

SHADY
DEALINGS

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EXPRUN # 1

Eduard Meinema

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1

I should be enjoying the spring sunshine. Here, relaxing on the bench, in a beautiful park adjacent to the Africa Museum in Brussels. But not even the smell of the young blossoms, in full bloom at this time of year, can refresh my thoughts. Memories of my work as a UN soldier in Mali plague my mind. My cousin always says, “those thoughts live forever, rent-free, in your head.” She is right. Unfortunately. The mission ended a few years ago. I should feel free. But the past holds me captive.

I had seen the man who thinks to sit unnoticed next to me on the bench from the moment he started following me, still in the museum. He sits down, seemingly nonchalantly, on the other half of the bench and looks straight ahead as if he is just resting here and enjoying the view.

I have long noticed that he deliberately keeps a safe arm’s length distance between us. He says nothing. And I don’t feel like starting small talk. So, I confront him, straight to the point. Without turning to face him, I ask, “What do you want from me?”

His face now shows a faint smile. “You already had your eye on me, didn’t you?”

I raise an eyebrow and now look at him sideways. An older man. Neat and well-groomed. Physically well too. Apparently, he still trains to keep his body in shape. “Subtle is different,” I say gruffly. “So, I guess you wanted me to see you.”

“You think so?”

“Yes. You’re not the type to put yourself in the spotlight. You stayed out of view of the cameras, but you deliberately showed that you were following me. And now you’re sitting here beside me uninvited. So. What do you want from me?”

“I know who you are, Salvatore Scarabocchio. I know your past...” He talks like a diplomat. Quietly and carefully considering his words.

His rambling annoys me. I interrupt him. “I know very well who *I* am. I want to know who *you are* and what you want from me!”

He nods in agreement but keeps looking ahead. Stands up slowly, calmly, and composedly grabs his iPhone, the latest model in the most luxurious edition, and pretends to call someone. He speaks softly, but clearly enough that I can literally follow his “conversation.” “This is Ravasio. Armando Ravasio ... Yes, it’s nice here. But busy. Very busy, I can’t talk freely here... Hmm, yes. Tomorrow. I can manage that. Tomorrow then?”

While waiting for an answer, *my answer*, he looks at me unobtrusively. I hesitate. Have suspicion, but I’m also curious about what this man wants from me. And tomorrow I have nothing to do. Darn. I don’t have anything to do for a single day. Since that godforsaken mission, I’ve been unemployed. I look the other way and mutter, with my hand in front of my mouth, “Tomorrow will work.”

He turns away from me and slowly walks away. “Okay, I’ll just stop by the Africa shop,” he says into his phone. “Need to buy another gift voucher for someone. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He finishes the “call” and puts his phone away. Without saying or explaining anything further, the man who calls himself Armando Ravasio walks away. I don’t even know if it’s his real name. He said something about the Africa shop. A gift voucher? I wait for him to be gone for a few minutes before I visit the museum’s gift shop, after a little walk, a deliberately chosen detour through the park to make sure no one else follows me.

I haven’t been in here yet. What am I supposed to do with souvenirs from Africa when my head is full of Africa? I walk around the shop again to assure myself that no one is following me and then walk to the cash register. The African girl smiles kindly at me. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m looking for a... No...” I realize Ravasio made a comment about a gift voucher for a reason. “Is there perhaps a voucher waiting for me?”

The girl points to a display on the counter that lists vouchers of various values. “I have lots of vouchers,” she says.

“Um, no I don’t mean that ... It’s for tomorrow,” I try.

That seems to be enough confirmation for the smiling employee. She grabs a voucher from a drawer under her counter. “Is it for yourself, or do you want to put a name on it?”

“My name?” I ask.

“Well, rather the person you want to give the voucher to.”

“Ravasio?” I say hesitantly.

“For example,” says the girl and slides me a voucher. The name was apparently the final test. “But you don’t have to do that now. Checkout please...”

Oh, that's nice, I think. Fine gift Ravasio. A gift voucher that I have to pay for myself? I put my hand on the envelope containing the voucher. A thick envelope. There is clearly more in it than just a gift voucher. "Alright. How much do I owe you?"

"Fifty euros."

I curse inwardly. I already don't have a lot of money, and now to pay fifty euros for a mysterious man I don't know and have never seen? What have I gotten myself into? I checkout and leave. Head for my home, an apartment on the outskirts of Brussels. Not the best neighborhood in this magnificent city, but I enjoy living there. As soon as I am sure no one can see me, I open the envelope. "*Holy fuck!*" I blurt out. Not a voucher. Twenty fifty-euro bills and a bright yellow post-it sheet with a short text written on it. "Lunch. Scheveningseweg 23, The Hague."

I shake my head incredulously. Who the hell are you, Armando Ravasio? Are you really that good a believer that you just give strangers a thousand euros in cash? And then that address. In The Hague? The Netherlands? I remember all too well what he said. "I know who you are..." Does that mean he also knows that I lived in The Hague for several years? And... does he also know what I experienced in Mali? But the biggest question still remains: what does he want from me?

2

The next day I am already in The Hague at 11 am. At Scheveningsweg 23. I immediately recognized the address on the post-it sheet I found in yesterday's envelope. The address of a restaurant I remember from the time I lived in The Hague, "*De Oude Tol*", the Old Toll. A former toll house that in earlier times was the beginning of the toll road between the center of The Hague and seaside Scheveningen. That street, the Tollroad, is still there. So is the toll house. Next to that tollhouse is the restaurant where Ravasio apparently wants to meet me. I assume he chose this location quite deliberately. A location opposite Carnegie Square 2, better known as the Peace Palace. That location not only triggered me but also convinced me to make the trip from Brussels to The Hague to continue the conversation with Ravasio. To the extent you could call it a conversation....

I take a seat on the still empty terrace. I choose the long wooden bench that runs the entire length of the terrace as my seat. Opposite my seat is a small table with one chair. From here, you see mostly trees and the tower of the Peace Palace literally towering above the trees; not the best view to admire the imposing Peace Palace. *Why on earth did you meet here*, I wonder. I sink down a bit and watch the busy traffic racing close by the terrace or squeaking to a stop at the traffic light. A blonde woman comes over to ask if I want something to eat or drink. "I'm waiting for an um ... friend," I say. Yeah, what do you call someone who doesn't know you, addresses you

casually, apparently knows everything about you and also throws you an envelope of money? For the sake of convenience, I'll stick with "friend" for now, but whether this conversation will *really* lead to friendship I doubt. "We'd like to have lunch here, so if you could bring me the menu in advance?" I say before the blonde leaves. "Oh. And a coffee please. Black, no sugar."

In an instant, the waitress is back. Unsolicited puts down three coffees and three menus on the table. The moment I want to say she's wrong, I see Ravasio approaching. He comes walking out of the restaurant, apparently informed by the waitress that his visitor is there, and he is not alone. He is accompanied by a charming woman, well-groomed like him. I estimate she is of his age. She walks so close beside him that they must be more than friends. I stand up to introduce myself. "Scarabocchio," I say to the woman. "Salvatore Scarabocchio, call me Salva."

"Priscilla," the woman says, leaving the rest of the introduction to Armando.

"Priscilla is my wife," he says as he grabs a chair for her and places it near the small table. He waits until she is seated before taking a seat himself. "Sit down, Salva," he says to me. "Or should I call you Scara?"

I look at him obliquely and sit down again. I don't like this.

"Scara? Is that a nickname?" Priscilla asks. "Does it mean something like the English "*scar*"?"

And that's exactly why I don't like it when someone addresses me by that name. I don't want to explain this over and over again. "Not really," I tell her. "Scara is an abbreviation of

my last name.” I see the grin on Armando’s face. He knows better. “But um, the word is Italian and also has a different meaning.” Armando says nothing, Priscilla waits. “Okay,” I finally say. “Scara means *cockroach*.”

“Oh?” Priscilla responds in surprise and pulls a dirty face. “Not exactly a pet name.”

I look at Armando. His reaction confirms to me that he deliberately provoked this. “Like you just suggested,” I tell Priscilla. I can’t blame her, I think. “It’s a nickname. My comrades gave me that name.”

“Well, they didn’t think very positively of you then,” Priscilla says. “Or am I missing something?”

“You’re missing a lot, honey,” Armando says. He grabs the menus, gives one to his wife, one to me and keeps one for himself. “Our man here, served in a UN peacekeeping force. His last mission he completed in Mali.” Damn, he really knows a lot about me, I now realize. “And he owes that nickname to the miraculous way he survived some, um, precarious situations,” Armando explains.

“Like cockroaches are the last ones alive even after a major nuclear disaster,” Priscilla remarks without looking up from her menu.

I know that’s incorrect. I’ve had so much free time recently that I’ve been watching all the old episodes of MythBusters. In one of those episodes, they unraveled this urban legend story. While cockroaches can tolerate up to three times more radiation than humans, even cockroaches don’t survive a nuclear disaster. I decide not to go into it.

“Exactly,” Armando says. “I recommend the Biltong Caprese,” he says to me. “I think you prefer the Grilled Chicken Salad,” he says to Priscilla.

“Think so too,” Priscilla nods in agreement and folds her menu.

“Biltong?” I ask.

“I know the owners. They’re of South African descent,” Armando explains.

“Oh? In my day...”

“Yes, when you still lived here in The Hague, they still lived in South Africa,” Armando says.

I sigh. “Can I tell you that I am starting to find it very uncomfortable? You apparently knowing everything about me while I know nothing about you. Or your wife. I asked you about it yesterday and would really like to hear from you now. What do you want from me?”

Armando raises an index finger. “One moment.” He beckons to the blond woman. “Lauren, this is Salvatore. Salva, this is Lauren. Along with Robby, the owner of this wonderful establishment. Remember those names.” A comment whose usefulness I frankly do not understand. “Lauren, may I have the Biltong twice and one Grilled Chicken from you?”

“And what would you like to drink with it?” Lauren asks.

“Tannat,” Priscilla says without deliberation.

“You heard it,” Armando says by way of confirmation.

“Coming right up,” Lauren says. She takes the menus from us and goes to the kitchen.

“South African red wine,” Armando declares noticing that I have no idea what Tannat is. “So... About the reason I approached you and asked you to come here...”

Finally. I sit up straight. Here it comes. “Yes?” I say tensely.

“It’s kind of a test.”

“A test? You’re making me come all the way here from Brussels for a test?” I take the envelope I “got” yesterday in the souvenir shop of the Africa Museum, for fifty euros that is, out of the inside pocket of my denim jacket and throw it on the table in front of Armando. “If you had said that right away, I wouldn’t have come. I don’t like games.”

Armando slides the envelope back to me. “Tell me what you saw? What did you see when you sat down here?”

For a moment, I consider standing up and leaving, but Priscilla interferes in the conversation. “Tell him, Salva. You won’t regret it, believe me.”

In front of his wife, I don’t want to argue with him. Maybe that’s also the reason he brought her. Anyway, I decide to play the game. “Alright. I got here in plenty of time. Sat down on this long wooden bench because I know people who come after me will choose not to sit next to me. That’s how people usually behave in public.” Armando nods as if approving of my decision. “Afterwards, I enjoyed the view. The Peace Palace is a beautiful building, although from here you can only see the tower. And today there is apparently an important session because I see more security driving around than would normally be the case.”

Priscilla looks questioningly at her husband. He gestures that my comment is correct. “That’s what I mean,” he says and seems to want to say more, but I interrupt him.

I continue. “And more cars with license plates that say CD on them. *Corps Diplomatique*. People who work at embassies. That in itself is not strange, because here around the Peace Palace there are a lot of embassies. And embassy personnel often drive cars with such license plates. Passenger cars, that is. What I do find strange is that three times already a van has driven by with such a CD license plate. That is, to say the least, striking.”

“Where? What van?” Armando asks visibly alarmed. His confident demeanor has abruptly disappeared. This is not the news he expected to hear from me.

I nod toward a parking lot on the other side of the road, directly across from the patio. “He’s parked there now. Near the NIBC bank building.”

“Damn...” Armando looks at Priscilla, who clearly already has enough from his gaze to know what’s going on.

“It’s a little chilly here,” she says. “Shall we just enjoy our lunch inside?”

“Will do dear,” Armando says and helps her up. Before they walk inside, he says quickly and gently to me, “Don’t follow us. We need to get rid of these “stalkers.” Stay for fifteen minutes, wait for the van to disappear and then visit Joseph Israël’s. There you will find everything you need to know. I contact you soon.” Without further explanation, he escorts his wife inside. Joseph Israël’s? Who is that? Also part of his test?

After a few minutes, I'm done with it. I'm just about to leave when the waitress, or rather the owner, Lauren, comes out with my dish. Just my dish. "Mr. Ravasio asked me to send you his greetings, he has already paid. Enjoy your meal." She wants to walk away again, turns around for a moment, and says, "Oh, in case you don't know. Through the toll house, next door, you can get to the cemetery."

I am left alone. With even more questions than when I arrived here. And with a van with two people in it, whom I cannot identify from here, apparently following my hastily departed host.

3

As soon as Lauren mentioned the word “cemetery,” the penny dropped for me. Before I left for Mali, I lived in The Hague for several years. In this neighborhood. I remember there is an ancient Jewish cemetery behind the toll house. I browse on my phone for more information. On the cemetery’s website, I quickly find what I’m looking for. Jozef Israëls, the famous painter, is buried behind the toll house. The grave number is listed on the map, so it should be no problem finding it. After waiting fifteen minutes and enjoying Biltong for the first time in my life, I get up and walk to the immense cemetery. The van does not leave until I leave the terrace.

The cemetery is a large open plain, screened by a wall of red bricks and, behind that wall, surrounded by old, tall trees. I read on the website that over 10,000 Jews have been buried here since 1694. Only some of them have headstones. Many of those headstones were damaged beyond repair from the bombing during World War II. Joseph Israëls’ grave is still intact. I walk hurriedly among the graves, many of which are not only damaged but also sagging. At first glance, it is not a model cemetery. Involuntarily, I think of the boys I have seen killed. Guys who went to Mali for a good cause, a peacekeeping mission, but never left Mali.

On Israëls’ grave is a fresh flower. Quite strange for a man who died back in 1911. I assume few, if any, family members will be alive, and Armando left this for me. There is one flower. One. By the looks of it, a rose snatched from a vase at the

restaurant. There is an envelope attached to it, provisionally fastened with a paper clip. I untie the envelope. It feels thick. It contains a sheet of paper and a lighter. I read the text. Let the text sink in but can't believe it. So, I read the text once more. It really does say: "Visit this website, then check your bank account, the amount deposited into it forms a number. The number you need to log in." Below is a link pointing to the dark web and one more note. "Burn after reading."

I am beginning to get annoyed at this little game. I'm of two minds. Should I play along with this childish thing? Burn this envelope? Behind me I hear footsteps approaching. I realize I cannot torch the envelope here if people arrive. So, I stow the envelope as inconspicuously as possible in the inside pocket of my jacket.

"Is it an acquaintance of yours?" asks a man who looks suspiciously like one of the two men who were in the white van. Now that he is closer, I can see his face clearly. He addressed me in English, but with a bold accent. An Eastern European, I guess. About thirty years old, slightly smaller than me, but wiry built. Not someone to argue with even if you, like me, are well trained. After the annoyance, I'm now starting to worry too. What have I gotten myself into?

"No," I answer truthfully. "This is the tomb of Israëls, the famous painter." The man looks at me glassily. "Never heard of the Hague School? Mesdag?" I ask. His response makes it clear to me that he has no idea what I am talking about. "Everyone who visits The Hague should at least visit the Panorama Mesdag. Wonderful work. And since I was in the neighborhood, the Panorama is not that far from here, I also made time to visit Israëls' grave. Two famous painters of the

Hague School.” He seems to accept my statement. I walk calmly in his direction. “But I must hurry. Must catch my train on time. Have a nice day,” I say as I walk past him. My hands are inside my jacket, clenched into fists, ready to strike back, if necessary. Nothing happens, the man remains standing beside the grave, not attacking me, but watching me. He waits until I am a little farther away from him, grabs his cell phone and calls someone. Probably his friend from the van. I may be farther away; I can still hear him. This time he talks in his native language. A language I don’t recognize. Will he call his friend to tell him to wait for me at the entrance to the cemetery? My mind races. I take no chances, don’t want to be carted off in the back of a blinded white van. I accelerate to get out of the cemetery as quickly as possible. The envelope is now “burning” in my inside pocket. I regret not destroying it immediately. At the entrance, there’s no one to be seen. I see a streetcar approaching on Carnegie Square, in front of the Peace Palace, and decide to make a sprint. I manage to board the streetcar just before it moves on again. We ride toward the city center. I think feverishly. Direction downtown. I can stop at the Public Library and use a computer there so no one can track me. That Ravasio guy won’t have sent me a link to the dark web for nothing. Just to be sure, I put the link in my phone, that way I can’t forget it. Looking back at the entrance to the Jewish cemetery, I see the white van stop. The man who addressed me looks around searchingly. It looks like he doesn’t see me. Finally, grumbling, he gets into the van.

“Okay,” I think. “I still don’t know who you are Mr. Ravasio, but I do know that your pursuers, are now after me. Thanks for that!”

4

Half an hour later, I am in the *Central Library*, sitting at a computer. I typed in Ravasio's link but keep getting the message "selected databases only." Damn. Apparently, they've blocked all other Internet for visitors to the library. I sink back into my chair. Now what?

"Problems?" asks a girl sitting two spots away. There is no one between us; she can see everything on my screen. I quickly click away the link I was looking for. "Um... I thought I could look for something on the Internet here, but..."

The black-haired girl, Asian by the look of her face, starts laughing. "They've blocked the Internet. Except for a few databases selected by them that aren't of any use to you." She gets up and comes to stand next to me. Without asking anything, she hangs over me and starts typing. I try to avoid her body but feel her warmth against mine. Her perfume invades my nose. A scent I immediately recognize. "Patchouli," I accidentally say out loud.

She looks at me. "True. But you don't strike me as the type who knows much about perfume. Rather... Anyway, never mind." She taps the screen. "I did a quick workaround for you. Unblocked everything that you, as an unregistered visitor, shouldn't be viewing. You can now search all you want." She sees my puzzled look. "You have to do something, don't you? When you're a student."

Who am I to contradict her? "Thanks," I babble.

“Zuleyka,” she says and holds out her hand.

Automatically I shake her hand and say my first name. I wait for her to leave to visit the dark web once more. But she remains standing.

“What are you looking for here, Salvatore?” she asks with a friendly but also suspicious smile. “I told you I don’t really think you’re the type who knows feminine things, like names of perfumes. But you’re not a bookworm either.” She laughs again. “And definitely not a computer nerd...” She looks at me piercingly, pointing to the shelves full of books around us. “So? *What* are you looking for here?”

I bite my lip and stare at the link on my phone. “Something for an um... friend.”

“Sure,” she now chuckles. “Do you need any more help?” She leans closer, her mouth near my ear, and whispers, “I know a thing or two about the dark web, mind you.”

I startle. “H-how...?”

“You can click away a lot, but your search history is still open, silly. Just erase it later before you close this terminal,” she says. “We don’t want any trouble, and hey ... I’d love to come back here again, if you know what I mean.”

“Student, you said, right? What the hell do you do for training?” I ask her. “National Institute for Counterterrorism or something?”

“I don’t think there’s any regular training for that. Besides, then I’d choose international. But no. I’m doing art school, here in The Hague.”

“Well. That was the last thing on my mind.”

She smiles at me again. Peeks at my phone, quickly taps the link she sees on my phone on the keyboard and then proudly displays the website that should have been hidden from everyone but me. “Here-it is.” She reads the text. “Oh, you have to log in with a number you...” Now she looks at me in surprise. “That you got through your bank account?” I don’t know what to say anymore. If this, this girl, is part of Ravasio’s test, I now hopelessly failed. “Who are you?” she asks. “A secret agent or something?”

I decide to go with the truth again. “Well, no. I’m unemployed.”

“Uhhuh...,” she says and waits for me to check my bank account. “Sorry. I’m very curious now.”

“I understand, but this is rather private.”

“Private? For ... your boyfriend? And you’re looking that up here? In a *public* library?”

I squeeze my eyes shut. Stupid. But then again, how was I to know that I couldn’t just log in and out here quickly to check this website? Ah, what the hell, I think. I don’t even know the guy, so what am I worried about? I grab my phone and log into my bank account. When I see my balance, I almost let my phone fall out of my hands.

“Are you okay?” Zuleyka asks. She peeks at my screen again uninvited. Her eyes get big when she sees the amount added. “Unemployed, you said? And that’s your, um, benefit or something?”

I try to apologize with useless hand gestures. “I ... I don’t know exactly what this is, someone approached me, and I had

to look at this,” I say pointing to the screen where a bulletin board of some institute called the EXPRUN is visible.

She puts her hand on my forearm. “Are you in trouble?”

“Seriously, Zuleyka, I have no idea what any of this means and I...” My breath stops as I see a familiar person walk into the room. The man from the van. Here. How? How did he find me here?

Zuleyka sees my worried look, peeks briefly at the man who just walked in, and takes action. “Give me your phone,” she says. Without waiting, she snatches my phone from my hands. Taps the number, actually the exorbitant amount just deposited into my bank account, on the keypad. The EXPRUN screen disappears and a new screen with a message for me comes into view. “Contract” it reads in bold capital letters.

“Contract?” I stammer. I see that the man from the van has seen me and is now coming my way. “Fuck. I must leave,” I say and grab my phone back.

Zuleyka stops me. “Wait,” she says. Again, her fingers fly across the keyboard. I’m at a loss. The man is clearly on his way to me, and I know these types. I don’t want to know what he’s up to. Or ... actually, I already know and, in any case, that’s not much good. “Goddamn,” Zuleyka curses. She has opened the document on the screen, read the outline at lightning speed, and now knows what I don’t know yet. She looks at me. “You *really are* in big trouble, pal.” She is lightning fast. Copies the text, and before I can say or do anything, she forwards it. That was not my intention. I panic. Who did she forward it to? I hear a ping sound on my phone. “It’s on your phone now,” she says to my reassurance. Then she clicks the

contract away, clears all searches and closes the terminal like a madman. “A contract to kill someone?” she whispers. “I don’t think you even know *how to kill someone.*”

Well. I know better. She totally misjudged that last part. But killing someone is not something I would do of my own free will. “I didn’t know. I really didn’t,” I whisper to her. “But what I do know is that the guy who just came in was targeting me and...” *Oh, fuck, I think, why did I let her do this? I should have stopped her in time.* “And since he sees you and me here together now, I think it would be better if you came with me.”

“Now there’s a pickup line I haven’t heard yet,” she chuckles. And again, she takes the initiative. She doesn’t wait a single second. Pulls me along by my arm to the other side of the hall. Leads me to the fire escape and halfway down the stairs pushes me into a door that has a “Private” sign on it.

“Are you sure...?” I begin.

“Hey, you’re asking me out,” she calls over her shoulder. “How much more private will it get?” She runs ahead of me. Clearly knows her way around here. Within a minute or two we are outside, but not at the main entrance, not the entrance I know. We’re at the back of the building. “That way,” she says firmly, “to café Kafka.”

“Really, a café?” I protest. Although? I read the name on the facade, spelled “Kafe Kafka.” How Kafkaesque is this situation I find myself in?

“I used to work there, we can hide there and then run off unnoticed later,” Zuleyka says and runs ahead of me. How bizarre. Where in Mali I had to lead my men, now I am being led through this urban jungle by a girl I didn’t even know until

fifteen minutes ago. Yes, I know her name. But that is all I know about her.

Just like I know Armando Ravasio...

5

I marvel at the modern decor of the café but can't enjoy it for too long. Zuleyka pulls me into the kitchen where she introduces me to the owner. The man, a fifty-something with gray hair and a figure that betrays that he regularly "previews" his own food, introduces himself as Moritz Maffay.

"And you're Zu's new boyfriend?" he asks in a way that makes me have no choice but to suspect that Zuleyka does drop in here often, if not regularly, with boyfriends.

Zuleyka stands half behind Moritz and gestures with a nod of her head that I should say yes. "Um, yes. She, um, wanted to show me where she works," I stammer. Moritz's look tells me I'm making a mistake.

"*Worked,*" he says and turns to my new friend. "I would only love for her to come back to work, but madam is busy with her studies." He waits a moment, then adds. "And boyfriends..."

"We want to take a breath here," Zuleyka says deadpan. "Is that okay?"

"You? Always," says Moritz. "Do you want to sit on the terrace?"

"No!" Zuleyka and I shout at the same time.

"Okay...", Moritz responds startled. "Then you stay in here for a while, that's also fine."

“Sorry Mo,” Zuleyka says. “My boyfriend is sweet and nice and all, but he has some um... “issues”. So, we have to stay out of the picture for a while if you know what I mean...”

Moritz shakes his head. “You know our café’s slogan, Zu. “*With Kafka even beer comes with baggage,*” Nevertheless, I hope you find a normal boyfriend someday, one who doesn’t drag a backpack full of misery along with him.” He looks at me grinning. “Nothing personal, kid.”

Moritz leaves us and Zuleyka makes herself at home. She grabs something to drink and asks me if I want something, too. “Love to, but no alcohol,” I respond. In this situation it is important that I keep my head clear.

She grabs a Coke for me from one of the refrigerators and then grabs two plates. Places a sandwich on them and walks to the bins that hold a variety of freshly cut vegetables and meats. “Chicken or Tuna?” she asks as she unabashedly prepares a club sandwich for me.

“Chicken please,” I say although the Biltong is still filling my stomach. I look around, not feeling comfortable at all. Normally I know exactly where I go in and how to get out again unseen. Now I have allowed myself to be taken in. Without paying close attention to the surroundings. “Are you sure this guy won’t follow us in here?”

Zuleyka puts the chicken on the rolls and licks her fingers. “Sorry, no time to put on gloves,” she says. Then she points to a large TV showing several small images. “Mo has cameras hanging everywhere. I watched the monitor. The guy didn’t come after us. I think we shook him off.”

“Yeah,” I sigh. “That’s what I thought the first time, too.”