the door.

“You can kill me,” the man slurs, barely lifting his head, spitting blood onto the desk. The sentry beeps and follows the spit before turning to face him again. “I don’t know what you want, but I’m not going to give it to you.”

"He thinks he is stronger than us," Misha laughs from where he's sitting on the ground. "Thinks we can not make baby man talk. He thinks he is tough but I bet tiny scout alone can beat answers out of him."

“Nothing you can do to me,” the man pants. “Is worse than what Redmond would do to me.”

"Redmond will not touch you.” Misha assures him. He pushes himself up and approaches the man, using his size to intimidate. The pain in his side flairs to life and he almost stumbles but manages to keep upright for now. "Will not hurt you if you tell. And you will tell. Question is will you wait until you are delirious from pain to spill secrets or will be smart and tell now?"

“Look mate, all we want is to know where Redmond dumped Fleischer’s things.” Sniper lopes up to the desk, scowling and putting pressure on the hole in his shoulder. “Come on, he probably won’t even notice it’s missing.”

“I’ve already taken the oath to die before giving in,” the man keeps his head bowed in defeat.

“I don’t know if we’re getting anything out of this fella,” Dell puts his hands on his hips. “He’s already made up his mind to give up. No self preservation in this one. Probably thinks he’ll be hailed
as some kinda company hero if Mann hears he died before givin’ up any information.”

Soldier suddenly cracks his knuckles and stands up. “Gimme ten minutes,” he says, looking over his shoulder. “Might want to pick up the door on your way out.”

Misha shrugs as much as he can and let's Dell help him across the room and into the hall. The engineer and the sniper put the door back in place, leaving the soldier alone inside with their captive.

It's not long before the noise starts. Shouts that are suddenly cut off, loud gasps, groans of pain, the sound of something hitting what could only be flesh, all come pouring out, muffled by the closed door but still loud enough for the whole assembled company to hear.

When the screaming starts, it doesn’t stop. The man barely takes a breath between his yowls, and the soldier doesn’t say a word. At least, none that they can hear. He doesn’t ever get very quiet, but then again, most of the base is probably ringing with this poor bastard’s shrieks.

The doors crack open and the soldier appears, splattered with blood from his knees to his face. “He says he’ll talk. Knew I could get it out of him!”

"Da. Good job." Misha says, feeling a little queasy. He's used to torture. He's seen some horrible things in his life but always from people he expected to do horrible things. Since he met soldier at Christmas he'd formed the opinion that the man, though a fanatic, was relatively harmless except for his guns. He had not thought of him as the sort who could do something like this.

But results are results. He isn't complaining.

They crowd back into the room. The man is leaning forward as far as his bonds will let him, dripping blood onto the desk from his face, rolled forward several inches farther from where he’d started. He mumbles something, his words garbled by the blood in his mouth.

“Tell me where doktor’s things are,” Misha takes a knee beside the slumped man.

“Burn,” the man whispers. He kicks his knee up, and slams into a button under his desk.

Misha lands hard on his back, his ears ringing and his body stinging from an explosion that rocked the office. The man in the chair was obliterated in the blast, the majority of the room stained red and black. His head spins and his side feels wet, but consciousness slips between his fingers and he closes his eyes.
Sorry for the delay friends, I’ve been pretty sick and kind of fried. This chapter is short, but I figured you’ve been waiting long enough and you deserve SOMETHING for being so patient. I’ll post another chapter quick as I can.

“Misha…”

Heavy’s eyes open. Erik is there, kneeling over him. His body is awash with warmth and a weightless sensation. He can’t feel the floor under him. He can’t see the ceiling over him.

“Misha.”

“Doktor?”

Hands close over the giant’s cheeks, clad in red rubber gloves. Icy blue eyes soften, thin lips curl into a smile.

“I am here, Misha.”

“Doktor, I can’t -”

“Shh, mein Liebster. I am here for you.”

He leans down. Heavy closes his eyes, and feels the doctor’s lips press against his own. The feeling is gone from his fingers and toes, he can’t lift his limbs. He can’t feel any of his body.

“Breathe.”
Doktor?

“I SAID BREATHE, DAMN YOU!”

Misha’s eyes snap open when a pain like fire explodes over his cheek. He sucks in a breath, chokes, rolls over onto his side and spits up blood, and he regrets it instantly. His whole body is alight with pain. He curls into himself and moans.

“Sakes alive, Heavy, we almost lost you,” the engineer is sitting on his haunches beside the fallen giant, tugging his rubber glove over the robotic hand he’d just used to slap consciousness back into Heavy. He has several gashes across his face, dangerously close to his eye, and his shoulder is bleeding freely.

Dizzily Misha surveys the rest of the room. The scout is unconscious, cradled in the sniper’s arms, but they both look relatively unharmed; they had been the farthest from the explosion. The pyro is busy cutting away part of his suit that had melted slightly in the incredibly high heat of the blast, which will add to the constellation of burn scars already decorating his skin. The soldier is nursing a broken arm, clumsily bandaging it to the wooden handle of his shovel in order to keep the joint straight.

“You were so close to the blast I was sure you were a goner,” Dell helps Misha sit up, slowly and with a lot of grunting. “Careful, now, I had to cauterize those wounds in your leg closed or you woulda bled out just from that. You’ve got enough shrapnel in there to build yourself a new bomb. You ain’t gonna be walkin’ anytime real soon.”

Misha almost misses the dream. He knows it was only an illusion brought on by almost dying but
there had been no pain. And he’d gotten to kiss Erik again.

Strange, that was what he had seen as he was dying. Unless it had come from the world of the living, like Erik telling him to breathe. But that would mean that someone out here had kissed him.

"You gave CPR?" he asks the engineer, more than a little affronted by the idea.

“Yes I did,” the Engineer groans and levers himself off his knees to stand, and grabs for the disintegrated corner of a filing cabinet to keep steady on what looks like a sprained ankle. “You weren’t breathing, son, you didn’t give me much choice.”

"We never mention this. Ever," Misha says, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "How do we get doktor's things? Only lead is dead."

Dell doesn’t roll his eyes even though he really wants to. “Not quite. He might be dead but the majority of this office is still intact. We might be able to find something if we look through drawers. Or, if we wait long enough, Redmond Mann might show up himself to survey the damage. I’m sure that kind of kill switch would be important enough that he’d be alerted. But honestly, you should sit this out. You’re hurt the worst and if you push yourself you could just drop dead.”

"Can not sit out!" Misha shouts. He tries to push himself upright but the pain in his leg flairs to life and his vision goes black as he falls back down.

He comes too a few seconds later, his leg throbbing, sending waves of searing pain through his injured thigh. "Maybe you are right." he admits as Dell helps him sit up again. "But is my mission. Can not leave you all to finish alone."

“I don’t know that we can finish it at all,” the Sniper lifts the unconscious Scout and limps over to the others, cradling him like a child. “Half of us are broken in more than one place, you can’t even stand, this kid’s probably got a concussion.”

“The irony is not lost,” Dell shakes his head and rolls his hurt ankle with a grimace. “We could really use one of the doc’s guns right about now.”

The pyro stands at the door occasionally setting guards on fire as they trickle towards the door and shouts something muffled at his team. He grunts and unhooks the base of his mask so he can hitch it
up past his mouth. “They're coming large,” he says, and points down the hall.

“They’re gonna be mobilizing towards the blast,” Dell tests his weight on his ankle and fits two shells into his shotgun. “Think you can sit in one spot and shoot if we can haul your gun over to you? If you can’t just try to drag yourself to cover.”

"Da. Can still shoot." Misha assures him, already reaching in the direction of his gun. Jane and Dell together manage to lift the gun off the floor enough to bring it over to him. A quick once over lets him know that Sascha is still functional, the blast knocked her out of his hands rather than destroying her. She is dirty and scratched but she'll shoot.

The rush of guards is fast and bloody. Jane takes a bullet in the gut but it only serves to anger him and he swings his shovel – still splinted to his arm – at the shooter. Dell shields himself from what would have been a headshot with his gloved hand, and the Pyro sets ablaze the man who shot him.

The Scout awakens during the brawl but the Sniper just hands him his bat and tells him to stay sitting and hit anyone who comes too close. The last thing a concussed man needs to do is shoot through his allies at his enemies.

The sniper launches himself at the guards with nothing but his kukri in hand, his rifle relatively useless at such close range and his SMG all but melted in the explosion.

The soldier and the Engineer overturn what’s left of the other desk in the room as a makeshift cover and duck behind it in a few moments of reprieve before another wave of armored guards come running to the office.

“We’ve got cover, but we’re barricaded in!” Sniper growls, ducking to avoid fire that nearly takes off his hat. “If we can’t stop the flow then we’re trapped in here until we run out of ammo, then we’re sittin’ ducks!”

“I still have a shovel!” Soldier bellows, barely hiding a wince as he waves it.

“Tied to your broken arm, stop waving that thing around!” Dell barks, kneeling up to take down a couple of guards with his buckshot before slumping behind it again and shucking the empty shells.

“Shovel or no shovel my point stands,” the sniper ventures a shot at one of the guards with his rifle.
“We can’t even search the office taking fire like this! How are you doing on bullets, big guy?”

"Sascha is good for while longer." the heavy answers, lifting the gun as much as he is able. "Move me to door and I can hold them off while you search office. Will buy you plenty of time."

“We can’t move you, you’re like the great wall of freakin’ Russia!” Scout complains and ducks from bullets.

“You’re in no condition to be holding the fort alone anyway!” Engie scolds. He shouts when he gets knocked off his feet by a powerful bullet to the side, and clamps his hand over it to slow the bleeding, and shoots the man with his free hand. “What I need is to get a sentry up but there’s no way I can build one taking fire like this!”

"We're doing the best we can mate!” the sniper yells, taking out another guard. He swings toward another, blade slashing through the air, but the guard is faster and catches his arm and twists, easily fracturing the bones.

Misha shoots and takes him out before he can shoot the sniper and shoots the two men who come in behind him but more just keep coming. He's going to run out of bullets soon at the rate Sascha goes through them and there's absolutely no chance of getting more ammo. If he could stand he might use his beloved gun to beat some of the guards over the head but there's no chance of that now.

The Scout loses consciousness again after a concussive flash grenade is tossed into the room, and he’s the only one who doesn’t see it in time and shield his eyes. Not that he was much good anyway with his bat, but the Sniper is forced to back into the room to cover him with only one good arm and a knife.

They’re losing. None of them want to think about it or admit it, but they’re grossly outnumbered, completely cornered, and they’re losing.

Sascha only has a few bullets left. Not enough to save them. Not enough to even get them out of the room so they might be able to find a more strategic position.

They're going to die.

He is going to die.
Here in this room, with these people who he can barely call friends. Misha is going to die and Erik will be all alone. He promised he'd come back. He's never broken a promise to Erik before. He's going to die and Erik will hate him for it. Even if he loves him now he'll hate him for leaving.

“If you don’t come back I’ll never forgive you.”

I didn't tell him I love him. Misha thinks as more guards go down. Then his gun clicks, no more ammo. They're done. My last words to him were a lie. I never told him I love him. I didn't get to kiss him goodbye.

Bile rises in his throat as he realizes the last person he kissed was not his doktor but the engineer who brought him back to life. It wasn't a real kiss but the first lips to touch his since Erik's surgery, since Erik told him he loves him, were not Erik's. Thinking about it now it feels like a grievous sin. If by some miracle he does survive he will have to make it up to the medic. He will find a way to earn his forgiveness.

And he will tell him how much he loves him. Those should have been his last words. They were Erik's last words to him, there's a small comfort in that. But he should have said it back.

"Я тоже тебя люблю," he mutters to himself as they are finally overwhelmed and guards stream into the room, setting themselves up like a firing squad. Erik isn't here to hear him, but they can still be his last words.

The shooting stops. The guns are pointed at them, but the firing has stopped entirely. Misha expects them to shoot them dead at any second, but they stand unwavering.

There’s a light clicking, and the tall, lean figure of a woman clad in violet strides confidently into the room. She’s like a living statue, commanding respect and authority without a word. She doesn’t introduce herself. She doesn’t have to.

Trailing on her heels is Miss Pauling, clutching a clipboard, with fear in her eyes. She looks at Misha and swallows hard enough for him to see.

“You boys,” the Administrator speaks slowly, assertively, “Are in a lot of trouble.”

They don’t speak. They can’t even think of a thing to say. They sink to the ground on their knees and toss their weapons aside, hands in the air. They’re shaking and scared and they can’t do anything but comply as the guards swarm them and bind them.
“I don’t know what you thought you were going to accomplish,” the Administrator sneers the words like they taste bad, and lights a cigarette. The men are all dragged to their feet, Misha by more than one guard. Scout is thrown over a shoulder like a sack of flour. “Redmond wants to see you.”

Miss Pauling stands behind the taller woman and gives Misha her hardest stare. She can’t communicate with him yet, but the look in her eyes is so severe that he knows she won’t waste a single second when she can.

Redmond. The man who ordered the destruction of Erik and the other medics' minds. If Misha were not so badly injured and so clearly outnumbered he would welcome the chance to see him. He would break the old man in half with his bare hands. But he knows there's no chance of that. Making any sort of move that isn't dictated by the guards or Redmond himself will probably have him shot in the head in a second. There's no chance of any sort of revenge today. All he can do is cling to the small hope that they'll stay alive long enough to find a way to escape.

“I’d like you to know that you haven’t captured me! I’ve only allowed you to capture me!”

“Solly, can it.”

“I have allowed you to win!”

“Can somebody knock him out?”

The soldier is knocked unconscious with his own shovel. The men are paraded back through the base with guns at their backs. Misha can hardly walk and crumples more than once, but the barrels pressed to his spine make a very persuasive argument for him to keep moving.

They’re loaded into an armored truck even bigger than the Soldier’s, with guards between them to keep them quiet. Miss Pauling gives Misha a suffering look as the giant lead doors are slammed shut.

The ride is long. Incredibly long. Misha falls unconscious a few times from the pain and general exhaustion. The Soldier regains consciousness only to be gagged. Scout wakes up too and despite his incredible disorientation and confusion at the situation, he seems to wise up and keep quiet.
“Where are we being taken?” Dell ventures after something like hours have passed. It’s impossible to tell in their tiny windowless prison.

“You can either keep quiet or I will shoot your mouth off,” one of the guards barks.

The Engineer decides it’s best not to tell him that it’s impossible to shoot off a hole.

The truck rumbles along, the driver seems to intentionally hit every pothole and bump they possibly can as they go. Each time the truck jostles another spike of pain shoots up Misha's leg and he has to clench his teeth to keep from shouting and being shot.

He isn’t the only one who isn’t doing well through the long ride. After an hour Scout looks ready to puke or pass out again, it’s impossible to tell which. Dell is bleeding more than ever and though it's impossible to see his face it's clear from how Angel keeps fidgeting that he desperately wants to go to his lover's side and help, but the guns pointed at them all keep him firmly in his seat.

Their only light comes from a single bulb in the ceiling that keeps everything dim and eerie. Misha suspects a few hours have passed by the time they truck starts to slow down.

When the doors open, the men are all blinded by the late afternoon sunlight. They’d been slowly cooking in the big black truck, so hot as it is outside, the breeze they get through the open doors is heavenly. They have to appreciate the little things or they’ll probably crack under the pressure and fear.

They’re marched through another concrete complex, lined with glass cases full of antique weapons and medieval torture devices. The walls are adorned with giant oil paintings, dozens and dozens of portraits of Redmond Mann himself.

“How don’t the man just hang a bunch of mirrors?” Dell mutters, grimacing at the ghastly paintings.

“He’s in a wheelchair, he’d be too short to see ‘em,” Scout snorts, and the mercs contain their giggles when the guards sneer and point their guns at them.

They pass through the decorated part of the building into a distinctly grimy place. It isn’t well lit, there are hardly any lights at all and the trapped mercenaries have to pass through moments of shadow between the bare light bulbs.
It doesn’t surprise them at all that Redmond would have a prison in his base of operations. They’re divided and tossed into unlit cells with strong bars criss-crossing so closely together that even the skinny Scout wouldn’t be able to pass through them. A guard is posted at the door of every cell, backs straight and rifles erect.

“I am going to go speak with Mr. Mann,” the Administrator paces slowly between the cells, not particularly looking right or left at any of them. “And he is going to decide your fate. And then I will return. May God have mercy on your souls.”

She walks elegantly out of the prison, Miss Pauling hot on her heels. She looks back at the mercenaries one last time before she’s out of sight.

Misha’s trembling from the pain of putting pressure on his bad leg. His vision is starting to go black at the edges as he fights to stay conscious. He can’t pass out now. They need to come up with an escape. They need to get out of here. Then he can pass out. Maybe they can communicate through morse code? But they can’t look at each other and any noise will be noticed. Maybe Miss Pauling will help? He can’t rely on her. She’d be putting herself in too much danger. She already has.

At least she can tell Erik what happened so he won’t be left waiting and wondering.
The mercenaries exchange worried glances between the bars of their cells. The prison is musty and damp, it feels like mold is growing in their lungs with every breath they take. They’re itching to speak, but they don’t dare.

Minutes pass, maybe an hour. Misha takes a short nap to try and preserve as much energy as he can, but it’s passing through him like a sieve. He looks into the other cells, at the men who have risked their lives, some for a man who was once their enemy.

The Scout is so young, too young to die. Crumpled against the wall of his cell, bleeding from the head, his face is bruised and defeated. Misha remembers him on the field, shouting loudly and gleefully bashing in heads with his bat, running at speeds no man has a right to move, swinging the intelligence cases in a mockery of the REDs. He has so much youth and spirit, and to see it withered and frightened in a cell makes Misha ache. He regrets ever letting such a young man come.

The Sniper is seated against the wall of his own cell, clenching and unclenching his fist rhythmically to keep blood flowing into the fractured bone and mutilated tissue. His eyes are clenched tight and his teeth bared, he looks at once defeated and strong. Misha remembers when he would sit in the mess hall during down time and share hunting stories, he remembers the gleam in his eye and the enthusiasm for weaving tales. He would do anything to see him free.

Dell looks close to death, bleeding from a bullet still dug into his side and an unknown injury to his shoulder. He’s nearly collapsed on the floor, his legs bent at strange angles beside him. He looks pale and weary, and if it wouldn’t get him shot Misha would beg the guards to see to him before he dies in his cell.

The pyro is clinging to the bars of his cage whimpering, his mask long forgotten behind him, staring right at Dell. The fire in his eyes is extinguished, replaced by icy fear. Misha can see tears glitter on his cheeks and he reaches through the bars across the thin hallway as though he could save him if only he could touch him. His hand gets nudged back through the bars with the barrel of a gun and Misha almost cries with him when he sinks to his knees with a quiet sob and presses his forehead into the bars.

The Soldier is the only force that could still be reckoned with, despite the bullet in his stomach that probably chewed him up and he’s certainly bleeding internally indefinitely, but a gut wound would never slow him down. The metal spade of his shovel had been cleaved from the handle, leaving it to splint his arm. He’s currently trying to weasel the gag out of his mouth with clever tooth work and the wall beside him.
These are the men who followed Misha to almost certain death, for a man half of them never knew and the other half didn’t even like. There was a reason that Misha was the medic’s only friend, and it wasn’t because he was shy.

Misha wants to shout, beg and cry. He would give his life to save any of them. They owe him nothing and he owes them everything. They risked so much for a plan that they had no guarantees would work anyway.

It’s been hours when finally the door at the end of the hall opens and a figure enters the room. At first Misha isn’t even sure it's human, it's merely a shape in the shadows, lit dramatically from behind like a movie villain. But as it approaches he realizes that it's Redmond in his wheelchair, hooked up to some sort of machine finally coming to decide their fates.

The Administrator is standing behind him, a portrait of grace and power. She puts her hand on the back of Mann’s chair. In the derelict old man’s lap lays one of the medic’s mediguns. Silence hangs in the air so thick they could choke on it.

“You have thirty seconds to tell me why you broke into my factory and killed my employees,” the old man wheezes, his bony spiderlike hands folded on top of the gun.

"Came for what is ours,” Misha answers before any of the others can speak. He knows Redmond won't like the answer but hopefully he can take most of the man’s rage and spare the others. "You let us go. But kept what belong to us. Like my gun. Came to take it back."

Redmond shakes his head with a sigh and swivels in his chair to face the groups’ spokesperson. “You are ungrateful children, all of you,” he sneers. “I gave you more than enough. Some of you. The others, I don’t even know you, but she does,” he points at the Administrator. “She tells me they are my enemies, so tell me, why are they here? I have nothing of theirs.”

"They are mercenaries. Answered call for help." Misha tries to shrug. "They come for cash reward. We pay them when we leave. That is all."

Redmond taps his fingers on the glass barrel of the medigun. “You can’t have your things. They’re my things now. You signed them over when you signed the contract. It’s not my fault if you didn’t read the fine print. You’ve now broken and forced entry, on private property, committed mass murder of humble factory employees, and killed one of my top beneficiaries. That man you killed, he had a family, you know. A wife and two children.”
He knows Misha’s weakness, and he’s sticking a fire-hot poker right into it.

Misha tries not to let his guilt show on his face. He can't care about them right now. He didn't have to kill himself. He could have lived. It's not Misha's fault he's dead and those children no longer have a father. It isn't.

"They fire first. We only defend ourselves," he argues. "We only want what is ours. Not all of us can read fine print in English. Was not fair."

“Then you should have gotten someone to read it for you,” Redmond sneers. “It’s not my job to hold your hand through the contract, you’re a grown man! You signed your souls over to me and you’re so ungrateful that you think it’s not enough that you got them back!”

"We won your war. Won your land. You got everything you want. We only want what was ours before." Misha continues to argue, gripping the bars of his cage in what might appear to be anger but really is just his desperate attempt to remain standing. "Is not much to ask for doing what other mercenaries could not. Is small price I think. Consider it reward maybe."

“You got your reward!” saliva shoots out of Redmond’s mouth and wets Misha’s knuckles. “And you got selfish. So now, you’re going to die. Four lives isn’t much compared to the sixty-one men you killed today, but I will make due.”

“Four?” the Scout suddenly croaks. “There’s five of us.”

“Yes, thank you for bringing that up, my boy,” Redmond’s chair keeps going and he stops in front of Dell’s cell. “I remember you,” he speaks to the Engineer. “You don’t look so well, son. I’ll give you one chance to sign up with me again. I’ve got a medigun here with your name on it, and a free walk out of this dungeon. Or, you can die with your friends.”

Dell lifts his head, his eyes steely. He looks at his friends and sets his jaw. “What’s the catch?” he hisses.

“The catch is you have to pick one of them to shoot dead. Just as a little display of loyalty to me,” Redmond’s sinewy face spreads into a grin.
Misha holds his breath, waiting for the engineer to answer. He thinks he knows what he will choose. Dell is not a coward who would betray his friends. He wouldn't choose life over them. Especially if it means living without Angel.

He almost wishes he'll be proven wrong though. He doesn't want to see Dell die. He wants at least one of them to make it out of here alive. Maybe he can go to Erik and tell him what happened. He can tell Erik that Misha loved him and died bravely. Maybe Erik will hate him a little less then.

“I’ll do it.”

The weight of the words come crashing down on the other mercenaries.

“Dell!” the pyro shouts and rattles his bars.

Redmond laughs, “That’s my boy!”

The guard opens Dell’s door and he’s bathed in the healing rays of the medigun that Redmond is almost too weak to use. He’s glowing in no time, back to his right self, and takes in a breath. He stares down the single pistol that Redmond holds out to him and closes his hand around it.

“Pick anyone you like,” Remond smiles, enjoying himself far more than is decent.

"Dell," Misha says because it doesn't matter anymore. Dell is going to live no matter what. As long as one of them dies. "Choose wisely. Please."

Dell looks at Redmond and considers shooting out the pipes and wires of the machine that keeps him alive, but he’s surrounded by men with guns who would shoot not only him, but the rest of them. Redmond would be dead, but then his company would probably be handed over to the Administrator, and he gets the feeling that would be actually worse. He doesn’t think he’s a quick enough draw to shoot them both, and all the guards before one of them fires.

He looks at Misha. They make eye contact, and they both understand, communicate without words. He walks up to the bars of the giant’s cage and lifts the gun. Misha is considerably taller than him, so he has to point it up. They look one another hard in the eye. Misha nods. Dell nods.
The gunshot leaves everyone’s ears ringing. The heavy hits the ground like a brick.

The others shout at Dell, Angel is pounding at his bars and screaming, Jane is screeching through his gag, ‘traitor! traitor!’ and the Scout looks sick. The sniper is muttering to himself, how they never should have trusted him in the first place.

“Good boy,” Redmond sneers as Dell places the pistol back in his hand. “Come with me and let’s write up a contract.”

Silence falls over the prison. Angel’s suffering sobs quiet and he lays face-down on the concrete floor. The soldier runs out of obscenities to spit through his gag. The fight leaves Scout and the Sniper loses his breath. The silence in the wake of that ear-splitting shot is too loud.

Misha has to fight not to breathe. The sting of the bullet in his trapezius is enormous, but he understands the plan, and if he moved a muscle he would ruin it. He landed facing away from the guards on purpose, and the blood that spills from the wounds forms a deceptive crown around his head. For now, the others will think he is a traitor, but he’ll prove them wrong. If he was a traitor, Misha would be dead.

Dell and Redmond had left the room but the others are left with their guards. Redmond hasn't given the order to kill them yet. He'll probably want to torture them first. Make them squirm. Or just leave them to suffer in silence and starve to death. Unless Dell's plan works and they find a way out. Misha desperately hopes so.

He quickly learns that the human body was not meant to stay completely still. His muscles ache and his skin screams and he itches and he wants to stretch out, but he dares not move, even just an inch. Whatever plan Dell has, if he ruins it, they’ll all be dead.

Fifteen minutes pass.

Half an hour.

An hour.

Misha needs to cough and sneeze, he needs to scratch a dozen itches. Put a man in a position where he can’t move a muscle and that is the only thing he will want to do.
In the distance, he hears a small explosion. He wants to lift his head to investigate, but he dares not even turn it. He hears the guards mutter to themselves, he hears a whoop, and the metallic shifting of their guns being raised.

Another blast, a louder whoop, and a cry of ‘I’m comin’ for yae!’

Misha furrows his brows only because he’s facing away. Another blast, this one much closer, only a handful of yards away. He hears a beep, and the guards are suddenly rushing down the hall towards the voice. He hears his comrades move to the bars of their cells and whisper to one another, but he won’t move yet.

Now he hears the screams of the guards and he knows they’re being rescued. He turns his head and pushes up on his arms.

“Whoa, hey! Two ton’s alive!” Scout shouts, just as the hollow whooshing sounds of sticky bombs being deployed starts to echo through the small chamber.

When the demoman trots into view, Misha thinks he could kiss him.

“Tavish! You smarmy bastard!” the Sniper howls, his voice shaking with excitement and fear alike.

“That’s *Mister* smarmy bastard tae you, ye sorry one-armed git!” the demoman chortles. “I’m sorry I’m late, boys, I had tae sober up first! I got a call from Little Miss Lavender. Step back from yer doors unless yer hankerin’ tae lose a couple limbs.”

"A couple more you mean.” Misha says with a small laugh as he pulls himself back from the cell door, afraid to put weight on his leg. He'll need to get up and run soon he's sure. It's best to rest the injury for now.

“aye, a couple more,” the demoman carefully places a sticky bomb at the clasp of every cell door. “We’ll have tae move quickly now, the Engineer is busy stickin’ up the old man but that wee shrivelly hag he’s got with him has some fight in her. Alright, cover your eyes an’ ears now lads!”

The explosions are small, but they still feel the heat. The doors swing open and the mercenaries
stumble out, half-alive and bleeding. The pyro is shifting anxiously from foot to foot, ready to sprint in an instant.

“Paulin’ says you boys are here to collect some things, is that right?” Tavish asks as he starts to pluck his precautionary sticky bombs off the doorway to the prison so he can reuse them. “Is that still the plan? Do yae want to do a search?”

"Can not go back with nothing," Misha says stubbornly. "You all go. I will find things alone. You have done enough. Get engineer and get to safety. Will join when I can."

“You’re kiddin, right?” Scout scoffs. “You can’t even walk, fun size. And you just spent the last hour dying!”

“Playing dead,” Misha rolls his neck. His trapezius stings.

“Either way you’re the most injured of all of us,” the Sniper says, limping out of his cell.

“I’m still the fastest even if my head is a little fuzzy. I’ll find Fritz’s stuff and then take you to it. If you go lookin’ for it at your pace we’ll be here until Christmas.” The Scout starts to stretch his legs.

"You have concussion.” Misha snaps. "And can not take as much pain as I can. You are too young. Should not have let you come in first place. If anyone goes instead of me it should be Jane."

“If one more guy tells me I’m too young I’m gonna bite their fuckin’ ear off!” the scout shouts, and jabs his finger into Misha’s chest. “I’m young enough to run circles around you bub! I’m not the kid you used to shoot at anymore alright I’m a grown ass man! I’d like to see you find the doc’s stuff before I can, bum leg. I might be concussed but I’m still three times as quick as you when you’re at your best and you’re hobblin’ like a lame duck so just you try to tell me to sit this one out because I will be off so fast there’ll be a sonic boom.”

Misha looks to the sniper for help, hoping he can talk some sense into his young companion. But the Australian just shrugs, clearly in agreement, or at least compliance, with the scout.

"Da, fine. You think you can do it? Go ahead. Need to sit down anyway," Misha says, waving him off. "If you die do not say I did not warn you."
“Take this with you, alright? For Christ’s sake, lad,” the demoman shoves a pistol at the youth, who pauses long enough to catch it before he’s off like a rocket. “I didn’t have enough pockets for the lot of you, so you’re gonna have to tag along with me until you all have something to protect yourselves with. We have to move now, the longer we stay here the more time we give them to corner us. Do you think you can walk?” he offers a hand to the exhausted Heavy.

Misha pushes his hand away. "Have had worse injuries than this. Will be fine. Might be slow but will not fall too far behind. Will bring up rear."

The group sticks close together, moving out of the dungeonlike lower levels and back up to the main foyer where a grin crosses the demoman’s face. He smashes one of the glass cases and starts tossing weapons at the group. He takes a broad sword for himself and hands a pickaxe to the soldier, a cluster mace to the pyro, a bow and quiver of arrows to the sniper, and lifts a gigantic battle axe for the heavy. Sniper snorts at the bow and arrows and makes a comment that it’ll be hard as hell to fire arrows with a fractured arm, but he’ll make due.

“This is a weapon,” he grins, swinging the sword like he’s been doing it all his life. He probably has. With a sword in one hand and his grenade launcher in the other, he grins at the group. “Alright, shall we split up? Pyro, you and Soldier go find Engineer and make sure he’s safe. Heavy, Sniper, stay with me. Let’s see if we can beat that kid to the doc’s things."

They agree to meet up in at least an hour if they can. If they haven’t found anything by then it’s safest to just give up. And if they don’t show it’s understood that they other group has to leave without them because they are probably dead.

Misha won’t stick to that. He won’t leave anyone behind and he doubts the others will either. But the agreement gives them all an out in case they do have to run.

Misha, Tavish and the sniper go on their way, heading for the lower levels where they expect storage will be. There’s no stairwell, apparently Redmond does not like being reminded that he can not walk, so they crowd into an elevator. Heavy is worried that it won’t handle his weight but it seems Redmond values quality and they arrive safely in the basement. There are a few guards waiting but the storage levels are relatively unprotected here in Mann’s home base. They are easily taken out before they can call for backup and no noise alerts anyone higher up thanks to the relatively silent weapons Tavish outfitted them with.

But now the real challenge begins. Finding what they’re looking for.
The basement is clearly larger than the house sitting on top of it. It looks like it goes on for miles and miles. Tavish hits the lights and they bellow and clang and make a whole big fuss about turning on one by one, down rows of rooms. They just keep turning on, ten lights, twenty, fifty, until the last light at the end of the basement turns on and they can barely see the opposite wall.

“God have mercy,” Tavish lets the sword edge clang against the ground in exasperation. “We really might be here all year after all.”

“There’s a chart over here,” Sniper appraises a glass-bound map. “These rooms ain’t labeled with names, they’ve got numbers. Like a dewey-decimal system or what?”

Misha treads over and looks at the map. “They are dates,” he says after looking at it for all of thirty seconds. He puts his finger on one. “06-21 is June, 1921. He has rooms organized chronologically.”

Sniper whistles. “They weren’t kiddin when they said you were some kinda genius,” he mutters and strings his bow across his chest. “Looks like he’s got the oldest stuff at the front, though, why? The newer stuff is way back there.” He jabs his thumb into the room labeled 05-55. “Do you think we’ll find his stuff here?”

"Is best guess," Misha says. "Fits time when Erik was attacked. If things are here, that is where they will be."

He starts to walk forward only to be stopped by sniper's good hand on his arm.

"Hold on a sec mate. Can't just go barrelin' down there like a crazed kangaroo! Might have the place booby trapped." the Australian warns.

“No booby traps!” they hear a voice echo from down the basement. “But man you guys kicked up one hell of a fuss gettin’ here! I had a good thing goin’ till you killed those guys and turned on the lights!”

"Little man beat us." Misha laughs. "Will buy him ice cream cone on way home as reward, da?"

“I better get a fuckin’ triple scoop cause you ain’t gonna believe what I found!”
The group ambles through the rows following the sound of the Scout’s voice. As they draw nearer, they hear a strange rustling sound, and the closer they get, it’s accompanied by a soft cooing. They round the corner and in a concrete cubicle sits not only piles of the medic’s belongings, but a giant metal roosting cage full of doves.

"Archimedes!" Misha shouts, recognizing Erik's bloodstained favorite immediately. He’s surprised to see them all still alive. Redmond must have been feeding them. Or Erik did a few too many experiments and accidentally made them immortal. Misha would be more surprised by the former more than the latter.

Somehow seeing them alive feels like a good omen. The birds are still alive so maybe they will survive the escape too. Maybe they all will.

“‘There ain’t no way we can carry all this outta here,’” the Sniper grunts, looking at the mess of things. There’s crates of supplies and shelves of books and reams of papers and, Misha sees, a small black suitcase.

He opens the case and finds inside clothes that have been folded for more than a year, musty and dry and creased. The medic’s uniform is sitting folded inside, and on top, a glass-framed picture of the Heavy. His heart stings worse than any of his wounds when he realizes that this is the suitcase he’d packed the day he was meant to board that train with Misha.

Zipping the case with shaking hands, he heaves it onto his shoulder. “Take what you can carry. Books, supplies, anything. Release doves and they will follow.”

The birds seem to recognize Misha, and settle on his shoulders. The numbers are few, only six remain from the doctor’s original twenty-eight, but Misha hopes that there are enough males and females for the medic to repopulate his flock.

The sniper tucks several notebooks into a big cloth bag and slings it over his back, under the quiver. The scout helps him stuff some surgical supplies in along with the books and an instrument case. The scout grabs a few books of photographs and medical journals and straps them all together with his belt. Misha fills another empty crate with the medic’s old clothing, and his ubersaw. Unfortunately there isn’t a medigun to be found, but the original blueprints are there and demoman carefully folds them to tuck them into his vest.

“Now all we’ve gotta do is collect the others and we’re out of here!” Tavish proclaims as they jog back to the front of the basement with the things in tow.
“How will we get home once we leave?” Misha asks, trying to situate the heavy axe along with the other things in his hands.

“Did yae think I walked here, lad?” the demoman laughs as they gather back into the elevator. It creaks and groans and complains at the extra weight but eventually deposits them back on the ground floor. “I’d suggest we put the things in my truck before we get the others, whaddya say?”

"Getting back inside may be problem,” Misha replies, lifting the crate onto his shoulder, still burning from the shot the Engineer had given him. His leg is still aching and trying to fight his way back inside might be too much for him. "Was hard enough getting in first time. But if you have more bomb in truck then may be worth it."

“Oh, I’ve got more bomb alright,” demo grins. He uses his free hand to fire grenades at any of Redmond’s men who draw too close, but the majority of the halls are clear. Distantly they can hear a commotion and the dim sound of the Engineer shouting, but they’re sure he can handle himself until they get there. With Pyro and Soldier as backup, he should be fine.

Misha hopes he can handle himself until they get there. He’d never be able to forgive himself if any of these men lost their lives for this mission.

Tavish’s truck isn’t enormously big, but it would be big enough to pile the things in the back. Or, it would be, if the bed of the truck wasn’t filled by a cart with a giant, familiar bomb strapped into it.

“More bomb,” he gestures to the cart as they set down the things. The doves lift from Misha’s shoulders to settle over the piles of belongings. “Remember our payload days? How about one fer old time’s sake. Say, Redmond’s office?”

Misha’s lips spread in a wicked grin. "Da. Sounds like good plan. For old time's sake."

He tries to put on a brave face but his leg is wobbling more and more and the pain is getting worse. Soon it won't just be his leg that's shaking but his whole body. Assuming he doesn't pass out.

"Need to move fast. Let's go."
Scout is completely useless in lifting the cart out of the back of the truck, so he guides them instead on lowering it to safety. Too much jostling and it could go off prematurely. Misha has to take a break after the cart’s wheels are on the ground, his vision spotting. The sniper pulls a ratty handkerchief out of his trousers and Misha accepts it graciously, wiping the sweat from his brow and neck.

“You gonna make it, big guy?” the Sniper asks, putting a hand on the giant’s chest to steady him when he wobbles. “Do you wanna stay out here?”

"Can not- can not let you go alone," Misha answers. There's sweat on his face from fighting through the pain and his vision is fading out more and more. He's going to pass out soon and if they aren't back outside yet he's going to cost them all their lives. "Is my mission. Have to go." he continues, arguing more with himself now. He can't leave them to finish the job. They're there for him and Erik. They can't be left alone.

But he's not going to help anyone by going. There's still a chance the damage he's done to his leg isn't permanent. But it might be if he keeps using it. There's no right answer and more than ever he wishes Erik were here to tell him what to do.

“Come with, and if it gets to be too much, just turn back,” the scout shrugs. “I ain’t gonna lie, you’d be a lot of help, but I mean only if you can stay on your feet. We can’t carry you if you go down.”

"Scared to go alone little man?" Misha laughs. Scout's made the decision for him. As long as he can help he has to try to fight through the pain. "I will go. But we must go now."

The cart is heavy. This doesn’t come as a big surprise. The carts were always heavy, but it was made a little easier because they were always on tracks. Now, there are no tracks. The wheels wobble and the cart veers and they constantly have to shove at corners and move in unison to keep it from taking a sharp left into a wall.

Misha has to take several breaks, and eventually Scout breaks away from the group in order to run ahead to give more backup to Engie, Soldier and Pyro – he wasn’t much good with the cart pushing, anyway. Even when they used to push bombs in the war, the scouts were responsible for scattering fire and keeping the other team off the bigger guys’ backs while they pushed the insurmountable cart.

When the cart had to stop for Misha to rest, Demo and Sniper would venture around corners to make sure there was nobody nearby to stall their process, shooting the occasional armored guard.
The closer they draw to the office, the more shouting they hear. Dell sounds frantic if not in pain, and they hear the yelp of a young woman – Miss Pauling.

“Lay down your weapons or God as my witness I will shoot her!”

Sniper, Demo and Heavy exchange worried looks and put double effort into pushing the cart, they have to get there fast. Twenty feet, ten, five, they throw the doors open.

They enter the spacious office into a scene right out of an old Western. Scout, Soldier and Pyro stand with their guns erect, pointed at the guards who have their guns pointed right back.

The Administrator stands tall with a shiny pistol pointed at Dell, who has his mechanical hand wrapped firmly around the neck of Miss Pauling, and his gun is pointed at her temple. The young woman’s hands are wrapped firmly around the engineer’s forearm, her face twisted into a charade of fear. She knows she’s not in danger.

Redmond is nowhere to be seen, but the sound of an airplane taking off can be heard in the distance.

“You won’t shoot her, Mr. Conagher,” The Administrator barely gives the bomb two glances as several more of the guard’s guns point at Sniper, Demoman and Heavy. “You’re too good a man.”

“All due respect, ma’am, I been shot, blown up, speared and forced to shoot an ally. I think you’d be surprised what I would do,” Dell growls, his mechanical hand giving a whir as it closes a hair tighter.

The heavy doesn't pay him much mind. He knows Miss Pauling is safe with Dell. As good an actor as he is Misha knows the Texan would never hurt her. He wouldn't shoot an innocent if his life depended on it and especially not a woman. He's too much of a southern gentleman. The Administrator might be the only exception if it really came down to it but her actions have lost her whatever protection her sex would have afforded her.

Instead Misha turns his overtired mind to the problem of getting them all out alive. They're evenly matched and the guards won't care about one little hostage. They probably have a hundred replacements for Miss Pauling lined up already. If they try to back out now they'll shoot and they'll all die. Or if they do choose to protect her they can easily call Dell's bluff and shoot the rest of them and leave Dell and Miss Pauling alive and undefended. There's no winning this fight unless one of the others thinks of something fast.

“You aren’t getting out of this one,” the Administrator’s painted lips curl into a poison smile as she
says the words they’re all thinking. “You’re cornered. You’re helpless. You’re holding an axe for goodness sake. I suggest surrendering to quick deaths.”

Dell cocks the gun in his hand. Miss Pauling whimpers. The Administrator’s smile slips into a sneer.

Misha’s vision is going black again. He stumbles a little and the gun in the guard's hand wavers to keep locked on his head. They need to leave. They need to get out now. But he can't think of an escape. The pain is clouding his mind too much for him to really think. He can't even hear what Dell and the administrator are saying to each other anymore.

But the gunshot he hears loud and clear.

Miss Pauling sags in the Engineer’s hold with a weak sound. His expression mirrors hers, pain and fear and confusion. Both of them hold their breath, suspended in time for a second-long eternity before they both crumple to the ground.

Time slows down. The Administrator retreats, the guards follow her. Everything is moving in slow motion. Distantly, Scout can be heard yelling. Misha’s ears are ringing as Sniper sprints past him at a snail’s pace. He falls to his knees, his vision goes dark.

He opens his eyes, sight hazy. He sees Engineer pushing himself up on his elbows. Miss Pauling is on her side, choking. His eyes close again.

When they open, Miss Pauling is being lifted under the arms and legs by Soldier and Demo. He hears her yell. His eyes close again.

He gets smacked across the face by Scout, and rouses fully, hands shaking, stomach clenching. Blood is smeared across the floor, the Engineer is seated against a wall where Pyro is kneeling over him, making distressed noises through his mask and pressing hands into the bullet in his gut.

The bullet that passed through Miss Pauling.

“Help!” Scout’s voice cracks as Redmond’s things are shoved off his desk, and the woman is laid down. One hand clutches Tavish’s sleeve, the other gropes for something to grab. Scout gives her his hand. Sniper is holding her head off the desk while the Soldier fumbles with the belt around her skirt so he can get at her tucked-in shirt and lift it up.
Misha lumbers over to them and pushes the soldier out of the way. He doesn’t bother with unbuckling the woman’s belt or gently pulling up her shirt. In his hands the fabric tears like tissue paper, leaving her bloodstained abdomen and plain white brassiere exposed. He figures considering the circumstances she won’t care.

"Clean shot. Through and through. We get her to doctor soon she may live." Misha says, his voice old and tired. They have no doctor and there are no hospitals nearby. "Must put pressure on wounds. Need clean cloth."

Scout yanks his shirt off over his head and hands it to the giant. He presses the cloth to her back and lets her lie on it to give her some comfort and pressure at the same time.

“Just – keep breathin’ dammit!” the scout shouts, his hands rubbing her shoulders while the Soldier rushes over to see how Engie is doing.

“Is he gonna be alright?” Sniper asks frantically, still cradling the woman’s head and wiping the blood off her cheeks when it geyser’s out of her mouth.

“Not dying, I can wait,” Dell grunts, shifting into a more comfortable position against the wall and holding Pyro’s rubber gloved hand against his wound with affection.

Misha doesn’t hear anything. He blocks it all out and demands someone to look for a first aid kit. The soldier starts to overturn everything in the office until he finally finds one, small but still full.

“Bite,” he tells the woman, holding a wad of her destroyed shirt up to her mouth. She fills her teeth, and he pours alcohol over her wound. She screams like a cat and arches, blood running from her mouth and soaking into the shirt, running down her sides and staining the desk.

The shirt slips from her mouth and she gives a sob, gritting her teeth and tightening her hand on the Demoman’s arm. Her other hand grabs onto Misha’s shoulder and her nails dig in. She’s panting and she isn’t looking at anything in particular, staring into space. Unfocused eyes filled with tears remind Misha of the way the medic used to look at him after the accident.

"Little man!" Misha snaps, getting the scout's attention. "Go find medical supplies. Must be some around for Redmond. If not we know there are some in basement. You are fastest, you must go."
Scout is off like a rocket, tearing out of the office like the devil himself is on his heels. Misha applies a local anesthetic found in the first aid kit to the area around her wound, hoping to keep her from slipping into shock from the pain. Blood loss might still do the job but he can only do so much.

He feels her hand close over the back of his and he looks her in the eyes for the first time since she was laid down. She looks scared, nostrils flaring, eyes squinted, mouth open. Her breathing is coming shorter. She slowly shakes her head.

"No!" he scolds, taking her hand in his. "You do not give up. Are not allowed to give up. Did not give up on Erik when was certain he could not be saved and look now! He is reading and writing and speaking! Same will happen now. Did not let him go and will not let you go. Is not allowed."

There are tears in his eyes and for a moment he doesn't feel the pain in his leg. This young woman, bleeding to death on the table in front of him, whose blood is all over his hands, literally and figuratively, can not die. She did everything for him. She found him when he had given everything up. She gave him back the most important person in his life. She gave them shelter when they needed it. She gave them all her kindness and friendship again and again. She is not allowed to give her life too.

She is one of his sisters now. And he would protect her just as he would protect them. She can not die. Not because of him.

The smile on her lips is small and bloody. Her hand is limp in his, fingers curled and cold. She doesn’t blink at him, she’s stopped choking. It takes a few moments of silence for him to realize that she’s stopped breathing.

Everyone has stopped breathing. They’ve all held their breath, listening for a sound from her. Not a single breath, not a cough or a gasp. Her hand would have slipped from Misha’s if he wasn’t holding it so tightly.

The air suddenly feels heavier, and the sunlight seems dimmer. The sniper makes a noise first, just a soft sigh, and lowers her head to the desk so he can remove her glasses and close her eyelids. Demo moves next, places her hand over the wound and closes what he can of her shredded shirt to give her some dignity. The soldier removes his helmet.

Misha doesn’t move.
There's silence in the room except for the occasional rustle of fabric or rubber depending on who's moving. There's no footsteps. No one moves enough to make a noise that loud. It's like they're worried they might disturb her. Like she's only sleeping.

Or like they've already started her funeral.

When Misha speaks it sounds too loud. Like how a cough sounds a thousand times louder during silent prayer in Church. His voice is too loud and too deep and he barely recognizes that he's the one speaking when the words fill the dead air around them.

"Did anyone know her first name?"

When silence falls again, it’s too loud. It’s the sound of everybody’s heads churning, and the sound of guilt and shame. Nobody can think to say anything. There’s nothing they could possibly say.
“Let’s… take her with us,” Tavish speaks quietly. “Give her a right proper send off. Viking funeral. She deserves it.”

Dell finally limps over, his arm wrapped around Pyro’s shoulders, and he looks mournfully down at the woman. “This is my fault,” his voice is dry and trembles. “I never shoulda grabbed her. Shoulda known that harpy woulda shot her to get to me. Christ, I- I don’t know how I’m gonna live with myself.”

"Is not your fault. Is Redmond’s fault for starting this. Is my fault for bringing you here. Is old woman's fault for letting heart shrivel and die many years ago. Is Miss Pauling’s fault for helping us in first place." Misha says with a heavy shake of his head.

He lifts her gingerly into his arms. She is so small and light. Like a small child. It's wrong that she's so still.

"Tavish is right. We take her with us."

“Not before I rig this thing to blow,” the Engineer growls and uncoils from the pyro’s arm to limp over to the bomb. “If she’s goin’ down, she’s takin’ this whole place with her. You fellas go on ahead, I’m… I’m gonna stay here and work. Get some fresh air.” The other mercenaries give him a quiet look, but they don’t argue. “I mean you too, ashes,” he pushes gently on the reluctant pyro’s shoulder. “I want you to go with them. Won’t take but a minute. You all need to be ready to hightail it outta here as soon as I get out.”

Pyro makes a few distressed noises, but eventually tails after the retreating group. The base is all but deserted as they walk through the concrete halls. Those few wayward souls who draw too near are killed swiftly and without mercy. Sniper descends on them with naught but an arrow in hand if Demo doesn’t blow them to smithereens with a grenade first.

Misha looks down at the woman’s face as he walks. He can’t even feel the pain in his leg anymore. He can’t feel anything. He can barely feel the weight of her in his arms. She looks so tranquil, like she’s taking a nap in his strong, safe hold. He hasn’t failed anyone this severely since he was incapable of saving Erik from his fate. The same dark, gloomy guilt falls over him, and he doesn’t think he’s going to sleep well for quite some time.
They hear feet in the distance, running fast. They remember; Scout. He’s approaching at top speed, hope in his steps, he thinks he can still save her. Misha wants to cry.

Half-naked and panting, the Scout rounds the corner and almost crashes directly into the group. “Oh good, you’re already halfway there! Hurry, you gotta hurry, Mann’s got a hospital! He’s got his own hospital right in his stinkin’ house! Bring her, come on, we gotta move!”

“Scout,” the Sniper mutters. “It’s too late.”

“It ain’t too late, it’s right over here!” the scout points and hops back and forth between his feet like his body hasn’t finished running yet.

“Laddie, she’s dead,” Demo says seriously.

Scout stops hopping. He looks from Demo’s face to Miss Pauling’s, quiet and peaceful in Misha’s arms. He makes a little noise in the back of his throat like a whine, his nostrils flare. “Well, so what?” he says, his voice considerably thicker than before. “Maybe he’s got somethin’ in there that can save her! The man’s livin’ on borrowed time as it is, he’s gotta have somethin’ around to keep his wrinkly ass alive!”

"Nothing can bring back the dead." Misha says sadly. He almost feels sorry for Scout. He's too young and hopeful. For all that he's seen and lived through he still doesn't seem to understand that sometimes things can be hopeless.

“We gotta at least try!” Scout cries and starts to tug on Miss Pauling’s arm like he wants to hold her himself. “If you wanna just give up then fine, give her to me and I’ll try to figure out all that crazy medical shit and you can just get the hell outta here!”

"Kid, calm down." Sniper says, placing a hand on the young man’s shoulder to try to steady him. "We'll take her. There's no reason not to. But she's not getting any deader. We can walk."

The small hospital resembles very strongly the Medic’s old operating theatre. It’s like stepping back through time when those doors swing open and shut behind them. Miss Pauling is laid across a sterile table, and Misha sees what looks sort of like one of Erik’s mediguns mounted to the ceiling, but it’s different.
"There’s all sorts of crazy shit in here," Scout says, zipping around like an insect. "We gotta find something that can do something – we gotta try something. Anything."

"This is like doktor's equipment." Misha says, checking out the modified machines. "I watch him work many times. Know how to turn on and aim machines. But these are different. Buttons are not in right order and is... bigger. Maybe more powerful?"

“Well turn the damn thing on and we’ll find out!” scout has resumed hopping from one foot to the other, full of too much anxious energy to stand still.

The gun charges up in moments with a hum, and it glows red. The familiar beam of energy collects in the barrel of the gun, and then slithers out into the air. It connects with Miss Pauling, but it doesn’t stop there. It mends the Soldier’s gutwound and seals up any still-bleeding cuts in the Heavy’s leg, sealing the shrapnel still inside. It’ll be hell to dig that out, but it might make it easier to walk.

“Is this thing… healing more than one person at a time?” the scout scoffs in awe as the blunt force injury to his head tingles and heals up, and the pain from the concussive damage fades. “Holy shit. We need to get Engie in here.”

“Engineer!” Demoman shouts suddenly, startling everyone. “He’s riggin’ a bomb to explode!”

No one needs to say anything. Scout is off again, racing out of the med bay back to the office to stop Dell before he kills them all.

While he runs Misha keeps the beam focused on Miss Pauling. The small hole in her stomach slowly closes, a fresh layer of skin growing over the wound. But he doesn't turn the gun off when the hole is no longer visible. He remember Erik telling him that the gun works down and it takes longer to heal internal damage than it does to heal the flesh.

Everyone holds their breath and waits. She doesn’t move.

“Hold on,” Demo steps up to the table. “Maybe she just needs a jump start.”

He sits on the edge of the table and pinches her nose while pressing gently on her chin, and he
breathes into her. He laces his fingers together and pumps them over her heart. He breathes into her again and pumps again. Three times, four times. The thread of hope is fraying.

He stills with his hand over her heart with a sigh and looks away. "’M sorry lads," he mutters with a shake of his head.

Silence falls again.

“’No!” Jane shouts. His fist comes down in a blur, before anyone could stop him.

It hits her chest, her eyes snap open, she sucks in a breath like a scream. The mercenaries can’t make a noise, they’re too rattled with shock.

She stares around the room, wide-eyed and open-mouthed and quiet. She takes in a shaky breath, her body trembles. Her hand lifts off the table, quaking, and Misha takes it in his.

She makes a little noise and everyone stays silent to see if she’ll speak. She coughs and rolls onto her side, grabs Misha’s hand, and spits blood on the ground.

“Do you think I should bother handing in my resignation letter?” she chokes.

Misha grins, fresh tears stinging his eyes. But for once they are happy tears and he doesn't bother blinking them away before lifting her up into a tight hug.

"Will discuss career options after we leave," He says when he lets her go. He doesn't set her down on the table though, just rearranges her so he's carrying her the same as he was before. "Now we go. Will carry you, will be faster."

“Faster,” she echoes, and lays her head down on his chest. She presses her face into his shoulder and whispers, “I saw her, Misha. I saw her.”

Misha remembers months and months ago when he asked Miss Pauling why she had helped them. She hadn't really answered but it was obvious what she meant by "We have to stick together." She didn't need to be clearer than that.
"Did she say anything?" he asks as the group hurries out of the hospital.

Miss Pauling shakes her head, keeping her eyes closed. “She was beautiful, though. She was so beautiful.”

They’re met by Scout and Engineer running in the opposite direction. “Go! Go!” Dell shouts, waving his hands towards the exit. “We’ve got less than ten minutes!”

They sprint. The pain is returning to Misha as the adrenaline and numbness wears off. The shrapnel that was sealed into his leg is starting to shred the muscle all over again, it feels like he’s been set on fire.

Miss Pauling is set gently in the passenger’s seat of Tavish’s truck while the Demoman slips into the driver’s seat and turns over the engine. Misha, Jane and Dell frantically move Erik’s things into the back of the truck haphazardly before climbing on themselves. They can situate everything better after they’ve gotten a safe distance away from the impeding explosion.

The doves settle between the belongings, some of them take flight behind the truck and follow as Tavish hits the gas and peels away from the concrete house. It’s still in eyeshot when it explodes, and the shockwave rattles the back of the truck.

Tavish drives for several long minutes before he finally pulls under the shade of a scraggy tree and climbs out of the driver’s seat to face the others in the back.

“We gotta figure out where we are,” the Scout says to the others, stretching his arms over his head to try and give some relief to his aching muscles.

“We’re in Arizona,” Demo answers. “Hours away from her home. We should get her tae a hospital and get her checked out. Might all be able to squeeze into a hotel room, if you don’t wanna sleep in the truck. If she checks out fine we can head out on the morrow.”

"Can not," Misha says, shaking his head. "Erik is alone. He will panic. He can not be left alone over night not knowing what has happened. I can not do that to him."
“She’s not in any condition tae drive for several hours,” Tavish gestures to the woman, sitting slumped in the seat. “I’m sure there will be a telephone at a motel you can use to call her home.”

"Take her to hospital. Get room. I will rent car and go to Erik." Misha says. He can't leave the medic alone all night. Not after he promised everything would be alright. "You come with things when you can."

“You ain’t in any condition to be drivin’ that long, either,” Dell says, putting his hand on the giant’s forearm. “Honestly we should all probably check into a hospital. I’m not doin’ so hot myself. I could really use a stiff drink and a long nap.”

"Can not go to hospital." Misha argues. But then he sighs. They're right. He can't drive all the way to Miss Pauling's place. He doesn't even know where it is. "A night of sleep will be good. As long as there is telephone." he agrees finally. "He is going to hate me either way."

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Miss Pauling is checked into a hospital as the sun starts to set, along with the Engineer, Pyro and the Sniper, whose arm was failed to be fixed by the healing rays in the hospital, either because it had been fractured for too long or he just didn’t step close enough. Scout tries to convince Heavy to check in as well, but he claims to be feeling fine, and he only wants sleep that the hospital wouldn’t let him have if they keep waking him up every half an hour to check his vitals. The group claims they were all injured in a car accident. The hospital barely seems to accept that answer, but they don’t press it.

The remaining group of four men are given strange looks when they ask for a room at the nearest motel, but they aren’t denied. The room is small, and there’s only two beds and a couch.

“I’ll take the couch,” Demo says before anybody else can martyr themselves and lies down on the soft cushions with a sigh, kicking off his boots and finagling the complicated straps of his safety vest.

Scout looks at the Soldier with a sigh. “Guess we’re sharin’ a bed,” he mutters, and collapses on the left side of one of the beds. “Fair warnin’ though, I kick.”

That leaves Heavy, mercifully, with a bed all his own. He doesn’t have to worry about rolling over on anyone in the night, or getting any of Scout’s bony limbs in the ribs. The mattress looks so inviting, but he can’t go to sleep yet. It’s eight PM, and dark outside, and his medic is all alone in
Miss Pauling’s apartment. He can only hope that the man hasn’t left in search of the missing woman.

He knows Miss Pauling's number by heart by now and calls her house from the motel phone. Each ring is more worrisome, more painful and by the fifth he's ready to scream. Luckily Erik answers before he gets up and steals the truck to go get him.

"Erik! Is Misha! Am so glad you are there. Have much to tell you!" he says when the ring breaks off, before Erik even has a chance to greet him.

All he hears is a broken little sound, a snuffle, and then the German speaks. “Tell me,” he whispers.

"Miss Pauling can not come home tonight. She was badly injured in accident and must spend night at hospital." Misha starts, knowing Erik will want an explanation. "Can you make yourself dinner? Should be toast or cereal for you. And I will be there tomorrow to get you. Will leave first thing in morning and should get there in afternoon."

Predictably, Erik wants details. Misha tells him that there will be plenty of time to relay the whole story when he comes to get him tomorrow, and that for now he is exhausted. The medic first asks three times if Misha is sure he is safe, because now that he knows he’s alive, if something were to happen to him in the last leg of his journey, the doctor doesn’t think he could cope.

Misha has never fallen asleep faster or deeper in his life. He sleeps like a rock, and in the morning he’s almost impossible to rouse. The only thing that gets him on his feet is the promise that they’re going to sit down at a restaurant and have breakfast to kill time before they can pick up their friends at the hospital.

“Is it really safe for us to be here like this?” the scout whispers as the four men settle into a large booth. They’re certainly a sight, the Scout is wearing Demoman’s white undershirt, which is much, much too big on him, and he has a healthy bruise on his face. Heavy looks like the living dead, Soldier refused to take his helmet off for breakfast, and Demo looks out of place hanging out with them at all. “I mean we just blew up Mann’s whole thingy. Don’t you think he’s gonna be looking for us?”

"Maybe," Misha rumbles, his voice lower and rougher than usual from exhaustion. "Has other bases. Might not want to waste resources. And will not attack so soon anyway. Will need to gather men. It not a problem for right now. Coffee is problem for right now. Wonder if they can give me bowl of coffee instead of tiny mug."
The waitress lets him drink right out of the pot.

They’re on the road again, with all of the belongings secured. The doves roosted on the truck overnight and Demo can hardly be bothered by the bird feces on his windows, he’s too tired. They’re all too tired.

Miss Pauling and the others are released to them without a fuss. Tavish and Dell combined cover the hospital bills without a problem. Miss Pauling has been dressed in a simple (itchy) white dress that she complains about loudly the instant they’re out of earshot of the nurses, so she doesn’t seem ungrateful. She’s put back in the passenger’s seat and none of the others will have any of it when she tries to humbly insist she really could sit in the back.

The back of the truck is cramped with the medic’s belongings and six men, but there isn’t any room to complain. They won. They succeeded in their mission. Archimedes sits in the crook of Misha’s neck and coos, two others nest on his thighs up against his hips, and the rest alternate between flying and roosting in one of the crates.

Misha can hardly believe they won. Everything was so crazy that he didn’t really get a chance to actually celebrate. He knows they will when they stop at Dell’s home on the way back to Georgia. For now he’ll quietly rejoice in his own mind. They won, and nobody died. Not really.

Their next stop isn’t to Miss Pauling’s, but actually back at the RED factory they were originally ambushed at and taken captive. They don’t go anywhere near the factory itself, instead taking a long detour up to the cliff where they left all their other vehicles. Soldier bemoans the loss of his beloved tank, but Dell promises to help him build a new one.

When they’re finally all separated into their own vehicles, it feels like they can breathe again. The drive from the cliff to Miss Pauling’s apartment is short comparatively. Misha welcomes the familiar sights of the small town, and the group parks in front of her building. The heavy can see Erik looking through the window of Miss Pauling’s apartment. He doesn’t even get halfway to the door before he can hear the loud thumping of the medic’s feet on the stairs.

He opens the glass door to the lobby and expects a hug or a happy cheer or even a smile, but what he gets is a faceful of the doctor’s palm and loud angry German yelling.

“Dummkopf! Ich werde nie wieder zulassen, dass du mich verlässt! Wenn du es nochmal versuchst, binde ich dich fest!”
But before he can even respond to the smack, the medic’s arms are tight around his neck and his face pressed into Misha’s cheek, and he whispers, “I’m not sorry for zhat vone. But I’m glad you’re back.”

Misha is crying when he wraps his arms around Erik to return the hug. All the fear and pain from the last few days comes back in full force in the face of Erik's anger. He could have died. He could have died and left Erik all alone and he would never again have been on the receiving end of one of his angry German tirades. They could have never seen each other again.

If Erik being angry at him and slapping him means he's alive and they're together he'd happily let himself be slapped a hundred times. And he says as much into Erik's shoulder while he hugs him.

The medic squeezes the life right out of him. He doesn’t cry. He won’t yet.

When he finally lets go, the next thing he knows, he’s swarmed by white birds. He panics at first, thinking he’s being attacked, and swings his arms wildly. But Misha catches his hands before he can hurt any of the birds, and they settle on his arms and shoulders.

Mouth open, the medic looks between the birds with wide eyes. One settles on his wrist and looks him right in the eye, his feathers are a little brown and his eyes are red and Erik’s heart lurches a thousand miles an hour in his chest.

“Archimedes,” he says. He says it without thinking. The name spills from his mouth like reflex and the bird coos and ruffles his feathers in response. He looks up at Misha with an expression like he’s witnessed a ghost. “Zhis is- oh no, I’m going to have to rename zhe canary.”

Misha starts to laugh. He can't help it. Compared to everything else it's such a silly, mundane little worry and he couldn't be happier about it. "Da. Will rename the canary. Will find better name. Archimedes is better for dove anyway."

The medic turns his attention to the other birds perching on him while Misha helps Miss Pauling into the elevator. She’s still sore and exhausted and leans on him. She’s unsteady on her feet and wriggles uncomfortably in the white dress the hospital left her in.

“First I need a shower,” she starts to pull her hair behind her out of habit, even though she has nothing to tie it in its usual bun. “And I’m going to change my clothes. And then I’m going to pack. If you boys would just linger for half an hour so I can get ready. There’s no way I can stay here now,
Redmond knows this is where I live and as far as he knows by now, I’m dead. I’d like to keep it that way, I can use that to my advantage while I slowly dismantle his company from the inside out.”

"You can come live with us." Misha offers. He helps her into her room and respectfully turns his back while she undresses. "Is nice little town. No one will know you. We have room. Erik and I share bedroom so you have choice of two others. We would be happy to have you until you are back on feet."

“Thank you for the offer, but I already arranged to live with Dell for a little while. I’m going to have to disappear, I can’t lay down roots in a hunky-dory little honey and oats town. I need to change my name, dye my hair, going into hiding is such an ordeal.” She pulls the ghastly white gown over her head and tosses it into the corner.

She catches her reflection in the full length mirror. The dark bruise on her belly, the calluses on her hands and the scrapes on her knees, the wild tangle of her hair. She pushes up her glasses with a frown and tugs a purple dress over her head.

“I think I’m going to go back to medical school,” she says suddenly. “I think I want to work in a mental hospital somewhere. Those people deserve more than they get.”

"Da. They do." Misha agrees. "You are good person. And smart. You will make good doktor. Just do not forget about us, da? Call and write. We will worry."

“I’m not a good person,” she tugs a brush through her hair with a laugh “But yes, I’ll call. If you want to help, could you wrangle my cat into her kennel while I shower? You can carry Dr. Fleischer’s things down, I’ll join you as quick as I can.” She scoots past him into the hall and disappears into the bathroom.

The cat is small and black and she is feisty. She’s a thousand times quicker than Misha and she has little claws like needles when he does manage to catch her, so he only drops her again and they start over. She jumps on the furniture and waggles her tail at him and he bumps his head against an arm rest and if he could speak cat he knows she’s laughing at him.

He still hasn’t caught her by the time Miss Pauling comes out of the bathroom pressed and dressed and made up, with her hair still wet but in a bun. She laughs at the breathless look on Misha’s face and claps her hand against her calf that has the cat running over to her and rubbing against her. He grabs her then and shucks her into the carrier.
“Devil cat,” he pants, hands on his hips, when the feline yowls from inside the carrier.

Miss Pauling doesn’t take long packing. She isn’t particularly attached to anything in her apartment, so she just leaves it all behind when they head down to the trucks. Misha has to struggle with Erik to try and get him to sit inside his truck, but the medic insists on sitting in the bed so he can be with his birds.
Chapter 25

Chapter by HarveyDangerfield

Chapter Notes

if you thought it was going to get better from here you were sadly mistaken

Are you curious about what kind of music I listen to when I write this story? Maybe you want to make a "Reading The New Rip-My-Heart-Out Chapters Of This Miserable Fic" playlist. Well it's your lucky day.

1) The Scientist - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7OVZjqhRkqw
2) Ballad of a Prodigal Son - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7OVZjqhRkqw
3) Running Up That Hill - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yN_67KMy9W0
4) Little Lion Man - www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILJf9qJHR3E
5) Radioactive in the Dark - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eR99ubyBCGE
6) Save Me - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPDqThq9QA0
7) Teardrop - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwhwSirr098
8) This Is War - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMAVLXk9QWA
9) You're A God - www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8s_q3JaglQ
10) Who Will Save You Now - www.youtube.com/watch?v=EaSbFPiihOY

This is only a small sample of the 25 or so songs that I listen to. If anybody wants more, let me know!

Dell has never been happier to have such a big house. Filling it with company makes him feel like a proper family man. He thinks he might turn it into a bed and breakfast.

The medic is bursting with excitement to look over these things the men risked their lives to recover. It has to be transferred from Tavish’s truck to Misha’s anyway before the morning, so they figure they might as well take it inside. Just in case it rains. It’s all stacked in a spare bedroom and Misha sits on the bed to watch the medic explore.

He opens the suitcase first, slowly. The first thing he sees is the framed picture of Misha. Lifting it gently, he wipes dust from the glass. “You look so young here,” he whispers, tracing the side of the heavy’s cheek where now there are deeper lines.

“Was from beginning of war. First week. Photographed all new mercenaries,” Misha loves the way Erik is looking at his picture.

He sets down the frame and the lingering, happy smile on his face vanishes in a blink when he sees a
pair of red rubber gloves sitting on top of the clothing. He doesn’t move towards them or away from them. He doesn’t move at all. He doesn’t even seem to be breathing.

"Erik." Misha says, catching the attention and bringing him out of the state of shock he's gone into. He holds his hand out for the medic to draw him away from the red gloves. "What is wrong?" he asks when Erik is standing in front of him. "Why are you so scared?"

“Misha,” the medic doesn’t look away from the gloves. His voice doesn’t shake. “Have I ever killed anyone?”

Misha sighs and squeezes Erik's hand. He doesn't know what to say that won't be a lie. But Erik isn't ready to know about his involvement in the war yet. It will be too much for him.

"You were doktor," he says. He wants to tell him that it was a war and of course he killed, everyone did. But he can't yet. "People die on operating table all the time. Sometimes sick people want to die. They are in pain and suffer. You help them to die quickly. Was not always allowed but was the kinder thing to do."

It's not a lie. Not completely. He never said it was usually Erik's fault they were suffering. He didn't need to know that yet.

The medic doesn’t seem pleased by this information. He pulls his hand out of Misha’s, and when the bigger man reaches for him, he takes a step back. Misha doesn’t know what to say. He doesn’t get a chance to say anything before the medic walks away. He returns to the suitcase slowly and lifts the gloves. They feel natural in his hands, like skin he shed. He pulls them on without a word and flexes his fingers in the rubber. Holding them up to the light, they catch it and shine. He looks down and sees the rest of his uniform underneath the gloves. Lifting it into his arms, he dashes into the bathroom off the bedroom and slams the door.

Misha is a little nervous. He sits back down on the bed and fidgets. Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe too many memories will come back too fast and overwhelm his mind and he'll die. He doesn’t know if it’s possible to die from memories. But he knows that if it is, Erik has more than enough terrible thoughts to kill.

The door opens again and Erik steps out. The long white coat sweeps around his feet, the boots click on the hard wood floor, the red tie is cinched perfectly into place. It looks like a day has never passed since the war ended as he stands with dignity. The uniform is a little looser than it used to be, he’s lost a good deal of muscle since the accident, but he looks more like Medic than ever.
"Doktor," Misha breathes. His eyes are wide and he couldn't tear them away from Erik if the walls started falling down around them. This is his doktor, right here in front of him. The man he's been fighting so long to get back is finally within reach.

He gets up off the bed, bad leg be damned, and limps over to Erik. He can't resist touching him, feeling the familiar medical coat under his hands again for the first time in more than a year. It takes all his self control not to start undressing Erik right then and there.

"I have missed this," he mutters, looking the doctor over from head to toe. "Have missed seeing you like this."

“It’s too big,” Erik mutters, rolling his shoulders. “Are you sure zhis vas mine? It seemed to belong to a larger man.”

Misha grins. "You were larger man once. Have lost weight. Were once very strong."

The medic turns sharply to watch the white coat flutter around his feet. “Zhis is what I vore when I vas a doctor?” he gives a little laugh, high in his nose. “I must have been very pretentious if I decided to vear zhis. It’s a little over zhe top, don’t you think?”

"You were very important doktor," Misha assures him with a smile. "Wanted everyone to know how important. Had many other doktors working beneath you. Had to know who was boss."

The medic continues to rifle through the suitcase, uncovering more old clothes that he recalls fondly. A chocolate-colored vest and dusty little pocket watch, a pair of black socks with little red medical crosses on them, a wine-colored bow tie. Everything looks new and exciting, but at the same time, familiar. He’ll ask Misha questions like if he really actually wore that white shirt with the ruffles and Misha laughs and tells him yes, and he looked rather handsome.

There’s a knock at the door after Erik has just reached the bottom of the suitcase, and it creaks open. “Hey, dinner’s ready do you wanna – whoa. That’s a sight I ain’t seen in a while.” Dell leans up against the door frame and looks down at the kneeling medic. "Little spooky, seein’ you dressed like that again, doc."

Erik looks up at him. “Again?”
"Told you. Wore that when you practiced medicine," Misha hurries to fill in. "Was very famous. But made people nervous. Doktors mean you are hurt or sick. Especially best doktor."

“But I met Dell at Christmas,” Erik looks back over at Misha.

There’s a whoop from downstairs that distracts the trio. “Aw, hell, I think Scout found the liquor. Come on down when you’re ready to eat. Might wanna change outta that old uniform though or you’ll spook the others.” He tips his hat politely and disappears down the hall.

Erik stares confusedly at the empty doorway and then back to Misha, but the giant urges him to change before he can ask any questions. He puts his sweater back on and they join the others downstairs.

The medic looks uncomfortable all night. Misha knows he has questions, but he doesn’t know how to answer them or if he even should. He dreads the moment they have to go to bed and they’ll be alone with his questions.

He wishes he could enjoy the company. Especially since this could be the last time in a very long time that he’ll see any of them. Scout winds up in Sniper’s lap at some point after taking two shots, and Angel wouldn’t separate from Dell’s arm for the world. It makes Misha ache, seeing the others happy and together, and then looking over at Erik and seeing him quiet and brooding.

The party winds down well after midnight. Erik is nodding off next to Misha who needs help from Dell and Jane to get upstairs to their room thanks to his leg acting up. Erik follows close behind, obvious tired but still too quiet and too contemplative for Misha’s tastes.

Then they’re in their room, finally completely alone. Misha’s heart is racing a mile a minute waiting for the questions he knows Erik has been holding in all night.

But he doesn’t ask them. He doesn’t say a single word as he changes into his pajamas and slips into bed beside the bigger man. He rolls over on his side, facing away from Misha, which is odd considering he usually snuggles right up to him. Maybe he can tell the heavy is hiding things from him.

He doesn’t talk all morning, either. Through breakfast and goodbyes, he gives friendly nods and hugs and handshakes, but he doesn’t speak. His things are carried into Misha’s truck and they give
one last final goodbye and thank you to Dell and Miss Pauling before they have to leave.

Erik doesn’t speak until lunch time, and then it’s only to agree idly to the roadside diner Misha suggests they stop at. He does a lot of looking out windows, stone faced and still. Misha has never seen him think this much since before his accident, and it worries him.

The drive is long and tense and a few times Misha considers letting Erik drive for a while so he can sleep and escape the awkwardness for a little while. But he'd rather they both make it home alive and suffers through.

When they finally get home around dinner time, Misha sends Erik inside so he can unpack. Everything is heavy and every box and step makes the shrapnel in his leg tear more and more of the muscle. But it's still better than trying to not quite lie to the doctor more.

“You’re still limping,” Erik says when the last box is inside. His voice startles Misha after so long in silence. “Let me see.”

“I am fine, I – ”

“I am not giving you a choice. Sit down,” Erik says firmly. Misha obeys without a second thought, so used to listening to that commanding tone that he almost forgets the doctor has changed.

Erik urges him to remove his pants so he can look at his leg. There’s horrible bruising all along his thigh, blood seeping under the skin where the muscle has been chewed up. Curiously, Erik pushes gently against the muscle, and then harder, and Misha cries out, but a small piece of metal breaks through the skin and Erik pulls it out with his fingertips.

“Shrapnel,” he says, and looks over at the crates and boxes that the doves have settled over. “You brought medical equipment?”

“Da, I can get – ” Misha starts to stand.

“I said sit!”
Misha sits.

Erik opens the crates and he doesn’t take a moment’s pause at the contents. He rifles through until he finds what he is looking for – a scalpel, a Petri dish, rubbing alcohol, bandages, cotton balls, tweezers and gauze. He takes the blanket off the back of the couch and a pillow and lays them on the ground. “Lay here,” he says. “I have to take care of you.”

"I can go to hospital." Misha offers, but he lays down on the blanket anyway. Erik is holding a sharp knife and is angry enough at him anyway. It's best not to antagonize him. "You do not have medical license anymore." Misha says as Erik starts cleaning the wound. "Are you sure you know what you are doing?"

“I don’t have anesthesia but I’m sure I can find a brick if you like,” Erik says, ignoring his question entirely and pressing an alcohol-soaked cotton ball to the wound. He presses gently through the muscle, and where he feels resistance, he makes a small incision and pulls out the shrapnel with the tweezers and puts it in the dish.

"That hurts." Misha says, gritting his teeth against the pain. "Could be gentler. Or talk to me. Distract me from pain like you used to."

“Of course it hurts, it’s a scalpel,” Erik says briskly as he feels for more shrapnel and makes another incision. “Did you think zhis vas going to feel good? Zhis is what you get for going on an incredibly dangerous journey and getting hurt zhis badly. Zhe brick is still an option.” He pulls three shards of metal out of the same incision before moving on.

"You could not lift brick." Misha laughs. "Would try to hit me gently and would drop on my head and turn me into Misha-face pancake."

“Is zhat a challenge?” the medic sits up straighter. “Shall I fetch a brick?”

Misha laughs and goes still to let Erik continue removing the shrapnel. The doctor keeps chiding him, pressing harder than necessary at times to really get his point across. Misha doesn't mind too much, it's painful but he's had worse. And it's so familiar Erik could be pulling out organs and he wouldn't care. By the time he finishes they’re both smiling and laughing despite the stress and pain.

"Reminds me of how we first met,” he says after Erik pulls out a particularly large piece of metal from his upper thigh. "Needed important surgery from top doktor. Met you from operating table."
Erik’s smile fades. He blinks down at the wounds on Misha’s leg and his fingers slow in their process of putting a couple stitches in each incision. He swallows hard and sighs. “I don’t remember,” he whispers, and looks up at the other man. “Tell me about it, please. Tell me like a story.”

"I was fighting in war. Big tough war hero. You will remember some day and will be very proud," Misha starts, already grinning despite the pain. "But war is hard. Gun is heavy and there is much running. And many bullets. Many, many bullets, could get very badly hurt very easily.

"I am used to hard work. But not in heat and not with bullets. Heat became too much and started to get weak and get hurt. Redmond, old scary bad man but was boss, did not like that. Did not want to waste money on me. So sent me to you."

He pauses for a moment, remembering how scared he was the first time he met Erik. He had heard stories of the mad doctor and laying down on his operating table was terrifying. If only he’d known then how it would turn out.

"You were genius who knew what I needed. Needed bigger, stronger heart. Big heart for big man with big job. But special heart too. Special heart that could make whole body resist bullets sometimes. So you took out my heart and gave me newer, better one. Heat never bothered me again." Misha finishes proudly, leaving out how Erik would come into battle with him and the damage they would do together.

The medic sews up the last incision silently, and packs away the needle. “Does zhat mean I held your heart in my hands?” he asks, putting his palms over the stitched-up cuts like his palms alone could seal them up.

Misha smiles and covers both of Erik’s hands with his own. “Always have.”

The medic rubs his thumbs in slow, gentle circles, his eyes hooding with a fond smile. He tries to remember, but his memories are foggy at best and he’d much rather focus on the comforting warmth of the bigger man’s hand on his. He leans forward and presses his forehead into Misha’s shoulder, and lets out a content sigh. His breath is warm on the heavy’s chest.

Misha wraps an arm loosely around Erik’s shoulders, more resting it than holding him but the effect is the same. This is how it should always be, he thinks. His doctor taking care of him and then they hold each other. Like they always did.
"You said you love me," He says after a moment. "Before I leave with others. You say you love me. What did you mean?"

The medic sits back on his calves. “It means I love you, what did you think it means?” he reaches for the gauze and bandages and straps a generous layer to Misha’s stitches.

Misha grabs his hands to stop him. He wants all of Erik’s attention for this.

"I mean how do you love me? Do you love me as brother? As good friend? Like a pet? Or is it romantic? How do you love me doktor?"

Erik’s cheeks light up and he jerks his hands away from the bigger man’s grip. They clench into fists, suspended in midair. He opens his mouth and closes it again, eyes wide. He can feel his heart pounding in his chest. “Put your pants on,” he says quickly and drops the giant’s trousers in his lap before collecting the supplies in his arms and scrambling to his feet so he can put some distance between them before his heart beats a hole right through his chest.

"No!" Misha says. He sits up too quickly and grabs the back of Erik's shirt so fast he makes the smaller man stumble. "I am sorry doktor. But I have to know if you love me like I think you do. I need to know. Have been waiting for you to love me back for so long. I can not wait longer."

Erik almost drops the things in his arms. He looks back over his shoulder with fear in his eyes. “I don’t want to talk about zhis,” he barks and wriggles out of Misha’s hold. He dumps the things in his arms in the crate before he almost sprints out of the room. He has to get to the study, that’s his safe haven. The only door in the whole cabin that actually locks. The only place he can be alone with his thoughts.

He slams the wooden door closed and leans up against it, jamming the lock into place with his elbow. His heart is pounding so fast it hurts, and his knees feel weak. He slides down the door, clutching his arms to his chest. He has to physically hold his heart in his chest it’s racing so quickly.

Misha’s words roll around in his head. He doesn’t know what he means, waiting, waiting for what exactly? He already told Misha he loves him, what more does he want from him? He takes off his glasses with shaking fingers and sets them down on the floor beside him so he can cover his burning face with both hands. Tears wet his fingers, but he presses harder to try and squeeze them back into his eyes.
Something flutters in the back of his mind, like the rustling of the birds downstairs he startled when he ran. Something like a memory, but it’s more of a feeling, or the reflection of a sensation. A flash like a gun, like something is bleeding slowly, dying and healing and dying all at the same time. He presses his eyes into his knees and holds them tight to his chest and tries, tries, tries not to think.

Misha checks the stitches under the bandaging to make sure they’ll hold. They look alright but he’s not going to test them anytime soon. For safety's sake.

Bandages back in place he gets up and starts unpacking one of the boxes that holds the doctor's more personal items. A few photos, clothes, his notes and even his old wedding ring are all tucked away, safe and sound inside the crate.

He figures its best to leave Erik alone for a little while. He pushed too far too fast again and Erik will need time to recover. They'll get past it eventually, he just needs space. He'll go get him for dinner and neither of them will mention a thing and it will be like things are back to normal.

All of that goes out the window when he hears the first crash upstairs. He tries to ignore it at first but it’s followed by another. Then another and there’s the distinct sound of something shattering. Before he knows it he's rushing up the stairs and banging on the locked study door.

The medic inside doesn’t even hear him over the sounds of his own anger and the thudding of books hitting the floor. He hears the doctor cry out, but it doesn’t sound like pain or like fear, it sounds like anger and like the kind of sadness that smolders for a very long time. Misha feels a cold breeze wash over his toes under the crack in the door and he knows the medic broke the window.

“Damn it, Misha!” he shouts. The giant can tell he’s yelling in general, and not at the giant standing outside his door. There’s a lost sort of misdirection to the anger in his voice. “Ich hasse dich!”

He hears Erik sob. The kind of sob that comes from deep in the throat, the kind that wanted to be a scream, but didn’t make it all the way. The kind of suffering, anguished sob that makes men fall to their knees begging forgiveness.

"Erik please, let me in!" Misha begs. He isn't banging on the door anymore. He's pressed against it now, trying to hear what Erik is saying. Or maybe somehow slip through the wood into the other room. "I am sorry," he says. "So sorry. We forget all about it now. Come out and have dinner and will not mention it ever again. I promise. Please come out."
The crashing and screaming stops. He can hear the medic panting, and then hears his breathing still. He doesn’t even hear Erik’s footsteps approach the door before it flies open so fast that Misha almost falls facefirst into the room.

“Go back downstairs,” the medic barks, trying to be tough despite the redness and wetness of his face. “You are hurt. Go lie down on the couch or I will put you there myself.”

"Would like to see you try," Misha challenges, hoping he can goad the other man into coming out of the room. Erik rarely backs down from a challenge.

The Medic doesn’t react very strongly. He sets his mouth into a thin line and narrows his eyes in a way that makes Misha nervous, but he doesn’t yell or stop his feet or push the Heavy.

“I said,” his voice is lower than Misha has heard it in a long time. “Go downstairs. Lay down on the couch. Now.”

"Only if you come with me. I can not serve us dinner from the couch. Not while you are up here,” Misha replies, but the fight is going out of him. He can’t disobey Erik when he’s like this. The doctor doesn’t even know what he's doing but that doesn't stop it from having the desired effect.

“I am going to make dinner,” Erik barks. “You are going to sit down and get off that leg before I have to redo your stitches. And then you’re going to stay seated until bed time, rinse, und repeat. For right this second, I need to be alone.” The door slams shut so abruptly, it bumps the tip of Misha’s nose.

"Yes doktor," Misha almost laughs. He practically flies down the stairs in his haste to obey his doctor. He loves when Erik gets bossy but he hasn't been enough like himself to start barking orders. Until now. It's a good sign. "Maybe trip was worth it." Misha mutters to himself, as he lowers himself onto the couch as ordered.

The Medic doesn’t descend the stairs for another hour. When he does, he’s holding the dust pan full of broken glass, and he dumps it into the bin. He looks over at Misha, obediently reading a book on the couch, holding it a little too far away from his face to look normal.

“You aren’t wearing your reading glasses,” Erik says. They both stop what they’re doing, responding to the statement in different levels of confusion. “You… haven’t worn zhem at all. I must have
dreamed it.”

"No. I have glasses." Misha tells him. It's such a small thing but Erik remembering it is huge. Maybe he'll remember more too. "I left them. Somewhere. Do not remember where but have not had them for long while. Do you remember where they were?"

“I think…” Erik looks over at the things still piled in the middle of the room, underneath the doves. His gaze zeroes in on the suitcase and he approaches it again. He unzips it and reaches into a smaller pocket inside, and pulls out a thin black case. “You… left them. In my office. I vas going to bring them to you when ve…” he cries out and drops the case when a flash of blinding pain sparks behind his right eye.

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*Erik turns the light off and takes a moment to look across the clean operating theatre. He runs his palm across the metal exam table with a fond smile. But he can’t stall for too long, he has a train to catch and a life to start somewhere else.*

*The suitcase is heavy. He knows Misha will offer to carry it for him, and he’ll only insist once that he can carry it himself before he hands it over. Misha’s glasses are tucked safely in the inside pocket of Erik’s suitcase. The war had ended so abruptly that he’d left them by his bed the night before when he read before going to sleep.*

*He pushes the door open and there are two men there, two men he’s never seen before. They’re big, and dressed all in red, with serious expression.*

“Good morning, gentlemen,” he says, balancing the suitcase on his thigh. “Can I help you?”

“Come with us,” the larger speaks.

“I’m sorry, I have a train to catch,” Erik glances down at his watch. “I’m sure some of zhe nurses can see you.”

“It wasn’t a request.”
"Doktor!" Misha sits up when the Medic knocks his glasses off in his haste to put pressure on the enormous pain behind his eye.

“I’m fine!” Erik howls, turning a manic eye to the Heavy. “Stay sitting down, it’s only a headache!”

"You sit down too," Misha says, ushering the man to the couch with him. "You pushed too hard for memories. Will hurt yourself if you do that. Let them come. You had my glasses. This is good, da?"

Misha is scared. Terrified. Erik had jackknifed forward with a cry and grabbed his head and Misha thought everything he had been warned about was happening now. Now, when things were really starting to get better. He’d finally pushed too far and Erik had burst a blood vessel or something and was going to die or go into a coma or some other terrible thing.

Clearly he's fine but Misha doesn't want to take too much of a chance by letting him continue to force his memories. It's not worth it.

Erik shakily puts the glasses in the bigger man’s lap. “I’m going to go make dinner,” he says wearily. “Vear your glasses or you’ll ruin your eyesight more.”

He pushes off the couch on unsteady feet and paces into the kitchen, shaking from head to toe, not sure what he just experienced.
The bed is cold and the room is dark when Misha wakes up in the middle of the night. Alone. Erik isn’t in the bed where he’d fallen asleep beside the giant. He sits up anxiously and sees a dim light down the hall through the open door. A light is on downstairs.

He reaches for his robe, but it’s not on the bed post, which means Erik is wearing it. It’s chilly, but he gets out of bed anyway. He knows the Medic will scold him for getting out of bed instead of resting his leg, but he’s too curious.

Erik is knelt in the middle of the living room with only a small lamp turned on, pulled over to him on the floor. He has several things spread out in front of him, and Archimedes perched on his hand. He’s stroking the bird’s dirty feathers and whispering to him, Misha can barely hear him as he draws nearer.

“—und you need a bath, ja? Tomorrow, I’ll give you a bath, you’re filthy. Do you ever even preen, you ridiculous bird?”

Misha’s foot creaks the floorboards. Archimedes flies away with a distressed noise when Erik whirls around fast as a bullet with his saw in hand, ready to fight off the intruder that startled him.

"Is only me, doktor." Misha says, raising his hands in surrender. Erik could not do much damage to him with only a saw anyway but he doesn’t feel up to a fight. "I have gotten used to having you in my bed. Am not so used to the cold anymore. Why are you down here in middle of night?"

“I couldn’t sleep.” Erik puts the saw down and Archimedes settles back down on his shoulders. “You shouldn’t be going up and down zhose stairs if you don’t have to. Go back to bed.” He turns his back to the Heavy again and lifts a medical journal off the ground and starts to flip through it.

"нет." Misha says, settling down on the couch behind Erik. "Bed is too big and too cold without
you. Will sit down and stay with you for now. You can tell about what you find in crates.

“I’ve found a lot of things, I don’t know what most of it is,” the Medic mumbles as he flips through the pages of the journal. He jumps when a photograph falls out of the book and lands in his lap.

He holds it up to the lamp with a frown. It’s a group picture of nine men standing in a row. He recognizes Misha instantly, and then sees Sniper beside him, and the cheerful black man that had come back from the dangerous mission with them beside the Sniper. A few faces he doesn’t recognize, until he gets to the end of the row, and he sees his own face looking back at him.

In his shock, he almost drops the photograph. “Misha,” he whispers, and looks up at the other man. “Tell me again how you met those men you took to New Mexico with you?”

"I met them in war." Misha says from the sofa. He looks over at Erik and sees that he's holding something. But in the dim light it's impossible to see what it is. "Why?"

“Misha,” he doesn’t look away from him for a second, his voice is quiet and shaking. "Was I in the war?"

“Why?” Misha asks, rather than answering the question. Erik is scared. He can see that and he hates it. Erik is too strong to be scared, especially of something like his participation in the war. He should be proud of his work, like he used to be, not frightened by it. This is wrong, very wrong, but Misha doesn’t know how to fix it.

“Tell me, was I in the war?” Erik asks again, his eyes blown wide as he clutches the photograph in his hand.

"Da." Misha says with a sigh. "You were head doctor for our unit. Had operating theatre in the barracks. Is not something to be ashamed of. Saved many lives."

Erik doesn’t speak. He looks back down at the photograph. It’s in black and white, but he can see black spots all over his coat and he just knows it isn’t ink. His stomach churns.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he says, looking up again. The fear is gone from his eyes, replaced by anger. His voice is sharp like a knife, accusatory. “What happened, why don’t I remember any of these men? Why don’t I remember you?!"
He frisbees the photograph at the heavy and slams the medical journal shut, rising to his feet. His anger is worth the respect of his height. “What happened to me Misha?! I’m in that photograph with men I thought I met for the first time this week!”

"I have told you! There was an accident!” Misha exclaims, catching the photograph. Erik looks so different there. If he did not know better he might not believe the man in front of him and the one in the photo are actually the same person. "It was not supposed to happen. Things went very wrong. I could not save you." Misha says sadly. "You were badly hurt. You forgot everything. Forgot everything. Could not walk or speak for a while. But you are remembering. Will remember more in time."

“What happened?” Erik tries to shout, but it just comes out as a wrecked sob.

Misha doesn’t say anything.

The Medic lets out a scream of anger and leaves the room. He can’t even look at the man right now. It feels like he’s been lied to all this time. He feels dizzy and queasy and he almost falls down, trips through the doorway into the downstairs bathroom, and he barely has enough time to fall to his knees in front of the toilet before he’s emptying his stomach, mostly acid at this point in the night, choking and crying and shaking from the core outward.

Misha hears his beloved being sick and it breaks his heart. But all of this is for Erik. Someday he’ll see that. He's confused and scared and emotional right now but someday, when he understands more, he’ll see that Misha was only doing what is best for him. He's only trying to help.

At least that's what Misha hopes. He holds onto that because it’s the only thing that keeps him from going to Erik and telling him everything. He can't put that much pressure on him now. It'll break him. If Erik never understands that, someday it will destroy the Heavy. But it's a risk he has to take.

The Medic declares he wants to sleep on the couch. He says he’s too queasy to climb the stairs, but in reality he just doesn’t want to sleep next to Misha right now.

By the time the Heavy hobbles back downstairs in the morning after a very fitful sleep, breakfast is already made and most of the boxes have been unpacked and sorted into piles.

Erik is standing with his back to the stairs, trying to situate a violin on his shoulder. He’s clumsy with
it, the bow is awkward and the grip keeps slipping from under his chin. Archimedes won’t stop sitting on the neck, fluttering into the air and perching once more every time the medic shoos him.

“Archimedes, please! I am trying to – ” he makes a noise, as though he doesn’t know exactly what he is trying to do, but he is definitely trying to do it.

"You need to move pinkie finger," Misha suggests. He remembers watching Erik play. It was such a common sight before the accident. He'd even asked Erik for a lesson once. It had gone terribly but he still remembers the finger placements Erik taught him.

The medic whirls around so quickly the bird finally takes flight and leaves him. “Oh. Good morning,” he says stiffly. “Breakfast is ready. It’s under zhe cover on zhe table to keep it varm.” The violin droops and he sets it down on a stack of books. “I have to let my birds out, pardon me.”

He walks briskly out of the room, clicking his tongue to get the birds to follow, and he opens the front door for them.

Misha sighs. Erik is still angry. He didn't expect him to get over his anger in a night but he had hoped. It will take time, the heavy knows that. Time heals all wounds. But for this particular injury he would prefer a medigun for some instant healing.

He goes to the table to find his breakfast, a plate piled with eggs and bacon and toast, waiting for him. It's delicious, if not a little worrying that Erik used the stove alone. Maybe it's a peace offering? Or just Erik's way of saying that he's angry but not angry enough to leave? Either way Misha eats it and tries to stay hopeful.

The day is spent mostly with Erik constantly barking for Misha to stay seated. That anything he can do that he has to stand for, Erik will do it for him. Whenever the heavy tries to protest, he’ll say,

“You spent so long taking care of me, it is my turn.”

The words would give Misha a sense of calm and warmth, if only the medic didn’t say them coldly and quickly like he’s trying to get them out of his mouth as quickly as he can, for propriety’s sake.

When the sun is highest and the day is warmest, Erik takes his birds outside again and begins to build them a roost. It’s not terribly well crafted, but it’ll work long enough until Misha is on his feet and he
can build a better one. He leaves the glass door open for now so the birds can come and go, and he tapes a simple decoration to the glass so the doves won’t accidentally hit the door when it’s closed and hurt themselves.

But they sleep inside. He’s only just got them back, he’s not going to risk them being taken by foxes or owls. He lays out a tarp and a rack that was once for clothes but is now definitely for birds.

And every time Misha tries to stand, Erik will be there in a flash and demand to know what he was going to do, and if he can do it for him. Sometimes Misha will respond that he has to use the bathroom and the medic will just flusteredly demand him to at least take it easy.

Sometimes Misha considers getting up and walking around just to have Erik come fuss over him. It's better than the frosty silence he's treated to otherwise. He tries to get up to turn on the television but Erik insists on doing it for him and asks if there's something special he wants to watch. Misha has a hard time explaining that he's just trying to fill the silence.

When he’s not flitting around like the birds on his heels, he’s sorting and putting away his old things. He fills the dresser and closet upstairs with his clothes and hauls the textbooks and journals and notebooks to his study, he keeps the violin downstairs and totes the other sundries to where they should go.

He sleeps in the bed again that night, but he doesn’t curl up against Misha like usual. Even with his warmth and presence in the bed, it feels too big for the heavy unless they’re side by side, sharing body heat.

Erik is cold to him for days. He doesn’t seem to be getting over this one any time soon. He doesn’t touch Misha unless he has to, he hardly looks him in the eye when speaking to him, and he’s never in the room for very long, putting distance between them that makes Misha want to cry.

He doesn’t see a way out of this one. He can’t tell Erik what happened, not after the incident with the glasses, he could really hurt him. But he can’t not tell him either, because as the rift grows, it feels like he’s slowly watching the Medic drift away from him. Damned if he does, damned if he doesn’t.

Erik doesn’t seem like he’s on his way out the door, but Misha is on pins and needles anyway. He can feel it in the air, it’s like they’re one more argument away from Erik claiming he wants to live alone.
On the third day of the freeze out Misha suggests getting a cane. He doesn't want to stay bedridden, or couchridden, but he can't put too much weight on his leg without hurting himself and becoming a bother to Erik. He suggests they go into town together and get one.

Erik says he can go alone and bring one back. Misha can't be on his feet long enough to pick out a decent cane. He doesn't let Misha argue, he just goes. He comes back with a simple hard wood cane that he claims is re-enforced and should withstand Misha's weight. But he has to promise to use it sparingly.

Misha will occasionally hear a wayward screech from the Medic’s violin, accompanied by a frustrated groan or sometimes the sound of something breaking. The violin is so familiar in Erik’s hands, but he can’t get a single note out of the thing.

If he manages to string together a simple, wobbly tune, Misha will hobble over to congratulate him, but the moment the Medic hears his awkward threesome gait he stops playing altogether and barks for the Heavy to go sit down again and stop standing up for stupid, unnecessary reasons.

Misha tries to cook dinner once and Erik yells at him. He doesn’t snap or bark orders, he yells. He insults his intelligence, his ability to listen, his sense of self preservation, before sending him back to the couch. Misha doesn't eat much that night, too heartsick to have much of an appetite.

He doesn’t disobey Erik's orders again after that. He spends most of the days after rereading the two books they own in Russian and watching what's on the television. He doesn't even get up to change the channel. It doesn't seem worth it to antagonize Erik further.

Erik hates the violin. Every time he picks it up, it upsets him. It feels too big, cold and wrong in his hands. He can’t hold it right and if he even tries to make a sound it comes out screechy and antagonized.

He wants to throw it, he wants to break it and forget about it, but even thinking about doing it makes him sad. He knows there was a time he could play it; he knows he wouldn’t have it otherwise. But his inability to play it now only reminds him of everything he lost, everything he can’t even remember having. It widens a hole in his psyche that keeps him awake at night, begging to be filled.

Misha stops offering encouragement. He likes to see Erik with the violin but he pretends not to notice. It's obvious that the doctor is growing more frustrated with the instrument and Misha is a little afraid that if he brings it up, even to praise him, the medic will break the thing over his head.
He hears Erik crying sometimes. He’ll hear him talking to himself in German and sobbing, muffled, into pillows or his hands, ashamed of his own tears. He wants to go to him, collect him up in his arms, comfort him. But he’s afraid to even go near him.

In the middle of the night, he’ll wake up to Erik breaking things downstairs, shouting and crying. It kills him to roll over and try to go back to sleep when he hears the man he loves more than anything in the world screaming at his own failure in the dark, alone.

Erik doesn’t even know what he’s angry about anymore. He’s still upset that Misha won’t tell him what happened, but he can only be angry about that for so long. Now it’s more like he’s fallen into a pattern of anger that he can’t get out of. Misha is too kind and too gentle and too sweet and it makes him angry because – he doesn’t know why. He wishes the Heavy would get mad at him, too. He wishes they would shout at one another, have a real argument. He wishes Misha would hit him.

Misha doesn’t smile these days. He tries when Erik is around but he’s not sure if the other man notices or cares. When Erik isn’t around he doesn’t bother trying. This is going on too long. He can’t survive Erik pushing him away. He's fought too long and too hard to get Erik back to lose him over a stupid fight. Something has to change soon. But he doesn't know what.

He goes back to cleaning when Erik isn't around to scold him. The work and pain together keep his mind off his problems. Just like back in the war. It's the most he can do now. But he's careful to always be back on the couch or in his chair when Erik comes inside or downstairs so he won't be caught.

Over the days, the need to get into a ceiling-rattling fight grows in Erik. He dons the gloves sometimes and closes his eyes when he’s alone so he can try to remember what it was like. The rush, the feeling of someone’s nose crunching under his hand, the way the saw used to arc and draw blood, he can see flashes and feel little flutters, but he can’t hold onto anything for long.

He wants Misha to hit him. He wants to feel a spark of pain that will bring him out of the monotony of this routine anger. He wants to watch his skin speckle with bruises and break open and bleed. He wants to see what colors he is on the inside.

When he yells at Misha now, it’s to try and get him to yell back. It never works, so he just gets louder and more aggressive, but the bigger man always cowers to him until he gets so angry that he has to leave the room, and an hour later something else has to be thrown out because he broke it.

Misha doesn't understand what Erik wants. He yells over nothing now. He shouts and insults and throws things when Misha's done nothing wrong and the heavy is left scared and confused. He can't
handle it any longer.

Erik starts in on him one day over breakfast, yelling about how little Misha is eating and how he is eating it, too slowly, too small bites, making a mess when he knocks over his juice because Erik is yelling.

Misha can't take it anymore. He stands up suddenly and slams his hands down on the table.

"Enough. That is enough. I go now." he says, voice low and broken. He can't look at Erik. He grabs his cane and the keys for the truck and heads for the door.

“Stop it!” Erik screeches. He grabs Misha’s hand. “You’re too nice! Stop it!”

“What do you want from me?” Misha turns so fast that he knocks the smaller man off his feet.

He scrapes his hands on the wooden floor and bangs his elbows on the way down and his whole body feels electric. “I vant you to hit me,” he says with conviction that scares Misha. He doesn’t get up off the ground. “I vant you to be angry with me! I vant you to use your strength against me!”

"No." Misha says, his jaw set. He has more life in him now than he's had in days and it shows in the sheer force of his words. "Never. Would cut off my own hands before I hurt you. I would leave you before I cause you pain. I can not hurt you do you not understand? You may hit, may swear, my call me every cruel name you can think of, but I will never hurt you. Ever. If that is what you want I will leave. Will take away the temptation."

Erik lets out a sob. “Vhy?!” he demands and scrambles to his feet shaking. “Vhy do you just take it?! Is zhis vhat you’ve always done? Have you never fought back a day in your life? Have you always been zhis subservient to me, I hate it!” he grabs Misha’s wrist and lifts his hand. “Hit me, choke me, knock me down! Damn it, I vant it, I need to feel it! I can’t feel anything else!”

Misha yanks his hand away. "No! Stop! I have hurt and killed many men in my life. Will not turn that on you! Can not! Could not hurt you like this. Not like this. Erik do not ask me to. Will touch you but not to cause pain. You want to feel something from me will only be gentle and loving. Will not be pain!"

The medic takes a step back, shaking from head to toe. His teeth are bared, his face is red, his hands
are bleeding. “Zhen go,” his voice is brittle. “I’ll find someone else.”

Misha has the door open and is almost outside when he stops. He slams the door and turns on the medic, his face twisted in rage and pain.

"Will find someone else?!" He shouts, advancing on the smaller man. "Will find someone else? After all I do for you because I will not do this one thing you will turn to someone else?"

He's shouting and is scaring himself as much as he can see that he's scaring Erik but he can't stop. He reaches out and smacks the doctor hard across the face.

There's a moment after his hand makes contact where everything goes still and seems to crystallize before him. He hit Erik. He smacked Erik in anger. He hurt him.

The heavy looks at his hand in shock and the next second he's dropped his cane and is rushing out the door, pain be damned. He feels sick and has to get away from what he's done.

Erik dropped like a rock. Pain exploded across his face and he felt his nose pop and bleed. His hands sting from where he tried to catch himself, but he collapses. His teeth rattle and his ears are ringing and hazily he can see blood dripping on the floor.

He hears the truck rumble to life and peel out of the driveway, squealing rubber over gravel. His head is spinning as he pulls himself so he’s sitting up, shaking. He didn’t know if Misha would actually do it. He knows he wished he would, but now he’s not sure if he regrets it.

It’s not the pain he regrets. This is what he wanted, this is what his body craved. The pain feels like ice, waking him up from the inside out, shaking him deep. He feels alert and on fire, his fingers and toes are full of electricity, his broken nose sends sparks of pain that dance across his nervous system. He wonders if his glasses were broken, but he can’t be assed to look for them right now.

He doesn’t regret the pain. He regrets what it may have done to Misha. He ran, he didn’t even take his cane with him. Erik can see the blurry shape of the wood sitting on the porch through the open door.

He knows he’ll be back. (He hopes he’ll be back.)
Misha drives to the other side of town and finds a motel to stay in. He has enough money to stay the night which is all he needs. He spends all day there, head in his hands, cursing himself for what he's done. He can't go home now. Erik will hate him. He told him to hit him but there's no way he will forgive him for actually doing it.

He hates himself for it. He curses the hand that reached out and hurt his doktor. If he had a saw he'd cut it off. The thing is vile and disgusting to him now. He never wants to look at it again.

He stays like that until almost midnight when he gets back in the truck and drives back to the house. Erik will be asleep by now and he can sneak in and get his clothes. That's all he has to take anyway. The rest Erik can keep, he doesn't mind. But he needs his clothes and some money before he can leave properly.

The cabin is deceptively calm when he enters. Most of the lights are off, and Misha’s cane is propped up right inside the door. Blood has been clumsily scrubbed off the wooden floor. The birds are roosting on their rack, heads tucked into their wings.

Upstairs, the medic hears Misha enter. He hasn’t been able to sleep all night, he gave up more than an hour ago. He doesn’t get up to greet him just yet, though.

While Misha has been gone all day, lord knows where, Erik has been home, cleaning up the mess they made. He’s felt a sick sense of fulfillment all day. Wiping the blood from his face, setting his nose, watching bruises bloom on his skin. He had to throw out the shirt he was wearing, the blood destroyed it. He feels a sense of pride almost, that he was able to get what he wanted. He knows that Misha is probably all twisted up, but he’ll get over it.

He’s holding the photograph of their old comrades, tracing his fingers over it in the dim lamplight. The picture is very old, he can tell. They aren’t standing next to one another, but he can see the way they’re ever so subtly looking at each other. They both look so young in the photograph, the lines on their faces are so much shallower, and even without color Erik can see there’s no grey hair at his temples like there is now.

They must have known each other for a very long time. Misha looks so young and vibrant, nothing like the sad man he has been over the last few days. The sad man that Erik has made sad. Blinded by his anger, he said horrible things. His head feels so clear now, it’s hard to believe he’s spent the last week so embroiled with rage that he could chase Misha clear out of the house. The man who has given him everything, over and over, and asked for nothing in return. He could live for a thousand years and travel to every corner of the globe and he would never meet another man who could take the things he’s put Misha through.
“I’ve been so selfish,” he whispers, tracing Misha’s jaw in the photograph. “If I’ve kept you around as long as I have, you’ve been doing something right.”

Maybe he’s been taking advantage of the heavy’s kindness. Maybe Misha deserves someone better than him. He hears the big man walking slowly through the lower levels of the house and he smiles even though it makes the bruise on his cheek ache. He creeps down the stairs as quietly as he can, wrapped up in his robe.

When he sees the bigger man with his old suitcase, emptied days ago, his heart drops.

“You can’t leave,” he says, startling Misha so badly that he drops not only the suitcase but also his cane. “I didn’t mean it. You have to stay.”

Misha looks at him and sees the bruises on the doctor's face and feels sick. It's like someone has punched him hard in the stomach and he has to look away. He picks up the suitcase and moves towards the stairs, head down so he can't see the man in front of him.

"Can not stay. Not now," he says. "Have to go. Do not deserve to stay any more. I am so sorry Erik."

“When I said I was going to find someone else, I meant someone else to hit me,” Erik rushes forward and grabs for Misha, but the bigger man steps back to keep distance between them. “I didn’t mean for you to leave forever, I don’t want you to go. You gave me what I wanted, I’m not angry anymore.”

"I can't stay!" Misha insists, taking another step back. "I can not look at you now. Hurt you. I swore I would never hurt you and I did. You are covered in bruises. Gave you what you wanted maybe, but should not have done it. Hate myself for doing it. Will always hate myself for it. Would rather die than see you like this."

“Zhen you don’t have to look at me,” Erik takes another step closer. “You can’t leave me, you’ve never left me. You’ve stayed by my side for years, haven’t you? I’ve always been awful, I can feel it, but you’ve always stayed. You can’t leave now, I need you. I’m so close to remembering, but if you leave I’m afraid you’ll take it with you. I don’t know how to live without you.”

Misha shakes his head. He wants to take Erik in his arms and hold him. Wants to cry on his shoulder
and apologize a thousand times. But he can't touch him. He needs to go, to get away. He can't stay.

"You ask too much Erik. You always ask too much! Has always been your problem! Usually am happy to give you whatever you want, even when you do not deserve it. You asked too much this time." Misha is almost shaking, caught between wanting to stay and give Erik what he wants and wanting to forget the clothes and get to his truck and drive until he doesn't know where he is. "Made me hurt you. I do not know who I am now."

Erik lunges forward to grab the hand that Misha struck him with before he can run. He lifts it and presses the palm to his face. "You are not going to hurt me every time you touch me," he whispers, holding his hand in place even though he knows it would be so easy for Misha to pull away. "It wasn’t your fault, I made you do it."

He turns his face, his nose throbs but it makes the fog lift in his mind a little higher. He presses a kiss to the hand that struck him.

“I wanted it, I needed my head to be knocked clear, everything vas so fuzzy and I vas so confused and angry, I’m okay now. I don’t want to waste any more time being angry. We’ve known each other for too long, you’ve always been too kind and I’ve always been too greedy, isn’t that how it goes? How it’s always been? I need you.”

The fight goes out of Misha and he sags onto the stairs, sitting down without pulling his hand away from Erik. He's crying and he doesn't try to stop. It's been too hard. The last few weeks with Erik hating him and then striking his beloved doctor have taken their toll on the heavy.

"I need you. Need you more than you need me," Misha admits through his tears. "But I hurt you. Can not be forgiven for that. Not ever. Was wrong of me to get angry. I am so sorry Erik. So sorry."

Erik goes down on his knees in front of the bigger man and wraps his arms around him so they’re eye to eye. He kisses the man’s stubbled cheek, kisses his tears. “Don’t cry,” he whispers. “I deserved it.”

The feeling of Misha’s arms wrapping around him so tightly, squeezing the breath out of him, makes him feel even more alive than the strike did. Misha holds Erik and cries into his shoulder. He soaks the man's shirt before he pulls away, wiping away the last of his tears.

"Have to go still." he says softly. "Can not stay tonight. Will get some clothes and go to motel. Will
come back. Tomorrow or next day. But can not stay tonight. Do not deserve it."

Erik wants to ask Misha to stay, but he doesn’t. He needs his space now.

“"You promise you’ll come back?" he asks at the door, wrapped up tight in his robe. "How can I be sure you’ll come back? I need collateral.”

"Promise. When bruises are healed, will come back." Misha swears. "You can be sure because I promise you. Have only broken promise to you once now. Will not do it again."

“"You can’t leave zhat long!" Erik grabs for Misha. "Zhat vill take days! I don’t vant to be alone zhat long.”

Misha sighs and rubs his face with one large hand. He suddenly feels very old and very tired. "Will come visit. Will come help around house and do cleaning. Will come for lunch and dinner. But can not spend night."

“"You can’t move around zhat much, I’m supposed to be taking care of you now, if you go away no one vill take care of you. I’ve been doing a pretty poor job of it but I really vant to now – ” his voice starts tripping, he gets more and more frantic as he speaks. "You could hurt yourself vorse or get into an accident or fall down stairs, you could end up in zhe hospital- you could die and I would never know what happened to you- Gott, you’re all I have Misha, you’re everything I have, please don’t leave me!”

"Am not leaving. Not leaving you." Misha assures him. "Am protecting you and me. Would rather risk accident and pain than stay and see what I did. Will kill me to see you like this every day. Do you understand Erik? Will kill me."

Erik covers his face with both his hands to hold in the anger that’s started to well up again. He’s not angry at Misha this time exactly, he’s angry at himself, angry in general. He doesn’t want to say anything else to hurt him, he doesn’t want to scare him away for good. He leans his weight on the door frame trembling, and tries to believe Misha will return.

He sits down on the stairs and he doesn’t move. He doesn’t move while Misha gathers his things, and doesn’t look up when he’s on his way out the door. He parts his hands just enough to speak.
“Please don’t come back until you’re ready to stay,” he says. As much as it scares him to be alone, he doesn’t want to watch Misha come and go every day. He doesn’t want to go through this every time, this gut-wrenching fear that he might not come back again. He can hardly stand it now. If he thought he could overpower Misha and force him to stay, he probably would.

Misha stops at the door and nods. "Я люблю тебя. I will come home," he promises before closing the door behind him.
this is kind of a short chapter, to make up for the one or two really long chapters coming up wherein lies nothing but fluff that is so sweet it's gonna rot you guyses teeth right outta your heads.

The only thing that keeps Erik sane in the days that follow are their twice-daily phone calls. Misha calls him in the morning to greet the day with him, and then again at dinner time to remind him it’s time to eat. The medic will demand to know how much walking Misha has been doing and scolds him every time he truthfully says he’s been walking more than he should.

Five days is a very long time to be alone. The house is too big and quiet and Erik can’t sleep in Misha’s bed. He sleeps on the couch near his birds. His dreams are filled with visions of home invaders who come to hurt him when Misha isn’t there to protect him.

He can’t stand the silence. He uses Misha’s absence as an opportunity to practice the violin. It’s still screechy and he still gets angry, but he doesn’t break things anymore. He covers his face with both hands like he did to keep his anger in when he was facing Misha, and breathes until the urge to break something has passed. He can’t keep breaking things. He can’t keep breaking Misha’s belongings.

Erik flips idly through channels or pages of books, but he can hardly read his own atrocious handwriting and the medical journals can’t keep his attention. The air around him feels dead without Misha there to fill it with warmth and life.

He goes out to the store once, determined to do the shopping. Misha left a shopping list before he went to the motel, but never had a chance to actually get the items. But when Erik goes to fetch it, he finds it in Russian and he groans. He’ll just have to get whatever looks necessary.

Shopping, however, is exhausting and incredibly overwhelming. Especially when everyone keeps staring at him. Word spread fast about the attack at Wetherby’s, and the boys who went to jail for a few days for assaulting the German that lives in the woods and his Russian caretaker. It was even more bizarre and suspicious when the two of them vanished for a week, and came back with boxes and boxes of things. Everyone stares and whispers, but nobody approaches him or says anything loud enough for him to hear. He’s too tired to confront anyone about it.
Putting groceries away at home is even more tiring than shopping. Misha has always had a system, but he never paid attention to it enough to replicate it. He doesn’t know where the vegetables go or if the fruit is supposed to be sorted or if the meat needs to be frozen, but damn it all he is going to try. Cans go in the cupboard, everything else goes wherever it sort of fits.

When Misha calls at dinner time on the sixth day, Erik says that the bruises are gone from his face. They’re almost completely invisible, just a barely noticeable red outline where once purple and black were bright. There’s still a cut over his nose where the skin popped open under the pressure and force of Misha’s hand, but he couldn’t possibly wait long enough for it to close up completely.

Misha promises to come home the next day. He's almost looking forward to it. He's a little scared that Erik is lying to him but he's going to have faith and go home the next morning anyway.

The past week has been torture. He hates to be away from Erik. They were never supposed to be away from each other for long. But he needed time to punish himself for what he did. Distance was necessary for that. Time and silence were necessary. He knows what he did wasn't his fault. Erik wanted him to lash out. But he hates himself for it anyway. He probably always will. But he can live with it if the evidence is gone. As long as he didn't do permanent damage he can live with his mistake and know that he will never do it again.

He gets up before dawn the next morning and drives to the cabin before Erik will be awake. He wants to surprise the doctor with breakfast when he wakes up. He doesn't expect to find him sleeping on the couch.

It looks like he hasn’t been sleeping well, if the dark circles under his eyes are any indication. His hair is a mess and his glasses are still on his face, a book is laying open on his chest and the lamp beside the couch is still turned on. It looks like he fell asleep while reading the night before.

Misha creeps over to him and removes the book and glasses before turning off the lamp. He lifts the smaller man into his arms, bad leg and cane forgotten, and carries him up the stairs to their bed. He tucks him in gently before creeping back out of the room and making his way back down the stairs.

Erik wakes up in bed like a child, confused and a little mystified. He doesn’t even remember falling asleep, but he knows he never climbed the stairs to bed. That can only mean one thing.

He flies down the stairs with Misha’s robe around him again and doesn’t even slow down when he sees the big man in the kitchen. He almost knocks him right over when he throws himself into his arms. His feet actually leave the ground for a second before they both stumble back and Misha can put his weight on the counter so he doesn’t have to stand on his bad leg.
“I’m sorry I made you leave I’m sorry I got angry at you I’m sorry I was so selfish I’m sorry I made you hit me I’m sorry I scared you – ” he gushes, pressed up against Misha from nose to toes.

Misha wraps one arm around the doctor, holding him close while keeping them both upright. It feels so good to hold him again after not even seeing him for so long. "Shh. Doktor, was not your fault. I am sorry. Am sorry I hit you and am sorry I left. Am so sorry doktor, can you forgive me? Can I come home?"

“If you ever leave again I’m going to follow,” the Medic grabs Misha’s face in both his hands. His voice is serious. “Even if you go all the way to hell I’m going to follow you. You’re not allowed to ever leave me again, so help me I vill nail your feet to the floor.”

"Da. Will never leave you again." Misha promises with a grin. He takes the medic's hands but doesn't try to pull them away from his face. He just holds them. "Will take you with me to ends of earth if have to."

That had been their plan from the beginning anyway.

Erik doesn’t move for a while. He doesn’t feel the need to move. He’s safe and comfortable against Misha. It feels so natural, holding him close, like this is the thing he was born to do. He was born only to hold and be held by Misha, everything else before then was just in preparation for their embrace. Everything before then has just been time wasted, waiting, trying to find something else to fill his life with until he met this man.

“I had an idea, while you were gone,” Erik hums, but doesn’t lift his head off Misha’s shoulder just yet. “But maybe breakfast first.”

“Cannot cook breakfast with you on me.”

“Vell zhen breakfast will have to wait because I’m not moving yet,” the medic says defiantly.

"Have idea," Misha says.

He gently pries Erik off him, despite the man's protests, and switches their places so Erik is facing the
counter and he is behind him. Then he wraps his arms around the smaller man's waist from behind.

"Have everything out for breakfast already. You do cooking. I will hold you."

The medic doesn’t object. This is where Misha is supposed to be, always. He’s never going to chase him off again. He’s come too close to losing Misha twice now, he can’t stand to see him gone ever again.

Pancakes taste better when you prepare them with someone you love hugging the stuffing out of you.

With the plates cleared away and both men a little sticky with syrup, they wash their hands together and Erik pretends not to notice the way Misha’s smile falters whenever he sees the cut on his nose.

“I vant to do something vith you,” Erik says, and fetches the canary’s cage from the bedroom, where he’s been giving it the barest amount of attention in order to keep it alive. He doesn’t need it anymore now that he has his doves back.

He sets the cage on the kitchen table with a sigh. This bird represents everything they’ve been through. All of the fear and suffering and anger and pain and confusion of the last year glitter in this little bird’s golden feathers.

Erik opens the cage and takes the scared bird, firm but gentle in his grip. Misha follows Erik outside, his hands folded gently over the bird, and encourages the heavy to fold his own hands around Erik’s.

“To letting go of zhe anger,” he whispers, leaning back in Misha’s arms.

Misha understands what Erik is doing. The bird represents all their past fighting and anger. And now it is time to let it go, together. So they can move on.

They release the canary together and watch it fly away. Erik leans against Misha's chest and Misha rubs his shoulder with one hand, the other holding his cane. Its a soft, quiet moment and Misha can feel the weight of their anger lifting as the bird flies farther and farther out of sight.
"What did you name him?" Misha asks softly when the bird is no where to be seen.

Erik thinks for a moment, comfortable in their togetherness.

“Vergangenheit,” he hums with a smile.

“I do not know that word,” Misha laughs.

“German word for past,” Erik turns his back to the retreating bird so he can look Misha in the eye. “All we have left is zhe future now.”

"Future." Misha says, mulling over the word. He likes that. He likes hearing Erik talk about their future together. He smiles and tilts his head down to kiss Erik's forehead. "Da. That is good. Future together is a good thing."

The kiss overwhelms Erik with a sudden, fleeting need to return it, full force, but he manages to contain his enthusiasm. That sort of thing would hardly be appropriate.

He’s never been happier to share a home with Misha. Even though it’s been a year, everything feels new. Joy fills him over the days instead of anger when he sees Misha hobbling around, and he’ll scold him just the same into sitting back down, but this time it’s out of love instead of duty.

“Sit down before I have to sit on your lap to keep you there,” he’ll say. Misha will challenge him to try it, but he sits down anyway.

With his anger gone, holding the violin feels so much more natural. He has no ill thoughts fogging his mind or encumbering his fingers. He lifts it with grace, even if he’s yet to manage a simple tune without a wayward screech. But the choppy melodies don’t anger him anymore, when he reminds himself of how they released the bird together. His inability isn’t a reminder of how he used to play with ease once, but instead a hopeful thought for the future. Every note that he plays without fault is another step in the right direction.

He’s probably overthinking it. He puts too much thought into everything. Standing out on the back patio, surrounded by his birds, sun on his face, he closes his eyes and lifts the bow, and he stops thinking.
Misha is upstairs folding laundry, one of the few chores he’s still allowed to do, when he hears the music. Its faint but he can make out the familiar strains of one of Erik’s favorite songs floating up through the window over the garden.

He rushes downstairs to see Erik standing in the sun, violin in hand. He’s playing, perfect and graceful. Just like he used to.

The notes flow out of the instrument without fault, as long as Erik keeps his mind clear. The moment he starts to try and think about it, his fingers itch and worry starts to creep in, so he just shakes clear the thoughts and lets the music come.

It’s only muscle memory, but it feels like magic.

It feels like progress. It feels like immortality. It makes him feel untouchable. It makes him feel like he’s flying.

The notes carry through the air like silk, melancholy and beautiful, hitching and lilting, swirling on the morning breeze. The music is like part of the air they’re breathing, filling their lungs and curling into their arms and legs, seeping colors behind their eyelids. It radiates from Erik’s face like the sunlight on his skin, bright and godlike. All the darkness in the world couldn’t touch him now.

Misha stands and listens to the music, afraid to move or even breathe and accidentally break the spell Erik is under. The music dances through the air and sounds like something from a dream. It’s been so long since he’s heard this song. The last time was the night before they were supposed to leave together. Erik had been celebrating.

Misha isn’t sure when he starts crying but when Erik finishes the last note his face is a mess of tears. He lets his cane fall to the floor in his eagerness to applaud Erik’s beautiful work.

The medic whirls around and scrunches up his nose in embarrassment, but his screwed-up lips bely a tightly hidden smile. “You’re spying on me,” he accuses without conviction, extending his hand for the bird that flies over Misha’s shoulder through the open back door.

He pets the bird, the violin tucked under his arm, and lifts Misha’s cane for him. “Do you know the name of that piece? I don’t know what it was, I just… felt it in my bones.”
Misha smiles. "You would never tell me name. You composed that years ago."

It’s most of the truth. Erik had written the song for their fifth anniversary. He had said the song represented their relationship, half ballet half battle march. Misha had thought it was beautiful but for all his asking Erik would never tell him what he’d named the tune. He said it was too embarrassing and it was in German anyway so it’s not as if the heavy would be able to pronounce it. Misha had eventually let the matter drop and Erik would play the piece whenever he felt like celebrating the two of them and their life together.

“I wrote zhat?” Erik looks down at the violin in his hands. “Are you sure? Zhat sounded much too professional, I vas a doctor wasn’t I? Not a musician.”

"You are both. You always love violin. Said it was good practice for surgery. Kept fingers nimble. And was much less messy." Misha explains. "Was your thing of beauty. Everyone needs something beautiful in war or will lose their mind."

Damn him, the doctor looks up with the sunlight in his skin and the clouds in his eyes and he asks, “And what was your beautiful thing?”

Misha blushes. Whenever things got bad or painful or he thought it was hopeless he had Erik. Erik, and the promise of what was to come had kept him together all those years.

"Is embarrassing," He says, clutching at his cane.

“No, tell me,” Erik puts his hand on top of Misha’s. “What did you have when it was bleak and scary?”

Misha looks down at him for a moment before sighing. "Was you. Had you to keep me together." He admits softly.

Erik looks away, trying to force a serious expression, but his mouth is quirked at the corners as though he was expecting that answer and trying to remain humble. “And when I vas hurt and you didn’t have me anymore, what did you do then?” he transfers the bird to his shoulder so he can put both of his hands on top of Misha’s on the cane.
"Still had you. Had you and had hope," Misha says, turning even redder. "Was all I needed."

The medic has to suck his lips right into his mouth to keep from grinning. “You old sap,” he claps his palm gently to Misha’s face and edges around him into the house. “Go sit down, vould you? All your walking is making me nervous.”

The gates to hell could open up in their back yard that afternoon and it wouldn’t have stopped Erik smiling.
Chapter 28

Chapter by HarveyDangerfield

Chapter Notes

No, dear readers, you are not hallucinating. This is in fact a new chapter. This ball is officially rolling again!

For any of you who missed it, this story does now have an official ask blog, here's a link to it if you want to follow or ask any questions of the characters in this story.
http://ofsound-mind.tumblr.com/

And life goes on, as life tends to do.

They make breakfast together most days, when Misha can convince his doktor that his leg feels fine enough to stand to make food, if he puts his weight on the other leg.

Erik becomes rather fond of the phrase “doctor’s orders” and uses it liberally. Finish your eggs, doctor’s orders. Let me massage your injury, doctor’s orders. Take a hot bath, doctor’s orders. Get in bed, mister. Doctor’s orders.

Being doted on so much makes Misha feel like an invalid sometimes, but he knows it brings Erik joy when he can carry his things or give him a shoulder to (pretend to) lean on.

Misha likes the way Erik smiles whenever he hands over his plates for Erik to wash or when he lets Erik help him up the stairs to bed. It seems to bring him no end of joy to get to be Misha’s doctor. And the heavy will do anything to keep his doctor smiling like that.

He finds ways to make it up to him. He reads to Erik when he’s doing chores. His reading is slow and stilted and he has to ask for help too often but Erik loves his voice and that’s good enough for Misha. He tells stories too, old fairy tales he heard when he was a boy in Russia that never fail to make Erik laugh. It almost makes being confined to the bed bearable.

Almost. It’s nice when the medic is there, almost pleasant. But when he’s not in the room, when he’s doing the chores that Misha used to do every day when Erik was the one stuck in bed, he has time to think. Time to think, and worry, and he gets so wrapped up in his thoughts sometimes that he’s disoriented when he comes back to reality.
Sometimes in his day dreams, he forgets that Erik was ever injured in the first place. Especially when he sees him cursing at his birds for all perching on him at once, or he hears him singing rather badly in German, or finds him asleep at the kitchen table leaning over a medical journal. He seems better than ever, like not a day has passed since the end of the war.

One day they get a big, heavy package. So big and heavy that Erik can’t actually bring it inside. He scolds Misha for heavy lifting, but he can’t stop him or the box would stay outside forever. It hurts him, carrying it in, but he won’t tell Erik that.

He opens the package and there’s a quilt inside, and wrapped in the quilt, Sascha. He can hardly believe his eyes as he looks down at the polished metal. Sitting in her barrel is a small folded note in dainty handwriting.

Tried to pound out most of the dings and gave her a good scrubbing. Couldn’t get my hands on any bullets, but unless you plan on massacring smalltown Georgia, you probably won’t need them. Take good care of her. Kiss Erik for me.

All my love,

Miss P

“What is zhat?” Erik asks, peering over the giant’s shoulder. “Oh my, zhat is a very large gun.”

"Is my gun!” Misha exclaims with a grin. "Doktor, meet Sascha! Sascha was my gun in war!"

“You named it?” Erik asks, but is completely ignored when Misha lifts the weapon into his hands and tries to settle it against his side like he used to. But the gun is too heavy and he can only hold her for a few seconds before he has to put her back on the blanket and sit down.

"Used to run with her. Used to be able to hold her and run for many hours. Can barely lift her now." Misha says sadly.

“You’re injured,” Erik says, without looking away from the enormous gun. “I’m sure you’ll be holding it again in no time. Not zhat you’ll really need to. Zhis place is hardly a battlefield. How much does it weigh?”
Misha’s eyes light up. “She weighs 150 kilograms –”

Erik barely listens, most of it goes clear over his head, but he keeps nodding because the heavy looks so excited. He puts away the dry dishes while he speaks, and lets the birds out, but he’s still going.

“So what you are saying,” he interrupts when Misha starts getting into the fine details about how the bullets are made. “Is there is no way I am ever going to be able to move that thing if you leave it laying around.”

"Uhh..." Misha says, as if he's really thinking about it. Finally he shakes his head. "No. No you will not. Will keep her out of way though, I promise. Will find special spot for her. She is Sascha, not thing."

“Sascha, I’m sorry,” Erik rolls his eyes and holds up his hands. “If you name your weapon does that mean I can name my violin? He seems like a Johann to me.”

“You tease me!” Misha grabs the retreating doctor around the waist and pulls him into a hug, but he can’t hold him for long before the pain in his leg flares up again and he has to take his seat. It's unfortunate, the number of things that Misha once took for granted when both of his legs were healthy and strong.

The pain and helplessness start to wear on him more than ever now that his old gun is in the house. Misha spends hours on the couch cleaning and polishing the gun but he can't lift it. He can't carry her around, strong and confident, like he used to. And he hates it.

He starts to get embarrassed when Erik has to help him up the stairs, or make dinner for them because Misha can't stand that long. He shies away from Erik's offers to massage his leg and tries not to use his cane as much as possible. He doesn't want Erik to think of him as weak.

He tries to help with chores, but the pain usually becomes too much and he has to stop. He can’t hang laundry outside with Erik, he can’t stand to do the dishes, he can’t help him repair the birds’ roost outside, he can’t do most things. Erik will tell him it’s only fair that he do everything considering how long Misha was doing everything, but the Heavy isn’t happy with that answer. His natural state is in motion, not flat on his back reading the same books over and over.

When he does try to help, it usually goes badly anyway. He tries to hang laundry, he drops the pins
in the grass and always has to ask Erik to come find them because he can’t bear to bend or kneel to look. He tries to do the dishes, and it takes more than an hour instead of only a few minutes because of how many times he needs to take a break, and then Erik will only scold him anyway. He can’t, he can’t, he can’t. The list of things he can’t do far outweighs what he can, and he *hates* it.

In the kitchen, he tries to help Erik put away the dishes when he almost breaks a cup. It tips backwards out of his hand when he has to reach for the counter to keep steady, and the Medic is barely quick enough to catch it before it shatters on the ground.

“Gott im Himmel! Go sit down before you break zhe whole kitchen, old man,” Erik teases and puts the glass in the cupboard.

Misha doesn't laugh. He doesn't smile. He picks up his cane and trudges out of the kitchen to retrieve his reading glasses and return to his book. A book that he's got almost memorized by now.

He *feels* old. He feels old and weak and useless and he hates it. He hates the book in his hands and in a fit of annoyance throws it across the room where it hits the opposite wall hard enough to leave a mark. Somehow that's satisfying.

Erik jumps in surprise when the book hits the wall just a few feet away from him. He knows that he has a tendency to break things, but Misha has never taken his anger out on inanimate objects before as long as Erik can remember. Which, granted, isn’t very long.

“Misha?” he retrieves the book and closes it so that none of the pages dog-ear. “Are you alright?”

"No," Misha says gruffly, rising off the couch. "Want to go upstairs. Do not need help. Go back to chores, I will not get in way."

Erik clutches the book to his chest as he watches the man teeter up the stairs. He creeps forward with concern and watches as Misha lumbers down the hallway, but he doesn’t turn into the bedroom. He closes the door to Erik’s study, and the Medic hears the latch click shut.

Misha has never locked himself in Erik’s study. Erik hasn’t even locked himself in Erik’s study in quite some time. It’s still the only door in the cabin that locks, so if he wanted to be alone, it would make sense that he would go there. But he doesn’t know why he would isolate himself there.
What he does know is that when he locks himself inside and Misha would immediately start pounding on the door, it always annoyed him. And he doesn’t need to go annoying a man who can bench more than Erik’s weight, whose range of attack has lengthened by about four feet thanks to the cane.

But when he doesn’t emerge more than an hour later, the medic finally makes his way quietly up the stairs and knocks gently on the study door.

“Misha? Are you okay in zhere?” he calls, pressing his ear to the door.

Misha has spent the last hour staring at himself in the mirror in the study. He’s had his head shaved since he was in his twenties but he’s started to realize how little there is to shave anymore. And there are bags under his eyes and wrinkles around his mouth, laugh lines Erik would call them. But he knows better.

Add in the glasses and cane and the picture is complete. He’s an old man. A sad, useless, fat old man. In Russia he could have been a scholar. At war he was the best in his class. Now he’s nothing. Not even Erik’s lover or caretaker anymore. He's just old.

"Go away," he answers. "Do not want you to see me like this."

“See you? Like vhat?” Erik presses up against the door. He’s not used to being locked on this side of the door and he’s beginning to understand Misha’s distress when he’s the one sheltered away inside. “Vhat’s wrong vith how you look? Did you hurt yourself?”

"No. Not again anyway." Misha says, glaring down at his bad leg. "Am always hurt now. Am hurt and slow and weak. Is pathetic. I am pathetic baby now. Except am too old to be baby."

Erik kneels down to try and squint through the keyhole, but all he can see is Misha’s hip. “Vhat are you talking about? Is your injury hurting you? I can’t help you if you’re locked up in zhere.”

"Do not want help!” Misha snaps. He immediately feels terrible for yelling at Erik and drops his head into his hands. That was bad. With a sigh he goes to the door and opens it to Erik. "Am sorry. Did not mean to shout. Only meant do not want to need help. Am tired of being hurt and useless and old."
"You are preaching to the choir, aren’t you?" Erik folds his arms and smirks up at the taller man.

"No. You are perfect. Are not old and slow and useless like me." Misha argues, shaking his head.

“You’re younger than me!” Erik looks up at the other man, trying to encourage him to cheer up. “You’re almost eight years younger than me, according to our papers, so if you’re old I must be a fossil.”

"You have not aged a day since we met," Misha argues. "You are perfect. Were perfect then, are perfect now. Nothing has changed. I have lost hair and eyes have gone bad and need cane to walk now. Might need cane forever. You are strong. I am weak now. Can not even lift gun. Probably could not kill even a little bear anymore. Sisters would be ashamed if they saw."

Erik’s small smile that was growing at Misha’s praise slips. “You have sisters?” he asks. “You never told me that.”

"Da. Have three sisters. And mother." Misha says. "Back home. Have not heard from them in very long-"

Misha’s anger and pain disappear as a look of sudden realization and horror crosses his face.

"Never told them," he whispers. "Never told them I was not coming home. They must think I died in war."

“You – what?” Erik steps aside as Misha scrambles out of the study and back down the stairs. “Slow down! What’s going on? Where are you going?”

“My family! In Russia!”

Erik follows him down the stairs. “What, are you just going to walk there?”

"Need to go to town. Need to get to post office and send telegram to Russia." Misha says, grabbing his coat and his car keys. "Mother must know am not dead. Letter will take too long and they do not have phone."
“Misha!” Erik jogs after the quickly limping Heavy. “Ach, Verdammt nochmal! I’m coming with you, hold on!”

He grabs his own coat and doesn’t have time to wrestle with Archimedes to keep him inside. Misha is already starting the truck. He throws his coat on and lets the bird come along with him on his shoulder as he slips into the passenger’s seat.

Misha barely waits for the passenger door to be closed before he’s pulling the truck down the driveway and out into the street. He breaks about ten laws getting them into town, but they make it in record time.

He parks and practically jumps out of the truck in his hurry to get to the post office.

Erik is slower in comparison, trundling after the larger man with the bird in tow. The silver-haired postman seems surprised when Misha asks for their telegraph, but he doesn’t give him any trouble.

“Alright, what do you want this to say?” the postman asks once the message is set up to be received by the proper machine.

"Mother, is Misha, stop. Am alive in America, stop. Plans change suddenly after terrible accident, stop. Will send letter and money soon, stop. Do not know when I will come home, stop. From loving son, Misha, stop." Misha dictates while the postman takes down the message to be sent out as soon as possible.

The message is paid for and Misha can finally relax. He sags into the driver’s seat of the truck with a groan and runs his hands down his face.

Erik doesn’t say anything. He fidgets in the awkward silence and strokes Archimedes’ chest feathers. He clears his throat, sighs, hums, and then finally speaks. “I’m sorry I ruined your plans to go home,” he mutters. “Your family must be worried sick, and it’s my fault.”

"No. No is not your fault," Misha assures him. "Was not your fault at all. If we could go back in time, would make same choice. Would never go without you. I promise."
“Without me?” Erik repeats, but Misha doesn’t hear him over the sound of the engine coming to life.

The ride home is a lot less tense than the ride there. Erik sits comfortably, smiling down at his bird and basking in the glow of the knowledge that Misha would have taken him to Russia with him.

They pull into the drive of their home and share a laugh when they see they left the front door open, and the doves are all roosting on the front porch railing. Misha turns the engine off, and Erik spots the cane lying in the living room, where the Heavy had dropped it when he rushed out the door.

“Look at zhat,” he points to the wooden thing with a smile. “I don’t know of any old man who could go all zhe vay to town and back without his cane.”

"Am going to feel it later," Misha says, leaning back in his seat. He can already feel the twinge in his leg as the pain starts to set in. "Will you go get cane for me doktor please? Will hurt to walk to house without it."

Erik leans over so he’s closer to the other man, edging on the long front seat to lean against him. “Only after you say you aren’t old,” he scolds.


“You’re vay too handsome and strong to be old,” Erik nudges his chin into Misha’s shoulder to make him smile wider.

Misha can't help but grin down at his doctor. "You think I am handsome? Really?"

“Zhe most handsome man I know,” Erik pinches Misha’s nose.

"Am not as handsome as you." Misha argues, flushing bright red. "Doktor is much more handsome."

“It’s not a contest, shut your mouth,” Erik releases Misha’s nose and edges out of the truck and heads inside to fetch Misha’s cane. Misha waits for him to bring it over before hobbling inside, Erik walking slowly next to him. It doesn't bother him as much as it has the last few days. And he doesn't
even mind when Erik makes him lay down on the couch and goes to cook them dinner.

It’s a week before he gets a return reply from the postman. Unsurprising, considering the nearest post office to his family’s home is a several-mile hike into town. Erik has to read it for him because they translated it into English, and the heavy is much too tired with stress, worry and pain to translate in his head.

*Dear Misha STOP don’t worry about coming home STOP I’ve disowned you STOP I’m only kidding STOP It’s wonderful to hear from you after so long STOP I guess this means we can take down the memorial we built for you in the back yard STOP Your sisters each want a letter of their own STOP Tell me all about this accident STOP Love, your mother STOP*

"Are not too angry then," Misha says with a sigh of relief. He expects his sisters are angrier than his mother is going to admit but he’ll hear about it from them in their own letters. "Will write to them tomorrow. Thank you for reading doktor."

Misha doesn’t just write them each a letter, he writes them all an individualized multi-page epic. Erik learns all about his sisters while Misha writes.

He tells Erik about his youngest sister Yanna, with golden hair and bright eyes, who always rode on his shoulders when she was small. She has more youth and energy than any girl Misha has ever met, she has all the stars in her eyes and the beauty of a goddess. She’s always been curious about everything, she wanted to read every book in the world and the only thing she ever asked for was a little globe she could look at.

He tells Erik about his middle sister, Zhanna, with the soul of a warrior and the spirited nature of a Viking. She could always out drink anyone, including him, and beat him at wrestling once or twice. But then she would dress up for a ball in the nearby town and she would let their mother do her hair and she would become the most beautiful, proper lady in the world, even if she did wear her hiking boots under her gowns.

He tells Erik about his oldest sister, Bronislava, who at times he forgets is still younger than himself. She’s gentle and mature, with the attitude of a mother and the wisdom of a woman twice her age. She’s nurturing and has a knack for making everyone around her feel safe. She’s also one of the most fierce and efficient hunters he’s ever known, quick with a blade and even quicker with a single-shot rifle, fast on her feet when she runs from bears, she moves through the snow like a nymph.

The medic listens excitedly, asking questions that Misha answers, sometimes before Erik can even get the last few words out of his mouth.
Misha digs up an old photo album of his to show Erik. He doesn't have many pictures, they weren't
the sort of family to waste much money on things like cameras and film. But the few he has make
him happy and nostalgic and he almost cries a few times looking at his baby sisters and wondering
what they're like now. Have they changed in a year or are they much the same? It's sad but he knows
he might never see them again and find out.

Erik asks about his own family, but there isn't much Misha can tell him. He doesn't know much
about Erik's parents, he never talked about them. And mentioning his ex-wife seems wrong
somehow. Erik doesn't seem to mind though. He doesn't remember and the subject isn't important
enough for him to worry himself about.

He says Misha is enough family for him now and the heavy barely manages to keep from kissing
him.

But that turns out to be a very tricky thing to do indeed. Everything makes him want to kiss Erik.
The longer he goes without it, the more he thinks about it, and the more he thinks about it, the more
difficult it is for him to keep from smooching the daylights out of the doctor.

It doesn’t help that Erik’s personality has been steadily leveling out. He started out almost childlike,
but that eventually escalated into rage, before evening out to resemble what he was like before the
accident so closely that it makes Misha angry.

Not angry that Erik is getting back to normal. Angry that he had to be hurt at all. Clearly, it had no
lasting effect on the man. Whatever the operation was supposed to do, it didn’t succeed. He's just as
strong-willed as before, just as temperamental and vivacious. The only wreckage done was to his
memory, and even those have been trickling back in.

It makes Misha furious that they thought they could ever harm Erik permanently. It makes his insides
twist up with rage that they thought he was weak enough. They should have known better, they
should have known that there’s no way Erik would ever be damaged.

The only thing that makes Misha resist admitting that Erik is back to exactly the way he was is the
fact that they aren’t together. He wasn’t ever a particularly affectionate man, even when they were
alone. But there was a different quality to his gaze when he would look at Misha then, like he was
looking for all the stars in his eyes.

Apart from that, it’s like hardly a day has passed. Even Erik’s weight has been coming back up, his
belts needn’t be cinched so tightly to keep his slacks from falling down. Misha remembers the way he used to be, with strong arms and a paunch to him that spoke of his age, too different from his thinness now. Secretly, selfishly, he hopes the doctor will gain that paunch back, so he won’t be the only old man with a belly in the cabin. But he remembers the way Erik would stare at it in the mirror with disdain and scoff about his wasted youth when he was thin and fit.

Sometimes he considers bringing up their plans to move to Russia. Erik might not remember that they had planned to move and build a cabin together but he had been amenable to the idea once. Maybe if he mentioned it again, brought it up like he had before, Erik would want to leave and they could go together. He's strong enough to travel now, it could be like it should have been.

Except without the lovemaking they once shared. But Misha has gone this long without it, he can wait for however long it takes. If it ever happens again. It might not, that part of their relationship might never come back. He could live with that if it meant being together with Erik forever in a cabin of their very own near his mother’s with a few goats and chickens.

The idea seems better and better every day and he has to constantly remind himself that as much as Erik might sound like he used to, act like he used to, even tease Misha in the same way he used to, he isn't fully recovered. Moving now and transplanting the doctor to a place he's never been, away from everything he's gotten used to, might undo his progress. He's happy here, with his classes and his friends and his life. In Russia he would have no one to talk to, no classes to take to keep his mind active and only Misha's own family for company.

It might sound perfect to the Russian but he isn't that selfish. They have been happy here and will stay happy here, with Erik getting stronger every day and Misha falling in love with him all over again.

Sometimes he can barely resist. Sometimes the urge to sweep Erik into his arms and kiss him until he can’t breath is too much. Sometimes, he thinks, Erik might even let him. When they’re sitting together at dinner and Erik is talking animatedly about something that Misha can’t keep up with because he keeps slipping in and out of German, he’ll rest his hand on Misha’s. When they’re side by side on the couch reading, he’ll curl up against the bigger man’s side to absorb his warmth and company. When they’re in bed together he’ll kiss Misha’s hands and wedge himself right against the Russian’s chest.

Sometimes, Misha thinks he could get away it. That Erik would be so overwhelmed and confused that he would submit to the sensations. But then he gets furious with himself for thinking of forcing himself on Erik.

He never could, anyway. No matter how lovely he looks when he’s excited about something, or how raw he looks when he’s just woken up in the morning and doesn’t want to move away from Misha
and the warm bed yet.

So he pretends not to notice. He pretends not to care about the way Erik holds his hand or curls up against him. He pretends that he doesn't wish the other man would come up behind him and kiss him on the neck or pinch his butt while he's doing dishes. He pretends not to want to tell him he loves him a thousand times in a dozen languages before they go to sleep every night. He pretends they've only ever been friends like he has every day since the accident. It's just harder now when Erik is so like what he was before, the only part still missing being the part that loved Misha back.

He tries not to think too hard about what that means.

Fortunately, distractions come easy. Erik is always going on about this or that (where he gets enough energy for it all boggles Misha) which gives the Russian ample things to occupy his mind with.

When his thoughts get too gloomy, all he has to do is find out what Erik’s doing. It’s always a picker-upper, even if he only scolds Misha for always following him around. So when he can’t be found this time after Misha spent almost twenty minutes sitting balefully with his own thoughts at the kitchen table, he feels a little wound up.

Until he sees him out in the back yard, half climbed up a damn tree.

Caught between amusement and anger Misha gets up from the table and makes his way into the backyard where Erik is sitting calmly in their largest tree, looking out on the property.

"Doktor! What are you doing up there?" he shouts, trying to sound scolding. "You are not supposed to climb tree."

"Says who? Are you zhe tree police?" Erik swings his feet on the branch like a child and peers down at the man a dozen feet below him.

"Da. And police of you. Come down before you break neck," Misha says, crossing his arms.

“No,” says Erik with a wily smile. “I like zhe view from up here. Also, I found a nest. It belongs to one of my birds.”
“How did you guess that?” Misha calls up, trying not to smile, his hands moving to his hips.

“Vell, one of my birds is in it,” Erik looks down between his legs. “She’s sitting on six eggs. Ve’re going to have children.”

"She is going to have children. You will be grandfather. Congratulations," Misha says, his grin fighting hard against his forced scowl. "Is about time. But she should have privacy. Will meet babies soon."

“I’m far too young to be a grandfather,” Erik says as he starts to disembark from the tree. “Perhaps a spry uncle.”

He slips from the lowest branch, only to be caught by Misha before he can take a tumble on his backside. He clears his throat and quickly rights himself, straightening out his sweater before heading back inside.

He spends the next several days checking that nest often. At least once an hour he sticks his head up that tree to check on the expecting mother. Half the time he leaves the back door open and Misha has to get up to close it.

He can be found muttering to himself at the kitchen table, hunched over a half scratched-out list of potential names for the new birds. He seems nervous about it, and Misha sees him with his face on the table more than once.

“Zhey don’t live forever,” Erik says when Misha ventures inquiries toward his friend’s sadness. “Zhis is just a reminder. I don’t have any idea how long I had zhem before I stopped remembering things, I don’t know how old zhey vere vhen I first acquired zhem, zhe average life span of a dove is only 15 years, and zhis only reminds me zhat zhe ones I know now could die.”

“They will be replaced by new ones,” Misha tries to comfort the distraught pet owner with a hand on his shoulder.

“Zhat’s not zhe problem, doves breed like mice, I know zhere will be more,” Erik says scornfully, like Misha is stupid for suggesting it. “Zhe problem is zhese are zhe ones I know now. Zhese are zhe ones I remember, and zhere’s so little I remember to begin vith. Vhen I lose zhem, part of zhat vill go away.” He cards his shaking hands through his hair and sets his glasses down on the table so he can rub his eyes.
"Erik, can not hold on to everything." Misha says, squeezing the man's shoulder gently to try to help him relax. "They will die, yes. But you do not know when. Could be many years from now. By then, you remember everything. Will be sad, da. Is true. We will mourn. But not now. Not yet. Do not mourn with babies on the way. Is not the way to greet new life."

Erik huffs a bitter laugh through his nose. “Very easy for you to say, you’re zhe one keeping half zhe secrets of my past hostage.”

He doesn’t sound as mad as he used to about the subject. He sounds sadder than he does angry. He makes his way back outside, and the next time Misha sees him he’s back up in the tree.

The tree is his new spot. He finds out the best way to get up and down it through trial and error, and spends much of his time up there, just thinking. It doesn’t do wonders for Misha and his overactive thoughts, to have Erik up in the tree and unavailable for distraction. But, he has to admit, the tree is better than the locked door of the study he used to sequester away in.

For two weeks they go about like this. Erik spends more and more time in the tree, watching over his dove and her eggs and Misha spends more and more time outside with him or inside brooding and trying not to bury himself in work or vodka. It’s not so hard since there doesn’t seem to be a bottle of decent vodka to be had in the whole town but the temptation is still there sometimes.

Then, one afternoon, he hears a shout from Erik’s tree. Fearing the worst, that the man has fallen or something terrible has happened to the eggs, Misha rushes outside. Instead of Erik broken and bloody on the ground, or crying in the tree, he sees the man staring at the nest with wide eyed wonder like a small child.

"The eggs? They are alright?" Misha calls up to him.

“Zhey’re hatching!” Erik calls down. “Oh, Misha! Zhey’re hatching! Zhey’re so ugly!”

He’s crouched over the branch that the nest is settled in, watching as the tiny white shells break apart to make room for featherless pink baby birds. There’s joy in his eyes unparalleled as he watches the fruits of his birds’ labor unfold.

“Who is zhe father?” he asks the female dove. “If zhey grow up vith red eyes zhen I’ll know it’s Archimedes but if it vas any of zhe others you’re going to have to tell me.”
"Maybe she does not know." Misha suggests from the ground. "Maybe she had fun with too many birds. What do babies look like? They have feathers or no? You know not to touch them? Can not touch them or mother bird will abandon them."

“No feathers,” Erik calls down. “Zhey’re all pink and bulgy. Except for zheir eyes, zhose are swollen and grey. Zhey’re so ugly, I love zhem.”

"Should leave them now. You are family friend but mother bird will be very protective. Come down and can go visit tomorrow,” Misha calls up, holding out his hand to help Erik back to earth.

Erik does check them every day. He watches their pin feathers come in slowly, he watches the mother feed them with a manic grin and starts to threaten Misha that he’ll throw up in his food.

He’s almost as protective over them as their mother. She’ll let Erik hang around for a few minutes, but eventually she always starts to peck at his glasses or his ears until he concedes and slips away.

It’s a while before he can tell the gender of the baby birds. Their real feathers come in at about three weeks, and they finally start to look cute. With big black eyes and downy white feathers, each a little bit smaller than a tennis ball, they’re absolutely adorable.

“Zhey’ll be flying soon,” Erik tells the bigger man one night over dinner, with potatoes filling his cheeks. “I’ll bring zhem in zhe house so zhey imprint in here and stay vith the others. I’ll finally be able to tell zheir genders and zhen I can name zhem!”

"Do not talk with mouth full." Misha scolds with no real strength. "Will choke. Is it good idea to bring baby birds inside? Do not want them to panic and fly into window trying to escape. Or to fly at my eyes and peck life out of me. These babies do not know me, will not trust me."

“Zhey’ll love you, zhey all love you,” Erik says, shoveling in the rest of his potatoes so he can rush back outside to check on the babies one last time before bed time.

He starts when he sees a tiny white speck on the lawn, bright against the blackening grass of evening. He doesn’t need to get close to tell what it is. He sucks a breath in through his nose and hurries across the lawn to inspect the fallen bird.
Its on its back, its wing bent awkwardly, legs straight up in the air, peeping miserably. Erik gently lifts the little thing into his palm and shelters it with his other hand as he hurries back inside and starts barking orders instantly.

“Misha! Bring my first aid kit from zhe downstairs bathroom! Und a warm damp cloth!”

Misha has heard that tone enough not to question Erik's commands. It's the same tone the doctor would use to bark orders to his nurses during the war or to the Heavy on the battle field when he was badly injured. It's a tone that Misha has learned to associate with pain and suffering and that leaves no room for hesitation.

He hurries to the bathroom and retrieves the first aid kit from under the sink, along with a clean wash cloth. He turns the tap on and curses the old pipes for taking so long to warm the water while he waits. When the water is warm enough he soaks the cloth quickly before rushing back to Erik, wringing out the excess water onto the floor as he goes.

The little bird is clearly distressed, Erik has to pin it on its back. “A rubber band! In my office!” he orders as he gently dabs the feathers of the broken wing so they’ll be easier to part and inspect the damage.

It’s exhausting, running around on his healing leg, but Misha hobbles up and down the stairs with a rubber band so the doctor can gently pin the opposite wing to the dove’s body so he has both hands to work with.

Erik drapes a strip of gauze over the bird’s face to hopefully subdue its panic somewhat as he parts the wet feathers. He’s no vet, but he’s been around his fair share of broken bones and the bones of a wing aren’t all that different from the bones of an arm. Misha doesn’t even need to be told to use the wet cloth to keep the sweat from running into Erik’s eyes as he makes the smallest of incisions to locate the break in the wing. With a pair of tweezers and held breath, he sets the tiny bone back where it’s supposed to go, and puts a single stitch to hold closed the pink skin. He has to pluck a couple feathers in order to wrap gauze around the break, and slings the wing to the bird’s body before finally removing the rubber band and flipping the disoriented bird back over in his hand.

He slumps back in his seat with a relieved sigh and closes his eyes, cupping the tiny bird to his chest. “Zhat vas stressful,” he opens his eyes and stares across the table at the white-faced Misha across from him.

"You did well doktor." Misha says, grinning despite his shakiness. He hasn't seen Erik work like that in so long. It's amazing, as if he hasn't forgotten any of his medical training. And his hands were so
steady, just as they had always been before when he would cut men open and rearrange their insides. Even if sometimes he didn’t arrange them quite right.

“Zhis one vill have to be taken care of by hand. I’ll feed it and shelter it indoors. I have to make sure zhe ving sets right and it doesn’t try to fly,” Erik says tiredly, stroking down the tiny bird’s back.

"Will go to town tomorrow. Go to vet and ask about pain medicine for little bird," Misha says, leaning back in his chair with a pained sigh. His leg is hurting him but he isn't about to tell Erik that. The bird needs Erik's attention more than he does.

Erik looks defiant, like he wants to take care of the bird all on his own, but he recognizes the needs of the tiny animal and sighs his assent. He strokes its head, staring into middle-ground in thought, before he smiles a little and looks over at the other man.

“You make an excellent nurse,” he says with a tired, teasing twinkle in his eye.

Misha can't help but smile. "Have seen it enough to know what to do. And is good to have something to do again. Am getting tired of sitting around all day, and butt is getting flat from hard chairs."

Trying not to wince he pushes himself up out of his seat. "I will go get bird cage. Little bird will need place to sleep inside house, will be comfortable for him there."

Erik wants to tell Misha to stay seated, that he can go get it, but he sees the determination in his eyes and allows him to hobble on.

He spends an hour that night with a bottle of lotion, massaging Misha's thigh. The younger man has to stare hard at the ceiling to keep his thoughts from fluttering to the hands on his leg, and where those hands once roamed, especially so close to that part of his anatomy.

Over the next few days, Erik takes very good care of the little bird. He carries it with him everywhere, lets it rest in his shirt pocket, and feeds it medicine through an eye dropper. It spends a lot of time sleeping, and the rest of its time making little peeping sounds.

It was never in Erik’s nature to be very nurturing… of course, that only ever seemed to apply to people. He was always gentle with his birds.
It's endearing, seeing him with the little bird. Misha can't keep himself from smiling whenever he
sees them together or hears Erik cooing to the bird like one might a young child. Most of the time it's
in German so Misha can't understand what he's saying but the affectionate tone tells him more than
enough.

The bird sleeps in their room at night, in it's cage on Erik's side of the bed and the doctor makes sure
to say goodnight to it every night before cuddling up against Misha. He never mentions it but Misha
knows he gets up at least once a night to check on the little dove and make sure nothing has
happened while he was asleep.

"You would make good parent," Misha says one morning over breakfast as Erik is feeding the tiny
bird. "Good mother, especially."

Erik scoffs so forcefully he almost topples the bird from its perch.

They’re noisy and villainous, curious, and they’re always sticky. I can barely stand adults, you think
I would be good with a child?"

He chuckles to himself and gives the tiny bird a perch on his shoulder. “No,” he continues with a
smile. “I would more likely experiment on a child than care for it. But animals, they are kind and
they deserve love. Birds, and horses, and dogs – I used to have this dog – ”

He suddenly gasps and whirls around, eyes wide, his voice scarcely above a whisper. “I had a dog. I
remember it. It was a Doberman. Her name was Alfhilda. I remember.”

"You told me about dog once," Misha says, hoping to encourage Erik to remember more. This is a
good sign. Erik had had the dog well before the war. If he's starting to recover such early memories it
can't be long until more starts to come back to him. "Tell me again. Tell me about Alfhilda."

“She was brown,” Erik says, sitting slowly at the table. “Chocolate brown. She wore a plain black
collar. She had only three legs. I used to experiment on her to try and regrow her leg. I never
succeeded, and eventually she had a heart attack and died. Why do I suddenly remember her?”

"We're thinking of animals. Must have triggered memory," Misha shrugs, trying not to think about
how all their time together hasn't triggered any memories. Because if he starts to think like that he'll
become bitter and he could never be bitter with Erik. "Do not force it. Memories come naturally, more will come. More things will help memory recover. Must be patient."

“Ach,” Erik scowls, and has a sudden violent urge to break something, but reminds himself that he doesn’t need to destroy something every time he feels bad. He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes to chase away the gloom himself. It helps that the little bird pecks at his earlobe.

When he opens his eyes, he feels at peace again, and his smile returns. “Why do you bring up children, anyway?” he asks, crossing his arms. “Are you suggesting we adopt? Do you vant to raise a baby vith me? I don’t think zhat woudl go very well, do you?”

Misha's face instantly turns bright red. He and Erik had never talked about children and now is definitely not the appropriate time to do so.

"I bring up children because you are taking care of bird like it is baby!” he exclaims. "Was only making joke. Teasing you. Meant nothing,” he continues before dropping his head and hastily shoveling more of his breakfast into his mouth.

“Misha, I vas only kidding,” Erik laughs, stilling the Russian’s hand. “If a stork drops a baby on our doorstep I promise you can keep it. As long as you keep it far away from me.”


It's a lie. He loves babies. He loves children and would love to be a father. But Erik will never want that and alone he is far too big and awkward to care for a child without hurting it. It's best they don't even think about it.

Misha looks sad, that much Erik can tell. He’s not sure why Misha is lying, but it’s a white lie. He won’t demand the truth. He wishes he could even pretend to like children for Misha’s sake if he wanted to adopt a child for himself in the cabin, but he’s always had an extreme, almost reactive dislike of children. He didn’t even like children when he was a child, this much is so evident to him, so engrained in his psyche that he remembers it even now. He remembers having no friends, entirely by choice, preferring the company of adults or animals. He’s afraid that he would strike the child or lash out if Misha brought one into their home.

“You do,” he says, his tone hesitant and almost fearful. He clears his throat. “Vell, you know… I can
take care of myself now. You don’t need to take care of me anymore. I could move out and find my own place, and you could have a child here. You could even find a wife for yourself now zhat I’m independent. You could have a family."

Misha’s expression turns from sad to a mixture of horror and utter devastation. He could never have a family without Erik. Not ever, even if he doesn’t remember their life together hasn’t he shown that he can’t live without him and would only ever leave if he thought himself a danger to Erik in some way?

"You want to leave me?" Misha asks quietly. "Want me to find new person, so you can leave? Do not need me anymore, I know but did not think you would want to leave."

“I didn’t say zhat,” Erik barks. “I don’t vant to go anywhere. But if having a family is important to you, I can leave.”

Misha sighs and takes Erik’s hand. "I would like family, is true. Would like to have child and be father. Would be nice. But you are more important to me than imaginary family. Would not leave you for people who do not exist. Not ever."

Erik tries not to smile, but he fails. He doesn’t care if he appears selfish, it thrills him to know that Misha would give up a lifelong dream just for him. He squeezes Misha’s hand back and looks down at his shoes for a moment.

“Do you vant to get a dog?” he asks quietly.

"Da. We can get dog. Must be big dog," Misha says, smiling again. "Big dog I can play fetch with. No little thing I will step on and crush. Mastiff. Or shepherd."

“Zhen ve’ll get a dog.” Erik lifts Misha’s hand and kisses his knuckles before dropping it to go let his birds out for the morning and check on the little ones in the nest outside.

Misha watches Erik go with a wistful smile. Maybe they will not have the sort of family he’d always imagined. He hadn’t really expected that anyway. But that isn’t so bad. They can have birds and dogs and goats and whatever else they want. That’ll be enough because he still has Erik.
Chapter 29

Chapter by HarveyDangerfield

Chapter Notes

It’s a special treat- two chapters in one night! To thank you all for being so patient with me.

The owner of the pet store in Savannah is an Elderly woman who launches into a new story every other sentence, sometimes without even finishing the previous one.

She tells of how she knew a German man once, a professor by the name of Lubitz, he taught geometry and they were lovers. That leads right into a story about how his dog used to run away a lot, and got caught under a train – which leads into a story about a train ride she once took across the country, at which point her story changes to the first time she ever rode in a car, and then quickly flops back to her college days.

She doesn’t stop talking all the way into the back, until the pair finally inquire about a dog that will suit their needs. Big, strong, affectionate, one that won’t run away if they leave the doors open.

They leave with a puppy. A ten week old puppy, to be exact. They hadn’t intended to get a puppy, but they had to admit a bloodhound was exactly what they needed. It would grow up to be huge, Misha would just have to be extra careful not to tread on it until it was grown.

They name the pup Ritter and immediately have him fixed with a red collar and shiny silver tags that give their address and phone number if he’s ever found. He tugs on his leash, but he’s small enough to handle for now. They’ll have to train him out of that habit before he grows big enough to tug Erik off his feet.

Ritter spends the first several hours at the cabin in constant motion, exploring everything. He sniffs every inch of the floor twice over, shimmies under furniture, fails to hop on top of things, and sniffs everything again. He’s constantly underfoot – under Erik’s foot, under Misha's foot, and under his own feet. He trips over his own long ears more than once.

Occasionally he can be found passed out on the living room carpet with all four legs stretched out and his giant paws twitching as he dreams of hunting things, but he’ll be up on his paws again in a matter of minutes to explore more.
By dinner time he’s parked by the stairs, whining as he looks up the flight, considering whether he should attempt the ascent. He has to be picked up and carried away by Misha in order to eat his own dinner in a shiny silver bowl on the floor.

They decide over dinner that they don’t care enough about any of the furniture to care if he climbs on it, though they will work hard to train him out of chewing on things he isn't supposed to. He's already shown an interest in one of Erik's shoes but it was snatched away before he could do too much damage, leading to the poor pup whining for about five minutes before forgetting about the whole incident.

When they go to bed he follows, climbing the stairs slowly and gracelessly, stepping on his own ear once or twice and barking loudly at some imagined foe each time.

As soon as they've settled into bed he is on them, finding the most comfortable place he can lay down and still bite at their toes whenever they move.

The weeks pass slowly, and the splint comes off the little bird, which has been officially sexed as male, and Erik names him Klaus. Archimedes has been growing increasingly jealous, and spends a lot of his time vying for Erik’s affections.

The other birds are finally flying from their nest, and the doctor is quick to train them to come into the house. His brood has increased by six, and Misha makes him promise that he won’t keep every nest of doves that he finds or there will be more bird than house.

Ritter chases the birds, but he never does try to actually catch them. He barks to stir them when they’re stationary for too long, and runs around with his head thrown back watching them as they fly around the room.

So far, he’s not allowed to leave the cabin without either Erik or Misha present. He’s still young and foolish, and he’ll run away on accident and get lost with his own curiosity if one of them isn’t there to call him back inside.

After a run in with Archimedes who - still jealous from Erik spending all of him time with the baby bird - pecked at the poor pup's ears Ritter has taken to sticking close to Misha's side, particularly when any of Erik's birds are in the house. Neither of them mind since the pup shows no ill will towards Erik and still comes by him whenever the birds are not around, or at the dinner table to beg for scraps where he can easily hide beneath the table.
Since the pup is always close and since Misha can’t get up and move too much he decides to start training Ritter early. Commands like sit, lay down, and roll over are easy enough to teach from the couch and when they get tired of that they play tug of war with the laundry Misha is trying to fold.

Erik isn’t happy to find holes in his socks from Ritter’s teeth, but the dog is so loveable that he can’t stay mad. Socks are only cents anyway.

Misha’s leg has been healing steadily. Erik has been encouraging him to stay standing longer, to work out the muscles again, to strengthen it before he loses the ability to stand for the rest of his life. He’s always there by his side to help him stay upright, lending a hand or a shoulder even if he ultimately wouldn’t be able to keep Misha on his feet if he were to fall.

They start to build a fence around the yard, both to give Misha some activity to spend time on, and to keep Ritter from running away. Erik digs the holes for the posts, Misha sticks them in the ground and nails the cross beams, and Erik paints it white as they go.

The first couple days they get distracted and both end up coming inside, covered in paint splatter and fighting over who gets to shower first. Misha wins only because he lifts Erik up and moves him out of the way so he can get to the bathroom door first.

After that the fence is fast going. In four days it's up and painted and they can let Ritter run free in the backyard and track as many squirrels as he likes back to their trees. Misha is assigned pooper scooper duty, something that will get him up and moving every day to keep the backyard clean. A small section of the garden is sectioned off for composting purposes so they have ample fertilizer for their small garden.

It's all very domestic and Misha can't remember a time since Erik's surgery that he's been happier.

Erik, however, seems to be getting increasingly bitter again. His classes don’t start up until the fall, which leaves him with nothing to do over the summer. The only time he ever even leaves the cabin is to take bike rides, or walk the dog, but he never does go far. Inwardly, he’s still frightened of the boys who once attacked him at the restaurant. Even if privately he’s convinced that at this point he could take them in a fight. He doesn’t really need to add murder to the list of charges the community has imagined for him.

He starts getting cranky and irritable, with no real direction or force behind his grumblings. He curses the birds, he curses the dog, he curses Misha, he even curses himself.
“I’m going stir crazy,” he says one day, flopped out on the couch with his feet in Misha's lap and his face in the cushions. “Let’s go camping.”

"We do not have tent. And your feet smell," Misha teases, lifting Erik's legs to get at the newspaper he was cutting coupons out of. They're rich now but Misha grew up knowing the value of money and still tries to save wherever they can.

"Where would we camp? Do not know campsite around here. You will not like not having bathroom. Will get there and will turn around and leave first time you try to shit in hole under bush.”

Erik groans and rolls off the couch onto the carpet, beckoning Ritter to him and lifting him onto his chest.

“You might be happy spending all day every day in this cabin but I for one am going to start picketing if I can’t get away,” he says, pinching the pup’s ears above his head like a hairdo.

"We can go for drive. Or go on vacation. Take plane up to New York and see big city. Can not take Ritter, will have to find kennel for him or send him to stay with Dell." Misha suggests. "Can go in a few weeks, will be good fun."

Erik groans again. “I can’t stand a few weeks, I can’t stand one more day,” he says, lifting the puppy and carrying him to the front door. “I’m going to valk him. I'll be back at some point.”

As he passes the back yard on his way into the woods, he looks out on the tree that his dove was nesting in only a few weeks ago. He sees the shortest branch, and an idea strikes him.

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“Erik, please.”

“I said don’t peek,” the doctor's hands are fixed firmly over Misha's eyes. “Okay… look now.”
Misha opens his eyes and squints against the fading sunset at the scene in the back yard. Erik has fixed a blanket over the lowest branch of their maple, with a rock on all four corners to hold it down. Inside he’s piled all the blankets and pillows from their bed.

A ring of rocks sits near the tent, with a big hole dug into the grass to give room for a haphazard pile of wood that looked like it belonged to a piece of furniture once. Ritter is running around in the grass chasing the doves as they flutter through the open back door.

“Camping,” Erik gestures to the setup. His hands are filthy from digging the hole.

The first thing Misha thinks is, this won't work. The fire pit needs work and the wood is piled all wrong. The tent is probably too small for the two of them and they still haven't left the property, so he doesn't see how this is going to help at all.

But he doesn't say any of that. Instead he smiles and tells Erik how great everything looks and how long it's been since he's gone camping.

"You bought snacks? Need sausages to make over fire and lemonade to have in cooler. And Americans make things called smores over fire that are very good. Had them once during war. Ate fifteen," he says, grinning at the memory.

“I remember,” Erik says wistfully. “Just barely. I had to scrub you for an hour to get all the marshmallow off your fingers and face. I don’t remember when or where we were, but I remember… you had your sticky hands around my waist…”

“You did not answer question,” Misha says quickly to bring Erik out of his memories. He remembers that night. He remembers the way Erik licked the marshmallow off his lips and they tumbled into the bed to make sticky love. He doesn’t want the doctor’s mind wandering farther than it should.

“Right, yes, I did buy snacks,” Erik snaps out of his daydreams and indicates a paper bag by the side of the tent. “Sausage and bread and punch and marshmallows.”

"Good, good. Will need all that to stay up late for ghost stories," Misha says with a mischievous grin. "I have many. Very scary stories too. But if you get too scared, can hold me at night, I will protect you. And so will Ritter, won't you?”
He looks down at the pup who barks in response. He's grown a lot and there's no way he will fit in the already too small tent with them but he looks like he has every intention of trying anyway.

“Oh, please, ghost stories don’t frighten me,” Erik scoffs. “You said yourself, I vas at var, vasn’t I? You can’t scare me with ghosts.”

Misha builds the fire correctly and lights the broken-up wood. When he asks what it was, Erik gestures to where his old, shabbily-built roost used to stand. He needed to build a newer, better one anyway. The fire is warm and roaring in no time, and Misha sharpens two sticks from their maple tree with a knife so they can spear sausages.

They feed a few bits of sausage to Ritter, who eventually sprawls out inside the tent while the pair sit out near the fire. Sure, it’s not real camping. When they need something, they head back inside to get it. But it’s better than spending another boring, identical night in their bed.

The sun goes down and mosquitoes start to bite as they finish dinner. Misha insists it isn’t dark enough yet but says that they can sing campfire songs if Erik does not mind him getting the lyrics wrong.

It turns out that neither of them know any real campfire songs so they end up making up their own to the tunes of old nursery rhymes Erik only half remembers, more from muscle memory than any actual recollection from his childhood.

As the moon rises they begin making their dessert, roasting marshmallows for s’mores. Erik sets his first one on fire and when it’s cool they feed it to Ritter while he roasts a second one, careful to keep it further above the blaze.

When it’s completely pitch dark, Erik suggests that they hunker in the tent, as it’s starting to get cold. But Misha insists that it’s time for a ghost story. Erik scoffs again to emphasize his distaste, but that doesn’t stop him from collecting Ritter into his lap, even if his gangly limbs are a little too long for a lap dog.

Misha moved from his spot next to Erik to a seat across the fire so the flames would make eerie shadows dance across his features. He waits a moment for the wind to pick up before launching into his story.

"Now I tell tale of The Well to Hell," he says menacingly, his voice dropping to a harsh whisper.
Erik tries to keep his expression schooled as Misha relays the story. He tries to sit still, but even Ritter starts to whimper after a few minutes. When the tree branches creak, he flinches. Ghosts do not scare him, he reminds himself as the story picks up to a crescendo.

He forces a laugh when Misha finishes his grim tale, as though to prove it didn’t frighten him. Nothing frightens him, least of all pretend stories of pretend things! He settles down in the tent, clutching the wiggling Ritter tightly.

“Ghost stories, honestly,” he huffs, scooting a little deeper into the tent. “Ve are not children.”

Misha follows him into the cramped tent and lays down on the bed of pillows and blankets that Erik put together. "Da. Is for children. But is still good story. You are sure you are not scared?"

“I’m not scared!” Erik barks. “Shut up and go to sleep!”

Ritter echoes him with a bark of his own as he scrambles over the pair to find room to curl up down by their feet.

Erik doesn’t fall asleep right away. He flinches a little every time the wind sways or a branch snaps. He’s not afraid of ghosts, he tells himself. They aren’t real. Spirits are imaginary, people die when they die, there’s no such thing as an afterlife. When his birds rustle, he dives under the blankets and curls up against Misha's back.

Misha drifts off to sleep with the comforting weight of Erik at his back. Even if Erik said he wasn’t scared Misha is pretty sure he was a little shaken by the story. But if he's resting easily there's nothing to worry about.

Some hours later Misha wakes up. The wind has picked up and he can hear it whistling through the trees. It's probably turned chilly out but Erik beside him is warm and comforting. He hates to leave the warm nest of blankets but nature calls.

After making sure Erik is sufficiently tucked in he slips as gracefully as he can out of the tent and heads across the yard towards the back door. He doesn’t even wake Ritter on his way inside.
Erik wakes up only a few minutes later when the cold starts to seep in around the edges. He squints in the bare light of the embers, but Misha is gone. He sucks in a breath and sits up so quickly that he wakes the dog, who flops onto his feet growling. Erik looks around frantically, but Misha is nowhere in sight.

His sleep-addled brain’s first thought is that the voices from the well to hell grabbed him and dragged him off. He clutches the blankets to his chest and shivers in the night air. He reminds himself that it’s just a scary children’s story, but that does nothing to alleviate the anxiety he feels at waking up to Misha’s absence. Misha would never just leave in the middle of the night, something must be terribly wrong.

He hears a scraping noise in the darkness and tries to strain his eyes to look for the source, but it’s too far past the glow of the dying fire. He holds his breath, shivering, and he hears slow, plodding footsteps. He tries to call out for Misha – but what if it’s not Misha?

His mind is running away so quickly that when the big Russian kneels abruptly by the entrance to the tiny tent, Erik yelps out loud and his hand moves faster than he can think.

Misha cries out as Erik's fist connects with his nose. It wasn't that hard of a punch, considering how little leverage Erik has but it hurts all the same.

"Doktor! Is only me!" he says, falling back on his butt onto the grass outside the tent. He raises a hand to his face to check for blood and luckily finds none.

“Don’t sneak up on me!” Erik shrieks, gathering Ritter up in his arms just so he has something to squeeze to prevent him from lashing out again. His cheeks are bright pink and his eyes blown wide, and he’s shaking slightly.

"Was not sneaking up! Was coming back to bed." Misha moans, rubbing his aching nose. "Got up to go to bathroom. Should I have woken you first? I am sorry, please do not hit again."

Erik drops the dog with a sigh and scrubs his eyes. “You should have, yes!” he’s determined to make this Misha’s fault. “You deserve whatever broken nose you got, sneaking up on me in the middle of the night! Oh, come here.” He beckons Misha closer and inspects his nose in the dim light with a scoff. “I doubt it will even bruise, you big baby.”

"You hit me. Should kiss it better," Misha teases, pouting. Once upon a time Erik would have
responded by lightly slapping him and telling him not to get greedy before ordering him to do something or other. Now he isn't sure what he's going to do.

“Oh, please, more children’s games,” Erik scoffs, cupping Misha's cheeks and pecking a kiss to his nose. “First zhe ghost stories, now magic kisses. You’re turning into a child again, Misha.”

"Was worth it to get kiss from handsome doctor!" Misha says, laughing as he wraps an arm around Erik's waist and pulls him down onto the blankets with him. "Have had goodnight kiss. Now it is time for sleeping. By morning, all the ghosts will be gone."

“Ach, release me!” Erik scolds, wriggling in the bigger man’s grip. “Unhand me! You’re cheating by- being- so- large!”

"No. Will not let you go. Keep fighting and I will tickle you until beg for mercy." Misha threatens, his hands already creeping under the doctor's shirt to rest his cold palms on the German's bare back.

“I'm not ticklish!” Erik hoots, bringing his forehead down hard on Misha's shoulder to try and get him to let go. “Your hands are freezing!”

Ritter decides to join in the fun and pounces on Erik’s kicking feet, chewing at his ankles with tiny, squeaky growls.

"Da! Ritter hold him down. I will go for the stomach!" Misha cries before he starts mercilessly tickling Erik's sides and stomach. "Surrender doktor! You can not win!"

Erik squeals with pained laughter, his face glowing red as he tries to escape the other man. “Zhis is undignified!” he wheezes, pounding on Misha's chest uselessly with his fists. “I am a man of science!”

"And I do not care. Right now you are ticklish man at my mercy." Misha replies, moving one hand to tickle the backs of Erik's knees.

Erik screams with laughter until he goes hoarse. “I’m going to pee!” he warns, shaking his head violently from side to side.
"You admit defeat doktor?" Misha asks, still tickling the smaller man. "Will not stop until you admit defeat."

“Fine!” Erik screeches, still kicking his feet. “You are a bad man! I’m finished, let me breathe!”

Misha stops and let's go of Erik to lay beside him, still grinning. "Am not bad man. You had fun, da? Tickling is fun."

The doctor’s arms flop out beside him and he pants, shaking his head. “Nein,” he says hoarsely, but he can’t stop the slight smile curling his lips. “Don’t think for a moment this means you’re forgiven for startling me. I’ll see to it you find justice tomorrow.”

"Da, da, whatever you say." Misha turns to face Erik. "Now is bed time. You will come here? Will hold you to protect from cold."

Erik turns his back on the other man, but wiggles backwards into the space between his arms. “Stupid fool,” he mutters, closing his eyes and dropping back into sleep.
Chapter 30

Chapter by HarveyDangerfield

Chapter Notes

Not very many chapters left, now. I'd estimate five at the most.

“Klaus! Get your tail feathers back in zhe house!”

Erik grunts as Ritter darts after the bird barking, nearly pulled right out of his shoes by the force of the dog. In the last few months of spring and summer, he’s more than doubled in size, nearly outweighing the doctor at this point.

The time has finally come for the medic to enroll for the fall semester at his school. He’s very eager to take the next level of psychology, and perhaps a literature or an art class this time. Ever since Miss Pauling took the liberty of unfreezing Erik’s bank account and emptying it into Misha's, money has become no object, so he could theoretically take all of the classes if he didn’t mind giving up things like meals and sleep.

The last two times he tried to get to the school to enroll were a disaster. Once, he was technically too early by a week, he’d been so eager that he marked his calendar completely wrong, and by the time he and Misha got back (he still didn’t see fit to let the doctor drive until his memory returned in full) Ritter had pooped twice in the cabin. The second time, he wriggled through a window that had been open a crack and came charging down the road after the retreating truck, forcing them to turn around and go back.

This time, they pair elected to take him with them. It wasn’t worth whatever mess he’d make by the time they get back, and Misha can either wait with him in the truck or take him for a walk around the campus to continue strengthening his leg.

Over the last several months, Erik has forced him on multiple walks with Ritter. If he caught Misha lazing around for more than a couple hours he tugged him to his feet and made him do something. He refused to let Misha's leg lose all of its muscle mass, and while the exercise was painful and left the Heavy exhausted, day by day and week by week he was able to walk farther and longer.

He still limps sometimes if the weather is cool, but he hasn’t touched his cane in more than twenty days now.
Erik finally urges the bird back inside to roost with his companions and throws the door closed before any of the others can get the wise idea to follow his lead.

“Little troublemaker,” the doctors mutters scornfully as he encourages Ritter to jump into the truck. “Zhey used to be vell behaved; he’s nothing but a rabble rouser. Coaxing zhem to mischief, he’s a ringleader! I should have let him die when he fell out of zhat nest!”

"Do not say that. Would break your heart if something bad happen to little bird," Misha says as he climbs into the driver's seat. They both know Klaus has become one of Erik's favorites and he would be completely devastated if anything were to happen to him, no matter how much he complains.

"How many classes you are taking this semester? And how much is it going to cost me?" he continues to tease when Erik is seated beside him and they start to pull out of the long driveway. "Taking anything new or more psychology? Must know everything by now, should take veterinary classes so we do not have to drive to town so much."

“I am taking psychology again, yes,” Erik says, edging over to get away from Ritter’s dog breath. “As for anything else, I’ll wait until I get there. I can’t take veterinary classes, I was already a doctor, zhat’s like cheating.”

The truck ride is short, but Ritter is wriggling by the time they pull up to the Admission’s office. He almost doesn’t let Misha clip on the leash before he’s yanking him down the street towards a nearby park. Erik bids them goodbye with a laugh and promises to be done within the hour.

The woman in the office is very pleased to see Erik again, and comments that he looks much healthier than the last time she saw him. Working together, he signs up for level 2 psychology, level 1 chemistry, and when she mentions they have music classes he jumps at the chance to perfect his violin playing. There are so many interesting classes and he would have loved to take a complete load with six or seven, but the academic part of him that’s interested in soaking up information isn’t nearly as loud as the part of him that loves Misha and would suffer spending hours and hours away from him every day. There will always be time for more classes later.

He decides to make a stop at the school book store to buy the text books he’ll need for the semester. The bell jingles announcing his arrival, and Erik halts in place when he meets the eyes of a girl he hasn’t seen in a very long time, standing behind the counter.

Holly stares back at him, her cheeks flushing pink. Her mouth tightens up into a tiny little frown and she quickly looks away as though she could pretend she hadn’t seen him. But she can’t avoid him forever, she’s the cashier.
With the books he needs in tow, he walks up to the counter confidently. “It’s good to see you again, Holly,” he says in an even, civil tone. She keeps her head ducked as she quickly rings up his books. Her finger glitters, and he looks down to see a sparkling diamond ring stacked under a modest gold ring. “You got married?”

She finally looks up at him with a shy, embarrassed sort of smile. “I did,” she murmurs quietly, tucking hair behind her ear. “His name is Henry. We’ve only been married a month.”

“Vell, I’m glad you could find somebody,” Erik says, trying to sound more sincere than bitter. He doesn’t particularly care about this girl anymore, but he doesn’t want to make enemies, either. He remembers how nasty she could be.

“Look, Erik,” she looks around to make sure they’re alone. “I’m… I’m really sorry. About how I treated you. It’s been eating me up for months. I’m too embarrassed to even walk down that street anymore. I can’t ask you to forgive me, but… I want you to know that I’m sorry.”

He stare at her unblinkingly. He’s honestly not sure what to say. He didn’t even think she was capable of remorse. All the malicious things he’s thought about her suddenly seem trivial in the face of her apologetic misery.

“I accept your apology,” he blurs. He wants to say more. He’s not sure what he wants to say. He kind of wants to smack her, but that doesn’t seem appropriate. He leaves quickly, his heart hammering in his chest, and almost loses his footing outside. He rushes to the truck, feeling twisted up inside.

She was the one who accused him and his best friend of being homosexual. She was the one who called him names and left him when he wouldn’t be with her. He liked it better when he could believe she was an unpardonable harpy. It was easier than admitting people with flaws can find repentance. He sees Misha, smiling and playing with Ritter in the truck, and he feels like he’s been struck by lightning.

A mallet has come crashing down on his head from the sky and left him wobbly-legged. His heart has climbed into his throat and he has the urge to throw a tantrum as he’s filled with powerful warring emotions.

Misha watches Erik making his way over to the car, his smile slipping more and more with every step closer the other man takes. He looks pale, and a little off balance, like maybe he’s coming down
"You are alright? They let you take classes, yes?" he asks when Erik opens the car door to climb inside.

“Ja,” Erik takes his glasses off to scrub his face. There’s no point pretending he’s not shaken up by his visit. He wants nothing more than to curl up on his couch with his dog and his Russian and close his eyes for a couple hours. “Holly vas in zhere.”

Misha’s worried expression turns cold and stony. "She vas. What did she say to you? She call you bad things again? I will go scare her for you. Will make her apologize."

“She already did,” Erik admits, sitting back in his seat. “I didn’t even bring it up, she just… said she vas sorry. She’s married now. She cut her hair short. I don’t know why I care.”

"Do you miss her? Are you jealous of husband?" Misha presses, not looking at Erik as they pull out of the parking lot. He isn't sure he wants an answer but he has to ask.

“My memories of her are fuzzy,” Erik sighs as he slips his glasses back on and stares unseeingly out the window. “I remember she vanted to be vith me, but she treated me poorly. Zhat isn’t zhe vay you should treat someone you vant to be vith. You’ve always treated me better zhan she ever did.”

"Does not answer question." the Russian says. "She was mean. Did not treat you well, is true. But does not mean you do not miss her. Can miss people who treat you badly. Can even love people who treat you badly. Sometimes, can not help it."

“I never loved her,” Erik says disdainfully, crossing his legs and turning to stare out the window. “I vanted to. I vanted to love someone. Even now, I feel… lonely. I don’t mean I don’t enjoy your company, but I feel like… I vant to be in love. I don’t know if I’m even capable, I’m such a bitter, strange old man.”

"You are capable." Misha says softly, tears in his eyes. "You are very capable. Give it time. You will find someone. Will fall in love and will be best feeling in whole world.”

Erik scoffs through his nose. “I don’t have time to look for love. I’m already old. I have too many odd quirks and too many problems to be loved.”
"No. Do not say that. You can be loved. There is nothing that could make it impossible to love you. Nothing at all," Misha snarls through tightly clenched teeth.

Erik doesn’t seem convinced. He stays quiet for the rest of the ride. Even Ritter can sense the mood, and lays his head down on the doctor’s lap. Erik idly scratches his ears the rest of the way home. Too many thoughts crowd his head, leaving him with a cottony feeling, like his head is full of static electricity.

He’s quiet still when he enters the house and goes immediately to tend to his violin. He wants to clear his head, and the best way to do that is by letting muscle memory take over.

He plays in the back yard, he plays the song he knows best, the first song he ever managed to play. He closes his eyes and lets it come to him, humming along quietly as the notes vibrate out of his strings.

His lips move on their own over a lilting chord. He didn’t know there were words to the song, and if you asked him now he still couldn’t tell you, but one line comes to him in a whisper.

*Ich liebe dich so sehr*

He almost drops his violin. His skin prickles and his hands shake. He doesn’t remember this song, all he knows is that Misha told him he wrote it. He must have written the lyrics them, for the life of him he can’t remember them but one line sears a hole out of his memory now and brands itself on his body.

Like a string snapping, or a bubble bursting, he shouts “Schlachthymne der Herzen!”

Misha comes running out into the backyard from the kitchen where he had been preparing dinner. He’d heard him shouting, worried that in his anger and confusion he might hurt himself.

"What is it? What is wrong?"

“Zhe title!” Erik whirls around. “I remember zhe title of zhe song, you said I wrote it, right? Schlachthymne der Herzen, it means *Battle Hymn of the Heart*. Move, move!”
He hurries up the stairs towards where many of his old belongings are kept after Misha recovered them. He throws a couple boxes aside until he finds the one he was looking for. Inside an old boot is a velvet bag with a ring in it. He’d originally thought it was mistakenly in his possessions, but perhaps not. He shakes the plain gold ring out of the bag onto his palm and inspects it. It’s utterly without decoration, but it’s a wedding ring.

“Misha,” he calls as he comes back down the stairs so quickly he almost trips. He thrusts the ring at the other man, his voice shaken and energized. “Am I married?”

"Ah. No. Not anymore." Misha admits, a little nervously. This isn't how he would like to tell Erik about this. In fact he'd rather never tell him but he's asked and Misha will not lie. "Had wife. Pretty German woman. You work hard away at war and she was not faithful. Left you for another man. Got divorced many years ago."

Erik looks crestfallen. His expression drops from cautious optimism to carefully controlled disappointment. “I see,” he mutters, setting the ring down on the kitchen table. It feels too heavy in his hand. “Zhat must be vhy I feel like zhis, zhen.”

"No, no. You did not like her. Not like her at all. Married her because was pretty and was expected," Misha assures him, placing a comforting hand on the doctor's head to ruffle his hair. "You never miss her. Lost nothing, I promise."

Erik steps out of range of Misha's hand and combs his fingers through his hair. His chest feels tight and hot, like he wants to cry or scream. “Zhen vhy do I feel like I’ve forgotten someone?” he whispers to himself, staring hard at the ring. He doesn’t wait for Misha to reply, he beckons Ritter into the back yard to be alone with his thoughts.

He climbs his tree and swings his feet in the air, staring out over the woods and ponds. Love seems to be a very popular subject of the planet. Everywhere he looks, in books or catalogues, TV shows or radio programs, people talk about being in love, about being married. The more he thinks about it, the more he feels like he’s missing out on something.

Not that he wants to meet someone and fall in love with them. He feels like he left something behind. There’s a tense gnawing at the back of his mind, quiet little whispers that fill him with dread like there’s someone out there somewhere who loved him who wonders to this day why he suddenly disappeared.
Misha waits a few minutes, arguing with himself, before going out to Erik's tree. This is probably a bad idea, he tells himself for the hundredth time but it doesn't stop him from shouting up to Erik.

"What if you did love someone? What if there was someone who you loved who promised to wait for you until you got better? Will it make you feel better?"

“I doubt it,” Erik mutters tiredly. If there was someone, they’ve probably forgotten him by now. Or they think he left them, and they’re filled with anger and disdain. They’ve probably found someone else by now. Misha is, as usual, trying to make him feel better.

"Even if this person loved you very much? Loved you and you loved them and they will wait," Misha calls up the tree.

“Please stop talking about it, Misha,” Erik says despairingly, and leans up against the trunk for support. “I don’t want to think about it anymore.”

Misha nods with a sigh. "Da. Will stop now. Come down for dinner. Made your favorites for going back to school. Please come down, we will have good night and you can choose tv channel."

Erik spends the rest of the night glued to Misha's side. He doesn’t leave an inch of space between them if he can help it, pressed up against him like he’s trying to melt into him.

He lays awake that night for a long time, staring up at the ceiling with his hands folded on his belly. He’s almost scared to learn if there was someone who he loved. He wonders where they might be now. If they’re even alive. He closes his eyes and tries, *tries* to remember. But all he gets are vague, fuzzy shapes.

That night he dreams that he has a wife. She has brown hair and silver eyes and red lips, and they were happy, until Misha arrived in his dream and locked Erik in a cage and killed her before his eyes. He woke with a start just as the first rays of dawn started to creep through the window, feeling suddenly uneasy being in bed with Misha. He doesn’t realize until he’s halfway down the stairs, wrapped in his robe, that the woman in his dream was created in his image, it was himself as a woman. He’s not sure if the dream meant anything, that Misha was responsible for locking part of him away – he knows the Russian has information about his past that he won’t reveal.

He shakes his head to try and scatter his thoughts. He’s had quite enough of doubting Misha, who has only ever been kind to him, even when he least deserves it.
Erik works extra hard to be nice to Misha over the next week until classes start. He stays closer to him, helps with the chores more and makes sure to compliment his cooking. If Misha notices he doesn't say anything but he does smile more and it's enough to convince Erik that he's doing the right thing by fighting off his suspicions.

Misha drives him to the college on his first day of classes and comes to get him afterward, happy to sit silently and listen to the doctor rambling on and on about his new professors and the syllabuses and how excited he is for his new semester. He doesn't really listen to most of it, just nods when it seems appropriate. After that he lets Erik go to and from the school himself, only getting up in the morning with him so he can pack the other man a lunch and wish him good luck. Erik is recovered enough now that he can handle going to and from the campus on his own.

Home alone Misha cleans and cooks and considers finding something to do with his spare time. The house is quiet and Ritter likes having him around but it's getting boring. So finally one night he raises the question of getting a part time job in town.

He winds up working for a grocery store, moving things around in the back room because he’s so large. The work is hard on his leg, but he keeps moving. The muscle is well healed by now, it's just a matter of building strength back into it, and that won’t happen if he sits down every time it feels tired.

Some nights he does need to use the cane around the house, just to give him a break. His leg hasn’t given out for months, but he doesn’t really want to push it until it does.

Erik teases him kindly about his cane, pulling his seats out for him and asking him if he wants a special pillow for it in their bed. Misha can tell he’s only joking, it’s also comforting to think that Erik would stop his teasing if he knew it was genuinely upsetting the other man.

“You’re going to be an old feeble man for the rest of your life,” Erik laughs one night when Misha sets his cane at the foot of the bed. “I might as well surgically attach that cane to your palm.”

"Am not feeble. But go ahead. Means it will always be within reach to hit you with." Misha snaps back as he crawls under the blankets. "Am still big and strong. Do not even need cane that much anymore. Only after work."

“You will be feeble if you keep relying on that cane,” Erik grins, shifting under the blankets so he’s closer to the big, warm man. “You’ll lose all the strength in your legs and then you won’t be able to
hold up your massive muscular arms and big wide shoulders and chest and you’ll fall over like a turtle and you won’t be able to get up. I can see it now, Man Dies of Starvation Because His Legs Got Too Skinny.”

"Legs are not skinny! I am still strong! I will prove it!" Misha shouts.

He rolls over quickly and grabs onto Erik, intent on pinning him down like he did while they were camping. He had been strong enough to do so then and he is more than strong enough to do so now.

“Ach! You’re always so quick to attack, you’re like a child!” Erik shouts with a grin, swatting at Misha's wrists. Ritter jumps to attention and starts barking playfully, wagging his tail. “You’re going to rile up zhe dog you mammoth!”

"Do not care. Will defeat him too!" Misha declares, grabbing at Erik's hands to pin them over his head.

They scuffle like children, kicking the blankets around and exciting the dog terribly. Erik manages to wriggle away and almost knocks Misha off balance a few times as they wrestle and shout. Erik has to admit defeat again, he really is physically outmatched by the younger man. Out of breath from both exertion and laughter, Misha is on top of Erik, supported only by his hands, eye to eye with the older man, smiling down at him.

Erik’s wide grin softens into a smaller, fond smile, his nostrils flaring as he tries to catch his breath. His smile widens again when Misha's does, and he lifts his hands to rub them across the bald head hovering over him.

“Alright, I admit, you really are strong,” Erik pants shallowly, shifting his legs into a more comfortable position around Misha's hips. His hands slide slowly from the bigger man’s shoulders to his chest, and he spreads his fingers, experimentally pressing them into the muscle of Misha's chest. “You really are… very big.”

"I...Da." Misha says, his breath catching as his throat suddenly goes dry.

He's been here before. It's all so vivid, memories of nights started like this. Him on top of Erik, looking down on him, as Erik's hands snake lower and lower. Leaning down to kiss the loving smile off his face, the doctor’s strong arms wrap around his neck. Stripping him nude so he can wrap bare legs around Misha's waist and press their bodies together...
He forces himself to stop thinking about it. His body is already starting to react to the memories and he jumps as if suddenly jolted with electricity. He tries to scramble away, to a safe distance, somewhere where Erik can’t see or feel him, or continue to touch him like he his. But his foot gets caught in the blankets and he tumbles off the bed, landing painfully on his bad leg on the floor.

“Misha!” Erik sits bolt upright. “Vhat on earth – give me your hand you old fool – ”

He helps the other man back up onto the bed, but when he tries to rub his leg to chase away the ache, Misha quickly turns away. Erik gets the terrible feeling that he’s done something wrong.

“Misha, you know I don’t mind if you’re close to me,” he says quietly, resting his hand on the Russian’s massive shoulder. “I don’t even mind if you're intimate vith me. I like zhe touching. You don’t have to be afraid to touch me.”

“No. Can not,” Misha says, shaking his head. Erik has no idea what he’s saying. If he knew what Misha is thinking he’d be shocked. He'd be frightened and send him away. He doesn't care for Misha like that anymore, Misha knows it. He can't let himself pretend otherwise.

Erik’s chest clenches. Somehow, the words feel like a blow. The idea of losing touch with Misha, the idea of never touching his hand again or hugging him close or sleeping in his arms makes his skin feel cold.

“Please, Misha,” he puts both hands on the Russian’s shoulder now. “I vant it. I need you to touch me.”

"Erik please stop. Please, do not know what you are saying." Misha begs, pulling out of Erik's grasp. "Is not forever. But can not right now. It not possible."

Erik feels rejected. Cast off, like a scorned lover. He swallows hard and swings his legs off the bed.

“I’ll sleep on zhe couch zhen,” he mutters, slapping his thigh to get Ritter to follow as he sweeps out of the room before he can hear Misha splutter some poor excuse to get him to stay while maintaining that he won’t touch him.
He curls up on the couch beside Ritter and wraps his arms around the bloodhound’s neck, burying his hot face into his shoulder. He’s not sure why he needs Misha to touch him. He recalls the way Holly had demonized this concept of homosexuality, this idea of men loving and touching men. He didn’t understand it then and he doesn’t understand it any better now. Fuzzily, he remembers Misha telling him that he’s not one of these men. Perhaps Misha thinks he’s one.

He isn’t, surely. He had a wife. Whom he never loved, according to Misha.

Why would Misha even know that? Why would he have told Misha that he didn’t love his wife? That seems very personal. There has to be some boundary between friends that can’t be crossed, some level of privacy, and it seems like that would be confidential. Women gossip about their marriage problems, not men.

Why didn’t he love his wife, he wonders. Misha said –

Oh, Misha said. He listens to Misha like he hands down the Gospel. Misha must not know. He must have loved his wife, or he wouldn’t have married her. He doubts he would have taken the time to marry a woman he didn’t at least like. The idea is absurd. The only reason he could fathom that a man would marry a woman he doesn’t like is for money, and he certainly has no shortage of that. Beyond that, the only reason he might is-

Perhaps to cover up the fact that he’s a homosexual.

Erik’s face goes even hotter.
Chapter Notes

STRONG WARNING

There is some dub/non-con in this chapter. If that triggers you, tread lightly. I don't want anybody to be caught off-guard.

Misha tries to make things better in the morning. He tries to ruffle Erik's hair when he comes downstairs for breakfast only to be rebuffed. He tries to touch his shoulder only to have Erik shrug away. He tries to explain himself, to explain that he only meant for last night, not forever. That he still wants to touch Erik like they used to, last night he just couldn't. There's no answer.

After a week like that they're both a little starved for touch. They haven't been sharing the bed and it's clear neither of them is sleeping well. Erik is constantly snapping at his birds or the other students in his classes and Misha barely talks to anyone, only mutters to himself in a constant stream of angry Russian under his breath.

They can't go on like this and they both know it. Finally Misha corners Erik one night after his classes and forces him to listen to an explanation. It's slow and stilted as he makes it up on the spot. He explains that that night was a fluke, that he was wrong to tell Erik no he had just been frightened by the sudden closeness. That it's been a long time since they roughhoused like that and he got sentimental and he shouldn't have taken out his sadness on Erik. It's a lie and he punishes himself later by making foods Erik loves that he hates but it's worth it to be talking and touching again.

There's still an uneasiness in the air, but the tension is lessened. And that's a start at least.

They start small. Little brushes of the hands and shoulders, the barest hint of physical affection. Eventually they're touching like they used to, but the doctor always seems stiff.

In truth, he’s been in a panic for days now. He’s trying desperately to remember if he was ever a homosexual. The more he tries to remember, the more the memories scatter. He’ll see a hazy, unfocused image of a man, but then he’ll lose him just as soon as he tries to focus on his face, and he doesn’t know if that man was just a patient in the war or a lover, anyway.
He has a constant, slight feeling of nausea, like he could be sick any moment if he put any thought into it. His legs feel like rubber and his head feels like it’s full of marbles, all rattling around and fighting for attention.

He does research on it, what research he can. But it’s not like he can go to the library and ask for the books about the gays. Especially not considering the fact that people already have suspicions that he’s a Nazi. And his psychology books don’t give him much information other than that they’re pretty sure there’s a cure for it. Who “they” is remains to be seen.

Determining one’s own sexuality shouldn’t be this complicated, he thinks. He should be able to look at a man and decide whether or not he’s attracted to him. He thinks Misha's handsome, but then again he’s always thought that, and now he can’t tell if that’s subjective or objective. He tries to think about what it might be like to be with Misha, but he gets so flustered that he can never think about it for long.

Misha starts to worry over Erik constantly. The man always looks pale and a little distant and has been poring over his psychology books like his life depends on the information contained within them. It's unusual behavior for so early in the semester and has Misha watching Erik most closely for any sign of what's wrong.

He starts keeping the doctor close. He encourages him to study in the kitchen when Misha is cooking and to spend time with him watching movies or television instead of going off to play his violin alone. If something is wrong he wants to be nearby to offer assistance in anyway he can.

Misha's closeness doesn’t help Erik’s anxiety over the matter of his own sexuality. He concedes to sitting in the same room as him only because he doesn’t want the other man to hover even closer if he starts acting strangely. Ritter makes for good distraction if he ever needs to actively ignore Misha for any reason, or even to get away from him.

A week passes, and then another. Things are odd and strained between them, like a violin string wound too tightly, just about ready to snap with the right amount of pressure. Their touches are light and almost professional, Erik won’t allow anything more. He’s been talking about moving back into his other bedroom.

Something is going to break soon. Misha can feel it, Erik can feel it, even Ritter and the birds seem to be picking up on it. It's only a matter of time and who is going to crack first. Misha is determined that it won't be him because he's sure he can pick up Erik's pieces when he falls apart, but he isn't so sure the other man can pick up his.
When Erik suggests moving into his old room Misha won't hear of it. He refuses to have the conversation and still puts Erik's clothes in their room after they're folded. He carries Erik to their bed when he falls asleep on the couch and refuses to go to sleep until Erik is in bed with him. They don't spoon like they used to but at least Erik is there.

Erik’s escape comes in the form of a trip his music class is offering to Atlanta to go to a live symphony. He would have wanted to go even if he and Misha weren’t on awkward terms, but it’s the perfect excuse for him to get out of the cabin for four days.

The Russian is, of course, unhappy with the idea of Erik leaving for that long. They haven’t been separated since Misha's trip to get Erik’s things, and that literally nearly killed him. But he can’t keep the doctor at home anymore. He couldn’t even if he tried.

Atlanta is huge, Erik finds, and a little overwhelming. He doesn’t even have time for his own thoughts because everything moves so quickly compared to the countryside where they live. He’s glad that he brought a book to read with him because even if he doesn’t have time for it, it’s an excellent tool for avoiding interaction. Just by holding it open and staring at it he can ward off conversation.

The music is wonderful, they go to two symphonies the first day. He’s very interested in speaking to the violin players about how they play and how he could improve, so long after the crowds have started to disperse and the musicians headed back stage, Erik sneaks behind the curtain.

Nobody pays him any mind. They think he’s just one of the musicians. He creeps through the back area until he finds himself very lost. He takes a wrong turn into an empty room – but it’s not empty.

He sucks in a breath when he sees two men sandwiched up against the wall. The taller man has a beard and his shirt is off, and he’s being kissed fiercely by the shorter man with a lined face and graying hair.

“Barty! I told you to lock the door!” the taller man says in a panic as the two turn to look at the startled doctor.

Erik’s frozen in place, his hand on the door knob, his mouth agape, clutching his book to his chest. He’s never seen- at least, not that he remembers- right in front of him- His thoughts are so scattered he can’t keep one in his head.
"Sir, listen I know what this looks like but it's not," the shorter man, Barty, says as he approaches Erik. He's moving slowly, like he's approaching a startled animal. "Please, don't call the cops."

Erik steps inside the room at last and closes the door, clearing his throat nervously. He has so many questions that he doesn't even know where to begin.

“I know what I saw,” he says before realizing that it came out a lot more threatening than he meant it to. “I mean, you don’t have to lie. I’m not going to call the cops, I’m- pardon me, I’m just curious.”

The two men look at each other, as if trying to make sure they had just heard him correctly.

"You're curious?" the taller one asks, looking back at Erik. "Curious about what? How it works? I'm really not comfortable explaining that here. Why we did it or what made us this way… this isn't really the place for that kind of talk."

Erik’s almost shaking in place, he’s so nervous. He knows that homosexuals existed, but to just stumble across a pair while he’s in the midst of his own crisis seems so unlikely that he’s almost afraid he’s imagining it.

“Where can I go?” he asks, his voice trembling. “If I vant to… find out? Is there any place safe?”

The two men don't answer immediately. They seem to be weighing their options, trying to figure out if this is safe or if they're going to go to jail or be beaten to death in the next few minutes.

They seem to rule in Erik's favor though as Barty steps forward and retrieves a business card out of his pocket. "The address is on there. Don't let anyone see you go in."

Erik looks at the card with trembling fingers. He’s shivering from head to toe, both anxious and terribly excited. He supposes that a proper heterosexual man wouldn’t be this excited at the prospect of going to a gay bar, but he’ll wait to pass judgment.

“Thank you,” he says, his voice lilting as he almost falls over backwards trying to retreat. “I’m so sorry to disturb you.”
He jams the lock closed in the door knob before closing the door a little too hard. He stuffs the card into his pocket and almost sprints from the theatre. He doesn’t stop running all the way to his school-funded hotel room, where he locks himself in the bathroom to avoid his two assigned roommates, both men younger than him by half.

The card is advertising what looks like a law firm. It makes him a little nervous, wondering if that man just gave him something to make him leave. He hopes that a stranger wouldn’t do that to someone who is in need of help.

He waits for an hour before he dresses nicely and heads out. He finds the address with a little help, and paces up the street and down a couple times before he’s absolutely sure there’s nobody around, and he hurries down the stairs beneath a set of apartments and through the fogged glass door that reads “Williams and Sons.”

Inside it looks like a law firm, which doesn’t help his anxiety any. But the man behind the front desk sees how nervous he looks, clutching the card, and he asks him if he’s there for their “special services.”

Erik nods numbly and is led into the back through a secret door. Inside is a smoky bar filled with nothing but men. He can hardly breathe he’s so nervous.

Men are drinking and dancing together. Holding each other close, holding hands, some kissing in dark corners. They’re all much younger than him, in their twenties and early thirties, but Erik is an attractive enough man to earn himself a few appreciative looks as he makes his way toward the bar.

The bartender is busy with customers and doesn’t get to him for a while, giving him time to look around at the assembled crowd. It’s hard to see because the club is kept fairly dark to allow the patrons some ambiguity, but the music is loud and fun and couples are swinging each other around the dance floor and it’s easy enough to tell that there isn’t a woman to be had in the whole place.

He must look nervous, because a few young men call him “pops” and promise him that it’ll be okay. He’s still shaking, he hasn’t stopped shaking since his encounter with the lovers in the theatre. Even his breathing is shaking, he’s shivering like he’s in a snow storm despite how foggy and warm the bar is.

He orders a club soda in a shaking voice because he doesn’t want any chance that his reasoning or decision making skills could be altered, but he can’t just sit at the bar with nothing. He almost drops his glass trying to pick it up the first time.
Maybe he should just leave. If he’s feeling this nervous about the whole thing, it might be because he’s heterosexual after all.

He's sipping on his club soda, trying to decide if he should go, when a young man, older than the rest but still young, sidles up the bar next to him and places an order for a rum and coke.

"Terrible isn't it?" he asks, looking around the club. "It's really a young man's game out there these days. Not much left for old men like us."

Erik almost jumps out of his skin. The man is handsome, tanned skin and twinkling grey eyes with sleek black hair and a big mustache. He has big muscles and a tiny waist emphasized by the tee shirt tucked into his jeans.

“Oh, I wouldn’t know really,” he says, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice. “I’m not really… experienced.”

"I can tell. That's a beautiful accent. German? There was a German exchange student in my college and he sounded just like that. It suits your voice much better though," the man says, smiling at Erik. He holds out his hand. "I'm Scott, by the way. It's a pleasure to meet someone as beautiful as yourself."

The doctor gives a nervous little hoot of laughter and shakes the man’s hand. “Erik,” he says, clearing his voice to try and chase away the tremble. He realizes he’s still holding the business card and jams it into his pocket. “I’m not… I mean, I’m not sure if I’m… I guess I’m here to find out, I don’t know.”

He shakes his head and mops his sweating forehead with the end of his sleeve. “Look at me, intimidated by a bar. I vas at war and I can’t even sit at a bar without shaking like a kitten.”

"War? You were in Germany during the war?" Scott asks, looking aghast. "I'd thought you might have fled the Nazi's and came here before the fighting really started. Were you in the camps? Oh you poor thing, it must have been horrible."

Flashes of something frightening clash in Erik’s head, but he quickly shakes it and presses a hand against his eye underneath his glasses. “N- no, not zhat var… a different one. In zhis country, out vest, in zhe desert.”
"Oh, the Mann fellas." Scott says, his expression brightening instantly. "So you're a mercenary. Used to not having a lot of women around then. None of the men out there never helped you 'find out' about this sort of thing?"

Erik almost says ‘I don’t remember’ but figures it’s probably safer to just shake his head no. “I vas a doctor, zhe only time men ever saw me is when zhey vere dying. Not good for making friends.”

He’s not even sure how much of his story is true. He gets the sense that if he was friendless, it would have had more to do with the fact that he’s just not a terribly nice person. But it’s better to make up a story than to admit half of the gruesome truth is just plain missing.

Scott shrugs and offers Erik a flirtatious smile over the rim of his glass. "They're loss, my gain then. They clearly couldn't see what a good looking man you are behind your surgical scrubs."

He takes a long drink from his rum and coke before setting it down and leaning away from the bar. "All that swing music makes it a little hard to hear. There are back rooms down that hall," he says nodding towards a door way off to the left of the bar. "Private rooms. We can talk more there if you'd like."

Erik’s heart is thundering in his chest. He wants to say no, but reminds himself that it’s probably just because he’s conditioned to say no. He’s not going to discover anything with caution. He was a man of medicine once, surely he prided himself on experimentation.

He gives a nod that he tries to keep confident but comes across more timid, and follows Scott down a dark hallway. Some of the rooms are closed, and Erik can hear quiet, muffled moans from inside that make his whole body feel too warm.

Following Scott into a dimly lit room with a wide couch and a few chairs, he sits anxiously on one end of the flat, plush daybed, still visibly shaking. He’s not sure whether it’s more from nerves or excitement at this point. His guts are twisting up, he’s almost ripped holes in the knees of his trousers from gripping them so tightly.

Scott closes and locks the door behind them before coming to join Erik on the day bed. He sits too close, their knees touching, and leans back a little to look at Erik, as if inspecting him.

"You look nervous. I could go get a drink to calm your nerves. Someone as dignified as a handsome
doctor like yourself should never look so uphappy," he offers, his flirty smile back in place.

“No, I don’t vant to addle my brain,” Erik says, his breath coming in short puffs. He feels seedy, somehow dishonest. The voice in the back of his head reminds him of the feelings he has that somewhere out there, there’s somebody he was in love with. “I’ve just never done anything like zhis and I’m edgy. I’m not even totally sure yet zhat I vant it.”

"We'll take it slow." Scott assures him, sitting back up. His face is closer to Erik's now and he's staring at him intently. "Have you ever kissed a man before?"

Erik’s guts instantly tense up. The idea of kissing this man makes him feel strange and out of place, and quite like running. He steels himself and shakes his head, but quickly amends, “No kisses. I… don’t really have a reason, I suppose, but no kisses.”

Scott's smile slips a little but he forces it back a second later. "Alright. No problem, no kissing."

While he speaks his hand creeps forward to rest on Erik's thigh, not too high to be demanding but high enough to make his intentions known.

"So what do you want to do then?"

Erik’s shaking again, his knees almost knocking together like bowling pins. “I don’t know,” he admits. “I don’t really know anything about zhis. I mean, I understand zhe mechanics, I understand zhe human anatomy and how it vorks, but I don’t know anything about…” he gives a low whine in his throat and tries to get himself together. He’s acting like a nervous virgin school girl, he’s humiliating himself.

He swallows hard and sits up straighter, putting on a mask of determination. Psychology. This man is probably nervous too, in his own way. He probably never had a good relationship with the men in his life, that’s what his textbooks tell him anyway. That’s probably why he’s attracted to older men. He must view Erik as a fatherly figure who could provide nurturing and male affection. He has the upper hand here, damn it.

"It's not that different from being with a woman." Scott says. He's clearly trying his best to put Erik at ease but his patience is going to start wearing thin soon. "Except for the physical side of it. The feelings aren't that different. We flirt, we dance, we kiss. It's all the same. Try touching me, however you want."
Erik licks his lips and takes in a shuddering breath. He reaches out and puts his hands on the other man’s chest. He flattens his palms and slides his hands across the muscles there. They don’t feel all that different from Misha's pectorals, he doesn’t know what he expected. He dips his hands lower to Scott’s waist, digging his fingers into his muscle through the shirt. Too thin, he thinks to himself.

His face is bright red, he’s afraid Scott will think he’s being too clinical. He might not get another chance to explore like this. That voice in the back of his head is screaming now, he feels like he’s being unfaithful to someone. He swallows hard and slides his palms down Scott’s thighs. It reminds him of when he would massage Misha’s thigh- he has to stop thinking about Misha.

Scott gives Erik's thigh a squeeze, encouraging him on. His other hand comes up to Erik's shoulder, sliding over to slip up his neck and cup his jaw. He applies a little pressure, urging Erik forward into a kiss, but not forcing him.

"See, it's not so bad," he says, his voice low and husky, an obvious attempt at making himself sound sexier.

Erik sucks his lips into his mouth, adamant against kissing. It’s as though he could pretend this is just for research as long as they don’t kiss. If they kiss, it’s something more personal. Instead he takes Scott’s hand from his face in his and gives it a squeeze.

Scott urges him slowly onto his back on the bed. The doctor moves stiffly, but complies as the younger man leans over him. Just like Misha had. When Misha was over him, he felt warm and safe, now he’s just anxious.

His thoughts are so full of the other man that when Scott leans down and kisses his neck, he envisions Misha doing the same. All the blood in his body rushes to his face, lighting him up bright red as he tries to chase the Russian out of his thoughts. He went on this trip to get away from Misha, damn it!

Scott kisses Erik's neck and jaw, unbuttoning his shirt as he sucks a mark onto the older man's collarbone. As buttons open he follows them down with his lips, kissing and sucking at the bared flesh of Erik's chest.

He pushes one of his legs between Erik's, his thigh pressing against the other man's groin, his own clothed erection rubbing against Erik's hip as he rocks forward to press himself more firmly against the older man.
Erik squeezes his eyes tightly, trying to work through the warring feelings and sensations. He puts the thought that he’s being adulterous out of his mind, he can’t even remember having a lover, that’s nothing he can help. He fights the visions of Misha’s mouth dropping lower on his belly, but the thought of lying in an anonymous room with a man he doesn’t know doesn’t really do anything for his nerves anyway.

But despite everything his body is reacting of its own accord. He feels flushed all over, dizzy, his breath is coming in shorter. It’s making thinking logically a hassle, especially while trying his hardest to pretend he’s not nervous. Hesitantly, he puts his hands on Scott’s shoulders as the younger man reaches his trousers.

With his eyes closed, no matter how hard he fights, he sees Misha. With his eyes open, he sees Scott and it frightens him. He’s not sure what about it frightens him.

He decides to stop fighting the illusion. Misha is in his mind, rubbing his thighs, kissing his belly. It makes him feel vile, thinking of his best friend in such a way, and it only makes his feelings of dread and anxiousness worsen. Misha is worth so much more than an imagined tryst in a dark room.

“Vait,” he says hesitantly, taking Scott’s face in his hands to halt him. “I’m sorry, zhis is just- it’s too much, I’m all up in knots.”

"Hey, it's alright. It'll feel good I promise," Scott assures him, pulling his face out of Erik's hands to focus on opening the older man's pants. "I'll help you relax. I won't do anything until you're relaxed enough to take it."

Erik takes a sharp breath in through his nose. He doesn’t very much like that statement at all. His heart takes a sharp dive into his stomach and his limbs feel like ice. “To take it” sounds like such a passive statement, and the audacity of this man to talk like he’s giving Erik some sort of a gift, like he should be grateful for it. It occurs to him that Misha would never say a thing like that.

“I’m sorry,” he says, stilling Scott’s hands and looking him in the eyes apologetically. “I don’t think I can do zhis.”

Scott's kind smile disappears and twists into something closer to anger. "Listen fella I don't have a chance with anyone else tonight. You've taken up all the time I'd have used to find someone new and it's not like I can just go to another bar. I promise this'll feel good and if you're up for it we can switch it around for the next round. So just calm down and it'll be over soon."
Erik’s eyes narrow and he sits up abruptly, yanking his sweater back down over his opened buttons. “Sir, I do apologize for being an inconvenience, but I can’t do this. I’m too worked up, and I don’t appreciate being treated like an amenity. What you do with your life is of no consequence to me, come back tomorrow or another day, I hardly think that sex should be such a high priority anyway,” his voice is firmer than it has been all night, he speaks with conviction as he refixes his belt closed.

Scott growls and grabs Erik’s shoulders, trying to push him back down. "Maybe it don't mean much to you, but I only get to come out here once a month. The rest of the time I have to be home with my wife making everyone think I'm just a normal guy. This is my only chance, do you understand?"

Erik smacks the other man’s hands away. “I won’t be intimidated by you, sir,” he says steadfastly, bending to retie one of his unfastened dress shoes. “I'm sorry this didn’t work out, but I have my dignity.”

"Just lay back down!” Scott yells, looking ready to smack Erik and force him back down. "You're a good looking guy and I know you're nervous, I don't want to hurt you. I'll make you feel good, just lay back down and it'll be over soon."

Erik stands up and sets his jaw and says resolutely, “I’m going home.”

"No!” Scott says, grabbing his arms and throwing him back onto the bed.

A switch flips in Erik. His pupils blow, his heart starts pumping, his hands move with muscle memory. The side of his hand comes down on the side of Scott’s neck, shooting agony down his nerve endings from the pressure point. He jabs his knuckles into his solar plexus to knock the wind out of him, and slams his elbow into his ribs to disorient him. With a cuff to his ear and a knee to his groin, Scott is floored in seconds.

Shaking and terrified, Scott regards the man standing over him.

“What part of I was in a var didn’t you understand earlier?” Erik hisses, his whole body feeling electric. He feels alive, he feels supercharged, like he could take on the world, or at the very least this man.

"Fuck you.” Scott wheezes from the floor, glaring up at Erik. "Just get the fuck out of here."
Part of Erik wants to stay. He wants to make this man suffer for thinking he could overpower the doctor. He wants to let his hands roam, strip flesh from bone, listen to him scream, watch the carpet run red with blood. It’s a terrifying thought, but it only serves to excite him.

But a better part of him reminds him that he needs to get out of here and process some very major things. He steps gracefully over Scott, kicking him once in the back of the head for good measure, and slips out the door soundlessly while rebuttoning his shirt and tucking it back into his slacks.

He tries to appear calm on his way back out, bidding the bartender and the doorman polite nods, but inside him a storm is raging. He ducks into the first alleyway he can find, there’s no way he would have made it all the way back to his room at this rate, and even if he did he’d have to lock himself in the bathroom again and raise the suspicion of his roommates.

He had been aroused. Dimly, but for a moment there he did feel it. He highly doubts any heterosexual man would feel even the slightest flickers of pleasure, being kissed intimately by another man. He supposes that’s the end of it, though he’s yet to have concrete evidence after the emotional turmoil he was battling through.

Guilt boils white-hot in his belly. He allowed himself to envision Misha. His sweet, generous caretaker who has never had an ill thought towards him even when he really deserved it. He let his imagination get the better of him. Of course he would have pictured Misha. Misha is always so good at calming his nerves when he gets overexcited. It was a coping mechanism. It had to be.

He holds a hand to his heart to check his pulse. It’s amazing he hasn’t gone into cardiac arrest yet.

If he truly is a homosexual, then he’s sure the books have got it all wrong. He’s not mentally ill, he feels fine in fact. He feels better than fine, he feels ecstatic. The combination of fright and exhilaration from the encounter, his own self-discovery, and his attack on the other man has him feeling like he could soar.

If he truly is a homosexual, he’ll insist on going back to his own bed. He refuses to impose his presence in the bed of his friend any longer.
Chapter 32

Chapter by HarveyDangerfield

Chapter Notes

This is what you've all been waiting for since the beginning. I hope you're ready for it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Erik is gone for four days. Misha uses the time to clean every inch of the house, move everything and scrub places he's never scrubbed before. When that's done he goes to the grocery store and does enough shopping to fill the house to bursting with Erik's favorite foods. He takes Ritter for a walk and tries to teach him how to sit up.

It doesn't stop him from wondering about what Erik is doing every few minutes. It doesn't stop him from worrying if things are going to be as awkward as they were when Erik left when he returns. Working all day doesn't make it easier to sleep alone at night.

When he runs out of chores he tries knitting. His hands are big and clumsy, like they've always been, but it keeps him focused. Keeps him from thinking too hard about how quiet and still their home is without Erik in it. He's intent on making a blanket. It's enough work to last a month and with how slow he's working it'll take at least twice that long and having a goal in mind feels good.

He's re-knitting a row for the second time to fix the stitches he keeps dropping when he hears the front door open. There's only one person in the world who would just walk in unannounced, he's sure of that.

Grinning broadly Misha drops the stitching and rushes to the door to find the doctor standing just inside, suitcase in hand. Misha wastes no time in pulling the doctor into a tight hug.

Only when Erik hugs him back does Misha allow himself to let go and take a step back to look at his beloved. The German looks tired, like he hasn't been sleeping. He also looks happy, like he's figured out a puzzle he's been struggling over for a long time.

There's also what looks like a hickey peaking over his collar. The sight of it twists Misha's stomach but he chooses to ignore it for now. Maybe it's not what he thinks.
"Is good to see you doktor," he exclaims, smiling. "Have missed you very much."

"You’re helpless without me," Erik cups Misha's cheek for a moment before lifting his suitcase again.

He doesn’t make it ten feet in the door before he’s swarmed with birds. Every inch of him from the waist up is obscured by white feathers, only broken up when Ritter comes bounding up to scatter them and almost knocks Erik over with his paws on his chest. The wind knocked out of him, Erik scratches the dog’s back with a grunt.

"I don’t think you were the only one who missed me," he chuckles as six birds settle on his shoulders and in his hair, knocking his glasses askew.

"Shoo! Shoo! Silly birds, you have him later! Is my turn!" Misha says, waving the birds away and reaching up to fix Erik's glasses. "Have been nothing but trouble without you. Have been making big mess and Ritter only makes it worse. Much worse."

"Have you let them outside at all?" Erik asks as he carries his suitcase to the stairs with Ritter excitedly underfoot.

"Of course. Have been in and out at least ten times a day, can not make up their minds, the silly things." Misha says, taking the suitcase from Erik and carrying it up the stairs for him.

"Ah, in zhat room if you please," Erik says, pointing to the room that was once his bedroom before he moved in with Misha some months ago. "I’ve decided to move back into my own room."

Misha stops dead, almost dropping the suitcase. Slowly he turns toward Erik, frowning. "Why? What have I done wrong? Is it because of whoever gave you that?" he points to the mark on Erik's neck.

Erik swallows hard and adjusts his collar to hide the mark. “No, zhat vas an accident. You’ve done nothing wrong, I just think it’s time I sleep in my own bed again. I’m an adult, after all, an adult man for zhat matter. It’s not… right. For two grown men to sleep in a bed together.”

"You did not mind before. Did something happen? Someone said something to you?" Misha asks, brows furrowing and frown deepening. He doesn't like the idea of sleeping alone again. Not at all.
“Misha, please,” Erik sighs and takes the suitcase from his hand. He has to shoulder the door open because it’s been so long since he’s been in there. It’s a little musty, so he throws open the window and sighs at the sight. Everything looks so stiff and untouched. How long has he been sleeping with Misha? He can’t even recall.

He sets the suitcase on his bed and turns to find Misha standing forlornly in the doorway. He crosses his arm with a sigh. “This is a decision I made of my own accord. Nobody’s forcing me to do anything. Now you can either help me move my clothing from your room back into mine, or you can go downstairs and let me do it myself.”

"You do it. Do not agree, do not want to help," Misha says stiffly, turning his back on Erik and heading for the stairs. "Will make dinner. Come down when you are ready to eat."

He doesn’t wait for a response before going downstairs. He doesn’t go to the kitchen though. Instead he goes out to the backyard and sits with Ritter on the grass. This is all wrong. Erik was supposed to come back happier and things were supposed to be good again.

"Is not right," he tells the bloodhound. "Is not right at all. But you will stay, da? Will not go finding your own room too?" Ritter whimpers and rests his saggy face on Misha’s leg, wagging his tail despondently.

Erik sits on his bed. He wasn’t aware until now just how badly he’s shaking. He thought he would be able to face Misha just fine. He thought he’d processed his emotions well enough and come to the conclusion that he used Misha as a coping tool in his time of need. But faced with him, it has his heart racing and his throat clenching and his belly going hot.

He scrubs his face miserably. He left to get his things in order, and just when he thought everything was organized, it all came spilling across the floor again.

He’s determined to at least pretend that he has his shit together. He moves all his things from Misha’s room back into his own and spends the afternoon dusting and sweeping. By dinner time he comes downstairs with a spring in his step. He refuses to let Misha suffer for his own backwards sexuality.

He chatters through dinner about the symphonies he attended to an idly listening Misha, and discusses what’s coming up next in his classes. He mentions that there will be a recital by his music class at the end of the semester and makes Misha promise to come.
Misha doesn't say much. He isn't sure what to say or if he wants to say anything. He nods along with what Erik's stories and agrees to come to his recital but after dinner he gathers the plates and brings them to the sink without a word. Not even to ask Erik to help him dry them.

That night, Erik has a lot of trouble sleeping. He doesn’t know why sleeping alone suddenly makes him so miserable. He spent the last four days sleeping alone in a hotel room. But he tosses and he turns all night, catching only a couple hours of scattered napping.

Ritter doesn’t fare much better. He trots from Misha's bed to Erik’s several times that night, unsure of where he belongs.

Erik tries to keep things normal, he tries to maintain their usual routine. He goes to school while Misha goes to work, and they come home about the same time and talk about their days. They don’t quite touch like they used to. When they touch now, it seems more formal, almost professional. It’s not gentle or prolonged or intimate like it used to be.

Misha isn't sleeping. Or, is barely sleeping. He's gotten used to having Erik curled up beside him, or at least in the bed. Now the bed feels too big and too cold. It's all wrong and he ends up tangled in the sheets, trying to imitate the feeling of having Erik wrapped around him.

During the day he's as kind and courteous towards Erik as he can be, refusing to be bitter. He tells himself it's just a phase. Erik will come back, he just has to wait. It'll work out.

Over the days and weeks, Erik privately tries to rediscover his own sexuality. He looks long and hard at the men he goes to school with, deciding who he finds attractive and who he doesn’t. Frustratedly, after a few days, he realizes that Misha's kindness has gone and biased him. The men that he finds the most beautiful are always the largest. The men several inches taller than him with broad shoulders or wide bellies. They all look so masculine and inviting. But, he supposes, if Misha has doomed him to always prefer larger men, it’s no real problem for him.

He doesn’t ever act on it again, he just observes. His last encounter had been too rattling for him to make a second attempt, certainly not so soon after.

Sometimes, when he’s utterly sure Misha won’t catch him in his daydreams, he wonders what it would be like to be with Misha in that way. To lie in bed with him not as a friend, but a lover. To hold his hand and be wrapped in hugs again. To kiss him.
The thoughts are always so jarring, he can never think about them for long. He gets too overwhelmed and jittery, and he has to bury his face in a pillow for a few long minutes.

Misha catches Erik looking at him sometimes. It's an odd look, not quite appraising, not even really focused. He seems sort of off in his own world, while staring at Misha. He's tempted to ask what he's thinking about, but every time he starts Erik rushes off to his room or throws himself face down onto the couch.

Misha eventually gives up. He might not want to know. What if Erik is thinking of leaving? And he just doesn't know how to say it? It's best not to push him.

But he starts giving Erik more space. He eats dinner alone on the couch, leaving Erik the table, and avoids touching him even more than he had been. Maybe he can keep him from leaving if he can figure out how to make him comfortable.

There's an odd sort of tension between them. The kind that both of them can feel, but neither will acknowledge. They know that the other feels it, but they think that if they don't bring it up, the other won't know that they know. It's a twisted-around feeling that has both Ritter and the birds in a constant state of unease.

The weather has sensed the mood as well. As the seasons shift from summer into fall, it starts to gale most days. One particular week sees the pair rained in for seven days straight, leaving only for school and work.

Things are going downhill. They both know it. There's a horrible feeling like something is on the rise. Something big, something life-changing. They're both just biding their time until it comes and changes everything they both know.

The gale turns into a full-on hurricane. School is cancelled and the store closed early to make preparations. They're both told to not expect to be called in for at least a week, and to spend the time preparing and hunkering down to wait out the storm.

They bring in the birds and settle them in their room on the first floor. Misha brings home enough supplies from the grocery store to last them a good two months if they need it and together they get everything put away and the windows locked and covered and the glass back door is seriously reinforced.
But after that there's nothing left to do. No where to go, no chores to be done. Just the two of them alone together with a storm on the way.

The storm makes so much noise that they hardly speak to one another. They spend the majority of their time hunkered in the middle of the cabin downstairs, lifting things off the floor in case it floods. Lines are down within the first day, telephone and television both, cutting them off from the rest of the world. They can barely get any reception on their radio, just enough through the static to let them know after the third day that the storm won't be slowing any time soon.

Erik puts himself into his books. Conversation with Misha is strained and odd anyway, there’s nothing to be done but flip through his psychology text books. He forces himself to have self control and he doesn’t read ahead in his newest book, preferring to be surprised by the lessons. Instead he reads back over chapters he’s already read before, which isn’t terribly interesting, but he calls it studying. Misha busies himself with knitting.

On the fourth day, they lose power. Candles are set around to light the way, and the birds are locked in the back room so they don’t knock any over and start a fire. Though at the rate it’s been raining, the cabin is probably fireproof. Erik checks on them frequently to make sure that they’re alright, but they spend most of their time with their heads tucked in their wings, sleeping right through the rain.

The only time Misha and Erik seem to interact is when they need to discuss how to patch the newest leak, or how to best reinforce the windows when they start to rattle. They spend so much time not talking that their voices sound too loud and odd when they do.

Misha at least is used to not having power. Power outages were common during his childhood in the middle of nowhere and he learned to consider having electricity a luxury, rather than being without it a nuisance. Having though ahead enough to buy firewood he builds a fire in the living room fireplace to keep them warm and to cook over.

He can't do anything too grand, but hotdogs and hamburgers and hot water for tea are easy enough. He figures out how to make toast without burning it quickly enough and manages a few warm, not exactly grilled, cheese sandwiches for lunch on the fifth day.

Luckily the cold water is still running so Misha can wash the dishes. It gives him something to do other than work on his blanket and watch Erik read. He's tempted to ask him to read a little outloud, teach him some psychology, but worries that it will somehow break their unspoken rule of not speaking unless they absolutely have to.
By the sixth day he doesn’t care anymore.

"Tell me about current class," he says after lunch, his voice sounding odd against the backdrop of wind and rain that has been one of their only sources of noise for days. "Teach me why I am going crazy being cooped up in here."

Erik actually smiles for the first time in a few days. He starts to talk, endlessly. He reads from his book, reads and reads and explains everything that Misha doesn’t understand. The words flow out of him almost faster than he can speak.

It opens the tap. He talks about psychology, and then about music, he plays his violin and reads from story books. He fills the house with music and then with conversation, the noise is so constant that it makes up for the last week of silence.

He missed this. He’s not sure why he spent so long being quiet. Erik hand-cranks the old record player so Misha can sing for him, deep and loud. Things feel normal again.

*Erik* feels normal again. He’s slipped into absolute comfort with Misha. Perhaps sometimes when he’s by himself he’ll fantasize about being close to him again, even intimate, but he’s not going to take what he has now for granted.

They end up on the couch, sitting side by side again. They aren’t touching but they’re closer than they’ve been in a long time. Misha asks Erik to read to him from one of the many novels they have in the house while he knits, the blanket now large enough to cover his and Erik’s laps.

When Erik falls asleep sideways on Misha’s shoulder, the Russian could cry. It’s been so long since they’ve touched like this. He wants to pull the man into his lap and hold him tightly, squeeze the breath right out of him, he wants to be held by him.

He wishes he never rolled off Erik in bed that night. He can’t help but feel like this is his fault.

On the seventh day, the rain starts to slow, and the power comes back on. Erik is happy to finally read by light again, instead of by candles. He can suddenly see again. Sitting at the table while Misha makes dinner on the stove for the first time in days, his glasses slip down his nose. His hair is disheveled and his sweater is inside-out. He looks just as exhausted as Misha does.
Misha puts a cover on the pot on the stove to wait for the water to boil and turns to look at Erik. He looks rumpled and tired, so much like he used to after long hours in the operating room. It makes Misha smile knowing no one else will ever see Erik like this. That despite everything that's happened and the recent tension between them, Erik still trusts him enough to let him see him as something other than perfect. Which somehow only makes him more perfect to Misha.

Smiling he reaches over and gently pushes the doctor's glasses back into place from where they had slipped down his nose. He knew Erik would never fix them himself; he'd rather lift his head to keep looking down through them than take the energy to actually move his hand and straighten them.

Lightning strikes Erik.

“Doktor. Your glasses are going to fall right off your face.”

His eyes unfocus. He can remember. The simple act of having his glasses pushed up his nose. He remembers a time when Misha would do that. When they were at war. He would see Erik poring over notes and he’d adjust his glasses for him.

He sucks in a breath. He remembers.

All the breath leaves him then. He remembers the war. Slowly at first, he remembers his lab. Messy. Gruesome. Misha was in there so often, looking after him- he was so ungrateful. Spiteful sometimes, even, angry, furious. He would hit Misha sometimes.

And then there were other times where he would love the other man so ferociously that he would slaughter a thousand men on the battlefield to keep him safe.

Erik falls out of his chair in his haste to stand up. His foot catches and he collapses with a shout. His heart is going too fast, his glasses fall off, he’s going to be sick or faint.

He remembers loving Misha.

Everything comes flooding back all at once. He kept Misha's picture with him, in his desk. He followed him into battle to keep him alive for one more day so he could continue to love him. He remembers hating Misha for making him love him, he a man who had never loved anything before but himself.
He remembers shunning Misha for a few months when he realized he was in love. He remembers their bond. Their companionship, the way they would team up and become unstoppable. He remembers crying desperately in the rain one day when Misha was dying, before he ultimately saved his life.

It’s been as plain as the nose on his face. It’s no wonder he thinks about Misha the way he has, it explains that feeling that he’s left someone behind. All this time, he’s been in love with Misha. All this time spent falling in love with him again.

He starts to cry.

"Doktor!" Misha exclaims, jumping to Erik's side. He helps him back into his chair and kneels beside him, checking him for injuries. There's no sign of blood or anything being broken but he'll probably have a bruise on his knee from hitting it so hard on the floor.

He looks pale and unfocused though. Like he's seen something terrifying. It makes Misha nervous, seeing him like this when he can't see anything wrong.

"Doktor? Erik? What is wrong, how can I help?" he asks, hoping the other man can still hear him.

The medic is shaking now. It all came back too fast, he’s overwhelmed. He can’t even see Misha in front of him now, he’s trembling violently and lost in his memories. He doubles over retching, but nothing comes up.

His crying turns to sobbing, he slumps from his chair into Misha's arms, seeking warmth and shelter from the horrible memories that keep flooding in. Memories of sawing people apart, of calling Misha to come watch him disembowel a man gleefully, like he’s a bird showing off his plumage.

It’s too much, too fast, he faints.

The only time Misha has ever been more scared is when he thought he could prevent Erik’s accident. Misha lifts the doctor effortlessly into his arms and carries him into the living room. Gently he lowers him onto the couch and hurries off to retrieve a cool wet cloth for the man's head and a glass of water for when he wakes up.
Kneeling beside the couch he holds Erik's hand in his as he wipes the tears from his cheeks. Something has gone very wrong, he can tell. He isn't sure what but if Erik doesn't wake soon he'll have to call the hospital and have him taken in for an examination.

He only has to wait in a panic for a short while, Erik's eyes open within only a few minutes. He has the worst headache of his life, and he covers his face with his hands, moaning. The tears come back before he can stop them, it's not even an emotional reaction as much as a physical outlet at this point. He can't believe how blind he's been. All this time spent uselessly, falling over himself, desperate and confused and waiting, and he could have prevented it all if he just –

He sees Misha now. His glasses are still on the floor, so his vision is a little blurred, not only by his tears. He reaches out for him and takes his face in hand, rubs his palm over his stubbled jaw and bald head, strokes his cheekbone and thumbs across his lower lip.

He feels so weak right now. Not only physically, but emotionally. He tries to speak, but all that comes out of him is a whimper.

"Here, water will help." Misha says, lifting the glass. He manages to work an arm under Erik to lift him enough to take a few sips before settling him back down on the pillow.

"What is wrong? Are you in pain? I can call doctor. Do you need doctor? Is it head? I will stop talking if it makes it worse?" he asks, speaking faster than he usually allows himself and tripping over his words as he goes.

“I love you,” Erik whispers. He doesn’t even realize he’s said it out loud at first, he thought he’d imagined it. Everything is speeding through his head so quickly now. He’s shaking again, but this time with fear. He presses the heel of his hand to his right eye, which has suddenly started to smart. “I’m sorry- I’m so sorry.”

"No, do not apologize. Never apologize for that." Misha says, feeling tears in his own eyes. Erik has said it once before and then run away. He'd promised to never bring it up again because it had upset the doctor so much when he asked him what he meant.

But Erik is the one who said it again. He brought it up. Surely he can ask him if he means it. "How do you love me? Please, I must know." he begs. "Must know what you mean."

“I’ve loved you for so many years,” Erik can’t see at all past his tears now. He can’t breathe, he can’t
think, the words fall out of him like a faucet. “I love you, I hated you, but I love you, oh Misha.”

He grabs for the Russian blindly and pulls him close, wrapping his arms around his shoulders. He needs to feel him tight up against him, he needs to be close to him again.

Tears flow down Misha's cheeks as he grips Erik back, unsure of how to express the mix of shock, overwhelming joy and confusion that's warring inside him. He has no idea where this has come from or what it means for them beyond right now. All he knows is that Erik said he loves him, again, and is holding on to him for dear life.

"Oh God Erik! I have waited so long for this!" he sobs, hugging the doctor so tight he should worry about cracking his spine. But isn't worried though, he can't spare the brain power to think about anything except Erik loving him. "Have waited so long for you to love me again. Oh doktor, has been so hard. Have never stopped loving you."

“Misha,” Erik pushes at the other man’s shoulders, his throat clenching up. If he heard Misha right (which is only just possible considering the man’s roof-shaking sobs) then that means something he hadn’t even begun to be prepared to deal with. “Misha, Misha,” he tries to pry the inconsolable Russian off him, cupping his face to make eye contact.

“What are you saying, Misha?” he wipes the tears from red, damp cheeks and smoothes his palms over his pate with a shaky smile. “You’re not angry with me? I thought you would be- you said you aren’t- when I asked you if you were- you said- ” he feels faint again, dizzy, as he tries to sort through months of disjointed memories and years that have come flooding back all at once. He recalls loving Misha passionately, enviously, stalwartly, but he can't remember Misha loving him in return.

He thinks that would be something he would remember. The thought that he could have forgotten something that important, that life-altering, that dangerous and exciting, it wounds him deeply in places he didn’t know could hurt.

"I can never be angry at you for loving me. Not when I have loved you so much for so long," Misha tells him, still holding the doctor's waist tightly. He wants so badly to pull him close again, to feel him firm against his chest like he's wanted for so long but they have things to talk about now. That will come later.

"Told you I was not homosexual so I did not scare you. Would never do anything to you you did not want, but did not want to scare you away. Were so scared of liking men, would have hated me," Misha explains. "But have always loved you. Have loved you since I met you."
Erik is speechless. He grips Misha's shoulders, his muscles all tense and aching. He waits for something to happen, he waits for the Russian to laugh at him and tell him he’s joking, he waits to wake up, he waits for an angel to descend and tell him that they were both killed instantly in an atomic bomb moments ago, and Erik’s in Heaven now.

It’s preposterous; logically Erik knows that he’d never be allowed in Heaven. But as improbable as it is, it seems more likely than this firework of a revelation.

“You’re serious,” he whispers, so quietly it might have been mistaken for an exhale if Misha wasn’t listening closely. “You’re actually serious?”

"You still do not remember. Erik, I have loved you for years. I have missed being allowed to love you,” he runs his hands up and down the doctor’s arms.

Erik still doesn’t know what to say. He’s speechless, not a sound escapes him as Misha crushes him back against his chest. Eyes and mouth hanging open, frozen solid, he’s completely blanked.

Misha loves him? How could he possibly miss this part of his memories? Where are the parts that show Misha's love for him? Could he be lying, has he only recently fallen for him- is he even telling the truth at all? He could be making things up for Erik’s benefit. He’s always been a good friend after all, maybe now he’s trying to make him feel like less of a freak.

That doesn’t seem like Misha, though. That seems more like Erik’s paranoia.

He sags in Misha's arms, pressing his face against his chest. “I’m so sorry,” he whispers, tears leaking out of his eyes again. “I’m so sorry I forgot. I forgot you. I forgot you completely.”

"Not completely. Is not all gone," Misha reassures him. He smiles through his tears and taps Erik’s forehead gently. “Is all still in here. I know it is. Will remember, maybe soon. You remembered you love me. Will remember I love you. And if you do not, will prove it to you everyday.”

Erik wants to ask what happened. But he doubts Misha would tell him. He just leans into him and wraps his arms tight around his shoulders.
“I shouldn’t have forgotten,” he rubs his face on the bigger man’s shirt, trying to dry his tears as quickly as they fell.

"Is not your fault. Never blamed you. Not ever. Is my fault for not protecting you," Misha whispers. "Is my fault. Should have found you, should not have left you alone. I am sorry Erik. Have been sorry every day. Now have second chance. Can love you again like before."

It feels like a dream. Erik is boneless and weightless, supported completely by Misha because his skeleton seems to have left without even leaving a note telling him when it would be back. “I can’t believe I forgot something so important, I’ve wasted all this time, you’ve been so obvious and I’ve been so stupid!” he thunks his forehead against Misha’s shoulder to punish himself feebly. “How could I forget being loved?”

"Same way you forgot birds and medicine. Is not your fault," Misha continues to assure him. He never wants Erik to blame himself for what happened. It's his own fault, and Mann's, for what happened. His for not finding Erik sooner and Mann's for hurting him so badly and doing this to him. But it could never be Erik's fault.

"We will love each other again. Have nothing to be afraid of now," the Russian continues. "Is good again."

“I didn’t know it was possible to love someone like this,” Erik whispers. “I feel like my skin is going to fly off, I’m going to burst or catch fire, my blood is boiling- I may faint again. I didn’t think humans were even capable of this level of emotion.”

At first Erik's words make Misha so happy he thinks he might faint himself. Erik was never an affectionate man, not the sort to spill his feelings like this. He rarely told Misha how he felt at all and would never use such flowery language.

But the happiness disappears almost instantly, replaced by a dark, sickening sense of guilt that he's sure is going to cause him to disappear into himself it's eating him up so badly. He had thought Erik didn't love him, before he knew about his accident. He had left Erik to go home to Russia and had cursed him, thought him a liar and a cheat. He had been so furious and here Erik is, loving him so fiercely. How could he have been so blind?

"Do not deserve it." he says, pulling out of Erik's arms. "Do not deserve to be loved by you anymore. I doubted you. Doubted you and left you and let you get hurt. Thought terrible things about you. Loved you so much I thought even new giant heart could not take it but did not trust you. Should not love me, should be ashamed of me."
“What?” Erik breathes, his hands chasing after Misha of their own accord, he needs his touch back. “You shouldn’t say such a thing. I’ve only just remembered it, you can’t tell me to stop.”

Misha shakes his head, ready to cry again. "I did not have faith in you. Did not have faith in your love. Would be fair to never be loved again. Is not right when I have not earned love back after my mistake."

Erik doesn’t remember. He’s not sure what Misha is referring to, and he doubts the other man would tell him even if he asked. He wants to ask, he burns to ask, but he fears it’ll start another fight like all the other times he tried to find out his past, and they’ve only just started loving each other again.

“Misha, honestly,” he takes the big man’s face in his hands and forces him to make eye contact. “You’ve taken care of me. You’ve helped me grow. You’ve given me everything. Whatever happened to me, I would have died if it wasn’t for you. You think that after looking after me for all this time, staying even when I was awful, when I cursed you and hit you, having the patience to stay with me, you think that after all that you haven’t earned my love?”

"Hit you too, remember? Hurt you more than you ever hurt me. You are so small and fragile," Misha says. He can’t quite keep himself from smiling through the teasing, as much as the memory hurts.

But Erik is right. He has done a lot to earn his place back in Erik’s life and make amends for what he’s done. Maybe it's okay to start to forgive himself.

"As always, doktor, you are smarter than me. Have done enough to be loved by you again. I hope," Misha concedes. "Will still do more, if I can. But can be loved by you now too."

They hold each other in place for what feels like hours. Ritter eventually jumps up on the couch and worms his way between them seeking affection, but even that doesn’t pry them apart. They’re both afraid that as soon as they break contact, they’ll lose everything they’ve just discovered and shared. Dinner isn’t that important, anyway.

Eventually they shift, just slightly. Misha lays on the couch and Erik drapes over him, comforted by his warmth and closeness. He thinks back on their lives, on everything he can remember. Even his new flood of memories is fragmented, and they spend the rest of the night playing catch-up. Erik will begin a broken memory and Misha helps him fill in the cracks until it’s whole again.
By morning the pair is starving. They barely remember falling asleep, but waking up again to one another’s morning breath and crusty eyes and Erik’s messy hair, stiff and sore from sleeping in the same position all night, they couldn’t possibly be happier.

Erik stays glued to Misha’s side all morning, and all afternoon for that matter. He barely parts from him for a moment, as though he’s afraid if he wanders away he might forget Misha entirely. And it’s not like the Russian is complaining. He can still barely believe that this has happened at all.

They decide to take the day off from chores and spend it enjoying each other’s company. Misha shows Erik some pictures of them he had hidden away from when they were at war. Most of the days Erik doesn’t remember but the pictures of them together, hugging, laughing, exchanging Christmas gifts or even just sitting together in the mess hall give him proof of the things he does remember and of their love for each other.

They eat together side by side rather than across the table, to they can easily reach out and touch between bites to assure each other that this is still real and that they can touch whenever they please without fear.

After dinner Misha helps Erik move back into their room. After the last stack of clothes is moved back into the dresser he hoists the German up into his arms and deposits him on the bed like a bride on her wedding night. It makes Erik laugh and nothing could make Misha happier than to see Erik happy as he lays down beside him.

They face each other on the bed, holding hands and staring into each other’s eyes. They repeat to each other how much they love each other again and again until they both tire of saying it, even if they don’t tire of hearing it.

Then Misha decides to take a risk. It's nerve-wracking but if he doesn't ask he knows he'll regret it.

"May I kiss you goodnight?" he asks. "Have not done it in very long time."

Erik’s smile falters just slightly. He looks away, and presses his lips together tightly. “I… I don’t know, I think- ”

“Shh,” Misha hushes him, pulling the man against his chest before he can start to panic. His heart feels heavy, but he knows this isn’t because he doesn’t want to. “Is all too fast too soon.”
Erik nods, grateful for Misha's understanding, and relaxes against his body. He promises, quietly, "Soon."

Chapter End Notes

If we looked into how fanfiction gets published, and we went through all the steps, if I added illustrations and the like, would any of you want to buy this as a book? An e-book? I'd love your feedback!
Nothing is really normal after that, despite, technically, things being more normal than they’ve ever been.

Everything feels thrilling and new. Misha insists they were together for years, but to Erik, everything is happening for the first time. At first, he tried to jog his memory, he tried to remember what they were like before. He wanted to know how much he was missing, how many pieces were still scattered apart as far as the stars.

But he didn’t dwell for very long. Misha would find him deep in thought and he would look worried, he’d take his hands and kiss his cheeks, and Erik realized that the longer he spent digging for a broken past, the less time he’d have to spend with Misha in the present.

He hates leaving for his classes in the mornings now. He wants to lay in bed as long as he can, curled up with Misha, his *Liebsten*. He’s cantankerous in the mornings now, frustrated that he took as many classes as he did because he just wants to be home, now.

Sometimes they’ll be sitting on the couch together reading, and Erik will pause to stare at Misha. Even he looks new. He’s aging and large, but he looks so fresh now. His head is shiny and his stubble is trimmed, his jaw is severe and his eyes are so soft. He’ll watch the minute twitches of Misha’s face as he reacts to what he’s reading, and he’ll realize just how long he spent staring when Misha looks up at him and smiles.

Holding Erik takes on an all new joy for Misha. He always loved having the other man in his arms but now, when he can hold him as close as he wants and kiss his cheeks and pet his hair, it’s so much better. He doesn’t have to worry about scaring the man he loves away with his affection. He can love him as deeply and openly as he wants.

It’s so freeing. He could get high on the rush he feels whenever he murmurs "I love you" in the dark of the night, or when he kisses Erik’s cheeks goodbye before he leaves for school, or when he reaches across the table to take his hand during dinner and looks deep into his lover’s eyes.

Not that they are lovers again. They’re in love, but Erik still isn’t ready to make things physical. They’ve never gone beyond holding hands, cuddling and chaste forehead kisses but Misha isn’t in any rush. After waiting so long it’s *fun* to rebuild their relationship.
At least, he tells himself it’s fun. It’s frustrating, most of the time. He has to remind himself that he should be counting his blessings, grateful that they’ve even come this far. But it gets frustrating when he wants to kiss Erik on the lips, and the doctor shies away. Part of him worries that maybe he doesn’t want to be back together after all, that he’s just reacting based on past memories that aren’t even all the way formed. He tells himself that’s just months of paranoia that has built up and slowly shredded his self esteem, but that’s only as convincing as he can make it.

He wishes he could tell himself that Erik wouldn’t do a thing like that. But given that he’s essentially unchanged from how he was before the accident, it’s hard to convince himself that he wouldn’t do something so awful. He wasn’t a very good man, before. Handsome and clever and wise and strong… but not good.

These thoughts only ever come to the surface when he’s alone. When Erik is nearby, beckoning him with open arms for plentiful kisses to Misha's cheeks and nose, when he wraps his arms around him from behind while he’s making dinner or washing dishes, when he rolls over into him in their bed, it’s hard to imagine that he could be faking anything. Misha spins into an exhausting cycle of doubting himself, and then doubting Erik, and then feeling guilty for doubting Erik, and then doubting himself again. It’s not the sort of emotional turmoil he should be grappling with when their relationship is brand new again, just barely getting off the ground.

He tries to bury it down, to cover the doubt in love. He spends too much time with Erik so he can keep the bad thoughts away that new worries crop up. Is he smothering Erik? Will the doctor get tired of him? Should he go away or is it alright if he's as quiet and unobtrusive as possible?

Erik never says anything about it. He smiles and always seems happy to see Misha nearby. Usually he'll stop what he's doing, be it dishes or reading or bemoaning a paper he has to write, to snuggle up to the larger man and let himself be held.

The only time he ever ignores Misha is when he's with his birds. Misha's used to that though. Erik always loved his birds and would make time for them that he wouldn't give up for anyone, not bleeding patients or Misha. Some things never change.

Ritter has become increasingly jealous of his owners newfound closeness. At first he just sat icily at a distance with his back to the pair, but when his cold indifference didn’t get their attention, he started to worm his way forcefully between them whenever they were close. It became common for the pair to be snuggled together on the couch and then suddenly be pounced by 100 pounds of ruddy fur and slobber, which would then roll over on their laps and demand belly rubs.

Even the birds seem to sense the change in the human’s behavior. They start to pay attention to
Misha a little more. He’ll occasionally be up and about cleaning something, when a bird or two will come flutter onto his shoulder and hang around for a few minutes. It’s like they’re determining whether they approve of his courtship with their doctor. He tries not to take it personally when they poop on him, but they never seem to do so on Erik.

Apart from dealing with his birds, Erik’s new favorite activity seems to be sitting in Misha's lap. Misha can hardly sit down for five minutes before the doctor senses he’s seated from wherever he is and comes crawling into his lap like a cat. When Misha started to make fun of him for it, he would only stare out the corner of his eye at the bigger man silently, until Misha would sigh and invite Erik to come sit on him.

It’s his favorite place to sit and think, his favorite place to read, his favorite place to rest his head on Misha's shoulder and close his eyes for a few minutes. The classes have left him tired a lot of the time, and he catches plenty of micronaps, lulled by the soothing sound of Misha's loudly beating heart.

Sometimes they fall asleep together. Erik starts on Misha's lap until Misha decides to lay down and watch TV and shifts him so he's laying on his chest. They end up waking in the morning, still on the couch, both a little sore but otherwise comfortable and happy to serve as each other's blankets.

Sometimes Misha can't convince Erik to get up and go to school and ends up being talked into taking a day off from work. On those days they stay wrapped up in each other for hours, either in bed or on the couch or sitting in the backyard watching Erik's birds. Those days are like heaven and neither of them could be happier.

Everything isn’t perfect, though. If it was all happy all the time, Misha supposes he would get bored, anyway. Erik still gets in moods sometimes. He’ll shout or curse, or on the rare occasion he might actually break something, which he’s put a lot of effort into not doing anymore. He doesn’t hit Misha like he used to, but he will shout at him.

The thing that makes it worth it is the aftermath. Erik will almost always clean his own mess, or if he doesn’t he’ll make it up to Misha later. He’ll guide the bigger man into his arms and apologize for screaming. He hasn’t said “I love you” since that first day, but he doesn’t need to say it out loud for Misha to see it in his eyes and hear it in his voice.

The nights that Erik gets in these moods are wonderful, too. Misha might be too big to properly be the little spoon, but that doesn’t stop Erik from curling up behind him and propping an arm under Misha's head and draping the other over his waist.
Misha loves that. He loves being held, no matter how big he is compared to Erik. He feels safe in the German's arms and loves falling asleep to the feeling of his warm breath on his neck. Just as much he loves waking up to the feel of the man against his back, his occasional morning arousal pressing against his backside. They never do anything about it, he isn't even sure if Erik masturbates in the shower, but it feels good none the less.

He knows Erik has felt his arousal too, when they lay together at night. The other man never mentions it though so Misha follows his lead. If it isn't bothering him but he doesn't want to do anything about it it's best not to bring it up and risk a fight. It's easier to pretend it doesn't happen and go about their days.

Days that are getting busier and longer all the time. Erik's classes are moving on to more complicated topics, meaning he has to spend more and more time studying. Misha too is getting more hours at work, meaning longer times away from home and from his beloved. But they find ways to make it up to each other and share at least one meal a day no matter what.

The weekends are the best. They always devote their weekends to each other. Sometimes it's hard to pry Erik away from his homework, but it doesn't take too much convincing to get him to set aside his books for a hearty cuddling session on the couch, or a trip into town for special ingredients for supper, or even just into the backyard with some tea to watch the sun go down.

Misha notices that Erik is looking healthier than ever. It seems that with this last vestige of good feelings locking into place, whatever stress was keeping him from putting back on the weight he lost has disappeared. Misha thinks it makes him glow, but Erik seems to have other ideas.

The doctor is certainly not happy with the extra weight that has just started to fringe his stomach and sides. Misha finds him pinching it sometimes when he's alone and sighing angrily at himself. When Misha tries to reassure him that he's more beautiful than ever, Erik waves him off and pretends he doesn't know what Misha's talking about, denying the weight altogether.

He puts in extra effort to stay fit. He rides his bike longer than he needs to, he walks everywhere. He even piles all his books into his bag even when he doesn’t need all of them on a given day, just to give him more weight to carry to feel more active. The result of which only gives him terrible back aches, but Misha is always willing to rub them away with big, strong hands.

Misha tries to assure Erik that he doesn't mind. He's always been soft himself and Erik has never cared. Why would he care if the German were to soften up a little and put on some of the weight he'd lost? It just shows he's healthy.
He soon learns not to say anything as no good deed goes unpunished. Every time he brings it up Erik
denies his weight gain and starts to shout at Misha for insulting him. He gets mad and says hurtful
things before storming out, only to come back later and apologize for all the cruel things he said
about Misha's weight and size. Eventually the Russian gives up on talk and focuses instead on
showing Erik how much he doesn't mind the weight.

Erik manages to at least keep his weight steady. He spends less time sitting around doing nothing and
more time on his feet (effectively exhausting Misha on the weekends because of his desire to go
hiking in a random direction in the woods). He claims it’s good work for Misha's still-healing leg, but
the Russian knows otherwise.

The exercise, however, does wonders for Erik’s mood. If he’s ever feeling down, he goes out for a
walk in the woods. Sometimes he’s out there for hours, wandering around through the trees,
climbing them occasionally. The fresh air, warm sunlight and bright greenery lift his spirits like
nothing else. Sometimes he takes his birds with him, and he marvels at the way they stick out like
beacons in the trees.

He’s always careful to be home before nightfall. Misha gets nervous when he’s out on his own in the
dark, especially considering that there is a very real threat of wildlife in these forests at night. Erik has
never seen hide nor tail of a wolf or a bear over the years, but Misha still seems to think it’s a
possibility.

Too soon the leaves start to turn from green to red and orange and Misha takes to nervously waiting
outside for Erik to come back from his walks. The days are getting shorter and the hours Erik could
spend in the woods safely are dwindling, causing Misha more and more worry that he'll stay out too
long and get lost or be attacked by a bear.

Erik couldn't win against a bear. He's far too small and not nearly quick enough to get away. If he'd
let Misha come with him to wrestle away dangerous wildlife it'd be another story but he insists on
taking these walks alone. Time to clear his head and wrap his mind around the increasingly difficult
topics his class is covering.

The time alone to think has also been bringing back memories. Sometimes he’ll be on a train of
thought and a brand-new memory will surface and he’ll explore it excitedly. He’ll rush back to
Misha flushed and beaming and relays his new memories all in a rush.

“I remember zhe spies!”

“I remember zhe ubersaw! Vhat an invention!”
“I remember going to college once before! I guess twice is better than none!”

Misha can hardly believe how whole Erik is again. He wonders if they’ll ever go to Russia like they originally planned. He’s certainly well enough to travel. But the thought of never visiting their friends again is a sad one.

They have thanksgiving with the whole crew that year. They make the trip up to Texas for Erik’s fall break, even Miss Pauling is there this time. Even though it took them a few minutes to recognize her since she cut her hair very short and dyed it blonde, and traded in her simple black glasses for bright red rhinestoned horn-rimmed frames.

Dell is overjoyed to hear that Erik’s memory of his relationship with Misha has been recovered. He loudly asked if they were “gonna get married” and while Erik only laughed, Misha's face turned red so fast he got dizzy.

After long hours of eating and drinking and laughing, Erik and Misha say their goodnights and retire to their room. Their departure is accompanied by giggling and Dell's insistence that they can make as much noise as they want and not worry about bothering him or Angel.

It's embarrassing and for the second time that night Misha is too embarrassed to respond. He only ushers Erik out of the room faster and glares at the laughing group before slamming the parlor door behind him.

Part of Misha wishes that the night would take on a “romance novel” plot wherein they would giggle about Dell’s comments and then gaze into one another’s eyes as their laughter fades, and then Erik would finally lean in for their first kiss since the accident and he’d ask Misha to make love to him…

But that’s just a fantasy. Erik just crawls into bed and snuggles up against Misha's side as usual. The Heavy has to remind himself to count his blessings.

The good feelings that came from their visit didn’t last long for Erik when they got home. His classes have been getting increasingly difficult and he’s been spiraling into a cycle of stress that only bear hugs from Misha seem to alleviate. The work piles on and Erik’s stress levels rise, so he wants to escape the stress, which only results in procrastination so the work piles up higher and his stress levels rise more.
It doesn’t help when he asks Misha what he used to do to relieve stress. Misha can only awkwardly answer “violin” because it’s not like Erik can start splicing animal DNA into people again. He’d get arrested for that now.

Sometimes it helps for Erik to talk about his classes and what they're learning but he soon realizes that Misha is only listening to be polite and that he doesn't understand most of what they're talking about. While Misha assures him that he doesn't mind, knowing Erik doesn’t talk as much as he did before, he instead buries himself in his books, only reemerging with he can't focus anymore to demand hugs and food.

It's sweet and domestic and very much like how they used to be before when the doctor would become engrossed in his work and only stop when he wanted sex or remembered he was hungry.

He’s been staying up late again, like he used to. It leaves him very tired in class, but he keeps himself focused by pinching his leg whenever he starts to daydream or doze. He can’t afford to drift, not when the classes have been focusing on such difficult topics.

Freud was one hell of a man, Erik has been learning. The subject has taken several weeks to cover, and they had to write an extensive paper at the end and take a very detailed test. Erik complained about the material constantly, and on the night he came home from his test, he was both exhausted and overjoyed. He glued himself to Misha’s side and didn’t leave him all night, claiming that a several-hour snuggle session was in order after that hellish exam.

“Do you know what they are covering next?” Misha asks, but Erik doesn’t. He supposes he could go dig out his syllabus… but he’d rather not get up.

He sleeps well that night for the first time in ages. He’s so rested and comfortable in the morning that he doesn’t even want to go to school, and fights Misha to stay in bed. But the Heavy insists he has to go to work, and Erik can’t skip the first day of whatever subject material they’re moving onto next.

Grudgingly, he gets dressed and finds to his dismay that it’s a drizzly grey morning. He puts on an extra sweater, ties the hood under his chin, and refuses Misha's offer to drive him to school. He’s off on his bike with his books and breakfast bouncing merrily in his side bag.

Everyone seems to feel the same way about today when he gets to class. Every student is wearing the same expression of ‘I’d rather be in bed’ and at least ten students are completely missing. He bids a sarcastic good morning to a few of his fellow students that he gets along with and sits in his usual spot with his books out, ready to trudge through the next hour and a half so he can skip the rest of the day and go home.
After the teacher has resigned himself to the fact that all of his missing students aren’t going to show up, he starts into his lecture for the day. “Brain Damage” he enunciates and indicates a very large web he’s drawn on the board. Erik sighs and stifles his instinct to roll his eyes. This promises to be another very intricate and long subject.

He starts in on mental illnesses like depression and retardation, making notes on his chalkboard as he goes. Erik loosely takes notes, he’ll just read the chapters end to end later like he always does. Mostly he just doodles in his margins.

“Lobotomy,” the teacher’s pointer snaps against the board almost as hard as Erik’s head snaps up. The word is familiar, but distant, like he heard it a million years ago. It resonates deeply with him for reasons he can’t figure out and suddenly he feels ill. His throat is tight and he wants very much to leave the room immediately. The very word sinks into his belly and tightens in an ice-cold knot.

“Lobotomies are used to subdue very dangerous mental patients,” the professor continues droning despite Erik’s visible distress. “A lobotomy is a procedure in which the frontal lobe of the brain is destroyed via a metal spike inserted through the right eye.”

Erik cries out. Pain flares up in his eye like he’s just been freshly jabbed with a needle. He clutches his head with both hands, pressing the heel into his eye so hard he sees shapes.

“Mr. Fleischer?” the professor turns to look at his moaning student, doubled over so far his nose is almost touching the tabletop, shaking and crying out.

But Erik doesn’t hear him. Erik can’t hear anything, the roaring in his ears is too loud.

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Erik turns the light off and takes a moment to look across the clean operating theatre. He runs his palm across the metal exam table with a fond smile. But he can’t stall for too long, he has a train to
catch and a life to start somewhere else.

The suitcase is heavy. He knows Misha will offer to carry it for him, and he’ll only insist once that he can carry it himself before he hands it over. Misha’s glasses are tucked safely in the inside pocket of Erik’s suitcase. The war had ended so abruptly that he’d left them by his bed the night before when he read before going to sleep.

He pushes the door open and there are two men there, two men he’s never seen before. They’re big, and dressed all in red, with serious expressions.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” he says, balancing the suitcase on his thigh. “Can I help you?”

“Come with us,” the larger speaks.

“I’m sorry, I have a train to catch,” Erik glances down at his watch. “I’m sure some of zhe nurses can see you.”

“It wasn’t a request.”

The Medic is seized under the arms, a needle jabs into his neck, and he drops the suitcases as he loses consciousness and sags into their arms.

When he opens his eyes he’s strapped to a table. He struggles, shouting, shaking. There are doctors over him, Misha is nowhere in sight. He’s dizzy and disoriented. He tries to bite the hands that come near to him and he struggles against the leather-lined metal cuffs holding down his wrists and ankles.

“Let me go!” he barks, “Zhe var is over!”

They don’t say a word. He pales, the sight of a giant needle sending fright scurrying down his body and through his muscles, tightening them up in preparation to flee. He can’t even sit up.

He thrashes his head when the thick needle comes nearer, it’s held still by a pair of massive hands.
He cries out for help, he doesn’t know what else to do. Tears run involuntarily down his face. He’s never felt fear like this before as the needle is lined up with his eye.

He screams.

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“Mr. Fleisher!”

“Don’t touch me!”

Erik’s hand stings, his muscles tensing up for a fight. The professor topples backwards over the table behind him from the force of Erik’s powerful backhand. Erik trips over a chair and scrambles from the room, leaving the startled voices of the other students behind him, still clutching his right eye. His heart is beating too fast to be healthy, he can’t breathe, he has to get away, he has to get somewhere safe.

He shoves students out of the way in the halls, sprinting faster than any man his age has a right to. He’s being stared at, everyone is watching, they can see him, he has to get away.

Misha is called from the back room where he was stacking large crates of flour. He dusts his hands on the small apron around his waist as his manager indicates the phone on the wall.

“Hello?” he says, his confusion clear in his voice. He’s never gotten a call at work from anyone before. He balances the phone on one shoulder so he can pick flour out of his nails.
“Is this Mr. Petrovich? Mr. Fleischer’s caretaker?”

“Da, is him,” Misha's brows furrow worriedly.

“…There’s been an incident at the school. He attacked a teacher and several students and then ran. We’re not sure where he is now.”

Misha's blood runs cold and he drops the phone without properly hanging up. He shouts an excuse to the store owner and rushes out to his car, praying Erik has gone home.

He breaks about ten laws as he speeds through the streets but soon he's pulling up to the drive way. There's no sign of Erik's bike but he could have put it away. He's sporadic about when he decides to be neat and when he doesn't feel like it so there's no way of knowing until he gets inside.

The house is in a state. Chairs in the kitchen are overturned, a glass has been shattered, Erik’s violin lies cracked in half on the floor. The back door is open and Ritter is jumping around in the back yard barking like mad, scratching and whining at the gate that leads into the woods, closed but not locked.

Misha pales when he sees a trail of blood that leads right out the back door. He’s not sure which frightens him more, the idea that the blood is Erik’s… or that it isn’t.

Misha grabs Ritter's leash and hooks the dog to it before leading him to through the gate into the woods. The dog has Erik's scent and seems to understand how important this is because he sets right off, almost pulling Misha into the trees.

He doesn’t even realize he’s crying as he calls out Erik’s name. Tears run silently down his face as fear grips him. He doesn’t know what happened, they didn’t give him any specifics.

Erik attacked a teacher. Did he wound him? Did he draw blood? Did he… kill him? The rain is coming down harder now, obscuring his vision. The forest is bleak and grey and Ritter is starting to whine. The wetness and musk is covering up and erasing Erik’s scent.

"Find him," Misha begs the dog. "Find him and whole steak will be just for you. Will buy one special. You find him Ritter. Please."
The dog senses the urgency in his master's tone and despite the rain seems to get his bearings back and once again starts tugging on his leash.

The more time they spend in the rain the more he worries. He calls out Erik’s name frantically, his tears hot in contrast to the rain drops.

There was a good amount of blood on the floor. What if Erik’s bleeding? What if he’s bleeding bad? What if the blood is someone else’s, what if he has someone with him? What if he’s dragging some poor bleeding soul through the woods in the rain? What if he gets sick from being in the rain during flu season? What if he never finds Erik? What if Erik never goes home? What if he hurts himself seriously and dies alone and frightened and freezing in the woods?

The worst fear is probably what if Erik returned to the house while Misha is still out looking for him and finds the place empty of both their dog and Misha, despite the Heavy’s truck being out front. The thought grips him that if he were to return home, then Erik would still be in the woods, but if he stayed looking in the woods, then Erik would return home.

He can't go back until he knows Erik is safe. Even if that means searching the whole forest and staying out here all night. He'll find Erik. But he can't do that to Ritter. The dog is cold and wet and unhappy, shaking and whimpering at his side. All hope of finding Erik with the help of the bloodhound's impressive sense of smell has been lost. So Misha turns them around and starts to walk back. He'll drop Ritter off at the house and then head out again with a flashlight to continue his search.
Misha has never been the type to give up. He’s always been taught that if at first you don’t succeed, don’t even pause to rest, just get up and keep going. His mother was always so strong, and she always persevered even through all their hardships. Through everything they lost and forgot and left behind, she never, ever gave up. She taught him well and her lessons have stuck with him for decades.

But it’s been hours. He’s soaked to the bone, probably feverish, delirious with worry. “Giving up” shouldn’t be an option. Erik has been out in the woods God only knows how long. The police are probably looking for him as much as Misha is.

What if he’s been arrested? The thought frightens Misha more than almost anything else. With the town’s prejudices and ideas about the Medic’s past, he could be killed in jail, or worse.

It’s been so long the woods are starting to get dark. The rain has been on and off, first drizzling and then coming down in sheets. Misha can’t think of a time he’s been so cold and wet. He has to turn back and regroup, maybe actually recruit the police’s help. They’re the only group of people he can think of who would actively search the woods with him.

He takes the long way back, still calling Erik’s name. He’s hoarse and shivering, but as the cabin comes into sight, there’s a light on. He knows certainly he didn’t leave any lights on, because he left when it was still light out.

He runs. Even though he’s exhausted and his leg aches and he’s freezing and numb he sprints. He rushes through the gate and almost breaks the door in his haste to throw it open.

His heart drops into the pit of his stomach as his hope is shattered. Three very startled police officers are staring back at him, with no sign of Erik.

"You are not Erik," Misha sighs. The police are probably looking for the German too, probably thought he'd be home.

"No, we aren't. Sir, we have some questions for you," the chief officer says, and Misha knows he won't be going out again for a while.
He talks to the police while he changes into dry clothes and gets something out for Erik for later. He tells them he doesn't know where the blood came from, only that he got a phone call earlier. He hasn't seen Erik, he didn't leave a note. He's been trying to find him but the other man does not want to be found.

He offers the officers coffee and tea but they don't take it. They start repeating questions to keep him inside, refusing to let him leave until they've double and triple checked his story.

It's completely dark out by this point. Misha could cry he's so scared. The thought of Erik out in the woods alone in the dark all night in the rain… the chances of him surviving until morning seem slim.

They start prying into the history of the two men if for no other reason than to keep Misha put. Misha thinks it’s very rude and answers evasively because the information is really of no consequence to them. It shouldn't matter if Erik is German, or if they were at war a couple years ago halfway across the country.

Misha is sitting at the table with his head in his hands, working his way through his third cup of tea. Anything to help calm his nerves. It’s almost ten PM, Erik has been missing for almost a full twelve hours. Tears drip into his mug. He can’t imagine how he’ll survive it if he loses Erik now, after he only just got him back. He never even got to kiss him.

“That’s him!”

“He’s here!”

“Don’t let him run!”

Misha knocks his chair over backwards in his alarm. Erik has just stepped through the back door, soaking wet and covered in mud from head to toe, dripping and expressionless in the face of the officers swarming him.

"Do not hurt him!" Misha bellows, rushing forward to try to get to Erik's side. "Has been out for long time, give him minute to warm up and get dry clothes before you ask questions."

The officers finally move aside and he takes Erik by the arm and leads him up to his room where a towel and clean clothes are waiting for him. He takes the momentary solitude to kiss Erik’s forehead before stepping back outside to allow him to dress in peace before he has to face the police.
Erik’s face is a mask of stony indifference. There’s not a trace of emotion on his features as he steps out of the room and comes down the stairs where the police are waiting for him with a very anxious Misha.

Dried and cleaned, save for a few smears of dried mud, Misha can see several deep, nasty scratches around Erik’s right eye, as well as a cut across his palm. He doesn’t react as he’s ushered into a chair at the table, and sits obediently, staring at the wood grain without a word.

The officers begin to bombard him with questions, asking why he attacked the teacher, why he ran, where he’s been. They know he’s been in fights before and this seems like only an escalation and a dangerous path.

Misha tries to cut in and explain as best he can that the past fights were not his fault. That of course he has an explanation, can’t they just see that he is tired and cold and frightened but the police ignore him.

Erik doesn’t answer any of their questions very thoroughly. He responds in as few words as possible. He doesn’t deny what happened, but he doesn’t try to defend himself either.

Misha tries to encourage him to explain what happened in detail, even he’d like to know. But Erik doesn’t say more than he has to. He doesn’t look any of them in the eye, and after only half an hour it’s clear that the officers are going to arrest him.

Despite Misha's protests they take Erik out to one of their cars in handcuffs. Misha is glad that Erik is not struggling but would like if his love showed some sort of emotion rather than being led like a tired dog and pushed into the car without so much as changing his expression.

They take him to the station with Misha following close behind, ready to pay whatever it takes to bail Erik out.

The process is long and slow. The judge drags his feet, not even being subtle about how much he doesn’t want Erik to be let free. He jumps through every hoop he possibly can to stall, including asking if the professor is absolutely certain he’s not going to press charges and getting a statement from every single student he laid his hands on.

It’s well after midnight before Erik is finally released. Misha has a feeling they charged bail higher
than what it should have been, but he wasn’t about to haggle for Erik’s freedom. He would have given his entire fortune.

Misha wants to embrace Erik the instant he sees him. The heavy door he’s led through floods the lobby with the echoing angry shouts of men screaming slurs and inviting Erik to turn back and fight them. The doctor is sporting a fresh cut on his cheek dripping blood, and he doesn’t look Misha in the eye.

Misha glares at the closed door and considers going through and giving those men a piece of his mind. With any luck they’d arrest him and he could show them how angry he is first hand.

But Erik needs to get home and have something to eat and get some rest. So he resists the urge and instead leads the man to the truck.

The ride home is long and quiet, with Erik staring silently out the window and ignoring how Misha turns to look at him every few seconds. After an eternity they make it home and still Erik says nothing.

Misha has never seen anybody look so simultaneously exhausted and wired. Erik looks like he might scream or cry or throw a fit, but at the same time he looks like he might just silently go to bed. It’s extremely disconcerting.

He doesn’t go to his room right away like Misha expects. He heads into the seldom used downstairs bathroom and leaves the door open in a clear invitation for Misha to approach. He’s cleaning the cut on his cheek with a cotton swab when Misha steps into the doorway.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” Misha asks, his voice feels old and strained.

Erik sighs through his nose and catches Misha's eyes for a moment in the mirror before focusing back on the cut, and he swabs ointment over it before taping a bandaid in place. He gestures for Misha to move and then heads into the kitchen. Ritter paces anxiously by his feet, but he only offers the dog a few pats before he sits at the kitchen table and immediately hangs his head in his hands.

Misha follows and goes to the stove, taking a moment pat Erik’s shoulder gently as he passes. He puts on the kettle and starts warming a can of soup before he turns to Erik again.
"Do not have to tell me. But if I can help, that is why I am here."

Erik’s voice is small and tired. “Ve learned about lobotomies in class today.”

Misha’s breath catches in his throat and his heart begins to pound hard in his chest. He feels sick to his stomach and barely notices when he accidentally puts his hand down on the hot stove.

They learned about lobotomies. Of course, how could he not have seen this coming? At some point the procedure had to come up. He should have looked ahead in Erik’s book and pulled him out of the class. If anything could trigger the memories of that traumatic episode it would be a lesson built entirely around it.

And now Erik must know. He must have remembered and panicked and run. He'll know Misha lied to him and hid the truth from him. He'll be furious and the quiet anger is always the worst.

There are tears in Misha’s eyes as he drops his gaze to the floor and whispers a quiet, "I am sorry."

Erik scratches at his right eye again, opening fresh scabs. He streaks blood across his cheek. “I lost my glasses in zhe voods,” he mutters, exhausted, instead of acknowledging Misha.

"Will buy you new ones," Misha says. He gulps down air, trying not to let the tears fall. There is a fight coming, he knows it. And it will be worse than any they've had yet.

Erik is quiet for a long time. Misha doesn’t want to set off his fuse any sooner than he has to. He pours the soup into a bowl when it’s warm and Erik eats silently. It’s just canned soup, but after not eating for more than twelve hours, it’s a welcome warmth in the cold pit of his stomach.

When he finishes and Misha washes and puts away his bowl, once there’s nothing left he can use to stall, Erik gestures to the seat across from him. Misha sheepishly sits down in the chair.

“I vant you to explain to me vhat happened. And I don’t vant you to leave anything out or lie to me zhis time,” he says, his voice quiet and trembling.

Misha nods with a sigh. It all feels like it happened so long ago, like the war was another life, but he
has to do this for Erik so he forces himself to think back to that day. When he focuses it's there at the front of his mind and he can remember every moment like it happened yesterday. And soon the story begins to spill out of him.

"War ended. You and I had been in relationship for years before and had decided when war or contracts ended we leave together. We would go to away and be together where no one stop us. I would build cabin in woods and we would have chickens and goat." he starts, his voice as even as he can keep it.

"Day came that war ended. I had to go make arrangements and when I come to get you, was told you already leave. I look for you all over base but you are not there. I think maybe you made mistake and go to train station without me. But you were not there either. I thought..." he stops and tries to swallow back tears but they come too fast. "I think maybe you lie. That you do not love me and tricked me. Was going to leave without you. Then miss Pauling come. She come and tell me they have taken you away to hurt you. To make sure you can not sell secrets you learn during war. All doctors have been taken away for lobotomy. She takes me to hospital but..."

He swallows again and covers his face with his hands. "Was too late. They had hurt you, turned you into vegetable. Was my fault. If I had not left lab would have been there to protect you. I am so sorry Erik."

Erik listens silently. The last pieces of his memory are all clicking into place, and even the parts he can’t remember in detail make sense now. None of this sounds like a lie, it all feels true even if he can’t remember it.

"Where vere ve going to go?" he asks quietly. He doesn’t blame Misha for what happened. It was so long ago and they’ve been through so much together now, it would be pointless to be angry at him for his negligence two years ago. Misha looks up at him questioningly. "After zhe var. Where vere ve going to go?"

"Russia. Where my family lives," Misha answers quietly. "Is not important."

Erik stands so abruptly that Misha flinches, thinking for a moment that he’s going to be hit. But Erik just turns and walks up the stairs to their bedroom. Misha waits for a moment, thinking Erik might be coming back with something, but he hears dresser drawers scraping open and something thump on the bed.

Brows furrowing, Misha heads up the stairs and finds Erik hastily shoving his clothing into his suitcase on the bed. He’s sniffling, clearly trying not to cry, jamming socks and slacks into the
suitcase with shaking hands.

"You are leaving?" Misha asks from the doorway, his heart plummeting. He had known this was possible but had dared to hope that Erik might not go this far, that they could still work things out.

Erik whirls around, his eyes watery and his vision blurry. "Ve are," he says, his voice shaking. He blinks and tears run down his cheeks, he swallows hard. "Ve're going to go to Russia. I vant to go, right now, I don’t vant to be here anymore."

Misha stares at him, stunned. This is the last thing he expected to happen. Somewhere beneath all the shock and confusion he's thrilled but it's hard to get to with everything else in the way.

"Not leaving me? You do not hate me?" he asks softly.

“I hate all of zhis!” Erik barks viciously, gesturing around him, presumably at more than just the bedroom. “I hate zhat I vas hurt for no reason! I hate zhat I couldn’t fight it! I hate zhat you couldn’t save me! I hate zhat I’m such a bad person that when I vent missing your first thought vas zhat I left you!”

His voice cracks and tears drip from his chin to the floor. He gives a pained noise and collapses on the edge of the bed, running shaking hands through his hair, before he’s back on his feet and shoving more clothing into his suitcase.

“I don’t vant to be here anymore,” he sobs, slamming the suitcase closed and ferociously jerking the zipper shut. “I don’t vant to live here vith zhe memories and zhe pain I vant to go to Russia vith you like ve planned and pretend I haven’t lost zhe last two years of my life.”

"I do not think we lost two years. Think it was hard two years but was also good." Misha says, coming into the room and sitting beside Erik on the bed. "Wish you had not been hurt. Wish I could have saved you. But had two years to help you and fall in love with you again. And have you fall in love with me all over again. Was not lost or wasted years."

Erik crumples in on himself, shaking. He leans into Misha and tries to stifle his sobs, but he’s so sad and furious and exhausted.

“I vant to go right now,” he insists, choking on his gasps.
“It’s midnight,” Misha tells him gently.

“I don’t care!” Erik cries, jerking away from Misha like he’s about to jump to his feet and walk to Russia. Misha sighs and kneels on the floor in front of the distraught doctor. “I vant to go now. I don’t want to stay another night in zhis house, zhis house is my sickness and my injury and my anger.”

"House is also love. Is first time we say I love you. First time you say my name. Is where we bring Ritter home to and where baby birds were born." Misha reminds him, gently taking Erik's hands. "Has not been all bad times. But if you want to leave we will leave. Will go to hotel for tonight. Will take Ritter and come back tomorrow for birds."

Erik searches Misha's face desperately. He doesn’t know what he’s looking for, but he knows he’s found it. In Misha's creased eyes and broad forehead and strong jaw and thin lips and sharp cheekbones. His face holds wisdom and kindness and pain and patience and fury and love and all the things Erik has needed all his life.

His heart aches. He burns with anger and shakes with exhaustion and chill. He feels murderous, he could kill one hundred men and wash the streets in their blood for this. He feels betrayed by his own allies, by his own body, his own mind.

He should have been strong enough to fight off the people who came to hurt him.

He should have been wise enough to escape.

He should have been good enough that Misha would have looked for him.

He can’t recall ever being loved like Misha loves him. His eyes full with tears again and they chase the old ones down his cheeks when he leans in and presses his lips to Misha's.

Misha's eyes go wide for a moment before he sinks into the kiss he's been waiting for, for two years. Tears spill down his cheeks in hot waves as he wraps his arms around Erik's waist and holds him close, sobbing against his lips.

They're more chapped than he remembers and a little thinner but they're still perfect. Warm and gentle yet demanding and Erik's and they're on his. It feels like a dream that he never wants to wake up from and he decides right then that he'd rather die from oxygen deprivation than ever break this kiss.
Their faces are both wet and they’re both on their feet now, wrapped up in one another. Erik can’t breathe, it’s squeezes right out of him by Misha. He leans into the bigger man, allows himself to be held completely, body and soul. Misha is his shield, his shelter, even if this cabin burned down and they lived in a doghouse it wouldn’t matter. Misha is his home.

“Tomorrow,” he whispers hoarsely when the kiss finally breaks. He smoothes his hands over Misha’s head and wraps his arms around his neck. “Tomorrow, we begin making plans to go to Russia.”

"Da," Misha agrees. He presses kisses to Erik’s cheeks and nose and the tears still clinging to his eyelashes before he kisses his lips again.

Still kissing he lifts Erik off his feet and climbs onto the bed. He lays them down on their sides and manages to wriggle the blankets out from under them and pull them over their still embracing bodies.

He breaks the kiss finally and pulls Erik to his chest. "We will go wherever you want. Will follow you to end of Earth."
Hunting seems to take longer every day. Either the animals close to their small cabin have been over hunted, which seems unlikely since Misha is very careful with how he hunts, or they're getting smarter. Six hours today and he only managed a boar and a few rabbits. Enough for maybe a week's worth of dinners. If he'd caught a bear or a wolf they'd be set for days but there's nothing.

"Stay," he orders Ritter and Volk, his two hunting companions and in his opinion the best dogs in the world, before going into the post office. It's his last stop of the day and usually there's no point. They don't get much mail.

But today there's a small parcel waiting for him addressed from America. Misha takes it from the lady at the counter and grins when he sees Dell's name at the top. Erik will be happy to see this.

The long five-mile trek back into the woods is cold and slow as the dogs take off chasing each other or harassing squirrels every few minutes and he has to wrangle them back in line. The cabin comes into view and Misha can see smoke curling from the chimney.

The sight gives him renewed strength to make the last of the hike up the hill. Soon enough he's stomping the snow off his boots and brushing it off the dogs before opening the door and being greeted by a blast of warm air.

"Am home. And have surprise!"

“So do I!” Erik calls in greeting from his lab, a small well-lit warm room right off the main room. He takes Misha's furry hat off and leans in for a quick kiss. “You go first.”

They open the parcel together and a stack of photographs spill out over the counter as well as a hand-written letter and a crayon drawing. The pictures are of a wedding, that much is clear from the white attire and flowers. The pair recognize Dell's house in the background, his expansive yard decorated prettily.

In the pictures stands a proudly beaming barefoot Dell – who apparently decided to grow a mustache.
and looks very dignified – opening his arms to Angel dressed all in white. They can see Jane in the
background, arm-in-arm with a man neither of them can identify, but it’s awfully rude of him to be
smoking a cigarette at a wedding. Miss Pauling is there, her hair longer now and curled into fiery red
ringlets, along with the BLU Scout and the RED Sniper, all of them dressed in their best formal
wear.

“Zhey got married?” Erik asks, stunned, taking the picture right out of Misha’s hand of their kiss
underneath a flowered arch. “How can zhat be?”

Misha scans the letter and chuckles. “Is not real marriage,” he says, flipping it over to check the back.
“Just ceremony put on for their own benefit.”

Erik laughs to himself and picks up the crayon drawing. There’s a childish representation of himself
holding hands with Misha beside a drawing of a piece of cake and messy handwriting that reads
‘Dell would not let me send real cake.’

Misha looks at the picture over Erik’s shoulder and laughs. "Is very cute. And is good idea. Real
cake would make photos very messy."

He picks up the pictures and starts flipping through them again. "Is not bad idea. To have wedding.
Maybe you and I try it. Can have sisters there, maybe invite Dell and Angel."


“I will!” Misha beams as he looks through the rest of the photos.

“You’ll get so sick,” Erik laughs. “Oh, zhat reminds me! I figured out vhy I healed so rapidly from
zhe lobotomy!”

“Oh?” Misha chuckles as Erik vaults over the coffee table in lieu of taking a few extra seconds to go
around it, and grabs a stack of papers from his lab.

“Zhe healing beam!” Erik says, shoving the papers into Misha’s hands as though he could make
heads or tails of the Medic’s mad scribblings. “Zhe medic-gun!”
“Medigun,” Misha laughs.

“You were all exposed to it for a very long time. I think it has lasting effects on our bodies!” Erik says animatedly. “When you hurt your leg badly, you healed much faster than a man your age should have. That’s why it only took me two years to recover from having my brain literally mashed. I think we’re halfway immortal!”

“I think you are finding very creative way to call me old,” Misha says, grabbing Erik and pulling him onto his lap as he sits at their island counter. "But da, it makes sense. Medigun was experimental. Brand new technology, who knows what effect it could have long term? Make us immortal or give us cancer. Or both."

Erik rubs his nose against Misha’s cold neck with a smile and rubs his fingers through the man’s full, scruffy beard. “I could rebuild it. I would need time… resources… test subjects.”

“That sounds like terrible idea,” Misha says, but Erik is already collecting his papers.

Erik sees another item that must have fallen out of the satchel unnoticed. He picks it up with a felled paper and gives a laugh through his nose. It’s a ring box. He opens it up and inside is a simple, very large silver ring that looks hand-smelted. Tied to it is a very tiny note that reads,

*It’s not too late for you to have your own happy ending*

Slowly, Erik’s face spreads into a smile and he kneels in front of Misha, who is also grinning. Erik clears his throat. “Misha, don’t you think it’s time I make an honest man out of you?”

Misha opens his mouth to respond, grinning ear to ear, but he’s cut off by a loud

*KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK*

Both men stare startled in the direction of their front door. They live five miles from civilization on top of a mountain. Company isn’t a thing that happens.

"Go get gun." Misha says, lifting Erik off his lap. His face has gone stony and cold as he approaches
Erik has his pistol hidden behind his back as the dogs creep towards the door, growling low and protective. Misha and Erik exchange glances and nod when another forceful triple-knock shakes the front door.

Misha throws the door open and Erik points his pistol and both of them gasp.

“Miss Pauling!?”

Erik almost throws his gun in his haste to point it in any direction other than at the most important woman in their lives. Misha ushers her out of the cold so quickly her feet leave the ground for a split second before he stands her right in front of their warm, roaring fire.

“Thank you,” she says breathlessly, unwinding her scarf from her hair and sticks her gloved hands closer to the flames to chase the chill away. “I was about half a mile away from you the whole time you were headed home. I guess you didn’t hear me calling out to you. I’m not made for running in the snow.”

"No. You are tiny. Tiny people are not made for these conditions. Is why Erik only goes out during summer and hibernates in here through winter." Misha agrees. He goes to the kitchen and comes back with a cup of hot chocolate that he presses into her hands.

She sips it gratefully while Erik helps her out of her enormous puffy coat and replaces it with a thick blanket around her shoulders.

“Why are you here?” Erik asks the question both men wonder. “Not to be rude. It’s very nice to see you and you look vell. But…”

“I’m reassembling the old teams,” she says, sipping the cocoa again and setting it on the hearth so she can pull a folder out of her coat and opens it. “I have Mundy, Doe, Conagher, LaMuerte, DeGroot, Charleston, Boudreaux and Laurent. Now I’m here for you two, if you’ll have me.”

"What for?" Misha asks. He wraps one arm around Erik's waist, resting his large hand protectively on the man's hip as if to physically protect him from the horrors of the war they might be called upon to re-enter.
“Redmond Mann has been assassinated,” Miss Pauling says seriously, snapping the folder shut. “By his brother.”

“Blutarch died, didn’t he?” Erik says quickly. That’s the whole reason the war ended and he was attacked.

“They had a third brother. I didn’t know about him,” Miss Pauling says, grabbing her cocoa again to take another sip. “His name is Grey. And he’s built an army of robots.”

"Sounds like challenge for Dell," Misha says thoughtfully. "But I think you would not come here if you did not need us to go fight robot army, da? Want us to leave dogs and cabin and nice safe home on mountain to go fight bloody war again."

"Well, yes. The army has to be stopped and the rest of the team has agreed." Miss Pauling says with a nod before taking another sip of cocoa.

Misha sighs and looks at Erik. "What you think?"

Erik looks thoughtful for a moment. “You mean… ve would go back to vhere it’s varm year round… I’d get test subjects for my new designs for zhe medigun along vith my other ideas… and I’d get to practice medicine again?”

“That’s the jist of it,” Miss Pauling smiles over the rim of her mug.

Misha thinks he can see a twinkle in Erik’s right eye as he grins.

“Vhen can ve start?"

Chapter End Notes

Can you believe it, guys? It's OVER.
I know I can't believe it. I'm stunned that it's finally over after all these months.
Thank you so much, to everyone!!
To those who have been there since the start!
To those who joined us some time along the way!
To those who won't start reading until after it's already been finished!
To those who commented on every chapter!
To those who never said a word and silently loved it the whole time!

From harsh critiques to loving praise, every word has and will continue to be taken to heart.
And for the love of god. Don't ask for a sequel.

We're moving onto other things now! Next we'll be working on a story about Demoman and Sniper, and then we'll see where it goes from there!

THANKS AGAIN EVERYONE!!!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!