

Men Like Us

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Men Like Us

by [JiM](#)

Summary

Jason Bourne receives a rather odd peace-offering. He decides to keep him.

Covert operatives seem to be unable to avoid clichés, the man known as Jason Bourne thinks. As he surveys the occupants of his apartment living room over the barrel of his pistol, he wonders if any of his erstwhile colleagues have ever considered using a post-it note or waiting politely in the hall for someone to come home. No, they always seem to want to break in and wait in the dark for their quarry, even when the business at hand is parley and not assassination.

There are two of them standing now, empty hands out to their sides to show peaceful intent. A third man is kneeling on the floor between them, a dark cloth bag over his head.

“Well?” he says, not letting the gun move a millimeter.

“The company regrets the incidents of last spring very much,” the one on the left says, absolutely no trace of accent in his words at all. But there is something about him that marks him as fundamentally Russian and it isn’t the bad haircut or the paleness of his skin. It is more his air of fatalism, as if gravity simply draws more heavily upon his soul than upon his body.

Bourne grunts and waits for him to get on with it. The man’s eyes cut down to the figure kneeling at his feet. “Gretkov’s actions were not at our behest. Please consider this in the nature of a peace offering, Mr. Bourne.”

The second man pulls the bag from the captive’s head and Jason Bourne is looking at the scarred and battered face of the man who had killed Marie. His eyes shine with cold rage; they have gagged him with a cloth. His hands have been zip-tied in front of him and they look white and bloodless in the dim light of the living room. Bourne had last seen him in the dim light of a Moscow tunnel, slumped over the wheel of his crushed car and soaked in his own blood.

He looks only marginally better now, months later. Under the new bruises and scrapes, there is an angled scar up his right cheek; a matching scar cuts through his right eyebrow, giving it a sardonic lift. A ragged, thick scar twists its way through his military-short hair and across his skull. His lip is split and there is blood crusting on his chin.

As Bourne stares, his hand has automatically shifted to cover this new target of his attention. The man stares back at him past the barrel of the gun and then nods once. His eyes close and Bourne is amazed to see the tense shoulders drop suddenly. The assassin’s clenched fists uncurl and his bound hands now lay open on his thighs. This is a man who has given himself up completely to whatever his fate is to be at Bourne’s hands. If he does not welcome it, exactly, his body tells of his acceptance.

The other two men move suddenly and Bourne is recalled to the situation at hand, taking a step back and retargeting on them. They freeze and show their hands again.

“May I report to the head office that you have accepted their gift in the spirit in which it was intended?”

Bourne translates in his head: *Will I make it out of here alive and can I tell my bosses that you won't be gunning for them?* He nods once and gestures with his chin toward the door.

There is an emotion rising in him that he has not felt in months. His throat is thick with it and he doesn't think he can speak past it. The two Russians leave without another word and without sparing a glance for the man they have left as a sacrifice on his floor. For a moment, as they are framed in the doorway, Bourne has the crazy urge to shoot them. He resists, not wanting the attention it would surely bring. The door closes behind them and he is left with Marie's killer.

The man does not move nor open his eyes. Bourne watches him for a few moments, counting the slow and even breaths that whistle past the cloth gag. He is in motion before he is aware he has made a decision.

The man's eyes snap open at the sound of the safety being engaged on his pistol. Wary green eyes watch him holster the weapon and track his right hand as it reaches into his front pocket for a knife. The snick of the blade opening seems louder than Bourne's footsteps across the room. The kneeling assassin doesn't even flinch as the blade slips against the skin of his cheek before the twist that cuts the gag. Bourne wonders if he is dazed from being beaten into submission or if it is simply that he has given himself up to whatever Jason Bourne demands in retribution. He pulls the cloth away from the man's head, pausing so he can work the knotted fabric from between his teeth, and drops it on the floor.

He stares down and the assassin stares up. "Do you still want to kill me?"

The man shakes his head slowly. "Was just a job." Then he huffs a laugh between dry lips. "Are you going to kill me?"

"I didn't last time," Bourne points out and slits the plastic cable tying his hands together.

"You might decide to correct your previous mistake," the other man says in heavily accented English. He flexes his hands and winces, then begins rubbing at the swelling on his wrists.

"It wasn't a mistake." Bourne steps back and considers his unwilling guest. "What's your name?"

"Kirill."

"That's it?"

"It's the name I earned for myself. The only one that matters now."

Bourne watches as the man struggles to stand. It is an animal instinct older than any gloss of humanity – to stand means life, to remain prone is a death sentence. But Kirill has been kneeling too long and his cramped legs will not unbend enough to allow him to stand. He finally comes to rest half-crouched on his side, slowly stretching his long legs out and

grimacing at the pain. After two or three long breaths to ride out the throbbing, he looks up. His eyes widen almost comically at what he sees.

Jason Bourne's hand is stretched out to help him.

"Why?"

Bourne knows what he is asking.

"There's been too much blood spilled already."

"Blood calls to blood," Kirill says and it sounds like a mantra.

Bourne nods, then says, "Maybe so, but there's no reason I have to answer."

Kirill takes Bourne's hand and is levered to his unsteady feet. He stands, hunched and rocking slightly, as Bourne starts moving around the small apartment. He watches without comment as the other man pulls a packed duffel from the hall closet, pulls passport documents from a compartment cut into the center of a trade-size paperback and a thick bundle of currency from the back of the vegetable drawer in the refrigerator.

He understands the quiet urgency with which Bourne moves. He is a man who does not ever wish to be found. To be looking for Bourne means to be looking for death, his or your own. Either way, it would make Jason Bourne nervous and he would leave.

He wants to tell Bourne that the Russians had only found him by the merest sliver of bad luck. His face had appeared in the background of a paparazzo's photo of a Russian starlet's visit here in Warsaw. Her lover had been a bureau chief high up in the Trade Ministry with some unsavory connections in the oil industry. Someone had seen the photo on his desk and the connections had been made. Sheer stupid coincidence was driving Bourne from another refuge.

Kirill doesn't speak. It has been too long since he had his last dose of medication and he can feel the tremors beginning in his arm and leg. They make him fumble when Bourne tosses him a dark hooded sweatshirt and some plain glass spectacles.

"Put those on."

Kirill understands the need to change his profile, his shape on the street. It is the fundamental rule of survival: don't look like prey. It is this, more than anything that convinces him that Bourne doesn't intend to kill him. He picks up the dropped clothing and struggles into it, pulling the hood up.

"They'll be watching this place. Probably come back to check on whatever they think will be left of you."

Kirill nods. They were not professionals, those two. They were simple, vicious corporate thugs who enjoyed power and pain. It irks him that his superiors had not cared enough to send a professional after him, someone to end it quickly and cleanly. His years of service should have earned him that much at least.

“Let’s leave them something to gloat over. Give me your hand.”

His mind is working too slowly. The pain and exhaustion have taken their toll. There is the whisper of the knife being opened again and then Bourne’s cool fingers are gripping his bruised wrist. A sharp dig and his blood is running freely, dripping onto the carpet. He finds himself watching dumbly as Bourne lets a small but noticeable stain form at their feet. Then his arm is being jerked back and forth, splatters of blood droplets painted across the coffee table, a newspaper on the sofa, the pale cream of the wallpaper. He is led into the tiny bathroom, the fast-running drops blooming against the cracked linoleum and left to collect into another puddle in the bottom of the shower stall.

Bourne clamps his thumb over the wound and lets the last of the blood drip from Kirill’s wrist onto the chipped enamel of the tiny sink. At his nod, Kirill applies pressure on the small wound as Bourne rummages in a small cupboard in the hall, returning with a roll of gauze which he begins to wrap around the bloody wrist. He does not comment on Kirill’s trembling hand. He ties off the bandage and they return to the living room, avoiding the blood trail Bourne has created.

At the front door, Bourne pauses and says, “Go down the stairs at the end of the hallway. The street level door leads to a small alley; turn left at the end and start walking east.”

Kirill nods. East will take him away from the front of the apartment building where the two thugs are likely watching. He slips out the door without another word. There is no need for more words between them and he knows that he will never see Jason Bourne again.

Halfway down the hall, he hears the whistle-thump of two silenced shots and almost nods in approval. Bourne truly is an artist; the Russians will see the bright flash of the shots light up the dim windows of the apartment and assume that Kirill is dead. Bourne will disappear, leaving behind nothing more than some bloodstains and bullet-holes. He does not entirely understand why Bourne is giving him his life but he appreciates the chance.

The stairwell is empty, as is the alley. He walks slowly, hands deep in his pockets and shoulders hunched against the cold. His right leg is beginning to drag a bit. He feels the familiar rush of frustrated rage at the weakness left in the wake of the crash. His body, once so dependable, so perfectly responsive, is no longer capable of performing as it once had. That, probably more than anything else, is what signed his termination order.

Snow has begun to fall in wispy little flakes by the time he has limped to the end of the garbage-strewn alley. He pauses at the end to consider his options and to stare at the busy street before him. He has no money, no weapons, no official resources he can call on, few friends and none of his medicines. He is cold, there is a fresh wound on his wrist and it is snowing. He has never felt more Russian.

His neck begins to prickle in an ominously familiar way; someone is watching him. He scans the darkening street carefully, checking for watchers in doorways and shop windows. His attention is caught by a battered white Citroen parked on the curb, the driver's side window rolled down despite the thickening snowfall. Between the driver's shapeless hat and the muffler wound halfway up to his ears, he meets Jason Bourne's gaze.

After a moment, he limps over to the car and climbs into the passenger seat. As Bourne starts the engine, Kirill fumbles with the seatbelt. As they pull away from the curb, Bourne reaches over and helps his unsteady right hand to secure the buckle. His lip curls. "Who says we can't learn from our mistakes?" His thumb slides down the strap over his own chest and Kirill feels a bitter chuckle spill out.

Once they are well on the road northward Bourne says over the swipe of the windshield wipers, "You're limping. The crash?"

Kirill draws his attention away from the blowing snow that makes a tunnel around the headlights of the little car. "Yes," he says shortly.

"And the hand tremors?"

"When I don't have my medicines."

"Anything else?"

The Russian stares through the windscreen and his brows knit. His mouth opens then closes as he struggles for a word. Finally, he shrugs and says in Russian, "Brain damage."

Bourne is not certain what his reaction to that is. So he asks, also in Russian, "Is that why they cashiered you?"

Kirill is staring at his own right hand, stretched out against the cracked vinyl of the dashboard. The fingers are only completely still if he presses his hand flat.

"I am right-handed. I lost much vision in my right eye. My..." he gropes for the English word and again slips into Russian, "...dominant eye. I lose words." His twitching fingers trace the path of the scar tissue on his skull.

"No long-term disability program, I guess."

"Not for men like us," Kirill says.

The Lithuanian border presents little trouble. After purchasing a few props at a small store on the Polish side, he flips through a swatch of passports in his bag, considering the photos and basic descriptions until he finds one that will serve. There has been no time to doctor one with an actual picture of Kirill, so they will have to make due with one that has the worst and grainiest photo and trust more to luck than the passport.

He hands it to Kirill. "Congratulations, you're Albanian." The Russian nods and tucks the passport into the pocket of the sweatshirt he is still wearing.

He takes the hat and small bottle of vodka that Bourne hands him and slants a grin. "I am a drunken Albanian?"

Another cliché, Bourne thinks. But the thing about clichés is, they work. Especially on sleepy Lithuanian border guards who take one look at Kirill messily sprawled in the passenger seat and grin good-naturedly at the sleepy drunk who slurs and grumbles in badly-accented Polish as his companion pats him down to find his passport for him. They laugh when Kirill raises the brim of his hat for a split-second before cursing and jamming it farther down over his eyes in the glare of the border-crossing booth. Bourne receives their stamped passports back and much good advice on how to sober his companion up before they reach Vilnius.

They exchange a silent nod as they drive away into the Lithuanian night. They worked well together on this small task, playing off one another in silent understanding. *Men like us*, he thinks.

After that, it is a scant hour before he reaches the moderate-sized airport he had marked. It is large enough for their needs but doesn't have any of the facial recognition gear that might bring them the wrong attention.

Kirill says nothing as Bourne books them tickets for Cyprus. Bourne thinks that he understands that he is as much a prop as the hat and liquor were. If anyone is searching for Jason Bourne, they will be looking for one man traveling alone, not two together. It is always about changing one's profile.

Kirill says nothing at all, simply follows Bourne's lead and lets him do any necessary talking. They both sleep on the flight to Cyprus. In the peachy light of a Cypriot dawn, they stumble off the flight, yawning and stretching. At least, Bourne does. The Russian limps down the steps until his right leg folds under him, spilling him to the tarmac. Bourne and another passenger help him to his feet and Bourne keeps up a murmur of German teasing, accusing his friend of drunkenness and overwork as they come into the airport itself.

In the nearest men's room, he watches as Kirill washes the grit from his scraped hands and scoops cold water over his bruised face. If he is embarrassed, it is impossible to tell from his expression. The cant of his scarred eyebrow suggests a self-mocking humor but the tremor of his hand countermands it. Rather than worry about feelings, Bourne says only, "Breakfast." Kirill nods and follows him.

After a silent breakfast of strong coffee and bread and yogurt, it is time for decisions. There has been no sign of pursuit yet, but he knows better than to assume there is none. He has a bolt-hole waiting for him in Viet Nam, one he set up when he and Marie were debating where in Asia to settle down. He is still not ready to go there. Suddenly, he has an urge to hear his birth language spoken about him again. It is like an ache, this abrupt need to submerge himself in the restful vulgarity of America for awhile.

He considers the man across the table from him. Kirill is staring out the window, watching planes landing and taking off as he sips his coffee. It is his restless stillness that captures the attention of other diners, their waitress, casual passersby. Whoever he used to be, thinks Jason Bourne, they hadn't managed to teach him how to become unremarkable. Sensing his scrutiny, the other man turns his gaze to Bourne and his raised eyebrows invite a question.

"Were you army?"

Kirill nods. "A captain, before I was seconded to FSB."

It figures. Neither the Russian military nor their secret service had the slightest talent for concealment. It amounted to almost an institutional arrogance.

"You?" Kirill asks.

Bourne is surprised by the question. He has gotten used to every damned covert operative he meets knowing his entire dossier better than he does. Kirill's ignorance is almost refreshing.

"CIA, or so they tell me." At the Russian's look of confusion, Bourne adds, "I have amnesia. No memory before three years ago except for brief flashes."

"You are very good," Kirill says gravely. It is the reasoned compliment of one professional to another and it amuses him as much as it touches his vanity. He cannot return the compliment yet, not with Marie's dead face still behind his eyelids deep in the night. He nods shortly, then turns to the real matter at hand.

What he means to say is that it is time to split up. He intends to ask is whether or not the man has any caches he can tap or if he needs money – Bourne has some he can spare. What he hears himself saying is, "I'm going to America. Are you coming?"

During the 12 hour flight, he cannot decide if he is more surprised at himself for offering or Kirill for accepting. By the time they have landed in Mobile he is, if not comfortable with his decision, reconciled to his own odd impulses.

After two weeks, he finds that his near-silent shadow provides him with an excellent cover-story as well as another set of trained eyes to watch his back. They have rented a tumble-down shack on one of the unfashionable shores of the bay, the beaches that are left to the poor and semi-homeless. The neighbors are genial, politely curious and willing to share fish, fruit and gossip in equal measure.

They take Bourne's all-American boy looks at face-value but are inclined to regard Kirill and his heavy accent with deep suspicion until they notice his limp, scars and tremors. They are curiously kindly, then, especially the older folks.

They note how the two men are rarely out of one another's presence and their cover-story is practically spun for them. Jason Bourne is amused to discover that he and Kirill are lovers who met when he was in Europe as an exchange student. A car accident has marred Kirill forever but Bourne stays with him, either out of a) guilt or b) devotion.

He can do nothing about the stories. He just shakes his head and marvels at small-town America and its ability to turn rumor into fact. Kirill just shrugs and notes that it gives him a cast-iron alibi for drinking as much cheap gin as he does. Bourne teases him for preferring it to cheap vodka. This gets him a spate of growled Russian, much of it idiomatic and all of it profane.

Kirill drinks, along with large doses of Tylenol, to keep the pain from the pins in his femur and ankle from overwhelming him. Several of his vertebrae were damaged in the crash and his back gives him trouble, as well.

He never mentions it and Bourne wouldn't know save for the rate of decline in both the gin and the ibuprofen bottles. One rainy winter day, he had walked in to find Kirill tossing back 10 tablets and washing them down with close to a pint of gin.

The next morning, he had taken the man to the nearest internet café and spent two hours searching through the Pillbox.com website, looking at pills and capsules until they had identified all of the medications Kirill had left behind in Moscow. The reasonably simple theft of a prescription pad at the local clinic and a month's wait for an online Canadian pharmacy to respond and Kirill is slowly improving. Some weeks, Bourne even gets a gin and tonic out of it before the bottle is empty.

Bourne's dreams resurface after about four months. He figures it means that he feels secure enough to let his subconscious out from under lock and key. He gets flashes of men and women he can now put names to, including Nikki and Conklin and Abbott. Pam Landy makes an appearance only once, her arm wrapped around the amorphous shoulders of a faceless man she calls David. They are both looking down at Marie's body and their hands are soaked with her blood.

When he awakens from the nightmare, he finds himself retching into the kitchen sink, head pounding and gut churning. This is the worst it has been in nearly a year. He cannot seem to do anything but cling to the counter in misery and hunch over the sink with dry heaves.

The shock of a soaking cold cloth laid against the back of his neck seems to bring the episode to a sharp close. Kirill is standing beside him, one chill hand on his forehead preventing him from pitching headfirst into the sink. The other hand is holding an icy cloth against the base of his skull. Water trickles down his sweat-soaked chest and back and he realizes that Kirill has dipped a dishtowel in the pitcher of water they keep in their small fridge. He shakily drinks a handful of water, then slowly straightens up.

"I need to write it down," he murmurs, the agony in his skull receding some.

"No. Go to sleep," Kirill commands and begins to steer him toward the back bedroom in which he sleeps. Bourne tries to argue but it is as if he is still caught in the sticky remnants

of the dream and his words come too slowly. The cloth is taken away and he is pushed gently onto his bed before he can marshal his arguments or explain why he notes every dream while it is still fresh in his mind. He gropes in the bedside table for his notebook and a pen.

“Sleep,” Kirill says again.

“I have to,” Bourne whispers, fingering the notebook.

The other man sighs and throws him a look of frank irritation before seizing notebook and pen from him. Before he can open his mouth, Kirill seats himself on the other side of the bed and stares pointedly until Bourne climbs back under the covers. He uncaps the pen, opens the notebook to a blank page and says, “Tell me.”

Bourne talks until he falls asleep. When he awakens early the next morning, Kirill is gone and the notebook and pen are back in their drawer. He would wonder if the episode were merely another dream except for his words written down in two pages of exactly neat Cyrillic script. The antispasmodics seem to be working well for Kirill, he notes.

Kirill is forced to agree. He finds that the fingers of his right hand remember their old skill more readily now. He is able to pick the lock on a local gallery owner’s car and retrieve her keys for her in moments. Melissa is grateful, asks no questions about his ability to break into her car with a hairpin and offers him coffee.

While he sips the strong espresso she has brewed in her backroom, he strolls the gallery, looking at the photo exhibits she has hung on the walls. She sips her coffee and watches him.

“Well, what do you think?” she asks the third time he pauses in front of the same triptych of photos.

“It is not right, these pictures.”

He cannot express his sense of disquiet and irritation at the shots showing the bay at sunset. The water is blue, the shore birds gleam white and silver in the light and the effect is tranquil and lovely. But he knows the very spot those photos record and he knows there is a rusted shrimp boat lying on its side just out of frame of the middle shot. A cheerful, insane man lives there. Kirill sees him every evening that his leg allows him to walk that far down the beach. The man stinks of urine and Four Roses whiskey and he watches the sunset from the tilted wheelhouse of his rusted home every evening, laughing and shouting at the wheeling seabirds.

When she presses him, he can only say, “The pictures lie.”

Melissa looks at him for a long moment then turns and disappears back into her workroom. When she returns, she hands him a battered digital camera, a bag of lenses and two memory cards. “Bring me some true pictures, then.”

He takes the camera without intending to. But her smile is challenging and goads him into accepting her commission.

Kirill spends two weeks walking the town and learning to use the camera. The vision in his right eye has never improved, but the screen of the camera is large enough that he can sight with his left eye. The very first thing he does is go down to that spot on the shore and take the three pictures the unknown photographer should have taken at sunset. His shots show the boat, the lunatic, the birds and the sunset, all caught together in one golden, glowing moment.

When the memory cards are full, he goes back to Melissa. She hands him another cup of punishingly strong coffee, then downloads his photos to her laptop and sits back to consider the slideshow he has brought her. When Bourne enters the gallery half an hour later to pick Kirill up, she is still staring at them.

Melissa says his eye for color and composition are excellent, although she describes his photographic style as “ruthlessly honest” and claims his vision is “pitiless”.

There is the sound of a chuckle smothered by a hasty cough. When he meets Bourne’s eyes, the spark of humor in them is surprising. What shocks him is the answering smile he finds creeping onto his own face. Apparently all the years he spent staring through a sniper-scope will not be wasted in his new life after all.

Melissa buys five of his photos for her gallery, printing some in color and others in black and white. She also hands him back the camera and tells him to go out and bring her some more.

The money his photos bring in is welcome. He has been unable to access any of his accounts. Kirill was officially declared dead the day *before* he found himself kneeling in Bourne’s apartment. Another insult from the FSB that he doesn’t feel he deserved. Failing to kill Jason Bourne has put him in a special and elite class – failing to kill Jason Bourne and finding himself still alive makes him unique. Attempting to withdraw any money in his own name will draw lethal attention and he finds that he enjoys his new life enough to not squander it for the luxuries that money might bring.

There is no question of debt or repayment between them. Bourne has been keeping him for well over six months now and seems prepared to continue doing it indefinitely. But they are glad of the steady trickle of money from the gallery. It pays for better food, the occasional night out, lighter and more fashionable clothing that is better suited to the muggy Alabama summer. And, of course, gin.

If Kirill ever wonders why Bourne has kept him, he assumes it is his usefulness as camouflage. A crippled gay lover is an excellent cover story for gently discouraging passes from the many women attracted to Bourne’s strangely innocent charm. He still carries the wound from the loss of his lover and is not inclined to seek out female companionship.

Kirill himself has, several times, but far away from their little gossip town. He has taken the bus into Mobile itself and found a night club with a familiar pounding beat, flashing lights and willing women. While he no longer can command a tableful of biddable beauties

from which to choose, all he really needs is one. There is always one, usually a tourist, who likes his scruffy beard, direct gaze and broad chest. She will find him at the bar, meeting his stare with one of her own before coming over to flirt and scream cheerfully in his ear.

He is used to his longer hair now. He stopped getting military haircuts and he lets it grow and hang down almost to his chin. The women he finds like to run their fingers through it, fascinated by the locks of pure white hair that grow out of the scars across his scalp.

He likes American women; they are soft and smooth and smell good. They also seem to like sex a lot more than their Russian counterparts. Although he comes to realize that this could be due to the lack of desperation in their couplings. He tends to forget that the women he knew in Moscow were often professionals of one sort or another, while here, he tends to attract what might be termed “talented amateurs”.

Whenever he returns from one of his nights, it is always by the first bus in the morning. He is back in time to make breakfast for Bourne and himself before Bourne leaves for work. He works at a local nursery, doing everything from bookkeeping to unloading trucks and planting seedlings.

So Jason Bourne and Kirill have dug themselves in deeply and live their covers – Dan works at the Corrigan Nursery and Sergei limps around town and takes photos for Melissa at the gallery. He drinks too much, Bourne runs for miles; they both scan the streets every day for strangers and dangers they do not find. It is peaceful and restorative and they are nearly happy.

The 4th of July ruins it all.

“You’re not like any gay man I’ve ever known,” Melissa says to him, staring speculatively over her glass of white wine. Kirill half-smiles at her, taking a long drink of his own before saying,

“You have known many gay Russian men?”

“No, it’s not that, I don’t think. Although you do have the most charming accent.”

He bows his head in acceptance of the compliment but finds his eyes narrowing as she continues to stare at him assessingly. Melissa is always forthright, he has found. Generally, he appreciates it. Tonight it is making him nervous. He finds himself scanning the crowd before them for anomalies.

There are many unknown people here at the town’s Independence Day Ball; they are drinking, laughing, eating, flirting and dancing. He notes Bourne’s position in the crowd, dancing with some pretty tourist. They are actually waltzing and Bourne appears to be gazing into her eyes. Kirill can see the way his gaze takes in the crowd around them. The set of his shoulders is easy, though, so Kirill relaxes.

Melissa is still watching him. “You don’t mind?” she cocks her head gracefully in Bourne’s direction.

He shakes his head. “I do not dance,” he says and taps the slender metal cane he uses more for show than for aid. That it makes an excellent and unsuspected weapon goes without saying.

“She’s really going after him, though,” Melissa points out. This is true. The music has changed and Bourne’s dance partner has allowed her hands to slide up to wind gracefully around his neck. He has pulled her closer and their cheeks rest against one another’s. They make a very pretty couple, turning together in the soft lights under the stars.

It dawns on Kirill that Melissa is actually worried about them, worried for him. It warms him and amuses him in equal measure and he wonders how to answer her.

“I know who will be cooking his breakfast in the morning,” Kirill says finally and with absolute truth.

“And that’s enough for you?” Melissa demands.

“It must be.”

She bites her lip and looks undecided.

“Everything is fine, *Melitchka*, I promise.”

She smiles then, gets up, kisses his cheek and goes for more wine.

Bourne returns home that night with him, the pretty dancer turned away to someone else. But it is as if his conversation with Melissa has planted a seed of discontent within him that grows fast and wild like the strange kudzu plants along the highways here.

It is nothing he can voice or even clearly grasp in his own mind. Neither gin nor the nightclubs provide him answers. He can feel his mind worrying away at the problem as he wanders and photographs and sits on the shore and watches sunrises and sunsets. He knows Bourne can feel it working away in him, sitting beside him in the sand or reading the paper at breakfast. But he says nothing, asks no questions; he simply waits.

As the days of midsummer boil away into August he comes to believe that Bourne knows the answer, can name the mystery that troubles him. He knows, but will not say. It annoys him and shakes his confidence in the man who has been his partner in their shared game of hide-and-do-not-be-sought.

It comes to a head late one steaming night.

The light from the old-fashioned refrigerator wakes him from a light doze on the broken-down couch they keep on the screened porch outside the kitchen door. He has been sleeping

there under the squeaky ceiling fan, grateful for the light breezes that whisper off the bay after midnight.

He rises when he hears the murmur of cold water pouring into a glass. Bourne is sitting at the kitchen table, his notebook of dreams open before him, new pages filled with scribbled fragments. When Kirill appears in the doorway, he finishes the last swallow of water in the glass, then refills it and holds it out to him.

The water is ice-cold against his lips and he gulps it thirstily. Trickles spill from the sides of his mouth and run down his neck to drip onto his bare chest. Their chill is as welcome as it is disturbing. When he lowers the empty glass, he finds that Bourne has been watching him. Not staring, which implies intent, but watching, which suggests...what?

Wiping his mouth on the back of one hand, he realizes that Bourne doesn't need to stare because he knows. He *knows* and has accepted and is watching for the moment that Kirill accepts and makes his own decision.

His old handlers, if they could be brought to discuss Kirill's strengths and weaknesses openly, would be the first to admit that he was never good at understanding the intricacies of the world in which he moved. His strength, they would have advised, lay primarily in the single-mindedness with which he pursued the goals set for him. The characteristic that made him most successful was his complete acceptance of the changing field of play and his willingness to adapt even as he kept his eye on the target.

He takes one breath, and then another. He feels his decision wash through him. The sudden release of tension from his shoulders is almost painful. It makes it difficult to place the empty glass onto the table. The two steps he takes around the table are stumbling and he would blame his injuries for them and for the fact that his hand is shaking as he reaches toward the other man.

But it is his usually-steady left hand that he presses flat against Jason's golden skin, high on the planes of his chest, not far from the darkened scar of a year-old bullet crease. It is odd, awkward, the way he is reaching across them both so his fingers can skim sweat-slick skin that he once marred. Bourne must feel it, too. As he rises, his hand comes up to grip Kirill's forearm, drawing his hand down and away. Their fingers tangle together, then, and Kirill closes his eyes as he leans his forehead against Bourne's. Their breath mingles and seems too loud in his self-imposed darkness.

Bourne's lips are cool and his tongue cold as it slips into his mouth. He has developed the habit of sucking on ice cubes here and the odd chill is as welcome as it is unexpected. The chuckle that rumbles out of him is unpracticed but real.

He meets Bourne's amused gaze when he pulls back to demand teasingly, "Something funny?"

"Only to men like us," Kirill assures him and wraps a hand around the back of his neck to pull him closer.

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