There's No Happiness Without Cost

by: rennightingale07

The snowstorm outside hadn’t let up even a little. The wind howled around the building, rattling the windowpanes and making the whole structure creak. Inside the theater, everyone was scattered. Some were sitting on the floor, some leaning against walls, talking quietly, others just staring into space. The atmosphere was tight and uneasy, especially after what had happened earlier with Rampana and Kulish. No one said it out loud, but everyone was thinking the same thing: *there was something wrong here, and it wasn’t just the weather.*

Valeriy stood near the side exit, checking the fastenings on his coat and making sure the area was secure. As a Fatui Major, discipline was basically his default setting. He went through a mental checklist: doors checked, people accounted for, watch schedule set. But one thing kept throwing off his count.

Valeriy checked the corridor one last time, then turned and knocked gently on the door at the end. He didn't have to wait long before it swung open.

Mitya stood in the doorway, looking as put-together as he ever did, which was to say, like someone who had spent half the day thinking about equations instead of how he looked. They'd been together for months now. What had started as supervisor and subordinate had turned into late-night conversations, quiet walks, stolen moments between shifts. No one else knew. It was safer that way, especially in their line of work, but it meant for such intimate moments like this.

"I'm still the same person." Valeriy said, his tone gentler now. "Mode doesn't change who I am. Just what I have to focus on."

"Focusing on everyone else all the time," Mitya said, stopping by the table and leaning back against it, hands braced on the edge. His scarf lifted one of its little finger-tips and patted his shoulder, like it agreed. "You never save any focus for yourself. Or for me, for that matter. Though I suppose 'romantic getaway at a murder scene' isn't exactly what I had in mind when I pictured us spending time together."

"Mitya..." Valeriy said, a quiet warning in his voice, but there was no real bite to it.

Mitya waved it off, grinning, but his eyes stayed bright and alert — too alert. "I know, I know. Inappropriate timing. But if we don't joke about it, we'll just sit here and think about it, and I'd rather not. Thinking about it leads to worrying, and worrying leads to me coming up with seven different hypothetical theories on supernatural involvement, and we both know how much you love those."

Valeriy stepped forward, closing the distance between them. "I never said I didn't listen to your theories. I just said some of them needed more evidence."

"And some of them are ahead of their time," Mitya said, with a playful little tilt of his head. "But I'll forgive you for being a skeptic. Eventually."

He pushed himself off the table and walked over to Valeriy, his movements were fluid. The scarf draped itself loosely around his neck, the 'fingers' brushing against Valeriy's arm.

"How are you?" Mitya asked, quieter now, the teasing softening at the edges. "Really? You've been running around since this morning. Organizing, checking, making sure everyone's accounted for. You haven't stopped once."

Valeriy rested his hands on Mitya's waist, his grip steady and grounding. "I'm fine. As long as everyone is safe, I'm fine. But I should be asking you the same thing. You've been quiet all evening. Well, quieter than usual. And you've been watching the doors an awful lot for someone who claims he's just here for the opera."

Mitya didn't flinch but the smile didn't quite reach his eyes the way it usually did. He rested his hands on Valeriy's shoulders, fingers brushing lightly over the collar of his uniform.

"I'm always watching the doors," he said lightly. "It's how I know when to make my exit. Or when you're coming to find me. Both are very important pieces of information."

"Dmitry," Valeriy said, his voice dropping lower, more serious. "Don't. Not with me. Something is on your mind. You've been distant since we arrived. And earlier, you seemed to be running away from something. You said it was just a mist, but you were terrified. Don't tell me it was nothing."

The room was a bit dark, most of the light pulled to where a low fire crackled, casting long shadows across the floor. Mitya stood facing it, his back to the door, his silhouette still and quiet against the flickering glow.

"Sarge..." he said, and there was a pause before his words came out. *"Are you ready to die in this place?"*

Valeriy didn't answer. He stayed silent, standing there, the question hanging in the air between them. He didn't know what to say afterall. How do you even respond to something like that? He watched Mitya's back, the way his shoulders were held too straight and then he saw the way his jaw tightened, the way his hands curled into fists at his sides. And then the quiet, almost imperceptible tremor.

Valeriy realized he was crying.

He had never seen Mitya cry. Not once. This was the man who joked through long nights of research, who brushed off suspicion with a grin, who talked his way out of trouble like it was a game. He never let anything get to him, never let emotion show like it was something real and heavy. But ever since they'd gotten closer, ever since this thing between them turned into something more than just work, Valeriy had seen how much more open he became, how much more he let himself feel. How much more he let himself be vulnerable.

He never expected it to be like this.

The Major didn't say anything. He just walked forward, closing the quiet space between them, and then wrapped his arms around Mitya from behind, holding him tight. He rested his chin lightly on Mitya's shoulder, letting him know he was there without pushing him to turn around or speak.

Mitya's hands came up immediately, resting over Valeriy's forearms where they circled him, his fingers brushing lightly over the fabric of his coat. He didn't pull away. A faint shaky laugh escaping him that didn't sound happy at all.

"Why make this poor *old* soul suffer?" he murmured, his fingers tracing the lines on Valeriy's sleeve. "What did it ever do to deserve this?"

Valeriy blinked, a little surprised at the question, the way he spoke about himself like he was something worn out, something already at the end of its days. But he didn't press for details. He just rested his chin lightly on Mitya's shoulder.

"I don't think you're old." Valeriy said quietly. "And I don't think you deserve any of this. But we're here. And we're in it together."

Mitya's fingers tightened just a little on his arms, his head bowing further so his hair fell forward, hiding his face from the firelight.

"That's the trouble, isn't it?" he said, his voice quieter now, the laugh gone. "We're in it together. And that's what makes it hurt."

Mitya was quiet for a long time, the fire popping and hissing in front of them. His hands stayed where they were, light and restless on Valeriy's arms, like he was half holding on and half ready to pull away.

"You're too good for this, you know," Mitya said eventually, so soft Valeriy almost didn't catch it. "Too good to be standing here holding someone like me in a freezing theater while people die outside."

"I'm not here because it's good," Valeriy said simply. "I'm here because you're here. And I'm not letting you face it alone."

Mitya let out another shaky breath, and Valeriy let him lean back just a little letting his weight rest against him, letting himself be held. The scarf curled slowly around Valeriy's wrist, soft and gentle, as if it knew how much he needed the contact.

"Such a noble thing to say," Mitya murmured, but there was no teasing in it now. Just a quiet, raw feeling. "Very noble. Very you."

He replied, his gaze fixed on the flames. "With Soboleva and Torgov, and now Kulish and Rampana, people just keep dying. And I can't shake the feeling that if you walk out that door right now, it might be the last time I ever see you."

Mitya turned around then. His face was streaked with tears he hadn't bothered to wipe away, and he looked completely worn out. Without saying anything, Valeriy leaned down, slipped one arm under his knees and the other around his back, and lifted him up.

Mitya made a small, surprised sound, but he didn't fight it. He just rested his hands on Valeriy's shoulders and let himself be carried over to the couch near the fire. Valeriy sat down with him still in his arms, leaned in and kissed him deeply.

Mitya kissed him back right away, his fingers grabbing onto the front of Valeriy's coat and pulling him closer. It wasn't soft or gentle. It was desperate, like he was scared to let go. His hand-shaped scarf curled around Valeriy's neck, almost like it was holding on too.

When they finally pulled apart, Valeriy reached up and wiped the tear tracks off Mitya's face with his thumb, getting rid of the dark streaks they had left behind.

Valeriy shifted closer on the couch and pressed a kiss to Mitya's neck, slow and steady, right where his jaw met his shoulder. Then another, a little lower, his hand resting firmly on Mitya's side to keep him close.

Mitya didn't pull away. He let his head fall back against the cushion, his eyes fluttering shut, but his mind was racing even as he leaned into the touch. It felt so good. Too good and somewhere in the back of his head, a voice was screaming that this was wrong. That this was a betrayal of everything he was supposed to be.

Angels aren't supposed to love like this, he thought to himself. We're supposed to love everyone the same and equally without wanting one person more than anything else in the world. That's how it works. That's how it's always been.

He felt Valeriy's lips against his skin again, and a shiver ran through him that had nothing to do with the cold in the room.

This is blasphemy, his mind kept going. *I'm breaking every rule just by letting this happen. The Heavens would call it corruption. They'd say I've lost my way, that I've let something small and human get in the way of what I was created for.*

But then he remembered what the sinner had told him, once, a long time ago, when they'd been talking about curses and choices and what it actually meant to be free.

"If you can only love when you're told to," the voice echoed in his head, "then you don't really love at all. You just follow orders."

Mitya took a slow breath, his fingers curling into Valeriy's coat, holding on tighter.

And if I'm not an envoy anymore anyway? he thought. *If I've already fallen, if I've already lost the right to call myself one of them… then whose rules am I actually*

following? Hroptatyr was right. I don't have to be what they made me. I can be my own person. I can choose who matters to me.

Valeriy pulled back just enough to look at him, his hand coming up to cup Mitya's face. "You okay?" he asked quietly. "You went somewhere just now."

Mitya opened his eyes. He reached up and covered Valeriy's hand with his own, pressing it tighter against his cheek.

"Yeah." he said, his voice steady even if his head was still spinning. "Just… thinking."

Valeriy studied him for a second, then nodded slowly. "You're still the person I care about no matter what. That hasn't changed."

Mitya leaned in and kissed him then, harder than before, like he was making up for all the time he'd spent thinking he didn't deserve this. Like he was proving to himself that he was allowed to have it. That he was allowed to be his own person.

Freedom tastes good like this, he thought as Valeriy kissed him back. It feels like someone is choosing you. Just you. Not what you represent. Not what you're supposed to be. He didn't say any of it out loud. He held onto the Major tighter, and when Valeriy kissed his neck again like oh how he was back at the heavens, Mitya didn't fight the feeling or the guilt or the voice in his head telling him he was wrong.

"Stay a little longer." Mitya pleaded. "Please. Just a little more."

Valeriy didn't argue. He just wrapped his arms around the scientist and held him.

It wasn't anything fancy. They were just two people in a quiet room with the fire going, and for a little while they didn't have to be anything else. Valeriy's hands were moving slowly over Mitya's shoulders, his back, and his waist, taking his time checking in, making sure he was right there with him. Mitya leaned into every touch, his fingers holding onto the Fatui Major, pulling him closer. When they kissed, it was deep and slow, like they both knew they might not get another chance like this. The major's arm stayed around Mitya, his hand resting low on his back, moving slowly, like he couldn't stop touching him. Mitya rested his head on Valeriy's chest, listening to his heartbeat, his hand lying flat over Valeriy's side, his thumb moving in slow, small circles against his skin.

Valeriy kissed the top of his head, his hand still moving slow and gently. "You okay?"

Mitya nodded against his chest, his fingers still resting on Valeriy's. “Yeah.”

The time has come.

"I have to go," Valeriy said. It was the sound of a small hush, but final.

Mitya nodded, not looking up at first, just adjusting the garter on his thigh where his Electro Linchpin was attached. "Yeah. I know. Duty calls."

He looked up then, and his expression was mostly back to normal. He was calm, and composed like nothing had happened. But his fingers were still fidgeting a little with the edge of his coat.

"Be careful." The scientist spoke again. "Please. And keep your eyes open. Don't assume anything is what it looks like."

Valeriy stepped closer for just a second, his hand resting briefly on Mitya's arm. "I will. And stay where it's safe. Don't go wandering off alone."

"I'll try, Sarge." Mitya said, with a faint, tired half-smile. "But you know me."

Valeriy didn't smile back. He just nodded once, firmly, then turned to the door. He unlocked it, pulled it open, and glanced back one last time before stepping out into the hallway.

The Traveler woke to shouting, sharp and urgent, echoing down the theater main stage. They got up quickly and followed the sound to the main stage area, where a crowd had already gathered.

Valeriy was in the chair he'd set up for his watch, slumped slightly forward. He looked peaceful, almost like he was just resting, but it was clear that he was gone.

Vodyanitsa was pacing nearby, her voice tight with frustration. “This can’t be happening again! We watched, we locked doors, we checked on everyone and still nothing changed! People keep dying and we have no idea how or who or why!”

Mitya stood a little apart from the group, near the back of the circle. He was staring straight at Valeriy, his face pale, his hands hanging loosely at his sides.

Chugunov, gruff and loud as he usually was, stepped over to Mitya and put a hand on his shoulder. “I know you were close,” he said, his voice quieter than usual. “I’m sorry, lad. He was a good man. One of the best.”

Mitya blinked, and suddenly a soft, breathless laugh bubbled up light, almost cheerful in a terrible, wrong way. He shook his head, smiling like Chugunov had just told him a very silly joke.

“No, no, no,” he said, waving a hand dismissively toward the chair where Valeriy sat. “He’s not gone. Look at him, he’s just resting! Finally sat still for more than five minutes, that’s all. I told him he should take a break. He’s probably just… catching up on sleep.”

His laugh came again, a little sharper this time, his fingers twitching at his sides like he wanted to go nudge Valeriy awake himself.

“He’ll be up in a minute I swear! He’ll grumble about everyone hovering around, telling us all to get back to our posts. You’ll see! This is ridiculous. He doesn’t just stop. Sarge is the most stubborn man I know.”

His laugh came again, a little sharper this time, a little wilder. The scarf around his neck unfurled, its soft little hand-tips patting gently at his back, trying so hard to soothe him, the way it always did when he was upset.

But Mitya swatted it away hard, his hands were movements jerky and sharp.

“Stop that!” he snapped, and then laughed again, too bright, too brittle. “There’s nothing wrong! Why is everyone acting like he’s not just going to open his eyes any second now? He’s just sleeping!”

Nobody uttered a word.

“He’s just… being difficult,” He continued, his voice was becoming thinner now and the smile was starting to tremble at the edges. “He always hated getting woken up. I should just… go nudge him. That’s all.”

He took a wobbly step forward, but Vodyanitsa’s grip on his shoulders stayed. Then his knees gave way. He didn’t make a sound as he sank down, all the way to the cold floor, his hands falling limp at his sides. The scarf wrapped fully around him now, settling across his shoulders and chest like a blanket, and he didn’t fight it. He just let it, his eyes still fixed on the chair where Valeriy sat, *waiting, waiting, waiting.*

Chugunov looked away, his jaw working, rubbing a hand over his face. Vodyanitsa’s own eyes glistened as she knelt down beside Mitya

Vodyanitsa stopped pacing. She walked over towards him, her frustration melting into something that concerned her about Mitya. “Mitya. I’m so sorry. I know how much he meant to you. If you need to sit down, or step away, or anything…”

Still Mitya said nothing. He took a slow, shaky breath, and for a second it looked like he might crumble, but he just stood there, holding himself together as best he could.

“He’s *cold.”* Mitya whispered, so quiet they almost didn’t hear it.

No one answered. There was nothing gentle enough to say.

They moved Valeriy’s body to the corner of the theater, laying him down on a narrow bed there. Everyone helped carry some blankets towards the stage.

Once everyone else had filed out and gone back to the main hall to talk over what to do next, the scientist stayed behind. He sank down beside it, half kneeling, half sitting on the floor. He rested his forehead against the edge of the mattress, right near where Valeriy’s shoulder was. He kept his eyes closed tight, and tears leaked out from under his lids, running slowly down his face and onto the edge of the mattress. The humming turned into quiet, and soft *singing*. A sorrowful lullaby, slow and mournful, the kind used to mourn others who had fallen.

While he sang, the thought kept circling in his head, clear and sharp through the grief.

“Hroptatyr was right.” he thought, and it felt personal, like something he’d been arguing with himself about for months and now finally had to admit. “He told me this would happen. He told me the way this world works doesn’t suit us. He was right. This world

has to change. It doesn't matter if people don't like it. It doesn't matter if it tears everything apart."

He pressed his forehead harder against the mattress, his hands curling into the fabric like he was holding onto something he couldn't actually reach.

"Good people die while the ones pulling the strings stay safe and far away, and no one ever answers for any of it."

Valeriy would never hear him sing this again. How he'd never get to see him smile, or argue about paperwork, or feel his hand on his arm, or have him tell him to be careful one more time. All those little things he'd taken for granted. No one else should have to watch someone they love get taken away with nothing to show for it. He buried his head again on the side of the bed as he sobbed.

"The price is real and I just paid part of it. Sarge paid for it too."