

THE LONG WAY WEST

Mongolia to Istanbul Overland



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Disclaimer

This book is pure fiction, woven from half-baked ideas, dubious logic, and a reckless sense of humor. Any resemblance to real people—living, dead, or otherwise indisposed—is entirely accidental (or just unfortunate for them).

To protect the guilty, the innocent, and those who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, names have been changed, identities obscured, and alibis carefully fabricated.

A sincere thank you to the wonderful people of Russia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye for their warmth, generosity, patience, and for not tossing us out of a moving train, marshrutka, or minibüs at any point along the way.

Proceed with caution—and a sense of humor!

Chapter One

Mongolia to Russia

Once upon a time, in a land not too far away but distant enough to require a touch of daring and an insatiable thirst for adventure, four overly optimistic—and slightly chaotic—friends concocted a plan. The idea? To travel from Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, all the way to Istanbul, Türkiye Overland. Yes, the long way. The slow way. Because why take shortcuts when you can savor every bump, detour, and unexpected twist along the way? This wasn't just about reaching a destination; it was about immersing ourselves in the journey itself—the landscapes, the people, the food, and the countless moments that make life unforgettable.

The "plan"—if it could even be called that—was simple yet gloriously vague. We would meet in Ulaanbaatar at some point in May. Why May? No strategic reason; no foresight or meticulous planning involved. It just felt like as good a month as any to kick off an adventure. From there, we'd spend a week or two exploring the Gobi Desert because what's a great journey without sandstorms, camels, and nomadic hospitality? After soaking up the rugged beauty of Mongolia, we'd board the legendary Trans-Siberian Railway and traverse Russia, stopping at various towns and cities for cultural enlightenment, sightseeing escapades, and snacks we'd probably regret later.

Our dusty escapades in the Gobi are chronicled in *GOBI DIARIES: A TALE OF SAND, SURVIVAL, AND ADVENTURE*—a riveting tale of questionable noodles, homemade yogurt, and karaoke performances so bad they became legendary. But after two glorious weeks of sand-filled shoes, starlit nights under endless skies, and encounters with resilient nomads, it was time to bid farewell to Mongolia and head toward Mother Russia—a country perched firmly at the top of my bucket list. As much as I loved Mongolia’s untamed wilderness, the thought of crossing Siberia on the world’s longest railway filled me with equal parts excitement and trepidation.

Our final day in Ulaanbaatar dawned bright and warm, the kind of spring morning that makes you forget how brutally cold winters can be. It was almost surreal to think that just days earlier, we had been bundled up in layers of wool and down jackets, braving biting winds while riding camels across the desert. Now, here we were, strolling through the city streets in light jackets, basking in the golden sunlight. We started the day at our favorite coffee shop, a cozy little place tucked into a quiet corner of the city. The coffee wasn’t exceptional—it was mediocre at best—but there was something comforting about sitting together one last time, sipping steaming cups of brew and reminiscing about the highs and lows of our Mongolian adventures.

Afterward, we wandered over to Sukhbaatar Square, where Mother and Children's Day celebrations were in full swing. Families crowded the square, enjoying concerts, street food, and the sheer joy of being able to shed their heavy winter layers. Vendors sold everything from freshly grilled mutton skewers to sweet pastries dusted with sugar, and children ran around laughing, clutching balloons and toys. It was festive, heartwarming, and the perfect send-off for the city that had welcomed us so warmly. Watching these scenes unfold, I couldn't help but feel a pang of nostalgia. Mongolia had been more than just a stop on our journey; it had been a lesson in resilience, simplicity, and the beauty of living close to nature.

Before heading back to the Golden Gobi Guesthouse, we made a detour to the State Department Store—a relic of Soviet times that felt like stepping into a time capsule colliding with a bustling flea market. The aisles were crammed with everything from fur-lined boots to tins of smoked fish, dried fruits, and jars of pickled vegetables. Here, we stocked up on essential supplies for our upcoming train journey: instant noodles, dried sausage, biscuits, sweets, and, naturally, vodka—the cornerstone of any respectable Trans-Siberian experience. There was something oddly satisfying about wandering through this labyrinthine store, picking out items that would sustain us during the long hours ahead. Each purchase felt like a small ritual, a preparation for the unknown.

Back at the guesthouse, the inevitable chaos of packing began. Years of travel had taught me that backpacks are like black holes—once you unpack them, good luck getting everything back inside. There I was, trying to squeeze a packet of biscuits into a space that clearly didn't exist, when Brian muttered from his corner, "Too much bloody stuff."

Moments later, Doug burst in like a whirlwind, hair askew and brandishing a salami as if it were Excalibur. "Can anyone fit this in?" he asked, looking desperate. "My pack's about to explode." Brian, without missing a beat, held out his hand. The exchange was made in silence. Doug disappeared, and Brian returned to muttering as if this were all perfectly normal. Eventually, by some miracle of physics—or perhaps divine intervention—we managed to pack everything, though I suspect several laws of spatial reasoning were broken in the process.

With our bags ready, we gathered in the guesthouse foyer to say our goodbyes. The lovely owner drove us to the train station, a grand Soviet-era masterpiece of marble, chandeliers, and faded opulence that felt straight out of a Cold War spy novel. Walking through its vast halls, I couldn't help but marvel at the architecture. Despite its worn edges and peeling paint, there was a certain charm to the building—a sense of history etched into every surface. It was hard not to imagine spies exchanging coded messages in shadowy corners or diplomats rushing to catch trains bound for Moscow.

As the train pulled into the station, excitement rippled through our group. There it was—the Trans-Siberian Railway, right on schedule after traveling 3,900 kilometers from Vladivostok. Its punctuality was nothing short of miraculous to us, especially after years of Western European trains that treated schedules as loose suggestions rather than hard rules. Lin suddenly froze and looked around.

“Where’s Doug?” she asked, her voice tinged with exasperation.

We all glanced up and down the platform. No Doug. With a sigh that could have melted glaciers, Lin muttered, “It’s like herding cats,” and stomped off to find him. Minutes later, she reappeared, dragging a sheepish Doug behind her.

“I was taking photos of the Soviet signs,” Doug explained defensively. “They’re stunning! You should see the typography.”

“Get on the train, Doug,” Lin said, clearly unimpressed by his artistic endeavors.

The train wheezed to a halt, and we eagerly located our carriage, buzzing like kids on a school trip. Standing at the door, with the poise of a bouncer and the authority of a school principal, was Svetlana, our Provodnista. Every Russian long-haul train has one per carriage — a guardian angel (or drill sergeant, depending on her mood) who keeps the carriage running smoothly and the passengers in line. With a brisk nod, Svetlana checked our

tickets and passports, making it abundantly clear that this was her domain, and we were but humble guests. Once aboard, we settled into our compartment, marveling at its compact efficiency. Four berths stacked snugly together, a small table nestled between them, and a window offering views of the vast Siberian landscape stretching beyond.

Russian train carriages are a marvel of Soviet efficiency, where form meets function in ways that make you question whether comfort was even considered. These trains aren't designed for tourists; they're how Russians traverse their sprawling country, which stretches wider than your average geography textbook illustration. Picture this: a narrow corridor snakes along one side like the spine of some industrial beast, while compartments line the other like ribs—compact, utilitarian, and just slightly claustrophobic. It's as if someone took the concept of “cozy” and gave it a stern lecture about maximizing space.

As the train lurched forward, we cracked open a bottle of vodka and raised our plastic cups in a toast. “To adventure!” We cheered, knowing full well that the next 23 hours—and the thousands of kilometers ahead—would bring challenges, laughter, and memories we'd cherish forever. And so, our journey from Ulaanbaatar to Irkutsk began, marking just the first leg of what promised to be an unforgettable odyssey across continents, cultures, and countless cups of tea brewed in tiny metal kettles.

Settling into the rhythm of the train, we quickly realized that life aboard the Trans-Siberian Railway blends monotony with wonder. Hours passed slowly, marked by the clatter of wheels on tracks and distant whistles. Outside, the landscape shifted gradually from flat desert to rolling Mongolian steppes, distant mountains, and sparkling lakes. Watching the scenery unfold was mesmerizing, each kilometer revealing new shades of green, blue, and white. Occasionally, isolated villages appeared, their colorful wooden houses contrasting with the stark wilderness.

Inside the compartment, however, things were far less serene. Our group dynamic was a constant source of entertainment—and occasional frustration. Doug, ever the photographer, spent hours leaning out the window, capturing shots of passing landscapes and fellow passengers. His enthusiasm was infectious, but his habit of leaving his camera gear scattered everywhere drove the rest of us crazy. Meanwhile, Brian had taken it upon himself to organize our snack supply, arranging packets of biscuits and dried sausages into neat piles on the upper berth. He claimed it was for efficiency, but I suspected it was more about maintaining some semblance of control amidst the chaos. Lin, ever the pragmatist, kept us grounded, reminding us to stay hydrated and ration our vodka supply wisely.

Despite the occasional squabbles, there was an undeniable camaraderie among us. Conversations flowed freely, ranging from deep philosophical debates to silly jokes that left us

doubled over with laughter. At one point, Doug attempted to teach us a traditional Mongolian throat-singing technique he had picked up during our time in the Gobi. Let's just say the results were... mixed. Still, it added another layer of absurdity to our already unconventional journey.

"This train is amazing," Brian exclaimed as he returned from the bathroom. "We really need to explore it."

"Yes," Doug agreed, lounging on his bunk bed. "But not today. We've got plenty of time and a number of trains between here and St. Petersburg. I'm quite content here with my vodka, and I already know where to find the samovar for hot water and the bathroom—that's all I need for now."

"Lazy bones," Lin teased. However, she showed no signs of wanting to explore either, continuing to sit and gaze out the window.

And so, exploration was postponed for another day in favor of vodka and relaxation, as the train rattled onward toward Russia.

At exactly 9:30 PM, Svetlana materialized in our doorway like a stern fairy godmother straight out of a Russian folktale. She wore a uniform so crisp it could cut glass, and her expression suggested she had zero patience for nonsense. "Border soon," she announced, her tone brooking no argument. Her gaze landed on our vodka bottle with an expression that screamed, *Amateurs*.

She made a flicking sign with her hand—accompanied by a sharp "Tsk!" sound—which we understood as *hide the vodka*.

“Uh, Doug,” Brain whispered, nudging him. “What?” Doug hissed back. “She means now,” Brain said, nodding toward the bottle.

Apparently, showing up at customs smelling like a distillery is frowned upon. Who knew? We quickly tucked the bottle away, exchanging guilty glances as if we’d been caught sneaking candy into a movie theater.

The tales we’d heard about crossing the Mongolia-Russia border were not exaggerated—it’s less a border crossing and more a test of endurance. First came the Mongolian side, where a very serious official worked her way through the train like a detective solving a mystery. For two hours, she inspected passports and visas with the precision of a jeweler examining diamonds under a magnifying glass. Each stamp she applied seemed to carry the weight of national security, as though any misstep could trigger an international incident. Our documents were whisked away for processing, leaving us to kill time by making our beds and pretending we weren’t silently panicking about how long this was taking.

At last, the train jolted ahead into no man’s land, heading toward the Russian border, where things grew oddly dramatic. By then, we were half-asleep, soothed by the train’s rhythmic sway.

The train screeched to a stop, and we heard doors slam and voices boom as Russian border agents boarded.

“Why do border checks always occur in the dead of night?” I muttered to no one specifically. But the sudden appearance of a swarm of officials snapped us awake quicker than icy Siberian water. I spotted five distinct uniforms, each flashier than the next, as though part of a bureaucratic runway contest. One had epaulets so gleaming they could blind in sunlight; another wore a hat so towering it seemed gravity-defying. If you squinted, you might picture them practicing synchronized dance routines between checks.

When they reached our compartment, we dutifully climbed out of bed—well, most of us. Doug, ever the trendsetter, decided that his t-shirt and underwear were perfectly acceptable attire for a late-night border inspection. The guards were visibly amused, though one raised an eyebrow so high it practically disappeared into his cap. His expression clearly said, *Really, buddy?* Meanwhile, the rest of us tried—and failed—to suppress our laughter, because let’s face it, Doug looked like he’d wandered off the set of a low-budget comedy film.

First, they scrutinized our passports and entry cards with laser focus, stamping them with the gravity of someone signing a peace treaty. Next, we had to dig our packs out from every nook and cranny of the compartment for inspection, turning the

process into an extreme version of Tetris. Just when we thought we were done, we were ushered out so a young officer could give our compartment the once-over. I half-expected him to pull back the curtain and reveal Narnia hiding behind our luggage. Instead, he simply nodded approvingly, as if our tidiness had passed some unspoken test of character.

To their credit, the border officials were friendly and professional, with a few chuckles at Doug's casual vibe. By the time they finished, it was 2:30 AM. The train finally started moving again, and—most importantly—the toilets were unlocked. Let me tell you, nothing makes you appreciate modern plumbing quite like enduring hours of bureaucracy without a bathroom break. You haven't truly lived until you've shuffled down the corridor at 2 AM, clutching your dignity and praying the toilet door swings open before you explode. The relief was palpable, and for a brief moment, we forgot about the exhaustion weighing down our eyelids.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity we were able to crawl into bed and sleep.

A few short hours later, we woke up groggy and disoriented as the train rolled into Ulan-Ude, our first major Russian stop. From there, the scenery transformed into something out of a postcard. On one side stretched the endless expanse of Lake Baikal, shimmering like liquid silver under the morning sun. Its

surface was so smooth it mirrored the sky above, creating a surreal effect that made it hard to tell where the water ended and the heavens began. On the other rose towering, snow-capped mountains that looked like they'd been painted by an artist with a penchant for drama. After two weeks in Mongolia's dry, dusty desert, it was almost overwhelming to see so much water. It felt like nature itself was saying, "Welcome to Russia—land of extremes."

Lake Baikal, we soon learned, is no ordinary body of water. It's not just the deepest freshwater lake on Earth; it also holds about 20% of the planet's unfrozen fresh water. That fact alone felt monumental, especially after our journey through the arid expanse of the Gobi Desert. Watching the waves ripple against the shore, we were struck by the sheer magnitude of this natural wonder. It wasn't merely beautiful; it was awe-inspiring, a testament to the raw power and breathtaking beauty of the Earth.

As the train pressed onward, we found ourselves glued to the windows, captivated by the ever-changing scenery outside. Endless forests of birch trees stretched out before us, their pale trunks glowing softly under the golden sunlight. Every so often, clusters of wooden houses would appear, their rooftops blending harmoniously with the surrounding landscape. Thin trails of smoke drifted lazily from chimneys, hinting at cozy fires crackling within. The scene felt like something out of a storybook, almost too perfect to be real. In our imaginations,

wolves might have been lurking just beyond the tree line, adding an air of mystery to the serene landscape.

By the time we pulled into Irkutsk, our hostel driver was waiting to whisk us away for a chaotic, whiplash-inducing tour of the city's streets. When the vehicle finally screeched to a halt outside the hostel, we spilled out onto the pavement like passengers escaping a sinking ship. The relief of solid ground beneath our feet was short-lived, however, because the building before us immediately set off alarm bells. It wasn't so much a hostel as it was... well, an enigma wrapped in wood paneling and mystery. Part dormitory, part haunted house audition, it exuded a vibe that was equal parts welcoming and slightly unsettling.

The staff, bless their cheerful souls, greeted us with grins wide enough to make toothpaste commercials jealous. They handed over our room keys with such enthusiasm you'd think they were awarding us medals instead of access to subterranean sleeping quarters. "Your rooms are downstairs," one chirped brightly, pointing toward a narrow staircase. "Just follow the signs!"

"Downstairs?" Lin echoed skeptically, peering into the gloom beyond the creaky door. "Why does this feel less like 'cozy accommodation' and more like 'abandoned Cold War bunker'?"

Ignoring her ominous commentary, we descended into the abyss—or rather, the basement. Clattering down the stairs, we pushed through a creaky door and found ourselves plunged into

darkness so complete it felt like stepping into a black hole. Or maybe Mordor. Either way, it was not inviting.

“Good grief!” Lin exclaimed, flailing dramatically in the dark void. “Where on earth are we? Did someone say something about turning on the lights before sending us spelunking?”

I heard Doug rustling around in his pack, muttering something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like, “If I don’t find a light soon, I’m moving to a hotel.” Then, just as panic began to creep in, salvation arrived in the form of a single beam cutting through the gloom.

“Behold!” Doug declared triumphantly, holding up a flashlight like he’d just discovered fire. “Let there be light!”

“Well done,” Lin deadpanned, rolling her eyes as she reached out and flipped a switch conveniently located mere inches away. A weak fluorescent glow flickered to life, revealing... well, let’s call it what it was: a bunker for socially inclined moles. The space wasn’t terrible per se—it featured a cluster of private rooms, a communal kitchen, and even a sitting area—but the absence of windows gave the whole place a distinctly claustrophobic charm.

Our room turned out to be surprisingly cozy and clean, which was a small miracle given everything else. We started unpacking and settling in, but peace was short-lived. Moments later, a bloodcurdling scream erupted from the bathroom.

I bolted in, expecting to find some sort of horror-movie scenario—perhaps a ghost or, at the very least, a spider the size of a dinner plate. Instead, I found Brian dripping wet and clutching a towel like it was a lifeline.

“There’s no hot water!” he shouted indignantly, his hair plastered to his forehead. “And it’s not just cold—it’s glacier-level freezing! Can you go ask if there’s a switch or something?”

Off I trudged back upstairs to the reception desk, where the ever-cheerful staff assured me (with big, apologetic smiles) that the hot water outage was affecting the entire city and would return “soon.” Back downstairs I went, delivering the bad news to a chorus of groans and muttered curses.

Of course, that turned out to be nonsense. The water never warmed up during our entire stay. Later, Doug—ever the diplomat—asked someone at a nearby café about the supposed city-wide crisis and learned that the hostel staff were likely being “economical with the truth.” Classic.

After our invigorating ice baths, we decided to venture out, fueled by hunger and hope. First stop: the tourist office for a map and some dining tips. The cheerful girl behind the counter recommended District 130, an area bustling with restaurants and bars serving traditional local cuisine. Perfect!

Doug, self-appointed navigator and relentless optimist, led the way at a blistering pace, the rest of us straggling behind. His

“shortcuts” took us down dirt roads, across random fields, and through a small forest, all while our stomachs grumbled like angry bears.

An hour later, we finally reached District 130—only to find it completely closed. It was Sunday. The area, it turned out, was a fabricated tourist zone filled with replica Irkutsk-style wooden houses. Charming, yes, but why bother when original, crumbling examples were scattered across the city?

“For heaven’s sake!” Doug groaned. “How did that girl not know everything was shut?”

“I don’t care,” I muttered, stomping toward the nearest bus stop. “I’m not walking back.”

Miraculously, we navigated the Russian bus system and returned to the hostel, where we discovered that had we turned left instead of right upon leaving earlier, we would have stumbled upon a bustling street teeming with bars and cafés just 50 meters away. Naturally.

Settling into a chic bar with lounge chairs, tapas, and cocktails, our spirits (and blood sugar levels) were revived.

“Cheers!” Doug proclaimed, raising his glass. “To Russia, land of surprises.”

“Cheers!” we all chorused, grinning over our drinks.

Dinner that night was a triumph—pelmeni, potato pancakes, and steaming mugs of tea in a quaint little restaurant nearby. It was the perfect end to a chaotic day.

The next morning, Doug burst into view, map clutched dramatically in hand, looking every bit the intrepid explorer on the verge of uncovering some long-lost treasure.

“Does he have a pith helmet too?” I whispered to Lin. “Wouldn’t surprise me,” she shot back. “At this rate, we’ll end up in Siberia.” “Oh wait...” I deadpanned, glancing around. “... we already are.”

“Alright, team!” Doug announced with the enthusiasm of someone about to conquer Everest. “Let’s explore!”

“Yes,” Brian replied dryly. “But first—coffee.”

We rounded the corner and stumbled upon a boulangerie so charming it could’ve been airlifted straight from Paris. Coffee and quiche fueled our bodies (and Brian’s caffeine addiction), setting the stage for another day of accidental Siberian adventures.

Our mission? To conquer Irkutsk—a city where history and charm collided in its stunning wooden architecture. The streets were lined with intricately carved houses that seemed to whisper secrets of yesteryear. Some had been lovingly restored to their former glory; others leaned precariously, creaking under the

weight of time, as if waiting patiently for their turn at redemption—or collapse.

Doug quickly became obsessed with finding the quirkiest house. He stopped abruptly in front of one particularly lopsided building. “Behold!” he declared, striking a dramatic pose. “The Leaning House of Irkutsk! It makes the Tower of Pisa look like an amateur.”

Lin, never one to miss an opportunity for theatrics, launched into an impromptu tour guide narration. “Ladies and gentlemen, feast your eyes on this architectural marvel designed by Ivan Drunkovski, whose love affair with vodka inspired him to reject all notions of gravity—and straight lines.” We dissolved into laughter, drawing curious looks from passersby who probably thought we were either insane or just really bad tourists.

Irkutsk wasn’t just about leaning houses, though. It also harbored tales of revolutionaries—the Decembrists, Russian army officers who tried (and failed) to overthrow the autocracy in 1825. Their punishment? Hard labor in Siberian mines before being resettled in Irkutsk. Despite their rocky start, they thrived, bringing education, agriculture, and Western ideas to the region.

We wandered into the Trubetskoy House Museum, once home to one of these exiled rebels. Reading about their legacy was fascinating, though Brian couldn’t resist chiming in:

“Revolutionaries living with lace curtains? Seems a bit...fussy.” Still, we spent ages exploring the rooms, imagining what life must’ve been like for those exiled dreamers.

Next stop: the Regional Museum. Filled with old maps, artifacts, and displays celebrating Siberian explorers, it was a treasure trove of intrigue—if only we could read Russian. Undeterred, we admired the craftsmanship and historical significance while making up our own wildly inaccurate translations. When the attendant briefly turned her back, we made a stealthy exit, bursting into giggles once safely outside.

“To The Library?” Lin suggested, raising an eyebrow. No one objected. Not because we were bookworms, but because The Library was actually a cozy bar where we’d already earned honorary regular status. That evening’s drinks came with lively retellings of the day’s escapades and a toast to Doug’s ongoing commentary, which ranged from insightful to hilariously absurd.

Dinner was at a local restaurant, where shashliks stole the show. Well, mostly. The air was thick with smoke from water pipes, prompting Brian to wave his arms dramatically. “It’s like eating in a cloud,” he complained.

“A deliciously smoky cloud,” Lin corrected, savoring every bite.

On the way back to the hostel, we detoured through a supermarket to stock up for the next leg of our journey. Doug acted like a kid in a candy store when he spotted tubs of caviar. “Caviar by the scoop?! Who knew?!” he exclaimed, tossing a jar into the basket. Brian, ever practical, added bread and cheese, while Lin and I discovered an aisle dedicated entirely to pickled goods. “Pickled pine cones, anyone?” I joked, holding up a jar like it was Exhibit A in a bizarre science fair.

The next morning, we were up early, ready for whatever lay ahead. Doug appeared, map in hand, looking like he was about to chart uncharted territory. “Lake Baikal and Listvyanka, here we come!” he proclaimed, as if announcing the plot twist in an epic saga.

With equal parts excitement and curiosity, we set off for our next destination, leaving behind Irkutsk and its stories of revolutionaries, leaning houses, and smoky dinners.

Chapter Two

Lake Baikal Russia

Our adventure to Lake Baikal and the quaint village of Listvyanka began at the illustrious Irkutsk bus station, which bore an uncanny resemblance to every bus station on Earth. If you've ever been to a bus station anywhere in the world, congratulations—you've already seen this one. Picture this: disorganized queues snaking in no discernible order, passengers with expressions of profound existential crisis, and vendors hawking everything from fridge magnets to gumboots, alongside the ever-present bus station delicacies—fried, mysterious, and potentially life-altering.

"Good heavens, I'm glad we ate beforehand," Brian muttered, grimacing at a congealed mass languishing in a bain-marie. The blob glistened ominously under the fluorescent lights, as though it were daring someone to take a bite. "That looks worse than those dreadful Mongolian noodles."

"Mm-hmm," Lin mumbled, entirely engrossed in the Herculean task of deciphering how one actually bought bus tickets here. She squinted at a Cyrillic sign that might as well have been written in ancient Sumerian for all the sense it made to her. Meanwhile, the dubious cuisine remained unchallenged by either curiosity or hunger.

We, too, joined the ranks of the bewildered, wandering in circles beneath Cyrillic signs that seemed designed not so much to guide travelers but to test their patience. It was like being dropped into a linguistic labyrinth where every wrong turn led to another queue or yet another vending machine selling questionable snacks. After a while, Brian had enough.

"Right, let's crack on," he declared, charging into a nearby queue with the determination of a man who has just realized he can't stand waiting any longer. By sheer persistence (and possibly sheer luck), he emerged from the ticket office a minor hero, brandishing four tickets like a trophy.

"Success! Four tickets to Listvyanka!" he proclaimed, waving them triumphantly above his head. "At least, I think they're for Listvyanka. Communication was... let's say, abstract. We could be headed anywhere."

"That's the spirit!" Doug cheered, clapping him on the back. "Adventure awaits!" And with that, he strode off in search of our bus, the rest of us dutifully trailing behind like ducklings following their mother across a pond.

The bus itself was a pleasant surprise—a shiny, comfortable contraption, far exceeding our low expectations. Given what we'd just endured at the bus station, we half-expected to climb aboard something resembling a Soviet-era relic held together by duct tape and optimism. Instead, we found ourselves settling into

plush seats, complete with seat belts that actually worked and windows that didn't fog up immediately.

We settled in for the 90-minute journey to Listvyanka and the legendary Lake Baikal. For me, this was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. Lake Baikal, the world's deepest and oldest lake, is a UNESCO World Heritage site, holding 20% of the planet's freshwater and boasting a rich ecosystem. Simply put, it's a natural wonder unlike any other.

Outside, spring breathed life into the Russian landscape. Sunlight filtered through the fresh green canopy as we passed meadows splashed with wildflowers and rivers rushing with melted snow. The air carried the scent of pine and damp earth, and every turn revealed another burst of color—violet Siberian irises, golden buttercups, and the pale pink of blooming maral root. My heart raced with anticipation. This wasn't just another stop on our trip; this was *the* destination.

Listvyanka, perched on Baikal's edge, is a postcard-perfect village known for its traditional wooden architecture, omul fish delicacies, and activities like hiking and wildlife spotting. As we arrived, the distant snow-capped mountains and shimmering lake left us speechless, standing there as though the beauty had knocked the wind out of us. The air was crisp and clean, carrying with it the faint scent of pine trees and the promise of adventure.

"This might be the most stunning place I've ever seen," I whispered, still transfixed by the view.

"Alright, team," Doug rallied us, snapping us out of our collective reverie. "Let's find our guesthouse, dump our bags, and hit that lakeside restaurant. It looks very inviting."

Our accommodations were, shall we say, rustic. Nestled at one end of the village, it was one of the few places open since we'd apparently arrived just before tourist season kicked off. As we'd later discover, this timing explained the eerie quiet and limited options. The guesthouse was... memorable. Let's say it had character. Doors didn't close properly, people were crammed in like sardines, the toilet had a suspiciously damp floor, and everything seemed to be held together by sheer determination.

"Well," Lin remarked diplomatically, peeking into our room, "it's a bit rustic. There's about half an inch of water on the toilet floor."

"Let's hope it's just water," Brian muttered darkly, eyeing the puddle with suspicion.

"But look at that view!" Lin exclaimed, ignoring him and gesturing dramatically at the breathtaking panorama of lake and mountains visible through the window. She was right, of course. Even the most jaded traveler would struggle to complain when faced with such a vista.

Doug, ever the optimist, popped his head in. "Lunch, anyone? Let's get some fresh air and food."

Twenty minutes later, we were perched on a sunny lakeside deck, savoring smoked omul fish and frosty pints of pivo (beer). Fishing boats glided lazily by, and in the distance, adorable Nerpa seals bobbed up and down like they were auditioning for a nature documentary. These freshwater seals are endemic to Lake Baikal and are as charming as they are rare, adding yet another layer of magic to the experience.

"This," Doug declared, raising his glass, "is the life."

We clinked glasses in unanimous agreement. Indeed, it doesn't get much better than this.

After lunch, we set off to explore the charmingly scruffy town of Listvyanka. It had a wild-west frontier vibe, as though it was still deciding whether to be polished or perpetually disheveled. Somehow, this only added to its appeal. Russians adore the place and flock there by the hundreds on weekends to lounge on the pebble beach and take boat rides, presumably to admire the beauty they can't quite explain.

We moseyed over to the market, where every stall seemed to be in a competition to see who could serve up the best-smoked Omul, a local lake fish that was either a delicacy or just a very fancy snack—hard to tell, but delicious nonetheless. Surrounding the market were ramshackle wooden houses that

looked as though they'd been gossiping all night and were now leaning on each other for support. We all agreed it would make a stellar lunch spot—another day, though, since we had plans for a fancier dinner.

That evening, we dined at the town's self-proclaimed "posh" restaurant. After two weeks of potato-and-meat soup in Mongolia, it felt like we were at a Michelin-starred eatery. The Georgian wine was divine, the food was heavenly, and we capped off the night with the obligatory shot of vodka because, well, Russia.

As we strolled back under a bright full moon, Doug suddenly made an announcement.

"I'm swimming in the lake tomorrow," he declared with the enthusiasm of a man who had not considered basic thermodynamics.

Lin froze mid-step, turning to him with the wide-eyed horror of someone who just heard a terrible idea in real-time.

"Are you insane? The water's, like, five degrees Celsius. You'll freeze solid."

Doug puffed out his chest dramatically. "I'm channeling the Russian epiphany plunge," he said, referencing the Orthodox tradition of believers diving into icy waters for spiritual purification.

"And anyway," he added, "my foot's still sore from sledding down that sand dune in Mongolia. The cold water will help."

Lin snorted. "It'll help you straight into hypothermia, that's what."

"Well, I'm doing it," Doug insisted before turning to Brian and me. "What about you two? Joining me?"

"Ah, no," Brian said diplomatically. "But we'll cheer you on."

And so, the stage was set for what promised to be an unforgettable—and likely regrettable—moment in our journey.

The next morning, after a modest breakfast of bread and jam that left us feeling neither full nor particularly energized but satisfied enough to face the day ahead, we found ourselves standing by the edge of Lake Baikal. The air was crisp, carrying with it the faint scent of pine and water, and the surface of the lake shimmered under the early sunlight like an endless sheet of polished glass. It was here, amidst this breathtaking natural beauty, that Doug had decided he would embark on what could only be described as his "Arctic expedition." His enthusiasm was palpable, though perhaps slightly misplaced given the circumstances.

A group of Russian children nearby seemed oblivious to the cold—or maybe they simply didn't care—as they dove off a jetty into the icy waters below. Their laughter echoed across the lake, mingling with the sound of splashing water, creating a scene so

lively and carefree that it felt more like midsummer than the brisk autumn morning it actually was.

"See?" Doug pointed toward the kids with the confidence of someone who had just won an argument before even making it. "People are swimming."

Lin, ever the voice of reason, crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. "Firstly," she began, ticking off points on her fingers, "they're Russian, so they've probably got some sort of built-in frost resistance. Secondly, they're about 40 years younger than you. This is madness."

But Doug wasn't listening. He was already toeing the edge of the water, preparing himself mentally (and perhaps physically) for what was to come. With a dramatic flourish and a battle cry loud enough to startle two women walking by—both of whom turned to stare at him with expressions ranging from amusement to mild concern—he launched himself into the lake. For a brief moment, there was silence, save for the splash that followed his leap. Then, seconds later, Doug burst through the water's surface like a breaching whale, his face frozen in a mix of triumph and absolute regret.

"Good show!" Brian shouted from the shore, clapping enthusiastically along with the rest of us. Meanwhile, Doug flailed around in the water, looking very much like someone who was rethinking all of their life choices up until that point. In less

than a minute, he scrambled back onto land, teeth chattering like castanets and his skin tinged an alarming shade of blue. Lin, ever prepared and always the unsung hero of our group, immediately wrapped him in a blanket she had wisely brought along.

"Man, that was cold," Doug managed to say between violent shivers, his words barely coherent. But despite the obvious discomfort—and possibly hypothermia—he grinned broadly. "But I'm glad I did it. Now, can we please find coffee before my soul freezes?"

And so, still laughing over Doug's ill-advised plunge into Lake Baikal, we made our way to a nearby café. There, we warmed ourselves with steaming cups of coffee while plotting our next adventures. As we sat there, marveling at Doug's questionable yet undeniably entertaining bravery, it became clear that no trip to Lake Baikal would be complete without visiting the Baikal Museum. So, one fine morning, filled with enthusiasm and the naive hope that public transport would cooperate, we set out to explore this cultural gem.

We'd heard rumors of a bus service that supposedly ran near the museum, but after standing at a suspiciously empty bus stop for far longer than any of us cared to admit, reality began to sink in: either the bus was mythical, or it had retired early. With no other choice, we resigned ourselves to the Great Trudge—a long walk

to the museum that quickly revealed how Siberian adventures often double as impromptu fitness programs.

When we finally arrived, the Baikal Museum greeted us with its modest but determined charm. Inside, we discovered a treasure trove of facts and figures about the lake, learning not only of its enormous size but also of the staggering amount of water it contained—enough, apparently, to drown the entire planet several times over. But the highlight (or perhaps lowlight) of the visit came when we encountered the Nerpa seals. Two sad-looking specimens swam endless, lethargic laps in a tank so dark and tiny it might as well have been designed by a villain in a spy movie.

“Poor little buggers,” Brian muttered, shaking his head. “Maybe they’re here for rehab or something?”

“Yeah, maybe,” I said, though my inner skeptic was throwing up red flags. Watching them swim in circles felt less like a science lesson and more like a harsh reminder of the realities of captivity.

Next door, the botanical gardens beckoned with promises of beauty and tranquility. Unfortunately, every entrance was flanked by enormous signs that screamed, “DANGER: ENCEPHALITIS TICKS!” in multiple languages. It was the sort of warning you couldn’t miss, even if you tried.

“That bloody doctor,” Brian growled, recalling the so-called expert who had waved off the idea of a tick vaccine back in Australia.

“Unnecessary,” he said,” I added with a grim smile. “And he was pretty condescending about it too, if I recall.”

“Expert, my arse,” Brian grumbled.

The tick warnings were a serious blow to our plans. We’d hoped to hike through the forest to Bolshiye Koty, a picturesque village where we’d spend the night before catching a boat back. But visions of ticks lying in ambush quickly quashed that idea.

“Never mind,” Doug chirped, refusing to be defeated. “Let’s find that chairlift Lin mentioned. It goes to a viewpoint above the lake.”

Thus began the Quest for the Chairlift, a journey that felt like an epic in itself. We trudged up roads, crossed fields, navigated bridges, and climbed more stairs than seemed humanly reasonable.

“Why on earth is the chairlift halfway up the mountain?” I panted, glaring at the endless incline. “Shouldn’t it start at the bottom like a normal chairlift?”

“Onward!” Doug cried dramatically, pointing the way like a triumphant explorer.

When we finally reached the base of the lift, it was a sight for sore eyes. Rising above green fields (which doubled as ski slopes in winter), it looked serene and inviting. We bought tickets and climbed aboard, settling in for the gentle ride. As we ascended, we spotted a zipline off to the side, where lunatics strapped themselves in and flung down the mountain at terrifying speeds.

“I bet Doug’s already planning to try that,” Brian chuckled, watching Doug nudge Lin and point at the zipline with the excitement of a kid spotting candy.

At the top, we hopped off the lift and immediately noticed a café.

“Before we do anything, I need food,” I declared, heading straight for it.

Lunch, however, was a disaster. The café specialized in soggy tuna pastries, microwaved to a sad, rubbery consistency and served on flimsy paper plates.

“This is...not ideal,” Lin said, poking hers suspiciously.

“Just eat it,” Doug said cheerfully. “We’ve got exploring to do.”

We somehow managed to choke down our uninspired meal and headed for the viewpoint. And what a viewpoint! The lake stretched out before us, shimmering in the sunlight, vast and breathtaking. We stood in reverent silence, awestruck by the sheer beauty.

Eventually, Lin broke the moment. “We’d better get moving. We don’t want to be stuck walking in the dark.”

“And watch out for ticks,” Brian added, his paranoia clearly rising.

“Not me!” Doug announced, grinning. “I’m going down on the zipline!”

“Are you out of your mind?” Lin spluttered. “That thing’s dangerous, and you’re not exactly 20 anymore.”

“It’ll be fine,” Doug said breezily, already striding toward the zipline.

Turns out, it wasn’t so much a zipline as a rail-mounted toboggan that looked like it had been designed by someone who thought safety regulations were optional. Doug strapped himself in with the glee of a man about to live his best life. With a dramatic push from the attendant, he rocketed down the hill, whooping with delight as he hit bumps that sent him airborne.

“Well,” I said, watching his rapid descent, “let’s take the scenic trail down and hope he’s still in one piece at the bottom.”

The walk was lovely, but I couldn’t stop imagining ticks launching themselves at me like tiny, bloodthirsty ninjas. By the time we reached the bottom, I was half-convinced I’d been bitten a hundred times.

Doug, of course, was perfectly fine. We found him in a café, sipping coffee and grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“That was amazing,” he announced. “Although there were a few moments I thought I’d take off entirely.” He raised his cup in a toast.

“To Russian toboggans!” he declared, and we all laughed, shaking our heads at his boundless enthusiasm.

“You’re absolutely mad,” declared Lin, collapsing into a chair like someone who’d just been told gravity might stop working at any moment. “Bonkers. Completely, unapologetically bonkers.”

Doug, never one to shy away from a compliment—even a backhanded one—flashed a grin that could have powered a small village. “Ah, but you must admit, life with me is never dull.”

With that bold declaration hanging in the air like the punchline of a joke only Doug found funny, we gathered our things and headed back to Listvyanka, where the weather was warm, the sun shone like it was showing off, and the lake sparkled as though someone had sprinkled glitter on it.

For the next few days, we embraced the sunshine and explored the local trails with gusto, though we remained constantly on guard against the dreaded ticks. Our efforts were rewarded with stunning views, delicious food that seemed to taste even better in the fresh air, and a general sense of having stumbled into the perfect postcard setting.

Doug may have been bonkers, but he wasn't wrong—life with him and Lin was never dull. Their enthusiasm for adventure was contagious, and their knack for finding the humor in any situation made every day feel like its own little escapade. By the time we left, I couldn't help but smile at the thought of wherever their next "bonkers" adventure might take us.

And just like that, our unforgettable days of exploration around the breathtaking Lake Baikal had come to an end. It was time to pack up our memories and board the bus back to Irkutsk, the charming city that served as our gateway to this natural wonder. As we settled into our seats, there was a collective sense of nostalgia in the air. The vastness of the lake, its crystal-clear waters reflecting the endless Siberian sky, the serene beauty of its surroundings, and the warmth of the people we met along the way—all of it felt etched into our hearts forever.

The journey back to Irkutsk gave us one last chance to soak in the views of the taiga forests and rolling hills that framed the lake.

Once in Irkutsk, we didn't linger too long; our adventure wasn't over yet. After a brief stop to grab a quick bite and stock up on supplies, it was time to board the train once again. This iconic mode of travel has always been more than just transportation—it's part of the experience itself. Settling into our compartments, we exchanged stories from our time at Lake Baikal, laughing

over shared moments and marveling at the sheer magnitude of what we'd seen.

As the train pulled away from the station, signaling the next leg of our journey, anticipation began to build for what lay ahead. Our destination? Krasnoyarsk, another gem nestled deep within Russia's expansive wilderness. Known for its stunning natural scenery, vibrant culture, and rich history, Krasnoyarsk promised new adventures and discoveries. But for now, with the rhythmic clatter of the train wheels beneath us and the golden hues of the sunset streaming through the windows, we allowed ourselves to simply sit back, reflect, and dream of what was still to come.

In that moment, surrounded by fellow travelers and the ever-changing landscape outside, I realized something profound: journeys like this aren't just about the destinations—they're about the connections you make, the lessons you learn, and the memories you create along the way. And while our time at Lake Baikal may have ended, the spirit of exploration carried on, propelling us forward toward whatever wonders awaited in Krasnoyarsk.

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Chapter Three

Irkutsk to Krasnoyarsk Russia

We rolled into Krasnoyarsk in the morning, fresh as daisies that had been run over by a bus. And speaking of buses, we hopped on one because we'd made the bold (read: questionable) decision to navigate this entire trip using public transport. Local buses, baby! Because nothing says "adventure" like sharing a ride with a dozen strangers and a guy carrying a suspiciously large jar of pickled cabbage.

Brian, our new self-appointed navigator and Google whisperer, (Doug had evidently abandoned the post after the infamous Irkutsk Navigation Debacle) led the charge with his trusty sidekick, MapsMe—the offline app that's basically the Swiss Army knife of getting lost. The bus dumped us a few hundred meters from our apartment block, which was nestled in a charming neighborhood of Soviet-era concrete monstrosities. Picture a dystopian film set, but with more laundry hanging out the windows.

Turns out, we'd come in the back way, and the apartment was actually closer to central Krasnoyarsk than we thought. But first impressions matter, and our first impression was, "Wow, this place looks like it was designed by someone who hated joy."

We checked in and discovered our “two-bedroom apartment” was actually a one-bedroom with a sofa bed that looked like it had been salvaged from a dumpster. Brian, ever the optimist, declared, “Well, that just won’t work. Let’s go down and sort this out.”

Cue the descent to reception, where not a single word of English was spoken. Doug, sensing the futility of words, decided to communicate through the universal language of interpretive dance. He began a series of charades that involved snoring noises, arm-flailing, and what I can only describe as “sofa bed wrestling.”

“Is he... pulling out an imaginary sofa bed?” I whispered to Lin.

“Who knows?” she replied, watching Doug leap around like a man possessed. “But he’s committed. Look at him go.”

The reception staff exchanged nervous glances, clearly wondering if they were being pranked by a group of deranged Australians. Eventually, after Doug’s one-man performance art piece, one of the staff had an “Aha!” moment, swapped our key, and pointed us back to the elevator with a smile that said, “Please leave now.”

The new apartment was a proper two-bedroom, though it looked like it hadn’t been updated since the Brezhnev era. But it was

clean, comfortable, and close to the center of town. Good enough for a few days of pretending we were locals.

We dumped our bags and took stock of our surroundings. The kitchen was a blinding shade of orange—like someone had melted a traffic cone and smeared it all over the walls. Brian declared it “just like my parents’ house in the 70’s,” which explained a lot about Brian.

But hey, we had a kitchen! After a month of eating out, the thought of cooking our own meals was downright thrilling. Doug, however, had other priorities. “I’m starving,” he announced. “Let’s find food before we do anything else.”

We stumbled upon a little restaurant serving meat on sticks, salads, and bread so good it made us forget about the questionable sofa bed. After stuffing ourselves, we hit the supermarket for essentials, including a tin of tuna that I’m 99% sure was cat food. Brian insists it was human-grade, but I’ve seen what cat food looks like, and this was it.

Back at the apartment, we faced our next great challenge: the bed sheets. The bottom sheet was not fitted—because that would have been far too convenient—but that wasn’t the real problem. The real problem was that it was at least six inches too short. No matter how I pulled, stretched, or pleaded, it simply refused to cover the entire mattress.

It was like trying to put a swim cap on a watermelon. I'd get one side tucked in, only for the other to spring loose with an almost mocking snap.

Lin poked her head in, looking far too entertained. "Do your sheets fit?"

"Only if I saw six inches off the mattress," I grumbled, trying once again to coax the fabric into compliance. "Or if we sleep curled up like a cat."

She wisely chose not to get involved. "Ours are the same," she said, "it's most odd" and with that she disappeared into the kitchen.

We gave up and called it a night, collapsing into our half-made beds, exhausted but ready to explore Krasnoyarsk the next day. Because if there's one thing we'd learned, it's that travel is all about embracing the chaos—and occasionally sleeping in beds with sheets that do not fit.

The next morning, we were up bright and early, ready to explore this new city—though "bright" was debatable and "early" was an unfortunate necessity. Krasnoyarsk, perched prettily on the Yenisei River, had a Main Street lined with pastel-painted Victorian-esque buildings, making it look like a 19th-century postcard had collided with modern Siberia. It was here that we discovered a coffee shop and, unable to resist the siren song of caffeine and pastry, stopped in.

The friendly staff were utterly baffled that four Australians had somehow washed up in their café. One of them, eager to practice his English, plonked himself down at our table and proudly launched into a well-rehearsed tourism pitch. He told us visitors flocked to Krasnoyarsk for the Stolby Nature Reserve, a park famous for its dramatic volcanic rock formations. There was even a chairlift to a hilltop with sweeping views, he said. "Oh, how lovely!" we thought.

Then came the kicker: encephalitis-carrying ticks.

We exchanged glances. Ah, yes. The dreaded ticks. Our paranoia had already been finely tuned back at Lake Baikal, where signs had practically depicted them as tiny, bloodthirsty ninjas. Any illusions of frolicking through the forest vanished as we nodded solemnly and assured him we would definitely admire Stolby's beauty from a safe, well-paved distance.

After coffee and our unsolicited safety briefing, we headed off to the regional museum, chatting about our brush with tick-induced doom.

"Does terrible things to your brain," Lin muttered, side-eyeing a tree on the promenade as though it might lunge at her. "Lifelong consequences."

"I'm still furious at that so-called Travel Doctor in Hobart," Brian grumbled. "Expert, my foot."

"Not much we can do now," Doug said with a shrug. "But I'm keen to see this museum—I've read it has an excellent history of Siberia."

The Krasnoyarsk Regional Museum turned out to be a grand, red-bricked building that looked like a cross between an ancient temple and a Soviet government headquarters.

"This place has one of the best histories of Siberia," Doug said with authority. "Should be fascinating."

"I just hope it has a gift shop," Lin added.

We stepped inside and were immediately greeted by a rather dramatic exhibit—a life-sized woolly mammoth, standing in the middle of the foyer as if it had just wandered in from the street. Doug, naturally, wasted no time in posing next to it, flexing his arms in what he probably thought was an intimidating, caveman-like stance.

"Are you seriously challenging a stuffed mammoth to a fight?" I asked.

"Just asserting dominance," he replied. "You never know with these prehistoric creatures."

Lin rolled her eyes and walked off toward a display on ancient Siberian tribes.

The museum was impressively well-organized, with exhibits spanning everything from the indigenous peoples of the region

to the great Siberian exile years. There were artifacts from the Mongol invasion, a section dedicated to the Trans-Siberian Railway, and even an exhibit on local wildlife—complete with an alarming number of taxidermy bears posed in mid-roar.

“This is starting to feel like a warning,” Brian muttered as we passed our third snarling bear.

One floor was dedicated to the Soviet era, showcasing relics from the time when Siberia was a land of gulags and grand industrial projects. There were black-and-white photos of stern-looking Soviet engineers standing next to massive machinery, and an entire section on the mighty Yenisei River and its role in hydroelectric power.

“Look at this,” Doug said, pointing at an old propaganda poster featuring a beaming man in a fur hat standing beside a towering dam. “See how happy he looks?”

“Yes, Doug, nothing says unquestionable happiness like a government-issued poster,” Lin said dryly.

As we moved through the museum, Doug entertained himself by posing next to mannequins dressed in traditional Siberian furs, reenacting dramatic battle scenes in front of the Mongol warrior exhibits, and generally behaving as though he were on a school field trip. Lin, meanwhile, spent most of her time pretending not to know him.

We ended our visit in a dimly lit room filled with ancient rock carvings and archaeological finds. It was a stark contrast to the grand historical narratives of the other exhibits—just simple, everyday objects from people who had lived in the region thousands of years ago.

“It’s kind of humbling, isn’t it?” Brian said quietly. “All these centuries of history, all these people who lived here before us.”

Doug, however, was distracted. “Is that... a mammoth bone?”

“It’s labeled right there,” Lin said, pointing to the sign.

“Right,” Doug nodded. “I should probably stop touching it then.”

And with that, our museum visit came to an end. We made a quick stop at the gift shop—Lin finally got her wish—before stepping back into the sunlight,

On the way back to our apartment, we stumbled upon what can only be described as a beer lover’s paradise. A small shop with an unassuming exterior, but inside—glory be—over twenty different types of beer lined up along the wall, each one with its own tap. It was like walking into a Soviet-era science experiment designed to test the limits of human beer consumption.

The young woman behind the counter greeted us with the kind of enthusiasm usually reserved for long-lost relatives. She immediately launched into a demonstration, explaining how

they filled plastic bottles straight from the taps for takeaway. Before we could even pretend to hesitate, she had lined up several small cups, expertly pouring samples as though she were hosting a prestigious sommelier event—except instead of fine wine, it was an array of Russian brews that ranged from rich, malty lagers to dark, mysterious porters.

It would have been rude to refuse. Very rude. So, in the spirit of cultural immersion (and good manners, of course), we took our sampling duties very seriously. A few tastes turned into a few more, and after much deliberation (and possibly some minor beer-induced enlightenment), we selected a couple of liters to take home. Because when in Siberia, one must adapt to local traditions—and clearly, this was an important one.

The next morning, we found ourselves back at the same café, plotting the day's activities.

“Canoeing on the river today for us,” announced Doug cheerfully.

Lin's eyes narrowed. “Really?” she asked, as though Doug had just suggested swimming across the Yenisei in chain mail. “The river looks high. Are you sure it's safe?”

“Oh, of course,” Doug said, waving away her concerns. “There may be a few rapids, but that's half the fun. I saw a guy renting canoes—it'll be great.”

Lin sighed, accepting her fate as the day's reluctant adventurer. Doug turned to Brian and me expectantly.

"You two coming?"

"Ah, no," I said. "We read about a food market that looks incredible, so we're off to hunt down some tasty treats."

"Okey dokey," Doug said, springing up from his chair. "See you back at the apartment."

After parting ways with Doug and Lin, who were off to risk their lives in a canoe, Brian and I set off toward the Krasnoyarsk food market, following the tantalizing promise of smoked fish, fresh produce, and, if we were lucky, something snackable to tide us over until dinner.

The market was everything I'd hoped for—bustling, fragrant, and absolutely packed with stalls selling all manner of delicious goods. Vendors shouted their wares, locals haggled over prices, and the air was thick with the mingling scents of fresh bread, ripe fruit, and enough cured meats to make a vegetarian faint.

"Oh wow," Brian breathed as we stepped inside. "I think I've found my version of heaven."

The first stall we stopped at had an impressive display of smoked fish—golden, glistening, and piled high like edible trophies. A cheerful, elderly woman in a floral head scarf waved us over, eager to showcase her wares.

“You try, you try!” she said, pulling out a small knife and slicing off a piece of fish before we could even attempt to refuse.

Brian took the first bite and his eyes widened. “Oh, that’s good,” he mumbled, already reaching for another piece.

“Smoked on birch wood,” the woman explained proudly. “Very best in Krasnoyarsk!”

“Better than Baikal fish?” I asked, knowing the rivalry that often existed between different regions.

She scoffed, waving a dismissive hand. “Baikal fish—pfft! Too small. Too dry. Here, Yenisei fish—fat, juicy, delicious.”

Brian nodded seriously. “I feel like we should buy some, if only to support her anti-Baikal stance.”

We walked away with a hefty slab of smoked salmon, neatly wrapped in brown paper, and continued exploring. Next, we found ourselves drawn to a stall selling an array of colorful salads—beets, carrots, potatoes, and various mysterious mixtures that looked delicious but defied immediate identification.

“I feel like everything here is either bright purple or bright orange,” Brian observed.

“A good sign,” I replied. “The more neon, the tastier.”

The vendor—a stout man with a mustache that could have been a national treasure—scooped up samples onto little plastic spoons

and held them out expectantly. We tried a creamy potato salad first, followed by a beetroot and herring concoction that Brian declared “a revelation,” and finally, a shredded carrot salad with enough garlic to ensure we wouldn’t need mosquito repellent for the next week.

“Two of those, please,” I said, motioning toward the beet and potato salads.

The vendor beamed. “Good choice! Russian classic. Make you strong.”

“I could use some of that,” Brian muttered.

As we meandered through the aisles, we picked up more market treasures—fresh cucumbers and tomatoes, a loaf of dark rye bread, a wedge of something resembling cheese (we weren’t entirely sure, but it smelled fantastic), and finally, a small container of pickled mushrooms that the vendor assured us were “perfect with vodka.”

“Speaking of which,” Brian said as we finished up our shopping. “Do you think we should get more beer?”

I grinned. “Absolutely. It would be rude not to.”

And with that, we set off toward the bottle shop, our bags laden with Krasnoyarsk’s finest, ready for a feast that evening.

That night, as we sat around our apartment feasting on smoked fish, fresh salads, and bread from the market—washed down

with our carefully curated selection of beer—Doug launched into the story of their great Yenisei canoeing expedition.

“Ah, it started off beautifully,” he began, cracking open another bottle. “The sun was shining, the river was sparkling, and we found this grizzled old bloke renting canoes who, I swear, had seen one too many Siberian winters. He took one look at us, muttered something in Russian that I think was either ‘Good luck’ or ‘You absolute idiots,’ and shoved us off into the river.”

Lin, sitting across from him, let out a huff. “You forgot to mention that he also laughed before shoving us off.”

Doug waved this away. “A sign of encouragement, I’m sure.”

Apparently, all was going swimmingly (not literally, thankfully) until they hit their first set of rapids.

“It wasn’t in the brochure,” Lin interjected.

“You didn’t read the brochure,” Doug shot back. “Besides, they weren’t real rapids. More like... enthusiastic ripples.”

“Enthusiastic ripples that nearly tipped us over three times,” Lin corrected.

Doug grinned, clearly relishing the memory. “I like to think of it as character-building. Anyway, after successfully navigating what will henceforth be known as Doug’s Canyon of Courage —”

“Oh, give me strength,” Lin muttered.

“—we pulled over to a little stretch of riverbank to regroup. That’s when we met Sergey, the Fisherman Philosopher.”

Apparently, Sergey was a local fisherman who, upon seeing two clearly out-of-their-depth foreigners staggering onto the shore, took it upon himself to teach them the fine art of cooking freshly caught fish over an open fire.

“This man was a legend,” Doug said, his enthusiasm growing. “Didn’t speak a word of English, but somehow we understood each other perfectly. He gestured for us to sit, pulled out a knife that looked like it had last been used to fight a bear, and within minutes, he had fish roasting over the flames. Best fish I’ve ever eaten.”

Lin, despite herself, nodded. “It was incredible.”

Sergey, it seemed, also had opinions—many of them—which he shared enthusiastically in Russian while gesturing wildly with his fish-gutting knife.

“I have no idea what he was saying,” Doug admitted, “but from what I gathered, it was either a philosophical treatise on the beauty of the Yenisei River or a detailed survival guide on how to wrestle a sturgeon with your bare hands. Either way, a valuable lesson.”

Eventually, after much handshaking and fish-consuming, they climbed back into their canoe—only to be immediately spun around by an unexpected current.

“The last 20 minutes were basically us trying not to get stuck in a whirlpool while Lin shouted very specific instructions that I chose to ignore,” Doug said.

Lin threw up her hands. “That’s because you kept doing the opposite of what I said!”

“Debatable.”

By the time they finally paddled back to shore, the old canoe rental guy was waiting for them.

“He took one look at us, shook his head, and charged us extra,” Doug said, laughing. “I’m not even mad. We earned that surcharge.”

And with that, he took a triumphant sip of beer.

Lin, meanwhile, shook her head and muttered, “Next time, I pick the activity.”

The next morning, we checked out of our apartment and stashed our bags at the station before setting off for one last stroll through Krasnoyarsk. The sun was shining, the air was crisp, and despite the looming inevitability of another overnight train ride, spirits were high.

We ambled along the river, enjoying the fresh air, until we stumbled upon a park—one of those beautifully manicured, Soviet-era affairs, complete with neatly trimmed hedges, towering statues, and suspiciously well-behaved flowerbeds. In

the center of it all, standing tall and stern, was the ever-watchful Lenin, his outstretched arm seemingly pointing us toward something.

“Is he directing us somewhere specific, do you think?” I mused.

“To the glorious future, obviously,” Brian replied. “Or maybe just to the nearest snack kiosk.”

Nearby, a row of swings beckoned. Proper, old-fashioned swings—not the flimsy metal ones that creak ominously when you sit on them, but sturdy, wooden benches suspended by thick chains. The kind that promised a delightful little moment of relaxation.

Lin wasted no time, plopping herself onto one and giving a gentle push. “Perfect,” she sighed. “This is nice.”

I followed suit, and for a moment, we simply rocked back and forth, taking in the scene. Gardeners were busy planting hundreds of colorful spring flowers in neat rows, their movements brisk and efficient. The whole park smelled faintly of damp earth and fresh blooms.

“It’s going to be beautiful here when everything’s in full bloom,” Lin remarked, kicking off the ground for a slightly higher swing.

I nodded. “Indeed. It’s already pretty lovely now.”

Before she could respond, Doug’s voice rang out from across the park.

“Oi! You two! Stop lounging around like pensioners on a cruise ship—we’ve got lunch to get to!”

We turned to see Doug and Brian standing near the entrance, looking deeply unimpressed with our leisurely approach to sightseeing.

“I’ve found a restaurant with amazing views over the water,” Doug continued. “And possibly, if we’re lucky, more beer taps on the wall.”

That was enough motivation for us. Lin and I reluctantly heaved ourselves off the swings and trotted after them.

As we walked, Lin cast one last look back at Lenin. “He definitely wanted us to go to that restaurant.”

Brian nodded sagely. “The man knew his priorities.”

After a leisurely lunch bathed in the golden glow of the Siberian sun—a lingering feast of taiga venison stew, crusty black bread, and frosty mugs of Krasnoyarskoye beer (which Doug insisted was “just fermented breadwater” before sheepishly asking for a third tankard)—we ambled through the bustling streets of Krasnoyarsk, the mighty Yenisei River glinting in the distance. Brian, ever the amateur cartographer, attempted to navigate using a 1987 guidebook he’d bought at a market stall, leading us twice past the same perplexed babushka hawking hand-knitted mittens and jars of lingonberry jam. “It’s called scenic routing,” he declared, shrugging as I wrestled the map from his hands. A

vendor nearby toasted us with a glass of kvass, its earthy sweetness mingling with the aroma of siberian pine drifting from the taiga.

The train station buzzed with chaos: travelers debating the merits of instant borscht, a man in flip-flops hauling a samovar like it was an Olympic sport, and a trio of stray dogs eyeing Doug's leftover loaf of rye bread that was sticking out the top of his pack with unsettling intensity. Then we saw her. Standing like a statue of Soviet-era efficiency beside the Rossiya train was our Provodnitsa—the carriage attendant. She wielded a clipboard like a scepter, her steely gaze scanning tickets with the intensity of a TSA agent who'd just found a tube of toothpaste the size of a bazooka.

Doug, never one to resist assigning nicknames, leaned in and whispered, "That's Svetlana the Unyielding. Bet she folds towels into origami swans and once stared down a bear." I elbowed him, but the name stuck. Svetlana's eyebrow arched as she inspected Doug's ticket, which he'd accidentally stained with beetroot juice. "*Tourist*," she muttered, a single word that somehow contained multitudes of judgment.

We climbed aboard and found our compartment as the train rolled out of the station.

Our third Trans-Siberian voyage had reached its critical hour. Somewhere between Krasnoyarsk's hulking hydroelectric dam

and the endless birch forests blurring past, Lin, Doug, Brian, and I finally decided to stop acting like lazy sloths and *explore* the train. After two prior trips spent napping through time zones like hibernating raccoons, Siberia demanded our attention. And, as Lin put it, “If I hear Doug’s snoring impersonate a steam engine one more time, I’m jumping into the Yenisei River.”

Our home base was *Kupe* class: a four-berth compartment with all the charm of a Soviet-era sleepover. The bunks were stacked like pancakes, the faded blue curtains smelled vaguely of mothballs, and the fold-out table had seen more card games than a Vegas dealer. But oh, the *comfort*. The mattresses? Thicker than Brian’s hiking socks. The blankets? Scratchy but warm, like a hug from a well-meaning cactus. Doug, perpetually wedged into his top bunk, grumbled about ceiling-related head injuries, while Lin tossed sunflower seeds at him like a peace offering. “Relax. We’ve got a *door*. And a *lock*. This isn’t Platzkart, Doug. This is the *Ritz* on rails.” Brian, meanwhile, was convinced the radiator’s ominous groans were powered by “Soviet nostalgia.”

Venturing forth, we stumbled into the forbidden realm of *Spalny Vagon*—first class. Lin gasped. “They have *carpets*! And flowers! Are those... *individual reading lights*?!” A Provodnitsa materialized, scowling like a librarian during finals week. “*Nyet*. No tourists here,” she barked, until Brian bribed her with a Snickers bar. The cabin was posh: two plush bunks, crisp linens,

and a window you could actually see out of (no frozen condensation!). “Still no caviar,” Doug muttered. “False advertising.”

Next, we braved *Platzkart*: third class, open-plan, 54 bunks of unbridled democracy. The air was a cocktail of sweat, cabbage, and existential yearning. A babushka knitted furiously, her needles clacking like a metronome. A teenager blasted Russian rap from a speaker duct-taped to a bunk. A man in socks and sandals offered us pickled herring. Lin declared it “a hostel with *soul*,” while Brian attempted—and failed—to conquer a top bunk, toppling into a pile of coats. Doug, meanwhile, was adopted by a Siberian grandma force-feeding him pirozhki. “I think I’m her grandson now,” he whispered, clutching a dumpling like a lifeline.

The next stop on our tour was the dining car—a symphony of clattering plates and camaraderie, where the air smelled of butter, nostalgia, and actual beef Stroganoff. The warm hum of conversation mingled with the rattle of cutlery and the occasional burst of laughter, creating a scene as comforting as the food itself. We all looked at each other and, without another word, slid into a booth. The tour could wait—this was a moment suspended in time.

No frills, no fuss—just homely, delicious food slapped onto red-checked tablecloths by a cook who looked like he’d wrestled a

bear before breakfast. Lin stabbed her fork into a mountain of Stroganoff, the tender beef and sour cream sauce clinging to her noodles like a hug from a Russian aunt. “This isn’t art,” she mumbled through a mouthful. “This is therapy.”

Doug, ever the social alchemist, had already befriended a mustachioed stranger named *Dmitri*, who claimed to be a “professional potato inspector” from Perm. “To Siberia!” Dmitri boomed, slamming a shot of vodka on the table. “To not freezing to death!” Doug countered, clinking his glass. They downed the shots like champions, grimacing in unison. Brian, ever the skeptic, eyed the clear liquid. “Is this... jet fuel?” Dmitri grinned. “No. Jet fuel is weaker.”

The pelmeni arrived next—plump dumplings floating in broth like edible clouds. “They’re stuffed with beef, onions, and something I can’t quite place... and perhaps do not want to know,” Doug slurred, peering suspiciously at his spoon and already three shots deep. Dmitri nodded solemnly. “Also potatoes. For balance.” Even the blini, slathered in jam, tasted like childhood—if your childhood involved a babushka force-feeding you in a moving tin can.

By the time the compote arrived, we were all tipsy, sticky, and philosophizing about life with Dmitri, who swore the secret to happiness was “good boots and bad decisions.” The Provodnitsa passed by, rolled her eyes, and muttered something about

“tourists,” but even her scowl couldn’t dim the glow of buttery noodles, questionable life advice, and vodka-fueled kinship.

After dinner, we wobbled out of the dining car—slightly tipsy, thoroughly full, and propelled by a common goal: the next stop on our grand tour was the bathroom. Not exactly a highlight, but urgent in its own way.

The bathrooms, as it turned out, were less "restroom" and more "interactive experience." Tiny, vaguely damp, and ruled by a stern decree: **DO NOT FLUSH WHILE STOPPED**. “What if the train stops mid-flush?” Brian mused aloud, eyebrow raised. “Do we enter some kind of plumbing limbo?”

Lin gave the door a tentative jiggle. “It’s like Narnia,” she said, “but with more condensation and fewer talking animals.”

From inside, Doug’s voice rang out: “Why is there a footrest in here?! Am I supposed to strike a pose? Is this a toilet or a wellness retreat?!”

We were no longer just passengers—we were adventurers. Slightly drunk ones, navigating the mysteries of Soviet plumbing.

After our enlightening bathroom expedition, we staggered toward the final stop on our impromptu tour: the samovar. Like the bathroom before it, this leg of the journey was driven less by curiosity and more by sheer necessity—we all desperately

needed a strong cup of tea to dilute the vodka still sloshing through our systems.

“I give you... the Holy Grail of Siberia!” Lin declared with theatrical flair, gesturing toward the bubbling, hissing contraption gleaming at the end of the corridor. The samovar sat there like a benevolent, overworked kettle deity. Every carriage had one, and by now, we understood: these weren’t mere water heaters—they were the train’s beating heart.

With a flourish, Lin produced a stash of teabags from some secret compartment of her coat, as if she moonlighted as a mobile tea merchant. She handed them out with the solemnity of a ceremony.

We approached the sacred spout. Doug, of course, went first—and nearly singed his eyebrows off in the process. “Why is it hotter than the surface of the sun?!” he yelped, recoiling from the steam like it had insulted his ancestors.

Brian, already casually brewing his own cup, didn’t even look up. “Because this train runs on rage and scalding water,” he said, deadpan.

And so we stood there, mugs in hand, sipping our molten tea like true survivors—slightly tipsy, mildly burned, and quietly thrilled to be part of this strange rolling ritual.

As the train rattled on through the strange twilight that counts as night in June in Russia, painting the sky in vodka-cranberry

hues, we slumped in our Kupe compartment, stuffed and content. “This train’s a time capsule,” Lin mused. “Samovars, Soviet plumbing, and strangers sharing pickled everything.” Doug, now fluent in babushka, waved a half-eaten pirozhki. “I’m gonna miss my new grandma.” Brian snored softly, a copy of *War and Peace* splayed across his face like a very serious sleep mask.

By midnight, the train’s rhythm had lulled most of us into a dreamlike state—except Doug, who’d begun translating the wheel clatter into what he called “existential jazz.”

Svetlana pounded on our door at 6 a.m., shoving a steaming cup of tea into Doug’s hands with a glare that screamed, “Drink or else.” As the sun rose over Western Siberia’s endless steppe, Doug glanced out the window and muttered, “Are those cows... or what?”

As the early morning sun lit up Novosibirsk’s skyline, the train’s rhythm murmured: You’ll miss this chaos when it’s gone. The Trans-Siberian: where the tea scalds, the dumplings plump, and the Provodnitsas judge your life choices with a side-eye sharper than a samovar’s whistle. Still, the compartments are cozy, the food’s a triumph, and Siberia? She’s one hell of a host.

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Chapter Four

Krasnoyarsk to Novosibirsk Russia

We arrived in Novosibirsk, the capital of Siberia, at an hour so early that the sun was glowing low in the sky, barely seeming to consider making an appearance.

The train rolled to a halt, and Lin—ever the tireless guide—flipped open her trusty guidebook. Through a yawn, she gave us the lowdown on our next stop:

"Alright, Novosibirsk—Russia's third-largest city, right here in southwestern Siberia. It started as a railway stop in 1893 and grew into a major hub for science, culture, and industry. The Ob River splits the city, and it's got some cool spots like the massive Opera and Ballet Theatre and Akademgorodok, a buzzing research area from Soviet times. Oh, and it's home to a top university. Right now, it's summer, but don't let that fool you—the winters here are *brutal*. With over 1.5 million people, it's big, busy, and full of Siberian charm."

Armed with that crash course (and even less sleep), we grabbed our bags and stumbled off the train, looking more like sleepy penguins than tourists.

The air was crisp, carrying a sharpness that hinted at the freshness of the morning. Though the morning air nipped at our skin, we stepped out of the enormous Novosibirsk train station

with a sense of anticipation. Blinking into the morning light, we could already tell it was going to be a beautiful day, the kind that makes you forget the cold and embrace the promise of what lies ahead.

"Wow," Lin breathed, gazing up at the station. "What a stunning building!"

She wasn't wrong. The station was a Stalinist-era beast of a structure, green with white detailing, built to resemble a steam locomotive from a bird's-eye view. It was an architectural flex from a time when Soviet planners seemed determined to make buildings so imposing that people would forget they had frostbite.

Doug, standing beside me, nodded in appreciation. "Those Soviets really knew how to build a building, didn't they?"

Meanwhile, Brian was ignoring our admiration session entirely, furiously tapping away at his phone like a man defusing a bomb. He was our self-appointed navigator, committed to our group's golden rule of only using public transport—an idealistic principle that would soon test our collective will to live.

"Number 42," he suddenly declared, spinning on his heel like a general leading troops into battle. Off he marched, with the rest of us scrambling after him, down a flight of stairs and up another. At the top, Brian paused, frowning at his screen.

"Uh-oh," he muttered, which is never what you want to hear from your designated map reader. He then turned abruptly, marched back down the stairs, up another set, and right back to where we had started.

We followed silently, understanding from bitter experience that now was not the time to ask questions.

After some more frantic screen-tapping and whispered curses at Google Maps, Brian strode purposefully across the vast square in front of the station, leading us straight to a chaotic mess of buses, trams, trolleybuses, and marshrutkas—all with the same number 42. It was like the universe had decided to test just how committed we were to guessing correctly.

"Right," Brian announced, his voice full of forced confidence. "We'll just get on the next big bus marked 42 and hope for the best."

So that's what we did. The bus lurched into peak-hour traffic, crawling through the city before eventually stopping at what looked suspiciously like a metro station.

"Everyone off!" Brian commanded, as if this had been the plan all along.

We stood on the pavement, blinking again.

"We're supposed to be up there," Brian said, pointing at a road about fifteen metres above us.

Without another word, he set off, and we dutifully followed. We climbed the stairs, dodged two lanes of what could only be described as vehicular anarchy, and finally arrived at a tram stop.

“We need the 67 tram,” Brian said, still glued to his phone.

As if summoned by his words, a battered old tram labeled ‘67’ rattled over the hill and groaned to a halt in front of us. It carried us deep into a Soviet-era housing estate—our home for the next few days.

Doug turned in a slow circle. “This is bloody fantastic,” he said.

The Soviet-era apartment complex was pure Brutalism—24 identical concrete towers, arranged in groups of six around central parks and communal areas. Each 16-story block had rows of small balconies, perfect for smoking and judging neighbors.

Below, the ground floors housed essentials: a grocery store with tinned fish and vodka, a bakery offering only rye bread, a post office frozen in time, and a pharmacy staffed by a woman who looked like she’d seen it all.

The central park was the heart of the complex—pensioners hunched over chess boards, kids clambering on rusting playgrounds, and stray dogs claiming the cracked fountain. Laundry flapped from balconies, and the scent of cabbage and frying onions drifted from open windows.

Lin squinted at our instructions. "We're looking for Block 7," she announced.

"That's all very well," Doug said, scratching his head, "but none of these towers have numbers on them."

We wandered in confused circles for a while before I finally took the instructions and flagged down a passing local. With an elaborate mix of charades and desperate hand gestures, I conveyed our predicament.

She nodded sagely, grabbed my arm, and marched me to a building approximately two steps behind where we had been standing the entire time. With the efficiency of a drill sergeant, she shoved us into an elevator, pressed the button for the correct floor, and waved us off with a look that clearly said, Tourists...

At long last, we stumbled into our apartment like weary explorers returning from an arctic expedition. After a quick tour of the place, I was relieved to report it was clean, comfortable, and—most importantly—warm enough to thaw out my frostbitten soul. It felt like heaven, or at least as close to heaven as you can get when you're still debating whether the mysterious stain on the kitchen counter is actually part of the decor.

Lin poked her head into the room, looking suspiciously like someone who'd just discovered a crime scene. "Do your sheets fit?" she asked, frowning deeply, as if this were some kind of moral failing on our part. "Ours are too short. Again."

I unfolded ours with all the determination of a woman about to solve a Rubik's Cube in under a minute. Surely, it would work this time. I stretched one corner over the mattress, then another. Still too short. I rotated it 90 degrees because, hey, logic is supposed to work, right? Nope. Still too short. For good measure, I tried again, mostly for the illusion of control. Spoiler alert: no luck.

Lin sighed dramatically, as though the universe itself had personally offended her. "I just don't understand it," she muttered. "We must be missing something."

Doug, ever the philosopher, shrugged nonchalantly. "What's there to understand? The Russians like short sheets. Mystery solved."

Meanwhile, Brian—who had been quietly observing this domestic drama unfold with all the enthusiasm of a cat watching paint dry—suddenly perked up like he'd just won the lottery. "I saw a dumpling place on the corner," he announced triumphantly. "Let's go eat."

"Best idea you've had all day," Doug declared, already halfway out the door faster than you could say "Siberian hospitality."

And so, without further ado (or any semblance of properly made beds), we abandoned our linen struggle and marched off in search of dumplings. Because let's face it: no amount of public transport chaos, cultural confusion, or criminally undersized

bedding could stand between us and carbs wrapped in love. Or dough. Whatever—you get the point.

Over dumplings and tea, we sat in that post-lunch lull where the idea of movement seemed almost offensive. Eyes drooped, conversation lagged, and the only sound was the occasional clink of a teacup being set down—usually with a sigh of contentment.

Finally, Lin broke the silence.

"I know it's boring, but I have some admin to do," she announced, in the same tone one might use to say, "I need to have a root canal. Bills to pay, emails to ignore until guilt forces me to answer them. I'd rather do it today so we can explore tomorrow."

Doug, always one for seizing any opportunity to avoid responsibility, perked up. "Righto. Let's make this a 'chores day.' I need a haircut, anyway. There's a little place downstairs—thought I might stick my head in and see if they can work their magic."

Lin nodded, eyeing Doug's increasingly unruly mane. "Good plan. You're starting to look like the Wild Man of Borneo."

"Don't you mean the Wild Man of Siberia?" Doug struck a dramatic pose, hands on hips, attempting to look rugged and windswept.

Lin studied him. "Not sure what you're aiming for, but you look more like a man who just lost a fight with a leaf blower."

"I'm in," Brian chimed in, running a hand through his own hair. "Could do with a trim myself."

And just like that, our quiet afternoon transformed into a misadventure involving haircuts, linguistic chaos, and—somewhat unexpectedly—cake.

The hairdresser's shop, nestled beneath our apartment block, was the kind of place you'd walk past a hundred times without noticing. A small sign in Cyrillic hung slightly askew over the door, and the window displayed a sun-faded poster of a woman with a towering '80s perm that suggested time had stood still inside.

We burst in all at once, catching the owner—a small, stern woman in the middle of a lively tea-time gossip with a friend—completely off guard. She stared at us, wide-eyed, as though our sudden arrival was as absurd as a flash mob performing the Macarena.

To be fair, I was also questioning our life choices as I watched Doug and Brian try to communicate their need for haircuts. Both spoke at once, their overlapping English forming an unholy symphony of miscommunication.

"Just a trim—"

"Little off the sides—"

"Not too short—"

"Nice and neat, but not too neat—"

The hairdresser's expression remained one of deep skepticism. This was a woman who had seen some things.

Sighing, she finally held up one hand in the universal gesture for Enough. We shut up. With a flick of her wrist, she pointed at some chairs, indicating we should sit. Then, without a word, she picked up her phone and launched into rapid-fire Russian.

Doug shot us a wary glance. "We're not getting arrested, are we?"

"Hard to say," I admitted. "But if we hear sirens, run."

A few minutes later, our fate arrived in the form of Maria—a young woman who greeted us in excited, heavily accented English. If the hairdresser had regarded us as a nuisance, Maria saw us as the most thrilling thing to happen in her week.

"Oh wow, foreigners!" she exclaimed. "How exciting!"

Brian, ever the diplomat, smiled. "We do our best."

With Maria now acting as translator, things proceeded more smoothly. Doug was guided into the chair first, and as the hairdresser got to work, Maria turned her full attention to us, brimming with enthusiasm.

"Where are you from? Where have you been? Where are you going? Oh! Do you know my cousin Pavel? He lives in Wollongong!"

We hesitated. Maria watched us expectantly.

"I'm afraid we don't know Pavel," Brian said apologetically.

She looked momentarily stunned. "Really? But... he lives in Australia." She was visibly stunned when we said no. How could this be? Surely all Australians knew each other

"Yes, well," I said delicately, "there are quite a few of us."

She nodded slowly, clearly struggling to process this shocking revelation. Before she could continue, the door suddenly flew open, and she swept a babushka carrying a tray laden with a teapot and enough cake to feed a small army.

Without ceremony, she plonked the tray on a table and began pouring tea, nodding approvingly as she handed out slices of cake.

We accepted the offerings with murmured thanks, unsure if this was part of the haircut process or if we had unwittingly wandered into some kind of impromptu tea ceremony. Either way, we weren't complaining.

By the time Doug and Brian's haircuts were complete, we had consumed several cups of tea, half a cake, and taken no fewer than fifteen cheerful photos with our new friends.

"That," Brian declared as we left, "was a brilliant experience."

"That's what travel is all about," I agreed. "Sure, famous landmarks are great, but it's the bizarre human interactions that make a trip memorable."

Lin and Doug nodded, though Doug seemed more interested in admiring his reflection in a shop window.

The next day, feeling refreshed and considerably less shaggy, we wandered into the town square.

It was one of those grand spaces that make you feel like an extra in a movie about royalty or revolutionaries—or possibly both, depending on how things go for you personally. The square was lined with enormous statues of people who were either very important historical figures or just really good at posing dramatically. Families strolled leisurely, children played tag around beautiful fountains that sparkled and flowed with life, and pigeons strutted around like they owned the place—which, let's face it, they kind of did. If birds could hold secret government meetings, these pigeons would have been running the United Nations.

We stood there basking in the ambiance, soaking up the atmosphere like tourists who still believed sunscreen wasn't necessary until noon. That's when a low rumbling sound caught our attention. At first, I thought it might be my stomach announcing its urgent need for a lunch I hadn't yet dreamed up—

though my mind was already brainstorming possibilities with the ingenuity of a chef stranded on a desert island. But no—it was coming from somewhere farther away. Moments later, a procession of antique cars snaked into view, each vehicle looking like it had rolled straight out of someone's eccentric billionaire uncle's garage.

Doug's eyes widened so much I thought they might pop right out of his head and roll under one of the nearby benches. "Oh my God," he gasped, clutching his chest like he'd just seen Elvis riding a unicorn. "It's the Peking to Paris Rally!"

Now, Doug was something of a rally nerd. Not just your run-of-the-mill car enthusiast, mind you, but the kind of guy who could tell you the top speed of a 1923 Bugatti Type 35 while simultaneously explaining why its carburetor design was revolutionary. He once had a friend who participated in this very rally, which meant we were now officially trapped in what I liked to call "Nerd Trivia Hour." His face lit up with the joy of a man about to inflict niche knowledge upon his unsuspecting companions. And sure enough, here it came.

"This rally started in 1907 as a bet by a French newspaper," Doug began, launching into full lecture mode. "The idea was simple: drive from Beijing to Paris. No roads, no real support, just pure mechanical madness. Imagine trying to navigate across deserts, mountains, and whatever geopolitical disasters the

world has thrown at them. It was revived in 1997, and now classic cars attempt the journey every few years. Some of these drivers are practically living history books themselves!"

By the time he finished, he had already vanished into the crowd, snapping photos like a man possessed. Honestly, if he'd been holding a selfie stick instead of a camera, I wouldn't have been surprised.

"That looks like so much fun," I said wistfully, watching a particularly dapper-looking driver wave enthusiastically from behind the wheel of a vintage Rolls-Royce. "How great would that trip be?"

Brian turned to me, pointing a stern finger that could have doubled as a traffic cop's baton. "No," he said firmly. "We are not driving from Beijing to Paris in a half-broken antique. Do you know how many things can go wrong with a car older than all of us combined? Flat tires, engine fires, getting lost in Kazakhstan... Need I continue?"

"I don't know why," Lin mused, tilting her head thoughtfully as she watched another car sputter past, trailing a faint cloud of smoke, "but this whole thing reminds me of Wacky Races—you know, that cartoon from when we were kids? You remember, right? Dick Dastardly and Muttley always cheating, Penelope Pitstop being fabulous..."

"Oh yes!" I exclaimed, clapping my hands together like I'd just solved a lifelong mystery. "I always wanted to be Penelope Pitstop! She was so glamorous, even when she was tied to railroad tracks or dangling over shark-infested waters."

Brian sighed—a deep, soul-weary sigh that suggested he'd somehow ended up traveling with the cast of a reality show called *People Who Should Never Be Left Unsupervised*. "Come on, Penelope," he said dryly, grabbing my arm before I could start twirling dramatically like Penelope herself. "Let's go look at the cars."

And so we did. For the next couple of hours, we wandered among the gleaming relics of automotive history, marveling at their beauty and wondering how anyone managed to keep them running long enough to cross continents. We chatted with some of the drivers, who looked about as battle-worn as their cars. One gentleman proudly showed us a map covered in grease stains and coffee spills, claiming it was his "navigation system." Another regaled us with tales of breaking down in Mongolia and being rescued by nomads who insisted on feeding him fermented mare's milk.

Eventually, hunger won out, because apparently even admiring vintage automobiles doesn't burn enough calories to sustain human life indefinitely. As we headed off in search of lunch, I couldn't help but glance back at the rally one last time. Maybe

someday, I thought dreamily, I'd join a race like this. Or maybe I'd just stick to watching reruns of Wacky Races and eating snacks on the couch. Either way, life felt pretty good right now.

"There's a Kazakh restaurant I read about," Brian suggested. "Keen to try it?"

"Absolutely," Lin agreed.

We found it tucked down a quiet side street and settled in for a feast. Doug, always eager when food was involved, opened his menu with the air of a man about to make life-altering decisions.

"I'm starving," he declared.

The dishes arrived—steaming plates of beshbarmak, plov, lagman—each more delicious than the last.

Doug, after demolishing his meal, threw down his napkin and leaned back with a satisfied sigh.

"Fabulous. I am officially stuffed."

"Don't get too comfortable," Lin warned. "We still need to get to that museum this afternoon."

Doug groaned theatrically. "Fine, fine. Just give me five minutes to digest."

"Not us," I said, shaking my head. "I've hit my museum limit for this week, and besides, I need to tackle some emails. We spent so much time eating cake with the hairdresser yesterday that my

productivity took a nosedive. So, we'll just slink back to the apartment and pretend to be responsible adults for a few hours."

And so, we parted ways—Lin dragging a reluctant Doug off to absorb some culture, while Brian and I meandered toward the bus stop, still dreaming of Wacky Races and wondering if we really could make it from Beijing to Paris in a battered old car.

As we reached our destination, Brian declared with great authority, "We need the number 14."

Before long, the number 14 trundled into view, a battered contraption that looked as if it had been held together with duct tape, sheer willpower, and possibly a few prayers.

We climbed aboard, squeezing past a battalion of babushkas returning from the market, their bags brimming with fresh produce and what appeared to be enough potatoes to sustain Siberia through another winter.

"Goodness," I whispered, eyeing the cracked vinyl seats and rattling handrails, "this bus looks like it's been around since buses were invented."

The bus wheezed in agreement as it lurched forward, the driver wrestling with the gears like a man engaged in mortal combat. We rattled and bounced our way through the backstreets of Novosibirsk, the scenery growing increasingly unfamiliar.

"I don't think we're going the right way," I muttered.

“Hmmm,” Brian mused. “Possibly not. But let’s just see where this takes us.”

Where it took us, it turned out, was to a dead stop in front of a Soviet-era apartment complex, where the babushkas—clearly in on a plan we weren’t privy to—gathered their belongings and shuffled off.

We remained in our seats, clueless.

The driver finally noticed us, did a double take, and spun around in disbelief. Through a combination of sign language, expressive eyebrow movements, and exasperated sighs, we deduced that this was, in fact, the end of the line. Also, we were on the wrong bus.

Before we could fully absorb our navigational incompetence, another bus appeared about a hundred meters ahead. Our driver’s eyes lit up—salvation! He gestured wildly at the new arrival, clearly indicating that that was the bus we needed.

“I think we’re meant to be on that one,” I said, standing up.

Brian followed but immediately groaned. “Oh dear... it’s moving off.”

What happened next was pure local ingenuity. The driver flung open the door, summoned a nearby child from a makeshift football match, and barked rapid instructions. Without

hesitation, the boy took off in pursuit of the departing bus. The game came to a halt as all the other kids stopped to watch.

Brian and I sprang into action, leaping from our stationary bus and sprinting after the small hero.

The boy reached the now-moving bus, banged urgently on the door, and continued running alongside it. Miraculously, the bus came to a stop. He turned back and gestured for us to hurry.

Breathless, we reached the bus just in time. Before stepping on, Brian turned to the small but enthusiastic audience of children, babushkas, and our amused original driver—and with all the gravitas of a Shakespearean actor, delivered a deep, theatrical bow.

The applause that followed was thunderous—well, as thunderous as a group of babushkas and street urchins could muster. One of the older women even tossed us an approving nod, clutching her sack of potatoes like a scepter while muttering something that sounded suspiciously like "молодцы" (which we later learned means “good job”). It wasn’t Broadway, but it felt close enough.

As we boarded the second bus—which mercifully looked slightly less likely to disintegrate mid-route than our previous ride—I couldn’t help but marvel at how this day had spiraled into what can only be described as a slapstick comedy routine. Brian, ever the optimist, plopped down on a seat with the air of

someone who'd just conquered Everest rather than sprinted after public transportation in broad daylight.

"See?" he said, brushing imaginary dust off his jacket. "This is why you travel—you never know when life will throw you an impromptu relay race."

I raised an eyebrow. "Yes, because nothing screams 'cultural immersion' quite like chasing a Soviet-era death trap driven by a man who seems to regard traffic laws as mere suggestions."

Our new bus rumbled forward, weaving through Novosibirsk's labyrinthine streets with all the grace of a drunk moose. The interior smelled faintly of boiled cabbage and diesel fumes—a combination I hadn't realized existed until now—and every pothole sent shockwaves through the passengers like a game of human pinball. A toddler stared at me from across the aisle, clutching a stuffed bear that appeared to have seen better days. Its single remaining eye seemed to judge me silently, as if saying, *You really thought taking the number 14 was a good idea?*

Meanwhile, Brian was busy consulting a crumpled map he'd pulled from his pocket. He squinted at it dramatically, turning it upside-down and sideways before declaring, "Ah yes, according to this... we're either heading toward the city center or Kazakhstan."

“Comforting,” I replied dryly. “Let’s hope it’s the former unless you’ve packed your passport and a camel.”

Just then, the bus screeched to another abrupt halt—not because of any actual destination, mind you, but because a flock of geese decided to waddle across the road. Their leader paused mid-crossing to glare at us imperiously, as if daring the driver to honk. For a moment, there was silence. Then, one of the babushkas muttered something under her breath, crossed herself, and muttered again for good measure. Whether she was praying for safe passage or cursing the geese remained unclear.

Eventually, the feathered entourage moved on, and we continued our journey. By some miracle—or perhaps divine intervention—we eventually arrived at a stop vaguely resembling our intended destination. As we disembarked, Brian turned to me with a grin.

“Well,” he said, “that was certainly memorable.”

“Memorable?” I echoed incredulously. “Brian, most people go to Russia to see Red Square or drink vodka. We’ve somehow managed to turn a simple bus ride into an episode of *Survivor: Siberia*.”

He shrugged, unfazed. “Think of it this way—at least we’ll have a story to tell at dinner parties. Assuming we live long enough to attend any.”

And so, we stumbled onto the pavement, dusty, disheveled, and utterly delighted. Because sometimes, getting lost isn’t about

finding your way—it's about discovering the absurd beauty of chaos. Or, in our case, realizing that navigating Novosibirsk requires less GPS and more faith in random children playing football.

That evening, we all gathered at a bustling restaurant just a stone's throw from our apartment for one final feast in Novosibirsk—tomorrow, we'd be back on the train, chugging toward Yekaterinburg, a mere 1,600 kilometers and 22 hours away. The place was packed to the gills, with a folk band belting out tunes like they were auditioning for Siberia's Got Talent. And, as if that wasn't enough entertainment, there was a man in the corner with a parrot perched on his shoulder, because why not?

We snagged a table and settled in. Lin, ever the storyteller, launched into a vivid recap of her museum adventure, while Doug rolled his eyes so hard I thought they might get stuck.

A cheerful waitress bounced over, menus in hand. Without missing a beat, Doug handed them right back. Using an impressive combination of charades and some assistance from the English-speaking fellow at the next table, he declared, "Just bring us whatever's delicious."

Lin smirked. "You do realize this could mean anything, right?"

“I know!” Doug replied with the enthusiasm of a man who had just discovered the secret to eternal happiness. “That’s half the fun!”

“It could be offal,” Lin added helpfully. “You hate offal.”

Doug’s face went paler than a Siberian winter, but he held his ground and said nothing.

Moments later, the waitress returned, triumphantly plopping four frosty glasses of beer onto our table, followed by an array of steaming, mouthwatering dishes that looked like they’d been plucked straight from a culinary treasure chest. None of us knew what we were eating, but who cares when it smells that good? We dug in like bears emerging from hibernation.

“How incredible is this?” Brian exclaimed, pushing away his empty plate. “Absolutely amazing.”

As if on cue, the waitress reappeared, this time bearing four glasses of vodka over ice—on the house, no less. So there we sat, sipping our complimentary vodka, watching the band play, some brave souls dance, and life unfold around us in all its chaotic glory. I leaned back, took it all in, and thought to myself: What a gloriously unforgettable way to spend our last night in Siberia. Cheers to adventures, mystery meals, and parrots with impeccable timing!

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Chapter Five

Novosibirsk to Yekaterinburg

Packing a backpack should be easy. You take stuff out; you put stuff back in. Simple. Except, mysteriously, it never works that way. This morning, as we prepared to leave our Soviet-style apartment in Novosibirsk, I was locked in a battle of wits with my bag. I shoved, rolled, sat on it, and even tried the "zip while kneeling" maneuver, but the damn thing refused to close.

From the next room, I heard Doug and Lin having the same existential crisis.

"It's these stupid pointy slippers you bought in Mongolia," Lin grumbled. "They just don't fit."

"They came out, so they're going back in," Doug replied through gritted teeth, a man refusing to admit defeat.

Then—CRASH. A yelp.

Doug and Lin appeared in the hallway, wide-eyed. I rushed into the bathroom, fearing the worst. There stood Brian, soaked from head to toe, clutching the shower tap, which had somehow detached itself from the wall. Water sprayed everywhere like a cheap Vegas fountain show.

"It just bloody came off in my hand!" he sputtered, twisting it frantically as water continued to arc through the air.

Eventually, after some serious fiddling, he managed to reconnect it, averting what would have been Novosibirsk's first ever DIY indoor swimming pool.

Brian stood there dripping, blinking at the chaos. "What a nightmare."

"Indeed. But at least we can leave without being sued for flood damage," I said, handing him a towel before returning to my war with my backpack.

Somehow, miraculously, we got out the door. As we stepped onto the pavement, I turned to take one last nostalgic glance at our temporary Soviet abode. The peeling wallpaper, the creaky floorboards, the ever-so-slight scent of cabbage from a lifetime of Russian cooking—it had been home for a short time, after all.

We approached the bus stop with the grim determination of seasoned warriors. Our last attempt at navigating Novosibirsk public transport had been... well, let's call it a learning experience. But this time, we nailed it. We hopped on the right bus, got off at the right stop, and strode into the train station with the confidence of people who might actually survive in Russia without needing a local to rescue them.

Flushed with victory after mastering the Novosibirsk bus system, we rewarded ourselves with strong coffee and golden, spinach-filled pastries at a small café at the station. The woman behind the counter watched us with mild suspicion, but after

some enthusiastic pointing and mangled Russian, we were served.

Settling into a booth, we toasted our public transport triumph with steaming mugs and took our first bites—buttery, flaky perfection. Brian sighed. “We could live on these.” Lin, already halfway through hers, just nodded in bliss.

Brian, ever pragmatic, checked his watch. “Delicious, but if we don’t move, we’ll miss the train.”

As if on cue, the train rolled into the station, right on schedule.

“I know I keep saying this, but the Russian train system astounds me,” Lin said. “That train left Vladivostok four days ago, has traveled over 5,500 kilometers, and here it is—on time.”

“It’s impressive,” Doug agreed. “But it also waits for no one, so let’s get moving.”

We grabbed our bags and headed toward our carriage. After several train rides, we now considered ourselves experts in all things Trans-Siberian. Doug led the way, scanning for our assigned carriage.

“There it is,” he declared. “And look—our new Svetlana.”

Standing at the door was our Provodnitsa, the carriage attendant, a woman in her fifties with the kind of expression that suggested she had no time for nonsense.

“How do you know her name is Svetlana?” Lin asked.

“Because all Provodnitsas are called Svetlana,” Doug replied, as if explaining basic science. “It’s the law of the tundra.”

Lin rolled her eyes. “What absolute nonsense.”

Svetlana-the-Law-of-the-Tundra gave us the once-over before inspecting our passports with the scrutiny of a customs officer dealing with known smugglers. Eventually, she grunted, nodded, and allowed us to board.

We found our kupe—a snug four-berth compartment designed with the efficiency of a Tetris game. The bunk beds were narrow, the table small, and personal space nonexistent. But by now, we were used to it. With the precision of seasoned travelers, we stowed our bags, claimed our bunks, and accepted that, for the next stretch of the journey, our knees would become far more acquainted with each other than was strictly necessary.

We settled in like seasoned travelers, armed with books, journals, and an unshakable dedication to leisure. Doug and Lin battled it out over a deck of cards, their competitive spirits clashing like knights in a jousting tournament. Meanwhile, we took turns visiting the samovar—a magical tea cauldron that kept us warm and caffeinated as the countryside blurred past.

At lunchtime, things got *interesting*. The train screeched to a halt at a station so small you could practically miss it if you blinked. Enter: the Sandwich Lady, a mysterious figure selling foil-wrapped treasures from her platform perch. Doug, ever the hero,

leaned out the window like he was auditioning for an action movie, waving rubles dramatically until she handed over the goods. The sandwiches? Delicious—but let's just say they were a culinary mystery wrapped in bread. No one asked questions; no one dared. And so, fueled by curiosity (and carbs), the train rolled on.

By early evening, hunger began creeping back in, stealthy and relentless, like a ninja sneaking up on its prey. Stomachs grumbled louder than the train wheels against the tracks. There was only one thing for it: the dining car.

It was a lively mix of clinking glasses, low murmurs of conversation, and the occasional burst of laughter from a table of rowdy passengers already deep into their second bottle of vodka. The air was thick with the comforting aroma of butter, dill, and something unmistakably fishy. We settled into a booth, the upholstery slightly sticky from decades of travelers before us, and prepared ourselves for what we hoped would be a meal worth remembering.

The menu was, predictably, heavy on hearty Russian staples. We ordered a selection of dishes: pickled herring, smoked fish, potatoes in every conceivable form, dark rye bread, and a suspiciously bright beet salad that glowed under the dim train lighting.

When the food arrived, we were pleasantly surprised. The pickled fish, glistening with oil and garnished with fresh dill, was sharp and tangy, perfectly offset by thick slices of rye. The smoked fish flaked apart with a rich, buttery texture that melted on the tongue. And the potatoes—because, of course, there were potatoes—were golden and crisp on the outside, soft and creamy on the inside, soaked in enough butter to make a cardiologist weep.

We ate like condemned prisoners enjoying their last meal, washing it all down with cold Russian beer that arrived in great frosted mugs, condensation dripping down the sides. Just as we were leaning back in satisfaction, debating whether we had room for one last sip, the waiter plonked a heavy jug of vodka onto the table with an air of inevitability.

There was no discussion, no negotiation—just an unspoken understanding that this was happening. Lin eyed it warily, Brian sighed, and Doug looked absolutely delighted.

Just as we were mentally preparing ourselves for what this would mean for the rest of the night, the evening took a dramatic turn.

Doug, who had been eyeing the accordion player with the kind of look that spelled impending disaster, finally made his move.

The musician, a wiry man in a well-worn suit, had been squeezing out melancholic Russian folk tunes with the weary

expertise of someone who had done this routine a thousand times before. Doug, emboldened by beer, vodka, and enthusiasm, approached him with the bright-eyed confidence of a man who had never touched an accordion in his life but somehow thought he was about to be a natural.

After a brief negotiation (mostly consisting of enthusiastic gestures and what we assumed was Russian for “Go on, then!”), the musician—perhaps out of curiosity, perhaps out of sheer amusement—handed over the instrument.

Doug slung the accordion over his shoulders like a rock star strapping on a guitar. He placed his fingers on the keys, took a deep breath, and pulled the bellows apart with dramatic flair.

What followed was nothing short of an auditory crime.

A horrific, dissonant screech erupted from the instrument, like a bag of angry cats being shaken over a fire. Doug, unfazed, continued pumping the bellows with wild enthusiasm, his fingers mashing the keys in a way that suggested he was either inventing a new genre of music or conducting a séance for ghosts who had died tragically in polka-related accidents.

But it didn’t stop there. Oh no. Doug, ever the performer, decided that if he couldn’t play the accordion well, he could at least put on a show. He began dancing.

It was a spectacle.

He pranced between the tables, legs kicking wildly like an overzealous Cossack dancer, while his arms flailed in an attempt to keep up with the unwieldy accordion strapped to his chest. The combined effect was that of a deranged puppet who had suddenly gained sentience and was now conducting its own chaotic revolution.

Other diners looked up in horror. A woman clutching a delicate teacup flinched. One man, in the middle of spearing a potato, froze mid-bite, fork suspended in disbelief.

"Oh God," Brian muttered, putting his head in his hands.

Lin, ever practical, decided that intervention was necessary.

"DOUG!" she bellowed, waving her arms like an airport marshal guiding in a very confused plane. "STOP."

Doug, mid-twirl, gave the accordion one last, mournful wheeze, then stopped, beaming with self-satisfaction.

"That," he declared, "was much harder than it looks."

"It was also much worse than you think," Lin replied dryly. "Please, for the love of all things good in this world, stick to the guitar."

Doug ignored her, downed the rest of his beer, and raised his glass in a silent toast to the accordionist, who looked both amused and relieved to have his instrument back in more capable hands.

As the dining car settled back into something resembling normality, we sat back in our seats, our meal now thoroughly digested by sheer secondhand embarrassment.

The musician, to his credit, picked up his accordion and resumed playing—perhaps a little louder this time, as if to erase the memory of Doug’s tragic attempt at musical greatness.

Eventually, the evening caught up with us, and we took that as our cue to retreat. We weaved our way through the narrow corridor, gripping handrails as the train swayed beneath us.

“That was something,” Lin muttered.

“That was art,” Doug corrected.

“That was a crime against music,” Brian countered.

Back in our kupe, we took turns getting ready for bed, a process that involved an elaborate, acrobatic dance of changing clothes while trying not to smack each other in the face. The rhythmic clatter of the train against the tracks became our lullaby, and one by one, we drifted off—Doug, naturally, snoring first.

Later that night, as the train rattled on, I woke up with a desperate need to go to the bathroom. It was now mid-June, and being so far north, the sun never quite set. The sky had settled into an eerie twilight, making the vast, empty Russian forest outside look both beautiful and slightly haunted.

I wandered back to our compartment, still lost in thought. Quietly, I slid open the door and tiptoed towards my bed.

Then I stopped.

Someone was already in it.

At first, I thought maybe Doug or Brian had gotten up and climbed into the wrong bed in a moment of sleepy confusion. But no—the man snoring in my bunk was a complete stranger. I looked around. Every bed in the room was occupied.

By people I did not know.

I was in the wrong compartment.

Panic. Deep, soul-crushing panic.

I froze as one of the strangers stirred and muttered in their sleep. I held my breath

Now, the absolute worst thing you can do in this situation is wake up an entire compartment of Russians at 3 a.m. and have to explain why you, a foreigner, are standing in their sleeping quarters like a deranged train ghost. So, I did the only sensible thing—I slowly backed out, gently closing the door behind me, praying I wouldn't be arrested for trespassing in my pyjamas.

Back in the correct compartment, I climbed into my (empty, blessedly empty) bed and lay there, wide-eyed.

Lin stirred. "Everything okay?"

“Yes,” I whispered. “Just, uh... nearly ended up in a different life.”

She was already drifting back to sleep. “Goodnight”

I stared at the ceiling, listening to the rhythmic clatter of the tracks, and decided that from now on, I’d pay much closer attention when exiting train bathrooms.

The train rolled into Yekaterinburg station at precisely 9 AM, as if Russian Railways had a reputation to uphold. Blinking into the dazzling summer sunshine, we hoisted our packs and clambered down from the carriage, momentarily disoriented by the sheer brilliance of the morning. Russia had finally decided to embrace summer, and we weren’t complaining.

Outside the station, we huddled together like lost ducklings, taking a collective breath and figuring out our next move. Our apartment was supposedly a mere 600 meters away—an easy walk, theoretically. Enter Brian, our self-appointed navigator, who whipped out his phone with the confidence of a man defusing a bomb. We waited, watching as his thumbs danced frantically over the screen.

"Right then!" Brian declared, suddenly looking up, his face alight with purpose. "This way!" And off he went, deftly weaving through babushkas and small children, with the rest of us scuttling behind like a poorly coordinated parade.

We crossed a road, then another, flanked by a stretch of woodland on both sides. Brian paused now and then to consult the GPS, which filled us with an ever-growing sense of unease. Then, without warning, he veered off the paved path and straight into the trees.

Lin and I exchanged wary glances but, ever the adventurers (or just too tired to argue), we followed. The track turned muddy, puddles forming tiny obstacles along our path, until we arrived at a particularly rickety bridge.

"Are we sure about this?" I asked, eyeing the structure with suspicion. "This looks... questionable."

"Onwards!" Brian proclaimed, brimming with an optimism none of us shared.

Up one side of the bridge we climbed, down the other, and deeper into the woods we went.

"Do you think there are bears here?" Lin murmured, scanning the trees. "Or wolves?"

"Don't be ridiculous," scoffed Doug. "We're in the middle of a city."

As if on cue, we stumbled out of the woods and straight into an apartment complex—Soviet-era, much like the one we'd left in Novosibirsk, but with slightly more trees and slightly less enthusiasm for modern renovations.

"Here we are!" Brian announced triumphantly, pointing at a nondescript building. "And you all doubted me!"

"Fantastic," I said, checking my phone. "Now, how do we get in?"

I scanned the booking details. "Ah. Right. We need to pick up the keys from a hostel around the corner."

With collective sighs, we trudged off to the hostel, now hot, tired, hungry, and, if we were honest, a little irritable. I was fairly sure I was catching a cold, which only added to the general mood of despair.

At the reception desk, I plastered on my best weary-traveler smile and presented my booking confirmation.

The receptionist, a kindly-looking woman, glanced at the paper and winced.

"Oh dear," she said in flawless English. "There is a problem. The last guests locked the keys inside the apartment. We are waiting for a locksmith... but he won't be here for another two hours."

We collectively groaned, our shoulders slumping in unison.

"You are welcome to wait in the lounge," she offered, "or leave your bags if you want to go get some food." She hesitated, then added, "Or use the showers."

A telling pause followed.

Back outside, Lin mused, "Do you think she was trying to tell us something with the shower comment?"

"She may have a point," Doug sniffed meaningfully.

"Speak for yourself," Lin retorted.

Ignoring her, Doug took the lead, leading us down a cobbled lane that opened into a magnificent public square. The architecture was breathtaking—imposing, ornate, and grand in a way that suggested the Russians had really wanted to impress someone.

"Wow," Brian murmured. "They certainly know how to build a city."

"This is incredible!" Lin spun around, taking it all in.

"Yes, yes, very nice," Doug said impatiently. "But it'll be even nicer after I've eaten. I spotted what looks like a pub across the road."

Sure enough, it was a pub—or at least, Russia's interpretation of one. It was located in a basement and decorated in a bizarre nautical theme, despite being thousands of kilometers from the nearest sea. But who were we to judge?

The bartender, a cheerful man with an infectious enthusiasm for geography, was thrilled by the presence of four Australians in his establishment. He even fetched a world map to verify our origins, beaming as we pointed to Australia. In his excitement,

he poured us a complimentary carafe of red wine—an immediate upgrade to our day.

I ordered a chicken schnitzel, generously smothered in cheese and served with coleslaw and the inevitable potatoes, this time in the form of chips. Doug, mid-bite into his steak, suddenly posed a question.

"What do we actually know about this city?"

Cue my hastily Googled history spiel: "Founded in 1723 as a mining hub," I began, waving a fry like a lecture pointer. "Birthplace of Boris Yeltsin, execution site of the Romanovs. In the '90s, it was the Wild East—gangsters, uranium smuggling, the works. Now it's all tech bros and avant-garde theaters."

"Fascinating," Lin murmured, eyeing the apple pie that had just arrived at our table. "I'm looking forward to exploring"

"Indeed," Doug agreed, digging into his own slice with gusto.

We lingered over our meals, savoring the warmth of the pub, the unexpected hospitality, and the surprisingly excellent wine. It was one of those moments when travel, despite its occasional inconveniences, felt utterly worth it.

Eventually, Brian stretched and stood. "Right, time to check if the locksmith has done his magic."

We thanked our bartender profusely, bade farewell to the cozy haven, and made our way back to the hostel.

To our great relief, the locks had been repaired. With keys in hand, we finally entered our apartment, dropped our bags, and quickly headed back to the nearby square. We settled into the warm sunlight, soaking in the charm of this beautiful Russian city. An elderly woman tossed crumbs to a flock of birds while children laughed and played under the watchful eyes of their parents.

“Couldn’t get much better than this, could it?” Brian remarked.

We all nodded in agreement, savoring the moment.

Eventually, we made our way back to the apartment, where the day’s earlier mishaps began to fade, overshadowed by the promise of hot showers and, hopefully, a restful night’s sleep.

But before we could crawl into bed, there was one last task: making the bed. It seemed to be a quintessential Russian tradition—every apartment we’d stayed in so far left us with neatly folded linens at the foot of the bed, leaving the honor of assembly to us. I sighed and got to work while Brian... well, sort of helped. He shook out the bottom sheet and spread it over the mattress—it was six inches too short. Again.

We looked at each other. I yelled toward the next room, “Does your sheet fit?” “No!” Lin replied. “Too short, again! But I’ve given up. It’s just how it is.”

So we embraced the philosophy of “good enough,” crammed the sheet on as best we could, and fell into bed, exhausted. Mystery

solved: Russian beds are clearly designed for people six inches shorter than us.

The next morning, we were up bright and early, ready to explore the city.

"I think we should walk the Red Line," said Doug, his mouth full of toast smothered in jam he'd bought from a babushka somewhere along the way.

"The Red Line?" I questioned. "Do tell."

"Well," he continued, swallowing his mouthful, "it's a red line painted on the footpath that weaves throughout the city and takes you past all the interesting buildings and sights."

"What a great idea!" I said. "Let's go and walk the Red Line!"

"I hope it takes us past a pierogi restaurant," chimed in Brian. "I hear this city is famous for them."

"You've just finished breakfast, and you're already thinking about lunch?" I asked, giving him a look.

"Pays to plan ahead," he said with a grin, getting up from his chair. "Now, come on, you lot. Let's get a move on."

And with that, we set off to explore Yekaterinburg, starting at the Church on the Blood. Because if there's one thing we love, it's a cheery name for a tourist attraction.

We arrived at the famous church and stood in awe, staring at the stunning building with its golden domes, impressive bell tower, and stark white walls.

"I know I keep saying this and sound like a parrot," said Brian, "but boy, the Russians know how to build beautiful buildings."

He then looked at me expectantly. "Okay, history girl, tell us about this church."

Needing no further encouragement, I launched into an impromptu history lesson.

"Well..." I started, adopting my most professorial tone. "The Church on the Blood stands on the site where the Romanov family was executed in 1918, marking the end of the Russian monarchy. Constructed between 2000 and 2003, this neo-Byzantine church with its golden domes serves as both a memorial and a place of worship, commemorating the martyrdom of Tsar Nicholas II and his family."

Doug whistled. "Dark history. Any ghosts?"

"None officially," I said. "But given the way they met their end, I wouldn't rule it out."

"Right then," said Lin, "let's go and have a look, shall we?"

We entered the church, where we were immediately stopped by a stern-looking woman who handed us an information leaflet and,

with a no-nonsense expression, handed Lin and me a piece of fabric each, gesturing that we needed to cover our hair.

Lin tied hers neatly under her chin like a Russian grandmother. My scarf, however, had other ideas. It was made from some sort of stiff fabric, possibly an old curtain, and no matter how I tried to tie it, it kept slipping off my head in a most frustrating manner.

"Need some help?" Lin asked, watching my struggle.

"No, no," I grumbled, trying to knot it again. "I've got it."

Ten seconds later, it slid off again.

Doug watched with amusement. "Maybe just glue it to your head?"

Ignoring him, I gave up and decided to just hold it in place like some sort of Victorian lady about to faint at a scandal.

We wandered around, gazing in awe at the walls and ceilings, adorned with stunning frescoes and mosaics depicting biblical stories and saints' lives. Eventually, we reached the Romanov memorial, a somber place that even Doug, who usually had a joke for every occasion, found himself uncharacteristically quiet.

As we regrouped outside in the bright sunshine, Doug suddenly looked down.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "The Red Line!"

And there it was, at our feet, stretching off into the distance, beckoning us to follow.

And follow we did, with Doug bursting into song, belting out Johnny Cash's Walk the Line startling a couple of passersby in the process.

The first stop along the way was a pierogi restaurant Brian had spotted earlier. Spirits were high. Unfortunately, the service was not.

"I swear," Brian muttered after twenty minutes, "they must be making them from scratch, harvesting the wheat, and raising the cow for the butter as we speak."

When the dumplings finally arrived, they were stone cold and so tough they might have been used as hockey pucks.

"I hope I don't break a tooth," said Lin, attempting to chew one. "These are like eating rocks."

"And about as tasty as a rock as well," Brian agreed, pushing his plate away. "I'm done. I can't eat these."

Disappointed, we left the restaurant still hungry and continued our tour of the city along the Red Line, passing stunning ornate houses that had once been home to the rich and powerful, now turned into museums and upscale hotels. We gawked at enormous, imposing government buildings, marveling at their Soviet grandeur.

The Red Line took us past a lovely lake where children played in the sunshine, and parents sat on benches eating ice cream and gossiping.

"What a beautiful city," said Lin, snapping photos.

We all nodded in agreement. Yekaterinburg was indeed a beautiful city.

Later that evening, we found ourselves back at the same cozy pub from the night before. The moment we stepped inside, we were greeted like long-lost relatives. Soon, copious amounts of food and drink appeared on our table.

"What a perfect way to end the day," I said, raising my wine glass.

The others lifted theirs in agreement.

The next morning, I woke up with a full-on head cold and decided to stay at the apartment. Brian, ever practical, opted to stay with me, using the time to catch up on some much-needed admin.

Lin and Doug, however, set off to visit a gallery and a museum.

A few hours later, they returned, looking slightly disheveled.

"So, how was it?" I asked, sniffing into a tissue.

"Well," Lin began, "the gallery was... an experience."

Doug snorted. "Let's just say there was a lot of interpretation involved."

"Define interpretation," Brian said, looking up from his laptop.

"There was a painting of a man's face that was also a clock," Lin explained. "And another one of a chicken... but it was also a man? Or maybe a cloud?"

Doug nodded. "And then there was the one where the artist had just thrown paint at the canvas and called it Despair."

Brian smirked. "Sounds deep."

"Oh, it was," Lin said. "Deeply confusing."

"The museum was better," Doug admitted. "Lots of old Soviet stuff—telephones, uniforms, Lenin memorabilia."

"But then," Lin added, "we got lost trying to find the exit and ended up in what I think was a janitor's closet."

Doug grinned. "Best part of the whole visit."

And then, just like that—poof —it was time to pack up our intrepid crew and stride back to the train station with the kind of energy that could rival a pack of overexcited puppies. Onward to Perm! (Not that kind of "perm," though Brian still couldn't resist making a crack about crimping his hair. Some things are just too easy.)

This time, Brian and his trusty GPS—which may or may not have been whispering sweet nothings to satellites—led us back

to the station without so much as a wrong turn or a moment of panic. Hallelujah! There was even enough time for coffee at a café near the station, where the coffee tasted like... well, let's just say it had personality. A strong one. Like maybe it held grudges.

As we sipped our highly caffeinated enigmas, Lin casually dropped a mind-blowing tidbit: apparently, we'd traveled roughly 4,600 kilometers on the Trans-Siberian Railway so far. **FOUR THOUSAND SIX HUNDRED KILOMETERS.** That's farther than the distance from New York to LA—and we weren't even halfway through this rolling odyssey! Oh, and bonus trivia: we were crossing the Urals, bidding adieu to Asia and tiptoeing into Europe. Cue dramatic orchestral music and sweeping mountain vistas because geography suddenly felt epic.

Just as Doug began contemplating whether he should launch a blog titled "Tracks and Thoughts" (he avoids LinkedIn—too corporate for his free-spirited nature), Brian glanced at his watch and stood up.

"Come on, troops, the train's due in 10 minutes, and we don't want to be late," he announced. "We don't want Svetlana—the queen of carriage attendants—to be cross with us and banish us to the luggage compartment."

With that motivational speech still ringing in our ears, we groaned in unison, hoisted our backpacks onto shoulders that

were starting to feel like sagging hammocks, and trudged toward the train station like extras in a slow-motion rom-com montage. Adventure awaited—or at least another 8 hours of gazing out the window while debating whose turn it was to guard the snack stash. Onward to Perm! And hopefully, onward to staying on Svetlana's good side.

Chapter Six

Yekaterinburg to Perm

700 km

The platform at Yekaterinburg station was a symphony of chaos—suitcases clattering, vendors shouting about blini and kvass, and passengers darting around like they were auditioning for some kind of Russian version of *Dancing with the Stars*. Amidst this whirlwind stood our merry band of four: Doug, Lin, Brian, and me. We were attempting to look confident and worldly, but mostly we just looked lost.

“Are you absolutely sure this is the right train?” Lin asked for what felt like the 47th time that morning, clutching her meticulously color-coded itinerary like it was the Rosetta Stone. She had spent hours cross-referencing timetables, maps, and lunar phases (probably) to ensure we didn’t accidentally end up in Vladivostok—or worse, Kazakhstan.

“I’m telling you, Lin,” Brian said, squinting at his GPS, which had already betrayed him twice today. “This is it. Train 007 to Perm. It’s written right here.” He pointed triumphantly at the screen, though none of us could read the tiny Cyrillic letters flashing beneath his finger.

“Unless your GPS has decided to reroute us to Mars,” I quipped, earning an eye roll from Brian. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Doug was holding court with a gaggle of elderly women nearby, flashing his phone like a proud tour guide. He was deep into a slideshow of Sydney's beaches, kangaroos bouncing across the outback, his shiny red ute, and—inexplicably—his mate Jack's prize rooster, strutting like a feathered emperor. The women cooed and giggled, either charmed by his Aussie enthusiasm or just humoring the guy who thought a chicken pic was worth showing off. With Doug, it was probably both.

"Doug!" Lin snapped, yanking him by his jacket sleeve. "We're boarding! Put the poultry portfolio away and move it!"

"But I was just getting to the good part!" Doug protested, though he allowed himself to be dragged toward the train. As we approached, the conductor—a stern-looking woman with a clipboard and an expression that suggested she'd seen far too many tourists in her lifetime—eyed us skeptically.

"Tickets?" she demanded in Russian.

Brian fumbled through his backpack, producing a crumpled wad of papers. "Uh... билеты?" he ventured, holding them up hopefully.

She snatched them from his hand, inspected them briefly, then nodded curtly before gesturing for us to board. "Svetlana" number five, as we affectionately dubbed her, didn't crack a smile. Not even when Doug attempted one of his trademark charades routines to ask if there was Wi-Fi onboard.

Our kupe, like every other kupe on this wild Russian rail odyssey, greeted us at the end of a cramped corridor lined with identical compartments. Inside, it was snug yet practical, with four bunks stacked two high, ready to cradle us through Siberia's endless sway.

Doug immediately claimed the top bunk, declaring it "the penthouse suite" despite the fact that it barely left room to sit upright. Lin rolled her eyes but dutifully began unpacking our overnight essentials, while Brian flopped onto the lower bunk, already scrolling through Google Maps to plot tomorrow's adventures in Perm.

As the train lurched forward and the lights of Yekaterinburg faded into the distance, I settled into my own bunk, notebook in hand. The sun hung low on the horizon, casting long shadows across the landscape. June in Russia meant endless daylight, and something about the perpetual twilight made everything feel surreal—as if we were stepping into another world entirely. Little did we know, the next 24 hours would test not only our patience but also our ability to laugh at ourselves.

Morning arrived far too early, with the sun stubbornly refusing to set and Doug snoring like a malfunctioning accordion. By 7 AM, we disembarked in Perm, blinking blearily at the bustling station. Lin wasted no time whipping out her trusty itinerary. "Alright, team," she announced, holding it up like Moses

presenting the Ten Commandments. “First things first: luggage storage. Then we’ve got eight glorious hours to explore Perm before catching the 5 PM train to Valdimir.”

Brian squinted at his GPS, which had already proven itself about as reliable as a chocolate teapot. “Luggage storage should be near the main entrance,” he said confidently, though the slight waver in his voice betrayed his uncertainty.

“Famous last words,” I muttered under my breath, earning a smirk from Doug, who was already scanning the crowd for potential entertainment opportunities.

Doug clapped his hands together. “So, what you’re saying is, we have eight hours to soak in the wonders of Perm? Let’s get this party started!” He struck a dramatic pose, pretending to conduct an invisible orchestra, much to the confusion of a nearby family of tourists.

Lin rolled her eyes but couldn’t suppress a smile. “Yes, Doug, eight hours—but only if we stick to the plan. No detours, no distractions, and absolutely *no* impromptu performances unless they’re scheduled.” She shot him a pointed look, clearly remembering his opera rendition on the platform in Yekaterinburg.

We made our way through the bustling station, dodging commuters and stray luggage carts, until we finally located the luggage storage area. After some negotiation involving Google

Translate and Doug's increasingly creative charades (he somehow managed to mime 'suitcase' by pretending to carry an invisible boulder), we successfully stashed our bags. With lighter loads and a sense of freedom, we stepped out into the crisp morning air of Perm.

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"Alright," Lin said, unfurling her map with the flair of a general plotting an invasion. "First up: Perm Opera and Ballet Theatre. Built in 1870, it's one of Russia's oldest. Survived revolutions, wars—the works."

I couldn't help but add, "And during Soviet times, it was a cultural lifeline despite the Kremlin's censorship chokehold. Artists snuck in rebellion between the lines."

Doug, pretending to listen, was busy doing mock pirouettes on the sidewalk. "Got it. Drama, grit, culture. My kind of vibe."

The theater's grand facade rose before us like a tsarina sizing us up. Its neoclassical columns and Russian Revival flourishes whispered tales of long-lost empires.

"Wow," Brian said, neck craned. "This looks like it belongs in a fairy tale. Or a Tim Burton flick."

"Easy, Brian," Doug quipped. "Start waxing poetic about gothic vibes, and I'm ditching you here."

Lin, already snapping photos, ignored them. "Look at that gold trim! The statues! They say a whisper on stage carries to the back row."

"Romantic," I teased, nudging her. "If we had more time, we'd catch a show."

"Only if Doug swears not to hum along," Lin shot back.

"Hey, my *Nessun Dorma* could make Pavarotti weep," Doug bragged, striking a pose.

"It'd make the chandelier weep first," Brian muttered, sparking a round of laughs.

Next, Lin steered us to the Perm Art Gallery, nestled in a merchant's mansion that oozed old-world opulence. Ornate ironwork, stained glass, and frescoed ceilings made it feel like we'd wandered into a Romanov's art stash.

“This place was a haven for avant-garde art during Soviet crackdowns,” I said as Brian photographed the facade. “While others toed the party line, this gallery smuggled in rebellion.”

Inside, vibrant abstracts and bold compositions dazzled us. One painting—a wild clash of reds and blacks—stopped Doug in his tracks. “What’s this? A bear fighting a lawnmower?”

“That’s **The Struggle of the Proletariat**,” Lin said, rolling her eyes. “It’s about fighting oppression.”

“Looks like someone spilled borscht on a canvas,” Doug deadpanned.

“Only you’d turn revolution into soup,” I shot back, as Brian chuckled.

Inspired but starving, we moved on. “Food soon,” Lin promised as Brian clutched his stomach, moaning like a melodrama queen. “First, the Motovilikha Plant Museum. World War II artillery from this factory helped win the Eastern Front.”

The museum, set in a gritty industrial sprawl, smelled of oil and history. Tanks, shells, and hulking machines filled the space, each with plaques narrating their wartime heroics.

“This is like a sandbox for big kids,” Doug said, fake-aiming a vintage machine gun. “Pew pew!”

“Put it down before you break history,” Lin snapped, yanking him back.

Brian, geeking out over hand-drawn blueprints, called out, “No computers, just pencils and rulers. Imagine designing a tank without a backspace key.”

“Autocad wouldn’t help,” I joked. ““Did you mean: catastrophic explosion?””

Lin, usually all business, marveled at the scale. “People worked here round the clock, knowing every bolt could mean life or death. Even far from the front, the pressure must’ve been crushing.”

Doug, unusually subdued, murmured, “Makes you wonder what we’re still building out there, doesn’t it? All that effort, and for what?”

We left the museum in silence, each wrestling with the weight of history’s shadow, and made our way to a restaurant Brian had scouted, ready to trade heavy thoughts for a plate of comfort food.

Over lunch at a cozy restaurant, we dove into steaming pelmeni, hearty stew, and honey cake so good it deserved an opera. Doug’s charades with the waiter left the poor guy torn between laughter and confusion, while vodka shots fueled our chatter.

Our final stop was Gulag 36, a grim echo of Russia’s past. On the bus ride there, our usual banter faded, replaced by a heavy silence. “Gulag 36 was one of countless Soviet labor camps,” I

said quietly. “Thousands endured brutal conditions here. It’s a memorial to their resilience.”

Lin nodded, her pragmatism softened. “We need to see this. To feel the human cost behind the history.”

Doug, sensing the mood, kept his humor in check—mostly. “Think they’ve got prisoner hats for selfies?” he whispered.

“Doug!” Lin hissed, swatting his arm. “This isn’t your Instagram moment.”

“Joking, joking,” he muttered, though he stayed subdued as we arrived.

The museum, housed in the camp’s old administrative building, was stark. Faded photos, rusted tools, and smuggled letters told stories of survival and loss. Brian paused at a display of worn boots and cracked glasses. “These were people. Real lives.”

“Freedom’s fragile,” Lin said softly. “One accusation could end everything.”

Doug, usually all quips, went silent before murmuring, “Imagine being locked up just for looking at someone wrong. No trial. Just... gone.”

“It still happens,” I added. “History’s lessons don’t always stick.”

We stood, absorbing the weight. The bus ride back to the train station was quieter, but the driver’s blaring disco music broke the

spell. Two young girls leapt into the aisle, twirling with wild joy. One nearly crashed into Doug, who caught her mid-spin.

“Future ballerina, eh?” he grinned, giving her a gentle twirl.

Soon, Doug was in the aisle, busting moves that were half-decent, half-disaster. The girls giggled hysterically, and the whole bus clapped along. Even Lin smirked as Doug mashed up the Macarena with a chicken strut.

“You call that dancing?” I teased. “You’re like Baryshnikov after a bad borscht binge.”

“I’m a disco tsar,” Doug shot back, striking a pose.

By the time we reached the train station, the heaviness of Gulag 36 had eased, replaced by a shared warmth. Travel, we’d learned, was about balancing the profound with the absurd—honoring the past while embracing the ridiculous joy of a disco bus.

With our energy restored, we spent the afternoon exploring Perm’s streets, marveling at its architecture and soaking in the vibrant atmosphere. Time flew by, and before we knew it, the clock struck 4:30. Panic set in as we raced back to the station, only to discover that retrieving our bags would be far more complicated than storing them. Cue frantic searches, miscommunication, and a very impatient Svetlana waiting at the train door.

Somehow, we made it onboard just in time, quickly finding our kupe and collapsing onto our bunks as the train pulled away from the platform. “Well,” Lin sighed, brushing a strand of hair from her face, “that was... eventful.”

“Eventful?” Doug grinned. “That was legendary. Honestly, I think we should write a book about today.”

After narrowly escaping Svetlana’s wrath (and possibly a lifetime ban from Russian railways), we settled back into our Kupe, still catching our breath from the luggage retrieval fiasco. Doug was sprawled across his top bunk like he’d just survived an expedition to the Arctic, while Lin muttered something about “organizational failures” under her breath as she straightened her scarf for the tenth time.

“Alright,” Brian declared, sitting up suddenly and clutching his stomach. “I don’t know about you guys, but I’m starving again. That honey cake wore off approximately three seconds ago. Let’s hit the dining car.”

Lin raised an eyebrow. “Already? Didn’t you eat enough pelmeni to feed a small village?”

“That’s like asking if Doug has sung enough opera today,” I quipped, earning a grin from Doug, who immediately launched into a dramatic rendition of *Nessun Dorma*. “See? Never enough.”

Despite Lin's protests—mostly involving warnings about overeating and indigestion—we made our way to the dining car. The atmosphere inside was lively, with clinking glasses, animated chatter, and the faint aroma of borscht and smoked fish wafting through the air. We squeezed into a booth, the worn leather seats adding a rustic charm to the setting.

Before long, a man seated across from us caught Doug's attention. His hat, fashioned from what appeared to be bear fur, was impossible to ignore. Intrigued, Doug leaned forward, his curiosity piqued.

"Is that... bear fur?" Doug asked, pointing at the hat with wide-eyed disbelief.

The man looked up, startled for a moment, then broke into a grin. To our surprise, he responded in heavily accented but perfectly understandable English. "Da! Bear fur!" He tapped the brim of his hat proudly. "This hat, it is special. Very rare. From Siberian brown bear."

Doug's jaw dropped. "You're kidding. Did you... uh..." He mimed wrestling, flexing his arms dramatically.

The man threw his head back and laughed, a deep, hearty sound that drew smiles from nearby diners. "Nyet, nyet! Not me wrestle bear!" He waved a hand dismissively, then pointed to himself. "But my grandfather—ah, he was strong man. Very strong! He fight bear in forest many years ago. This hat, it is

family treasure.” He paused, his expression softening as if lost in memory. “Now, only story remains. But hat still here.”

“Well, it’s one heck of a story,” Doug said, nodding appreciatively. “And one heck of a hat.”

The man introduced himself as Ivan, his accent thick but warm. “I am pleased to meet travelers like you,” he said, raising his glass. “Travelers who come far to see Russia. It makes me proud.”

Lin, ever the researcher, couldn’t resist asking more questions. “So, this tradition of making hats from bear fur—is it common? Or just something your family does?”

Ivan shook his head. “Not so common now. Long time ago, yes, hunters wear such things. Symbol of strength, courage. But today...” He shrugged. “Too much trouble. Bears are protected. No more hunting like before.” He smiled wistfully. “Still, I keep this hat. For memory. For pride.”

As the evening wore on, Ivan grew more talkative, sharing tales of life in rural Russia, where winters were brutal and survival required ingenuity. He spoke of fishing through ice-covered rivers, chopping wood for months on end, and celebrating festivals with vodka and song. Each story painted a vivid picture of resilience and community, leaving us all captivated.

At one point, Ivan produced a small flask from his coat pocket. “Georgian whisky,” he announced, pouring a generous amount

into tiny glasses he'd procured from somewhere. "Try! You will like!"

We hesitated for only a moment before accepting the offer. The amber liquid burned pleasantly as it went down, warming us against the cool night air seeping through the train windows. Ivan raised his glass again, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "To new friends and unforgettable journeys," he declared, his voice resonating with genuine warmth.

The whisky sparked a lively exchange of stories and laughter among us. Brian recounted his culinary misadventures, each tale more outrageous than the last, while Lin shared insights from her research, painting vivid pictures of the places we had visited. I chimed in with historical anecdotes, tying our experiences to the broader tapestry of Russian history.

Amidst the jovial atmosphere, Ivan's presence added a layer of authenticity to our travel narrative. His tales of rural life and survival skills painted a stark contrast to our urban adventures, yet underscored a shared human spirit of resilience and joy. As the train rattled on through the night, the bonds we formed in that dining car felt as robust as the whisky we shared.

Eventually, the hour grew late, and with a final toast, we bid Ivan farewell, returning to our compartment with hearts full of warmth and stories to last a lifetime. The dining car had not just

been a place to eat; it had been a vessel of connection, carrying us deeper into the heart of our journey.

Back in the Kupe, Doug immediately launched into an impression of Ivan, complete with exaggerated gestures and a terrible Russian accent. “My grandfather, he wrestle BEAR!” he boomed, pretending to grapple with an invisible opponent. “Then he make HAT!”

“Oh, stop,” Lin groaned, though she couldn’t hide her smile. “You’re going to scare off the other passengers.”

“I think it’s charming,” Brian said, raising his imaginary glass of Georgian whisky. “Here’s to grandpas, bears, and hats that look like they belong in a Wes Anderson movie.”

“And here’s to us,” I added, leaning back on my bunk. “For somehow managing to survive another day without getting arrested—or eaten by a bear.”

As the train swayed gently through the countryside, the conversation drifted to lighter topics: Brian’s growing obsession with Georgian whisky (“It’s medicinal!”), The book Doug was reading about the history of the Trans Siberian railway and Lin’s determination to finally master Google Translate before our next stop.

Finally, as exhaustion began to overtake us, Lin closed her notebook with a satisfied sigh. “Well, it’s been a day,” she said, stretching out on her bunk. “Here’s hoping tomorrow brings just

as much wonder—and maybe fewer near-death experiences involving Svetlana.”

“Amen to that,” Brian muttered, taking one last swig of whisky before tucking the bottle away.

As the train rocked us gently to sleep, the endless summer sun casting a soft glow through the window, I smiled to myself. This journey wasn’t just about ticking destinations off a list—it was about embracing the chaos, laughing at ourselves, and finding joy in the unexpected. Sure, we weren’t exactly seasoned explorers. We bickered over directions, nearly missed trains, and occasionally embarrassed ourselves in front of entire busloads of people. But somehow, those moments—the chaotic, laugh-out-loud, utterly human ones—were what made this trip unforgettable.

Whatever lay ahead—whether it was stunning architecture, culinary adventures, or another run-in with a disgruntled Svetlana—we’d tackle it together. With laughter, questionable decision-making, and maybe a little bit of moonwalking. Because if there’s one thing I’ve learned so far, it’s that the best journeys aren’t about perfection. They’re about showing up, embracing the chaos, and finding joy in the ride—even if you’re singing off-key the whole way.

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Chapter Seven

Perm to Vladimir

The train rumbled into Vladimir early in the morning, though it was hard to tell by the light. At this time of year, the sun barely dipped below the horizon, casting a perpetual golden glow over the landscape. The air was already thick with warmth, carrying the unmistakable promise of another sweltering day in the heart of a Russian summer.

Despite the long journey and our bleary eyes, there was an undeniable buzz of excitement among us as we stepped off the train. Stretching stiff limbs and adjusting to the humid atmosphere, we swung our backpacks over our shoulders, feeling their familiar weight dig into our backs. With eager spirits but weary bodies, we shuffled toward the exit.

Outside the station, the faint hum of idling buses greeted us, and we made our way across the pavement, scanning for the right stop that would take us further into the city. It felt like the beginning of something new—a mix of anticipation and exhaustion mingling in equal measure, each step forward fueled by curiosity about what lay ahead.

“This is it,” Lin said, consulting her map app. “Our luxurious retreat awaits.”

“Luxurious retreat?” Doug repeated, raising an eyebrow. “Sounds fancy. Do they have room service?”

“They do,” Lin confirmed, a smug grin spreading across her face. “And I fully intend to take advantage of it.”

The hotel was everything Lin had promised and more. Perched on a hill overlooking the Volga River, it boasted floor-to-ceiling windows in the lobby that framed breathtaking views of the water below. The receptionist greeted us warmly, and within minutes, we were handed keys to our rooms.

“Too early to check in?” Doug asked hopefully, eyeing the plush seating area near the front desk.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Lin replied. “But we can leave our bags here and explore the city until they’re ready.”

“Exploring sounds good to me,” I said, pulling out my notebook. “Vladimir’s got some incredible history. Where do we start?”

“The Golden Gate,” Lin declared, consulting her itinerary. “Then we’ll head to the Dormitation Cathedral. After that, maybe the Museum of Crystal?”

Doug groaned dramatically. “Lin, it’s barely sunrise. Can’t we grab breakfast first?”

“There’s a café near the Golden Gate,” Lin countered. “We’ll eat after we’ve seen the gate. Trust me, it’s worth it.”

Reluctantly, we followed Lin's lead, strolling through the quiet streets as the city slowly woke up around us. When we reached the Golden Gate, I launched into an impromptu history lesson.

"This was built in the 12th century," I explained, gesturing to the massive stone structure. "It served as both a triumphal arch and a defensive fortification. Imagine armies marching through here, banners flying..."

Doug interrupted with a theatrical flourish. "And me leading the charge, sword in hand!"

"More like getting lost trying to find the battlefield," Brian quipped, earning a laugh from the group.

Lin stepped closer to examine the intricate carvings on the gate. "Look at the detail here. You can see how important this place was—it wasn't just functional; it was symbolic."

"It's like a giant welcome mat," Doug said, pretending to wipe his feet on the ancient stones.

"Doug, stop ruining the moment!" Lin scolded, though she couldn't hide her smile.

From there, we moved on to the Dormitation Cathedral, its golden domes gleaming in the morning light. As we approached, I began another history lesson.

"This cathedral was one of the most important churches in medieval Russia," I said. "It housed the revered icon of the

Virgin of Vladimir, which people believed had miraculous powers.”

“Miraculous powers, huh?” Doug said, peering inside. “Think it could help me win the lottery?”

“I think you’d need more than divine intervention for that,” Brian muttered.

Inside, the intricate frescoes and ornate iconostasis left us speechless.

“This place is incredible,” Brian murmured, craning his neck to take it all in.

“It’s a masterpiece of medieval architecture,” I added. “Every inch tells a story—look at these depictions of saints and biblical scenes.” Doug wandered over to a particularly vibrant fresco of Saint George slaying a dragon. “Now *this* is what I’m talking about. Action-packed art.”

Lin rolled her eyes. “Of course you’d gravitate toward the battle scene.”

Next, we visited the Museum of Crystal, Lacquer Miniatures, and Embroidery. The exhibits showcased exquisite craftsmanship, from delicate crystal vases to intricately painted lacquer boxes.

“These lacquer miniatures are amazing,” Lin said, holding up a small box adorned with a scene of a bustling Russian market. “Each one is like a tiny window into history.”

Doug squinted at a particularly detailed piece. “How do they even paint something so small? My hands would shake just looking at it.”

“It takes years of practice,” I explained. “Artisans often spend their entire lives perfecting this craft.”

Brian stood with his nose practically pressed against a crystal goblet, staring at it like it held the secrets of the universe. “This thing’s gotta cost a czar’s ransom,” he muttered. “Careful!” Lin snapped. “Don’t breathe on it too hard, or we’ll owe the museum a fortune!”

By the time we reached the riverside café for lunch, we were ravenous. We ordered salad, pelmeni, and blini, savoring the flavors of traditional Russian cuisine as the Volga sparkled in the distance.

“This is living,” Doug said, leaning back in his chair with a satisfied sigh.

“Don’t get too comfortable,” Lin teased. “We’ve still got the museum to see.”

“Of course we do,” Doug muttered, though he didn’t sound particularly upset.

As we lingered over coffee, the conversation turned to the places we'd visited that morning.

"I loved the Golden Gate," Lin said. "It felt so... grand. Like stepping back in time."

"And the cathedral was stunning," I added. "Those frescoes were breathtaking."

Doug grinned. "I liked the dragon-slaying saint best. Very heroic."

Brian chuckled. "Leave it to you to focus on the action hero."

Despite the early start and hours of walking, we were energized by the morning's discoveries. Vladimir had proven to be a treasure trove of history and culture, and as we made our way back to the hotel, I couldn't help but feel grateful for the chance to experience it together.

After a morning steeped in history and culture, the allure of our luxurious hotel became irresistible. We returned to find our rooms ready, much to our relief after hours of walking. Doug, ever the enthusiast, immediately stuck his head into Brian's room, animatedly discussing the mini bar's offerings.

"Brian, you won't believe this," Doug said, holding up a tiny bottle of vodka like it was a trophy.

"It's like they knew we were coming! Miniature spirits—perfect for a man of my stature."

“Your stature?” Brian replied dryly, raising an eyebrow. “More like your thirst.”

Lin appeared in the doorway, arms crossed. “Doug, if you drink all the mini bar before dinner, I’m charging it to your card.”

“Relax, Lin,” Doug said with a grin. “I’ll pace myself. Maybe.”

We changed into our swimsuits and headed to the pool area, a serene oasis that promised relaxation amidst the opulence of our surroundings. The pool shimmered invitingly under the relentless June sun, its waters a cool contrast to the heat that enveloped the city. A few guests lounged on plush chairs, sipping colorful cocktails and basking in the warmth of the afternoon.

“This is the life,” Brian said, sinking into a lounge chair. “I could get used to this.”

“Don’t get too comfortable,” Lin teased. “We’ve still got more if Vladimir to explore tomorrow.”

Doug groaned dramatically. “Lin, can’t we just stay here and enjoy the pool? No more sightseeing!”

“Nope,” Lin said firmly. “You’ll thank me later.”

Doug's eyes gleamed, “Let’s see who can make the biggest splash!”

Lin rolled her eyes. “Doug, this is a five-star hotel, not a public pool.”

But Doug was already climbing onto the edge of the pool, arms raised like an Olympic diver. “Watch and learn, my friends!”

With a theatrical leap, he cannonballed into the water, sending waves splashing over the edges of the pool. A few guests lounging nearby looked startled, but most couldn’t help but smile at his antics.

“Classic Doug,” Brian muttered, shaking his head.

Brian decided to join in next, executing a surprisingly graceful dive that earned appreciative applause from a couple of sunbathers. “Not bad for a guy who gets lost without a map,” he said with a smirk.

I opted to float lazily on a pool noodle, soaking in the sun and the light-hearted banter of my friends. The afternoon stretched on, filled with laughter and the occasional splash fight, a perfect blend of relaxation and playful antics.

“You know,” Doug said as he floated past me, “this might be the best day of the trip so far.”

“Don’t jinx it,” Lin warned, though she was smiling.

As the hours passed, the group settled into a rhythm of leisure. Lin reclined on a lounge chair, flipping through a magazine while occasionally glancing up to scold Doug for splashing water too close to her towel. Brian, meanwhile, had commandeered a second pool noodle and was attempting to

balance a cocktail on his chest without spilling it—a challenge that quickly devolved into fits of laughter when Doug swam by and “accidentally” nudged him.

“This is why we deserved this treat,” Lin said, gesturing to the scene around us. “After weeks of trains, dusty roads, and questionable food, don’t you feel like we’ve earned this?”

“I’ll drink to that,” Doug said, raising an imaginary glass before diving underwater to retrieve a stray flip-flop someone had dropped near the shallow end.

Even I found myself caught up in the moment, letting go of the constant need to document or analyze everything. For once, there was no itinerary, no historical landmarks to visit, no trains to catch—just the simple joy of being together in a beautiful place.

By late afternoon, the sun began to dip lower in the sky, casting long shadows across the pool deck. The air grew slightly cooler, and the faint hum of cicadas drifted in from the surrounding trees.

“Well,” Lin said, stretching lazily, “I think it’s time to head back to our rooms. Dinner reservations are in an hour.”

“Aww, do we have to?” Doug whined, floating on his back.

“Yes,” Lin said firmly. “Unless you want to explain to the restaurant why we’re late because you refused to leave the pool.”

Doug sighed dramatically but hauled himself out of the water, dripping onto the tiled floor. “Fine. But only because I’m starving.”

As we gathered our towels and made our way back to the hotel, I couldn’t help but feel a deep sense of contentment. The afternoon had been a perfect pause in our journey—a reminder that sometimes, the simplest moments are the ones that linger longest in memory.

That evening, we dined at a quaint restaurant nestled near the riverbank, its windows offering a panoramic view of the Volga as it shimmered under the lingering twilight. The menu was a celebration of local flavors, and we indulged in dishes like stroganina—thinly sliced frozen fish—and shashlik, tender skewers of marinated meat grilled to perfection. Lin raised her glass of kvass, the traditional fermented drink, and made an announcement that sent a ripple of mixed reactions through the group.

“Tomorrow, we’re going on a river cruise!” she declared, her eyes gleaming with excitement.

Doug groaned dramatically, slumping back in his chair. “A river cruise? Really? What happened to spontaneity?”

Brian chimed in, equally unenthused. “Yeah, Lin, aren’t we supposed to be roughing it across Russia? Not sipping champagne on some fancy boat.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at their exaggerated protests. “Come on, guys, it’ll be fun! Besides, after nearly two weeks on trains and dusty roads, don’t you think we deserve a little luxury?”

Lin nodded emphatically. “Exactly! And it’s not just any river cruise—it’s a chance to see villages and meet locals. Trust me, it’ll be worth it.”

Doug leaned forward, his curiosity piqued despite himself. “Villages, huh? Any chance I’ll get to drive the boat?”

Lin rolled her eyes. “Absolutely not. You’re not touching anything that floats.”

Brian smirked, raising his fork. “Well, if the GPS behaves itself tomorrow, maybe I’ll navigate us instead.”

We laughed, the tension easing as the conversation turned lighter. The meal continued with lively chatter, the clinking of glasses, and the occasional burst of Doug’s off-key singing, which earned us a few amused glances from neighboring tables. By the time dessert arrived—a decadent medovik honey cake—I could feel the group’s mood shifting. Even Doug and Brian seemed resigned to the idea of the cruise, their earlier reluctance softening into cautious curiosity.

As we left the restaurant, the cool evening breeze carried the faint strains of music from a nearby café. The Volga sparkled in the distance, its surface alive with reflections of the city lights. Tomorrow would bring new adventures, but for now, we savored the moment, content in the knowledge that our journey was far from

The morning sun draped the Volga River in golden light as we boarded the modest riverboat slicing through rural Russia's heart. Lin, always prepared, held up her handwritten notes—scribbled maps and historical tidbits—for the group to see, pointing out key details with a proud glint in her eye. Brian, meanwhile, waved his trusty phone like a trophy, proclaiming, “Today, this beauty's gonna steal the show!” To everyone's astonishment, it did. For once, the device worked flawlessly, guiding us smoothly from one village to the next without a single wrong turn. Brian couldn't stop grinning, occasionally muttering, “Who's laughing now?” to no one in particular.

Our first stop was a small village nestled along the riverbank, its wooden cottages painted in cheerful blues and yellows. I regaled the group with tales of how these settlements had thrived during the medieval trade routes, their strategic location making them hubs of commerce and culture. Doug, meanwhile, struck up a conversation with a local fisherman using an enthusiastic combination of Google Translate and wildly exaggerated

gestures. By the end of it, he was proudly holding up a freshly caught pike, declaring it “the catch of the century.”

As we moved on to the next village, we met a group of babushkas who were eager to share their traditional crafts. They demonstrated embroidery techniques passed down through generations, their hands moving with practiced precision. Doug, ever the adventurer, tried his hand at stitching but ended up tangling the thread so badly that the women erupted into laughter, patting him on the back as if he were a lovable but hopeless nephew.

The highlight of the day came when the captain of the boat, a burly man with a thick beard, invited Doug to take the wheel. Lin’s face turned pale as Doug eagerly accepted, shouting, “Finally, my moment has arrived!” He steered the boat with surprising confidence, weaving us gently through the calm waters while the rest of us clung to the railings. “Relax, Lin,” he called back, grinning. “I’ve got this!”

By the time we docked in the early afternoon, we were all running on the high of adrenaline and the low of energy reserves—like over-caffeinated sloths. Lin, ever the prophet of good times, raised her glass with a triumphant, “See? Told you it’d be worth it.” We nodded in exhausted agreement, too tired to argue but still buzzed enough to admit she was right (which, of course, she’ll never let us forget).

Our train to Moscow was set to depart at 5 PM—a "short two-hour hop," as if trains are just casually hopping across countries. But first, we had to wrangle our bags and sprint to the station, dreaming of overpriced station food that would probably taste like regret.

Doug, however, was too busy playing *National Geographic* photographer, snapping shots of the boat and captain like they were about to vanish into the mist. "Come on, Doug!" Lin called, tapping her foot. "We don't want to miss the train and end up hitchhiking with a babushka in a potato truck."

Miraculously, we made it to the station with a whole hour to spare—enough time to find a café, inhale something vaguely edible, and reflect on the day's adventures between yawns.

Then, like a metallic savior, the train rolled in, and our new guardian angel, Svetlana, appeared at the carriage door, scanning the platform like a hawk eyeing particularly disherable prey.

"Ah, the iron horse has arrived," declared Brian, heaving himself up. "Best get moving, or Svetlana might turn us into the next cautionary folktale." And off we went, a ragtag parade of scruffy backpackers, ready for the next leg of our epic overland journey.

As we hopped on the train for the final stretch of our Trans-Siberian Railway escapade, there was a mix of excitement and

sadness in the air. The rhythmic clatter of the wheels seemed to tick away the moments, reminding us that this incredible chapter was nearing its end—for now, at least. Sure, we still had thousands of kilometers to go before reaching Istanbul, but this was the last hurrah of our epic ride from Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia—a whopping 7,000 kilometers behind us already.

“Well,” I said, lounging back in my berth and watching the scenery morph outside, “this is it. The grand finale of the Trans-Siberian.”

Doug smirked, pulling a battered harmonica from his pocket. “Time to give this trip a proper send-off!”

Lin raised an eyebrow, half-amused, half-exasperated. “Where did you get that thing?”

“Scored it off a bloke at the station—swapped it for my old cap,” Doug said with a cheeky grin, then launched into a lively tune that turned our cozy kupe into a makeshift music hall.

Brian glanced up from his GPS, which he’d been fiddling with absentmindedly. “You know, I think this thing might actually miss Russia,” he joked, patting the device like an old friend.

“Miss Russia? Don’t forget the time it sent us in circles around Novosibirsk!” Lin quipped.

“Or when it tried to convince us Krasnoyarsk was in Kazakhstan,” I added, laughing.

“Alright, alright,” Brian said, raising his hands in mock surrender. “But admit it—it redeemed itself on the Volga River.”

“That it did,” Lin conceded with a smile.

I leaned back, letting the gentle sway of the train lull me into a reflective state. “Can you believe how far we’ve come? From the Gobi Desert to the Volga River, it’s been one wild story after another.”

“And we’re not even close to done,” Doug chimed in, lowering his harmonica. “Next stop: Moscow. Then St. Petersburg. And after that, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and finally Türkiye.”

Lin nodded, flipping through her meticulously organized itinerary. “The Trans-Siberian has been the backbone of this trip, but the adventure doesn’t stop here. Think Red Square, the Hermitage, the Winter Palace...”

“And hopefully lots of delicious food,” Doug interrupted, rubbing his stomach theatrically.

“And then it’s onward to Baku,” Brian added, his eyes lighting up. “I’ve heard the Flame Towers are something else.”

“Not to mention Georgian wine,” Lin said dreamily. “We’ll have to make time for a vineyard tour—or three.”

“And then Türkiye,” I said, my voice tinged with awe. “The landscapes, the history, the food... Istanbul feels like the perfect cherry on top of this crazy sundae.”

“It’s wild to think about,” Doug said, shaking his head. “All the way from Mongolia to Türkiye. Who would’ve thought we’d pull this off?”

“We’re not pulling it off yet,” Lin reminded him, raising an eyebrow. “We’ve still got trains, buses, and probably a few questionable taxi rides ahead of us.”

“Bring it on,” Doug said with a grin. “I’m ready for whatever comes next.”

We all laughed, the sound mixing with the steady clatter of the train beneath us. It hit me then—this trip hadn’t just messed with our internal clocks and stomachs; it had somehow turned us into a weird little family. Well, a slightly dysfunctional one, at least.

“I never thought I’d say this,” Lin admitted, “but I’m going to miss the Trans-Siberian. The trains, the stops, the unpredictability of it all.”

“Unpredictability is putting it mildly,” Doug said, chuckling. “Remember when we got on the wrong bus in Novosibirsk? We were so convinced it was heading toward our apartment, only to realize halfway through the ride that we were going in the complete opposite direction. And then the bus just dropped us off at some random bus stop in the middle of nowhere.”

“How could we forget?” Lin said, rolling her eyes. “You insisted we ‘just roll with it,’ like getting stranded in a place with no signs or taxis was some grand adventure.”

“And you loved every second of it,” Doug shot back, winking.

Brian stretched out on his berth, crossing his arms behind his head. “I’ll miss the food, too. The pelmeni, the blini, the shashlik... I don’t think I’ll ever eat like this again.”

“You mean you won’t ever eat *this much* again,” Lin teased.

“Hey, traveling is hungry work!” Brian protested.

I smiled, watching the banter unfold. These moments—the laughter, the shared memories, the inside jokes—were what made the journey so special.

“We’ve learned so much,” I said softly. “Who knew Doug could charm an entire village or that Brian’s GPS had a hidden talent?”

Doug grinned, tucking the harmonica back into his pocket. “And who knew Lin could plan an itinerary that even I couldn’t mess up?”

Lin smirked. “Don’t get too cocky. There’s still Istanbul to navigate.”

The mention of our ultimate destination sparked a fresh wave of excitement—and maybe a touch of nerves.

“Istanbul,” Doug repeated, his voice tinged with awe. “Feels like a dream, doesn’t it? All the way from Mongolia...”

“It does,” I agreed. “But we’re not there yet. And honestly, I’m kind of glad. There’s something magical about knowing there’s still more road ahead of us.”

As the train rolled on, carrying us closer to the next phase of our adventure, I felt a deep sense of gratitude—for the journey, for the friendships that had grown stronger with every mile, and for the countless memories we'd created together.

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Chapter Eight

Vladimir to Moscow

Our train pulled into Moscow around 7:30 PM, the summer sun still blazing like it had no plans to clock out. Light streamed through the grimy windows of our Kupe, where Svetlana—or whatever her real name was—bustled about, mop in hand, face set in a permanent scowl. We were bleary-eyed from the long day but wired with excitement. And starving—absolutely ravenous.

“I could devour a horse,” Doug announced, stretching dramatically.

“Let’s not,” Lin shot back, adjusting her scarf. “Pretty sure that’s frowned upon here.”

“Actually,” I piped up, trying to sound worldly, “horse meat’s been on Russian menus for centuries.”

“Unless there’s a menu in front of me, I’m sticking to pastries,” Brian declared, already scanning the chaotic platform outside.

Before hunting down our bus, we needed food. After some aimless wandering—because that’s our brand—we stumbled on a fancy café nestled in a grand plaza, all fountains and statues. The aroma of fresh pastries yanked us inside like a cartoon pie on a windowsill.

“Holy hell,” Doug muttered when the bill arrived. “Sixty-seven Aussie dollars for a few pirogi and dumplings?”

“They’re pirozhki, technically,” I corrected, wincing at the price tag myself.

“Highway robbery,” Doug grumbled. “We’ll be broke by noon.”

Lin rolled her eyes. “You inhaled it all, Doug. Quit whining.”

“They were delicious!” he protested.

Bellies full, wallets lighter, we set off for the bus. Cue chaos. Brian, our self-appointed navigator, waved his GPS like a magic wand, swearing he had it figured out. Ten minutes later, we were climbing stairs in a random mall.

“You sure about this?” Lin asked, eyeing his phone skeptically.

“Totally!” Brian snapped, leading us down another staircase, through a food court, and—yep—back to square one.

“Uh...” Doug raised an eyebrow.

“It says go this way!” Brian insisted, jabbing at his screen.

“No, it doesn’t,” Lin said, pointing. “We’re looping, Brian.”

He muttered something incoherent as we exchanged tired glances. After another ten minutes of wandering, we spotted a bus stop with a sign vaguely pointing toward our destination.

“Is this the right one?” I asked as we boarded.

We tried paying the driver, but he waved us off without a word, leaving us baffled.

“Did we just ride for free?” Doug whispered, half-grinning.

“Isn’t that illegal?” Lin fretted.

“We’ll sort it later,” Brian said, plopping by a window. “Let’s just hope this is the right bus.”

“Is this okay?” Lin whispered, clutching her bag.

“Guess we’ll find out,” Doug said, leaning back like he owned the place.

Ten minutes later, two police officers boarded, their eyes locking onto us—the only tourists in sight. One held out a hand, expectant.

“Oh no,” Lin groaned.

I stared out the window, leaving Brian and Lin to deal with the issue, while Doug leaned forward, grinning like he was watching a sitcom.

“This is straight out of Borat,” he stage-whispered.

“Shut it, Doug,” Lin hissed.

After a stern lecture, a fine, and proper tickets, we were free. By the time we got off, Lin and Brian looked like they'd aged a decade.

"Better than the Gulag," Doug chirped, earning dual death glares.

We reached our apartment, dragging backpacks up five brutal flights of stairs.

"No elevator? Seriously?" Brian panted, collapsing onto a couch.

"Why's there a massive bed in the living room?" Lin yelped, staring at the mattress dominating the space.

Doug smirked, pointing up. "Check the bathroom ceiling mirrors."

"Classy," I said, rolling my eyes.

Too exhausted to care, we crashed into our beds, passing out in seconds. Morning came fast, and we were up, pumped to explore this historic city. First stop: Red Square.

After a twenty-minute walk, we hit the metro station. Stepping underground, we froze, jaws dropped, utterly stunned by what we saw.

"Wow," Lin breathed, gazing up at the ornate chandeliers and marble columns.

“It’s like stepping into a palace,” I added, craning my neck to take it all in.

“I’ve planned a whole morning exploring the top metro stations,” Lin announced proudly.

“That sounds great,” Doug said, clapping his hands together. “But first, let’s get to Red Square!”

Thirty minutes later, we emerged into the iconic square. My heart raced as I stood there, surrounded by history.

“This has been on my bucket list since Miss Digmans’ Year 9 History class,” I told the group, unable to contain my excitement.

To our left stood St. Basil’s Cathedral, its colorful onion domes rising majestically against the sky. “Legend has it that Ivan the Terrible blinded the architects so they couldn’t recreate anything like it,” I explained. “Each dome represents a different saint, and the colors symbolize various elements of Russian culture—red for beauty, blue for heaven, and green for fertility.”

“Cheerful guy,” Doug commented, referring to Ivan the Terrible.

Directly ahead loomed the Kremlin walls, red bricks stretching endlessly. “The Kremlin dates back to the 14th century and has served as the political and spiritual heart of Russia ever since,” I

continued. “Inside those walls are cathedrals, palaces, and even the President’s office.”

To our right, Lenin’s Mausoleum sat solemnly, its black granite structure contrasting sharply with the vibrant colors of the cathedral. “This is where Lenin’s body is preserved,” I said, lowering my voice reverently. “He’s been lying in state here since 1924, despite debates over whether he should be buried.”

“Creepy,” Lin murmured.

"And right across the square sprawled G.U.M.—Moscow’s legendary department store, looking like a grand, glass-roofed palace of shopping. 'This beauty’s been around since the late 1800s,' I said, admiring its fancy facade. 'Back in Soviet times, it went full communist chic—turned into a state-run mega-shop where regular folks could (theoretically) buy everything from socks to samovars, if they were lucky enough to find any in stock. Oh, and fun fact: When Stalin was in charge, part of it got turned into boring admin offices. Rumor has it he also ran some top-secret spy business from there—like, ultra-classified ‘who’s plotting against me today’ surveillance. But, you know, no proof... so maybe he just really loved a good department store view?'

These days, though, G.U.M. has traded ration queues for ritzy vibes—it’s packed with fancy boutiques, overpriced cafes, and

tourists sipping lattes where Soviet shoppers once hunted for toilet paper. How's that for a glow-up?

By the end of the day, we'd visited St. Basil's, paid our respects at Lenin's tomb, and wandered through G.U.M's luxurious halls.

Exhausted but exhilarated, we found a nearby restaurant for dinner.

The cozy eatery had wooden tables and soft lighting, creating a warm atmosphere. We ordered plates of shashlik, tender skewers of marinated lamb and pork grilled to perfection, served with a side of fluffy rice and pickled vegetables. For starters, we shared a plate of vareniki, delicate dumplings stuffed with potato and fried onions, drizzled generously with melted butter.

To drink, we sipped on glasses of kompot, a sweet fruit punch made from stewed apples and berries, which paired perfectly with the hearty meal. Doug, ever the adventurer, insisted on trying a shot of vodka—"for authenticity," he claimed—and promptly coughed as it burned its way down his throat.

"This is amazing," Brian said between bites, clearly in his element. "I could live off shashlik."

"Don't forget the vareniki," Lin added, spearing another dumpling with her fork.

As we dug into our meals, Doug raised his glass. “To Moscow,” he toasted. “May tomorrow bring fewer fines and more adventures.”

We clinked glasses, laughing, already looking forward to whatever chaos awaited us next.

After dinner, we reluctantly dragged ourselves away from the cozy restaurant and headed back to the metro. The station was quieter now, the crowds of earlier in the day having thinned out. As we descended into the underground, the grandeur of the metro stations once again left us in awe—even in our tired state.

“I could get used to this,” I murmured, gazing up at the ornate chandeliers and intricate mosaics.

“Not me,” Brian grumbled, leaning against a pillar. “My feet are killing me.”

The train ride back to our apartment was a blur of dim lights and gentle swaying. By the time we reached our stop, we were practically sleepwalking.

Back at the apartment building, the sight of those five steep flights of stairs felt like a cruel joke.

“I can’t do this again,” Brian groaned, staring up at the staircase as if it were Mount Everest.

“Yes, you can,” Lin said firmly, giving him a nudge. “Just think about that giant bed waiting for you.”

“Or the mirrors on the bathroom ceiling,” Doug added with a smirk, earning an eye roll from everyone.

We trudged to bed, thoroughly spent from the day’s adventures. The apartment had its oddities—mirrors on the bathroom ceiling (why?) and a massive bed inexplicably parked in the living room—but none of that mattered once we sank into the impossibly soft mattress. It was like sleeping on a marshmallow engineered by sleep scientists. One moment I was blinking up at the ceiling; the next, I was gone, swallowed whole by the kind of deep, dreamless sleep that only comes after a day of nonstop exploring.

As I drifted off, flashes of the day played in my mind—the chaotic thrill of the bus ride, the golden domes of Red Square glowing at sunset, the smoky, garlicky perfection of our shashlik feast. Sure, not everything had gone smoothly (when does it ever?), but even the mishaps felt like part of the adventure. These were the kinds of memories that would stick, the stories we’d laugh about later, retelling them until they became legend

And with that thought, I drifted off to sleep, the distant hum of Moscow’s nighttime traffic lulling me into dreams of onion domes and endless metro stations.

I woke up early, sunlight streaming through the thin curtains of our odd little apartment. Today was the day we'd been waiting for: a visit to the Kremlin. Lin had pre-bought tickets online—thank goodness, because navigating Russian websites would have been a nightmare even with Google Translate—and her meticulous planning meant we could skip the long lines outside.

Doug, ever the optimist despite yesterday's mishaps, bounded out of bed like he'd just discovered caffeine existed. "Morning, team!" he chirped, already rummaging through his backpack. "Who wants some toast?"

"Toast sounds great," Brian replied groggily, rubbing his eyes.

We gathered in the tiny kitchenette, which barely had enough counter space for all four of us. Doug pulled out the last jar of his prized basbuska jam—a local delicacy he'd bought during one of our train stops—and spread it generously on slices of stale bread.

"Ah, now *this* is how you do breakfast," Doug said smugly, holding up a slice of toast slathered in jam.

As we munched on our makeshift breakfast, I couldn't help but feel a buzz of excitement. The Kremlin wasn't just any tourist attraction; it was the beating heart of Russia's history and politics. And today, we were going inside.

The metro ride to Red Square went smoothly this time, thanks to Brian's GPS behaving itself for once. As we stepped off the train, Doug immediately spotted a street musician playing an accordion near the exit. Without hesitation, he joined in, belting out what sounded suspiciously like "Hotel California" in his best karaoke voice.

Lin looked mortified. "Doug, please don't embarrass us before we even get there."

"What? He's loving it!" Doug grinned, pointing at the busker, who gave him a thumbs-up. A small crowd began to gather, clapping along as Doug launched into another tune.

"You're impossible," Lin sighed, though I noticed the corners of her mouth twitching upward.

Finally, after much applause (and a few coins tossed into the musician's hat), Doug rejoined us. "See? Free entertainment. That's how you travel smart."

"Or shamelessly," Lin muttered, shaking her head.

When we arrived at the Kremlin, Lin proudly presented her pre-purchased tickets, and we breezed past the queue. Stepping through the towering gates felt surreal.

"The Kremlin dates back to the 14th century," I began, slipping into full history-buff mode. "It served as the residence of

Russian tsars and later became the seat of Soviet power. Now, it houses the official offices of the President of Russia.”

We wandered through the sprawling complex, marveling at its mix of medieval fortresses and opulent cathedrals.

“Look at those walls,” Brian said, craning his neck. “They’re massive!”

“They’re over two kilometers long and up to nineteen meters thick in places,” I added. “Built to protect against invaders, they’ve stood the test of time.”

Inside the Cathedral Square, we gazed up at the golden domes of the Assumption Cathedral, where Russian tsars were crowned. “This cathedral symbolizes the unity of church and state,” I explained. “Every ruler from Ivan the Terrible to Nicholas II was crowned here.”

“Creepy guy,” Doug quipped, referring to Ivan the Terrible again.

Next, we visited the Archangel’s Cathedral, the final resting place of many Russian princes and tsars. “Over forty tombs are inside,” I continued. “Each marked with intricate carvings and symbols.”

“Feels kind of eerie,” Lin admitted, glancing around.

“But fascinating,” I countered.

Our last stop within the Kremlin was the Armory Chamber, home to treasures like Fabergé eggs, royal crowns, and ornate carriages. Doug pressed his face against the glass cases, mesmerized.

“I bet one of these things are worth more than my house,” he whispered reverently.

“Probably several houses,” Lin agreed.

After leaving the Kremlin, we made our way to the State Historical Museum at the northern end of Red Square. Its imposing red-brick facade mirrored the surrounding architecture, blending seamlessly with the historic square.

“This museum covers over a thousand years of Russian history,” I told the group as we entered. “From ancient artifacts to Soviet-era relics, it’s a treasure trove.”

Inside, we explored exhibits showcasing everything from medieval weapons and armor to elaborate Orthodox icons. One section featured a reconstructed peasant hut, complete with wooden furniture and tools.

“Imagine living like this,” Brian said, peering inside.

“It’s humbling,” Lin replied softly.

At one point, Doug leaned too close to a fragile display of imperial jewels, triggering a sharp beep from the security system.

“Sir, please step back,” a stern guard instructed, glaring at him.

“Just admiring the craftsmanship!” Doug protested innocently, raising his hands in surrender.

Lin pinched the bridge of her nose. “Doug, seriously...”

“What? It’s not like I touched anything!”

Despite the minor scare, we spent hours wandering through the museum, soaking in centuries of Russian culture and history.

By the time we stepped back onto Red Square, the endless summer daylight had softened into a golden early evening glow, casting a warm, timeless aura over the cobblestones and iconic landmarks.

“Pizza?” Brian suggested hopefully.

“Pizza?” Lin repeated skeptically.

“Come on, every country has its own version of pizza,” Doug argued. “Even Russia. Blini is basically flatbread with toppings!”

“That’s a stretch,” Lin said, crossing her arms.

“Fine, fine. But sometimes you just need comfort food, okay? Let’s grab takeaway and a bottle of wine. We can eat it back at the apartment.”

No one objected to that plan. We found a nearby pizzeria and ordered a large pizza topped with mushrooms, cheese, and something suspiciously labeled “local sausage.” Alongside it, we picked up a cheap bottle of red wine.

Back at the apartment, we settled around the giant bed in the living room, balancing paper plates on our laps. The pizza was surprisingly delicious—perhaps it was the local sausage or just our hunger after a long day of sightseeing—but no one complained.

“This might be the best pizza I’ve ever had,” Doug declared dramatically, taking another bite.

“It’s definitely the cheapest,” Lin noted dryly, sipping her wine.

As we relaxed, Lin cleared her throat and announced, “Tomorrow, we’re exploring Moscow’s famous metro system.”

“Yes!” Doug cheered, raising his plastic cup. “To escalators and chandeliers!”

“To getting lost less often,” Brian added, earning a laugh from everyone.

“And to surviving Russia without ending up in the Gulag,” Lin finished with a grin.

She paused for dramatic effect before adding, “Oh, and by the way—I bought us tickets to the ballet for tomorrow evening.”

Brian’s eyes widened. “The ballet? You mean...tights and tutus and all that?”

“Yes, exactly,” Lin said matter-of-factly. “It’s Swan Lake. It’s iconic. We’re in Moscow; we can’t leave without seeing it.”

Doug leapt to his feet, abandoning his plate. “Finally, something I’m built for!” he exclaimed, striking a dramatic pose. With exaggerated flair, he spun around in a clumsy pirouette, arms outstretched like a deranged swan.

Lin groaned, burying her face in her hands. “Doug, please don’t embarrass us before we even get there.”

“What? I’m practicing!” Doug protested, attempting another spin but nearly tripping over the coffee table.

Are we seriously underdressed for this?" Brian asked, plucking at his travel-worn shirt like it had personally offended him.

I held up my least wrinkled shirt—which still looked like it had been stuffed in a backpack for weeks (because it had). "We’ve been on the road forever. ‘Black-tie optional’ was never in the cards."

Lin gave us an appraising glance. "It’s fine. The ballet crowd has seen worse than a few creases."

Brian's eyebrows shot up. "So you're saying I don't need to raid a charity shop for a last-minute makeover?"

"Just..." Lin gestured vaguely at his general silhouette. "Maybe pretend you didn't air-dry your clothes by sleeping on them?"

Brian raked a hand through his perpetually windblown hair. "This is peak performance. I'm giving them 'artistic dishevelment'—very avant-garde."

Lin smirked. "Right. Let's call it 'deconstructed chic' and hope no one looks too closely.

We clinked cups again, laughing and chatting late into the night, grateful for the simple joys of pizza, wine, and each other's company—even if tomorrow would involve pirouettes, combed hair, and possibly a reluctant Brian trying (and failing) to look polished.

Morning came quickly, and we were up early, eager to explore Moscow's famous metro system. Lin had done her research (as always) and mapped out six iconic stations for us to visit. Armed with our pre-bought tickets and Brian's GPS—which thankfully seemed to be cooperating today—we set off into the underground labyrinth that is Moscow's pride and joy.

Our first stop was Komsomolskaya, a station so grand it felt more like a palace than a train hub. The ceiling was adorned with intricate mosaics depicting scenes of Russian history, framed by

golden chandeliers that cast a warm glow over the marble floors.

"This place could rival Versailles," I said, craning my neck to take it all in.

"It's beautiful, but I can't imagine commuting through this every day," Lin remarked. "I'd feel underdressed."

Doug, inspired by the opulence, began humming a tune. Within seconds, he launched into an impromptu song:

"Riding on the metro, oh what a show!

Chandeliers above, and history below!

From Sydney's grime to Moscow's shine,

This train ride feels almost divine!"

"This puts Sydney's metro to shame," Brian chimed in, shaking his head. "Remember Town Hall? Dark, dirty, and hotter than a sauna—now *that's* a transit experience."

"Don't remind me," Doug groaned. "It's like they're trying to punish commuters."

From there, we headed to Mayakovskaya, known for its Art Deco design and rows of stainless steel columns topped with intricate reliefs. During World War II, Stalin used this station as an air raid shelter.

“They held government meetings down here during the war,” I explained. “Can you imagine running a country from a subway station?”

“Makes sense,” Lin replied. “If your office looks this good, why not?”

Doug wandered off to inspect one of the columns, pretending to hold an important meeting. “Comrades,” he announced dramatically, “today we discuss... uh...” He paused, looking blank. “Travel snacks!”

We burst out laughing as a group of locals gave him curious glances.

Next, we visited Novoslobodskaya, where stained glass panels embedded in the arches caught our attention. Each panel depicted themes of peace, labor, and Soviet ideals, illuminated by soft backlighting.

“These look like church windows,” I observed.

“That’s because they were made by artists who worked on cathedrals,” Lin added. “The Soviets wanted to prove atheism could inspire beauty too.”

Doug leaned close to one of the panels, squinting. “Is that... a tractor?”

“Yes, Doug, it’s a tractor,” Lin sighed. “Symbolizing progress.”

At Kievskaya, we marveled at the mosaics celebrating Ukrainian culture—a nod to the historical ties between Russia and Ukraine. The vibrant colors and folkloric motifs stood in stark contrast to the political tensions of today.

“I love how these stations tell stories,” I said, pointing to a mosaic of dancers in traditional costumes.

“Me too,” Lin agreed. “Though it’s bittersweet knowing how much has changed since these were built.”

Doug struck a pose, mimicking the dancers. “Look at me—I’m a Cossack!”

“You’re ridiculous,” Brian muttered, though he couldn’t suppress a grin.

By the time we reached Park Pobedy, Brian was starting to lag behind. This station boasts some of the deepest escalators in the world, descending nearly 80 meters underground.

“How deep does it go?” Brian asked nervously as we stepped onto the seemingly endless escalator.

“Deep enough to survive a nuclear blast,” Lin replied casually.

Brian paled. “Comforting.”

At the bottom, we admired the towering marble columns and bronze sculptures commemorating Russia’s victory in World War II.

“This feels heavier somehow,” I murmured, gazing at the somber statues.

“It’s meant to,” Lin said softly. “This station honors sacrifice.”

Doug nodded solemnly—for once—and didn’t crack a joke.

Our final stop was Arbatskaya, famous for its enormous barrel-vaulted ceiling painted a rich shade of blue. The simplicity of the design made it feel almost serene compared to the others.

“This is my favorite,” Lin declared. “It’s elegant without being overwhelming.”

“I agree,” I said. “It’s peaceful.”

Doug, however, wasn’t satisfied until he’d performed one last chorus of his metro song, complete with exaggerated gestures. A passing commuter applauded politely, which only encouraged him further.

After hours of exploring, we were starving. Brian led us to a nearby Georgian restaurant he’d found online, promising authentic flavors and hearty portions.

We ordered plates of khinkali (juicy dumplings filled with spiced meat), khachapuri (cheesy bread boats oozing with butter and egg), and lobio (a rich bean stew). To drink, we sipped on glasses of sweet tkemali sauce and fizzy tarkhun soda.

“This is incredible,” Brian said, stuffing his face with khachapuri.

“Georgian food might be my new favorite,” Doug agreed, slurping up the broth from a khinkali.

Lin dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. “Delicious.”

Back at the apartment, we dug through our backpacks in search of something remotely presentable for the ballet.

“Do I really have to wear this?” Brian complained, holding up a wrinkled shirt.

“It’s either that or your hiking gear,” Lin said firmly.

Doug emerged triumphantly from his bag, brandishing a shirt that had seen better days “Behold! My secret weapon.”

“You call that presentable?” Lin raised an eyebrow.

“It’s debonair,” Doug insisted, striking a pose.

That evening, we arrived at the Bolshoi Theatre, awestruck by its grandeur. Despite our travel-worn clothes, we managed to blend in somewhat—though the sea of designer dresses and tailored suits made us feel slightly out of place.

During intermission, we sipped champagne in the ornate lobby, feeling like impostors among the elegantly dressed crowd.

“We stick out like sore thumbs,” Brian muttered, tugging at his collar.

“Relax,” Lin whispered. “No one’s judging us.”

The performance itself was breathtaking. The dancers moved with such grace and precision that even Brian—who had been dreading the evening—was captivated.

“That was amazing,” he admitted afterward, still clapping enthusiastically.

“Told you,” Lin said smugly.

As we left the theater, champagne buzzes lingering, we all agreed: it had been a night to remember.

“To Swan Lake,” Doug toasted, raising an imaginary glass.

“And to surviving Russia without ending up in the Gulag,” I added, laughing.

And just like that, another unforgettable day in Moscow came to an end.

The morning greeted us with a relentless downpour, the kind of rain that seems determined to wash away everything it touches. It was our last full day in Moscow before catching the midnight train to St. Petersburg, and while Lin and Doug were off to visit the State Tretyakov Gallery—a museum brimming with Russian art—Brian and I had more practical matters on our agenda. My jeans, stained weeks ago during our time in the Gobi Desert when the camel Doug was riding dribbled all over my leg leaving a green stain that stubbornly refused to budge. Meanwhile, Brian’s sock supply had mysteriously dwindled to

almost nothing. “It’s like they’ve been stolen by some sock-eating gremlin,” he muttered as we donned our raincoats and grabbed umbrellas.

We waved goodbye to Lin and Doug, who were already consulting Google Translate for directions to the gallery, and set off into the drizzle. Thirty minutes later, we arrived at a gleaming shopping center that looked eerily familiar.

“Looks like shopping centers the world over,” Brian said, peering up at the glass facade.

“Yep,” I replied, shaking my umbrella dry. “They’re built to a formula.”

Inside, the polished floors reflected the fluorescent lights, and stores lined up in predictable rows: fashion chains, electronics outlets, and fast-food joints. We split up briefly—I headed for a clothing store to find new jeans, while Brian ventured into a sports shop for socks. Reunited twenty minutes later, we compared purchases.

“These will do,” I said, holding up a pair of dark blue jeans. “No more camel-spit stains for me.”

“And these are officially my lucky socks,” Brian declared, wiggling a bright orange pair.

With our errands complete, we rewarded ourselves with coffee and cake at a cozy café tucked into a corner of the mall. Over

steaming cups of espresso, we plotted the rest of our afternoon.

“We should go back to Red Square one last time,” I suggested. “For lunch and maybe just to stand there again. You know, soak it all in.”

Brian nodded. “Good idea. Let’s take the metro—it’ll be quicker than walking in this weather.”

Red Square once again left me speechless. Even under gray skies and persistent rain, its grandeur is undeniable. The cobblestones glistened beneath our feet as we stepped onto the square, dodging puddles and fellow tourists huddled under umbrellas. Saint Basil’s Cathedral loomed ahead, its colorful domes defying the gloom, while the Kremlin walls stood stoic and imposing.

We ducked into the same restaurant where we’d eaten a few nights prior, savoring hearty soup and pelmeni. Afterward, we wandered through G.U.M, the historic department store whose opulent interior felt almost surreal against the dreary weather outside. Finally, I found myself standing in the middle of Red Square, letting the rain trickle down my neck as I took it all in.

“This place...” I murmured, unable to finish the thought.

“Come on,” Brian interrupted gently, breaking me out of my reverie. “We need to get back to the apartment, finish packing, and make it to the train station.”

Reluctantly, I followed him back to the metro. By the time we returned to the apartment, Lin and Doug were already there, deep in the throes of packing.

“How was the museum?” I asked, tossing my damp jacket onto a chair.

“It was great!” Lin enthused, pulling sweaters out of her pack to rearrange them. “So much history! And the paintings—they’re incredible. Did you know—”

“Yes, yes,” Doug cut in, grinning. “She gave me the entire lecture on Russian Realism. Twice.”

Lin rolled her eyes but couldn’t suppress a smile. “You loved it too, admit it.”

Doug shrugged good-naturedly. “Fine, fine. But now I’m starving. Can we eat on the train?”

After a quick snack, we lugged our packs downstairs and caught the bus to the main Moscow train station. If Red Square was awe-inspiring, the station was overwhelming. Enormous and chaotic, it buzzed with activity—people rushing past, announcements blaring in Russian, and vendors selling snacks and souvenirs.

As we navigated the crowds, Doug broke into song, belting out “*Leaving on a Midnight Train to Georgia*” with his usual

enthusiasm. A group of teenagers nearby giggled, and Lin shot him a look.

“Doug,” she hissed. “Not here.”

But Doug was undeterred. He continued singing until we reached the platform, where he promptly tried to board the wrong train.

“That’s not ours!” Lin exclaimed, yanking him back by the sleeve.

“Oh. Right.” Doug grinned sheepishly. “Close enough.”

When we finally boarded the correct train, we discovered something unusual: our carriage attendant wasn’t Svetlana—or even female. Instead, a stern-looking man greeted us with a nod.

“No Svetlana?” Brian whispered dramatically.

“This is technically no longer the Trans-Siberian Railway, we left that in Moscow, we are now on a commuter train” said Lin
“Maybe Svetlana's are exclusive to the Trans-Siberian”

“Could well be” I stifled a laugh. “Guess we’ll have to christen him Yuri.”

Yuri didn’t seem amused when Brian introduced himself with a cheerful, “Privyet, Nikolai!” accompanied by exaggerated hand gestures. Still, he efficiently showed us to our kupe and ensured we were settled.

As the train pulled away from the station, we sat quietly for a moment, watching the city lights fade into the distance.

“I can’t believe how much I love Moscow,” I said softly.

“Me neither,” Lin admitted. “It’s so... alive. Even with the rain and the chaos.”

“And the architecture,” I added. “Everywhere you look, there’s history.”

Doug leaned back, stretching his legs. “And let’s not forget the food. Or the trains. They’re surprisingly efficient, aren’t they?”

“They really are,” Brian agreed. “Though I still think my GPS could’ve done better navigating those streets.”

We laughed, the sound mingling with the rhythmic clatter of the train wheels. Exhaustion crept over us, and one by one, we drifted off to sleep, lulled by the gentle rocking of the carriage and the patter of rain against the windows.

Moscow had been unforgettable, but St. Petersburg awaited—and if it was anything like the journey so far, we knew it would be another adventure worth writing about.

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Chapter Nine

Moscow to St Petersburg

Another station, another early morning arrival... This time it was St. Petersburg—a city I had been dreaming of visiting for years. The train screeched to a halt, and we clambered off one last time, bringing our epic journey across the vast expanse of Russia to an end. Well, almost.

"It's a little sad, isn't it?" I said, my voice catching as I turned to look at our train one last time. It stood patiently at the platform, its metal flanks scuffed from the miles—just the latest in a procession of steel carriages that had carried us across seven thousand kilometers of Russia's soul.

These trains had been our moving home. They'd rocked us to sleep past mirror-still lakes that stretched to oblivion, through pine forests where shadows pooled like spilled ink, and across four time zones that left our circadian rhythms in tatters. Each one had its own quirks—a whistling samovar in Car No. 8, a provodnitsa who smuggled us extra blankets, the metallic tang of ancient brakes protesting at every stop. Now, disembarking for the last time, I ran a hand along the cold siding as if memorizing its texture. The rails ahead stretched empty; our Russian rolling saga was over.

“Sad? Not even close,” Brian replied without missing a beat or showing any hint of sentimentality whatsoever. “It’s been epic, but let’s not forget: Istanbul is still calling our names. We’ve got miles to go before we sleep.”

“Yes,” chimed in Doug, ever the pragmatist, “onwards! Let’s find this apartment.” And with that motivational speech (or something resembling one), he led the charge down what seemed like the world’s longest escalator into the bowels of the St. Petersburg metro system. If Dante had written *The Divine Comedy* about public transportation instead of hell, this would have been his inspiration.

Lin and Doug stepped up to buy tickets using what can only be described as interpretive dance meets charades. They gestured wildly at maps, mimed swiping cards, and eventually emerged victorious with small tokens that promised safe passage on the labyrinthine subway. Meanwhile, Brian muttered something about how traveling during peak hour with full packs is less ‘adventure’ and more ‘guaranteed manslaughter.’

I couldn’t help but agree. Trying to navigate rush-hour crowds while lugging around enough gear to survive an apocalypse is truly the stuff of nightmares—for everyone involved. As we descended deeper underground, I decided to share some trivia I’d picked up somewhere along the way.

“Did you know over 2.5 million people use this metro system every day?” I announced proudly, though no one asked.

“And approximately 1.5 million of them are currently packed onto this platform,” Brian quipped dryly as he narrowly avoided being elbowed by a sharply dressed businessman clutching a briefcase and talking loudly on his phone. “Seriously, if I accidentally knock over another commuter, I’m blaming all of you.”

Just then, salvation—or so we thought—arrived in the form of a rumbling train pulling into the station. With military precision (or perhaps sheer desperation), we prepared ourselves for the mad dash aboard. Doug went first, followed by Lin, then Brian, and finally me. But fate, being the mischievous prankster it often is, decided to throw us a curveball.

As Lin entered the carriage, she came to an abrupt stop, blocked by the impenetrable wall of humanity ahead. Brian, caught mid-stride behind her, froze awkwardly in the doorway, leaving me to collide with him like a human pinball machine. Before anyone could react, the doors began closing—with Brian still half-in, half-out of the train. In a moment of quick thinking (and possibly panic), I grabbed his backpack and yanked him back onto the platform just as the train zoomed off into the tunnel, taking Lin and Doug with it.

Brian and I exchanged looks that said everything words never could. Finally, he broke the silence. “Lin has the instructions, right? Do you remember where we’re going?”

“Four stops,” I replied confidently, because sometimes confidence is all you’ve got when logic fails. “Okay, four stops it is,” he nodded, and we steeled ourselves once again.

When the next train arrived, we boarded successfully and counted aloud like giddy children playing hide-and-seek. One stop... two stops... three stops... four! Victory! Or so we thought. We disembarked, expecting to see Lin and Doug waiting for us—but alas, they were nowhere to be found.

Thinking maybe they’d gone upstairs to escape the chaos, we climbed the seemingly infinite escalators to street level. Still nothing. After a brief conference, we devised a plan: I would stay put while Brian returned to the platform below. Fifteen minutes later, he reappeared, looking slightly frazzled but accompanied by Lin and Doug, who looked equally sheepish. Apparently, they’d gotten off at the wrong station, realized their mistake, doubled back, and somehow managed to spot Brian waiting patiently on the correct platform. Crisis averted.

By this point, we were all sweaty, tired, hungry, and mildly cranky—but thankfully, salvation was near. Our Airbnb turned out to be just a short walk from the metro, nestled in a charming old building on a tree-lined street. Our hostess greeted us warmly

and gave us a tour of the stunning apartment, which was clearly owned by artists. Every corner screamed creativity—from the hand-painted murals to the quirky furniture—and it was exactly the kind of place you'd want to hole up in after surviving the Russian railway system.

Once she left, Doug collapsed dramatically into a chair. "I'm starving," he declared, "but too exhausted to move."

"Never fear!" I proclaimed, whipping out several bags of food I'd purchased earlier at the station. Inside were flaky pastries filled with either potato or cheese and spinach—a Russian twist on burek. I laid them triumphantly on the table like a medieval knight presenting spoils of war.

"Well done," Lin said with genuine admiration, already heading toward the kettle to make tea.

And so, we found ourselves gathered around the kitchen table, savoring a leisurely late breakfast while discussing our plans for St. Petersburg. Despite the hectic morning, an undeniable sense of camaraderie lingered in the air. Sure, we'd encountered our share of mishaps, but isn't that what makes a trip truly unforgettable?

The rest of the day was spent tackling mundane chores, like doing laundry. Later in the afternoon, we ventured out to explore the neighborhood around our apartment. Eventually, we stumbled upon a cozy pub where we indulged in refreshing gin

and tonics. We rounded off the evening with a simple dinner before making our way back to the apartment and calling it a night.

The next day dawned sunny—promising a hot day. The four of us gathered around the small kitchen table in our rented apartment, sipping coffee and nibbling on toast that was slightly too crunchy thanks to Brian’s overzealous approach to using the toaster.

“Alright team,” Lin said, spreading jam with precision across her slice of bread, “today we’re visiting the Peter and Paul Fortress. I’ve planned everything.”

Doug raised an eyebrow, his mouth full of toast crumbs. “Planned everything? That sounds suspiciously organized for you, Lin.”

Lin shot him a look but couldn’t help smiling. “Yes, Doug. Planned. No zip-lining into rivers or singing opera at random strangers today, okay?”

“I make no promises,” Doug replied with a wink.

Brian leaned back in his chair, scrolling through his phone. “GPS says it’s about a twenty-minute walk from here. Should be easy enough.”

I groaned. “Easy enough? Remember what happened when you followed your GPS in Yekaterinburg? We ended up walking in

circles for forty-five minutes before realizing we were already where we needed to be.”

“That wasn’t my fault!” Brian protested. “The streets were confusing!”

“And yet,” I teased, “you still insist on being our navigator.”

Lin interrupted before things could escalate further. “Enough bickering. Let’s just go. It’s a beautiful morning, and I don’t want to waste it arguing about directions.”

We finished our breakfast quickly, grabbed water bottles, hats, and sunscreen (because yes, Russia can get scorching), and headed out into the bright sunshine. As we walked toward the fortress, we passed rows of stunning buildings—pastel-colored facades adorned with intricate moldings and ornate balconies. Each one seemed like it belonged on a postcard.

“This city is incredible,” I said, pausing to take a photo of a particularly grand building. “Did you know St. Petersburg was founded by Peter the Great in 1703? He wanted to create a ‘window to Europe’—a modern capital that would rival cities like Amsterdam and Paris.”

Doug pretended to yawn dramatically. “Oh great, here comes the history lesson.”

I ignored him. “Anyway, Peter moved the capital from Moscow to St. Petersburg because he believed this location would give

Russia better access to trade routes. But it came at a cost—the swampy land made construction incredibly difficult, and thousands of workers died building the city.”

Lin nodded approvingly. “Exactly why we’re visiting the Peter and Paul Fortress—it’s the original citadel of the city. It symbolizes the beginning of St. Petersburg.”

As we approached the Neva River, we paused on one of the many bridges spanning its wide expanse. The water sparkled under the sun, reflecting the golden domes of nearby cathedrals. Boats drifted lazily along the surface, their wakes rippling outward.

“Look at that view,” Brian murmured, snapping photos with his phone. “It’s breathtaking.”

“It really is,” I agreed. “And see those spires over there? That’s the Admiralty Building. Back in Peter the Great’s time, it was the heart of Russia’s naval power.”

Doug squinted at the distant structure. “So... basically, Peter built himself a giant fort and then stuck a bunch of fancy buildings around it?”

“In layman’s terms, yes,” I said dryly. “Though I’d argue it’s more nuanced than that.”

We crossed the bridge and soon arrived at the Peter and Paul Fortress. Its massive walls loomed above us, weathered by

centuries of wind and rain. Inside, we wandered through cobblestone courtyards and explored various museums housed within the fort.

“The fortress served multiple purposes,” I explained as we strolled past old cannons and statues. “Initially, it was designed to protect the city from Swedish attacks during the Great Northern War. Later, it became a political prison—some pretty famous figures were held here, including Dostoevsky and Trotsky.”

Lin chimed in, consulting her guidebook. “And let’s not forget the cathedral! The Peter and Paul Cathedral is where most of Russia’s tsars are buried.”

Sure enough, as we entered the cathedral, we found ourselves surrounded by elaborate tombs and gilded icons. The air smelled faintly of incense, and the sunlight streaming through stained-glass windows cast colorful patterns on the floor.

After spending hours exploring every corner of the fortress, we stopped for lunch at a cozy café tucked away in one of the quieter courtyards. Over plates smoked salmon and salad, we debated whether Peter the Great had been a visionary genius or a tyrant who pushed his people too far.

“He definitely had ambition,” Lin said diplomatically. “But ambition doesn’t always mean kindness.”

“True,” I agreed. “Still, you have to admire how much he transformed Russia.”

By the time we left the fortress, the afternoon heat had settled over the city. We wandered down to the riverbank, where locals lounged on the grass or splashed in the water. Some brave souls were even swimming as while the day was hot the water was still very chilly.

“Look at them,” Doug said, shaking his head as he pointed to a group of teenagers diving off a dock. “They’re absolutely mad.”

Lin smirked, leaning back against the warm grass. “Mad? You’re one to talk, Doug. Don’t forget your little adventure in Lake Baikal—five degrees Celsius, wasn’t it? And you called *that* refreshing.”

Doug shot her a glare but couldn’t suppress a grin. “That was different. That was survival. This?” He gestured toward the river. “This is just showing off.”

“They’re Russian,” Brian chimed in with a shrug. “Crazy is practically their national sport.”

We all laughed, watching as another daring teenager plunged into the water with a whoop, sending ripples across the surface. Despite the heat pressing down on us, there was something invigorating about the scene—a reminder that sometimes, madness has its own kind of charm.

We bought ice cream from a nearby vendor and sat on a bench overlooking the river. The cool treat was a welcome relief from the sun, though none of us felt inclined to join the swimmers.

Eventually, we decided to head back toward our apartment. Along the way, we stumbled upon a lively park filled with families, musicians, and street performers. Brian spotted a bar with outdoor seating and suggested stopping for drinks.

“How about gin and tonics?” he proposed. “Something light and refreshing?”

No one objected. We claimed a table under a shady tree and ordered our drinks. As we sipped them, we marveled at how vibrant the city felt—even in the late afternoon, there was energy everywhere.

“This place is amazing,” Lin said softly, gazing out at the park. “It’s so different from anywhere else we’ve been on this trip.”

“It’s got character,” Doug agreed. “And good food. Speaking of which...” He glanced at his watch. “Anyone hungry?”

We all laughed, knowing full well that Brian would never turn down an opportunity to eat. Sure enough, he perked up immediately. “There’s a burger joint not far from here. Casual, cheap, and supposedly delicious.”

Tired but content, we made our way to the restaurant. The burgers turned out to be exactly what we needed after a long day of sightseeing—simple, satisfying, and utterly delicious.

As we walked home afterward, the sky began to shift into shades of pink and orange. The city lights flickered on, casting a warm glow over the streets.

“You know,” I said, breaking the comfortable silence, “I think this might be my favorite stop so far.”

“Mine too,” Lin admitted. “There’s something magical about St. Petersburg.”

Doug grinned. “Maybe it’s the lack of frozen lakes to jump into.”

We all laughed, the sound echoing softly in the evening air. For a moment, everything felt perfect—the camaraderie, the adventure, the beauty of the world around us. And as we stepped inside our apartment, ready to collapse into bed, I couldn’t help but feel grateful for this journey and these friends who made it unforgettable.

The second day in St. Petersburg dawned hot and sticky, the kind of heat that clings to your skin like an unwelcome hug. Even before we stepped out of our apartment—a cozy little flat tucked away on a quiet street—I could feel the humidity pressing against my face as if it had been waiting all night just for us. Doug, ever the optimist, declared it “perfect weather for adventure” while Lin rolled her eyes and muttered something

about needing sunscreen. Brian was already scrolling through his phone, no doubt looking up restaurants where he could indulge in yet another plate of pelmeni or some other local delicacy.

After a quick debate over whether breakfast should be at a traditional Russian café (Brian's vote) or somewhere more modern (Lin's preference), we settled on a compromise—a sleek little spot around the corner from our apartment. Doug claimed the cafe was called *Café Noir*, although how he knew that when it was written in Russian remained a mystery. It was one of those places that looked like it belonged in Berlin rather than St. Petersburg, all glass walls and minimalist furniture. The menu was written in Cyrillic script, but Google Translate came to the rescue once again. Doug decided to order using charades instead, flapping his arms wildly when trying to mime pancakes. When they arrived—golden, fluffy, and topped with fresh berries—we cheered loudly enough to make the barista glance up from behind the counter.

As we sipped our coffees, Lin reached into her bag and pulled out four small slips of paper triumphantly. “Skip-the-line tickets,” she announced with a grin. We erupted into cheers so loud that nearby patrons turned to look. Skip-the-line tickets were practically gold dust here; everyone knew how long the queues could get at the Hermitage. Lin basked in the praise,

clearly pleased with herself. “Research pays off,” she said smugly, tucking the tickets back into her purse.

With full stomachs and caffeinated enthusiasm, we set off toward Palace Square. Our route took us through some of the most beautiful streets in St. Petersburg, lined with pastel-colored buildings adorned with intricate moldings and wrought-iron balconies. Each corner revealed a new architectural gem: a cathedral with golden domes glinting in the sunlight, a park filled with families lounging under shady trees, and even a vintage tram rattling along its tracks. Doug couldn’t resist breaking into song as we walked, belting out lines from *Fiddler on the Roof* in his best faux-Russian accent.

“Doug, please stop,” Lin pleaded, though I noticed the corners of her mouth twitching upward. “You’re going to scare off the locals.”

“Nonsense!” Doug replied cheerfully. “They love me.”

By the time we reached Palace Square, we were all buzzing with anticipation—not just for the museum ahead but also for the sheer beauty of the city itself. As we approached the Winter Palace, I felt my breath catch in my throat. There it stood, sprawling and majestic, its pale green facade gleaming under the summer sun. But what truly stole the show wasn’t just the palace itself—it was the grandeur of Palace Square, the vast open space that seemed to pulse with history and life.

Palace Square is unlike any public square I've ever seen. It's enormous, almost intimidating in its scale, yet somehow inviting. At its center rises the Alexander Column, a towering monument made of red granite and crowned with an angel holding a cross. What fascinates me most about this column is that it stands without any external support—it's simply balanced by its own weight, a testament to 19th-century engineering brilliance. As we craned our necks to admire it, I couldn't help but share a fun fact: the column weighs over 600 tons and was erected in 1834 without the use of modern machinery.

Surrounding the square are architectural masterpieces that tell the story of Russia's imperial past. To one side looms the General Staff Building, its sweeping yellow arc punctuated by a triumphal arch celebrating Russia's victory over Napoleon. On the opposite side sits the Hermitage Theater, a smaller but equally elegant structure that once hosted performances for the tsars. And then there's the Winter Palace itself, dominating the northern edge of the square with its symmetrical perfection and endless rows of windows.

The Winter Palace, now part of the State Hermitage Museum, has a rich and tumultuous history. Originally constructed in the mid-18th century under Empress Elizabeth, it became the official residence of the Russian monarchs. Its opulent interiors were designed to reflect the power and wealth of the Romanov dynasty. During Catherine the Great's reign, the palace

expanded dramatically, both in size and in its collection of art and artifacts. She founded the Hermitage as a private gallery, filling it with treasures acquired from across Europe. Over time, the collection grew exponentially, eventually becoming one of the largest and most prestigious museums in the world.

“It’s like stepping into a dream,” Brian murmured, snapping photos furiously. “Everything feels so... monumental.”

“That’s because it is,” I chimed in, eager to dive deeper into the history. “This square has witnessed some of the most pivotal moments in Russian history. In 1825, it was the site of the Decembrist Revolt, where young officers rose up against Tsar Nicholas I. Many of those rebels were exiled to Siberia after their failed uprising—places like Irkutsk, where we visited the museums dedicated to them. Remember how we walked through those exhibits, seeing the letters and personal belongings that told the story of their ideals and struggles? It was fascinating to trace the arc of their movement—from its fiery beginnings here on this very square to its quiet conclusion thousands of kilometers away in exile.”

I paused for a moment, then continued, “And then, nearly a century later, this square became the stage for another revolution that would reshape Russia forever. In 1917, Bolshevik revolutionaries stormed the Winter Palace during the October Revolution, effectively ending centuries of Romanov rule. That

event marked the beginning of an entirely new era, one that would have profound consequences not just for Russia but for the entire world.”

Lin nodded thoughtfully. “It’s strange to think about how much bloodshed happened right here. Now it’s just tourists and pigeons.”

I added, “And yet, standing here makes you reflect on how far-reaching these events were. Those same Decembrists who once stood defiantly on this square ended up shaping culture and thought even in exile. Their legacy lives on—not just in places like Irkutsk but also in the way they inspired future generations to dream of change. And maybe, in some small way, their ideals echoed through time, influencing even the revolutionaries of 1917. History has a way of connecting us across centuries, doesn’t it?”

“Well, mostly tourists,” Doug quipped referring to Lin’s earlier comment, dodging a flock of birds that had taken flight near his feet. “Though I wouldn’t put it past these pigeons to start a coup.”

We laughed, but there was a sobering truth to my observation. Standing in Palace Square, you can’t help but feel the weight of history pressing down on you. Yet despite—or perhaps because of—that heaviness, the square exudes a sense of resilience. Its

beauty remains undiminished, a reminder of both the struggles and triumphs that have shaped this nation.

After soaking in the view, Lin led the way toward the entrance—or so we thought. Instead of heading straight for the grand staircase flanked by golden statues, she veered off down a narrow side street lined with cobblestones. After a few moments of following her blindly, Brian stopped abruptly.

“Uh... Lin?” he asked hesitantly. “Are you sure this is the right way?”

Lin didn’t even turn around. “Of course I’m sure.”

“But there’s nothing here except creepy alleyways,” Doug added, peering suspiciously at a cat lounging in a doorway.

“Oh, relax,” Lin shot back. “Trust me, okay?”

We exchanged skeptical glances but kept walking. Just when I was starting to wonder if we’d wandered into some sort of secret underworld, Lin stopped in front of an unassuming door tucked between two larger buildings. She pushed it open confidently, revealing a hidden courtyard filled with tourists streaming toward a secondary entrance.

“Told you,” she said, flashing a triumphant smile. “This line is shorter.”

Brian groaned. “Why do you always have to take the scenic route?”

Once inside, the sheer scale of the Hermitage hit us like a tidal wave. Room after room stretched endlessly before us, each more opulent than the last. Gold leaf ceilings, intricate frescoes, and gilded chandeliers dazzled the senses. My inner historian couldn't resist pointing out highlights as we went along.

"These bronze horses above the main staircase? They're replicas of ancient Roman sculptures looted by Napoleon," I explained, gesturing dramatically. "And wait until you see the Pavillion Hall—it's modeled after Versailles Hall of Mirrors!"

At the mention of Versailles, Lin raised an eyebrow. "Didn't you say your trip there was terrible?"

"It was horrendous," I admitted. "Crowds everywhere, impossible to move, and half the rooms were closed off for renovations. This feels completely different. Here, everything flows smoothly, and the space itself feels alive."

We lunched beneath the dappled shade of the museum's courtyard café, where sunlight filtered through ancient oaks onto white-clothed tables. A gentle breeze carried the scent of charcoal-grilled meat as Brian took his first bite of shashlik. "This," he announced with the gravity of a man experiencing revelation, "changes everything." The khachapuri disappeared so quickly I barely saw it between his plate and his mouth.

At the next table, Doug had already befriended a young Japanese couple, thrusting his phone in their direction. "...And this was

right after I jumped into Lake Baikal!" he proclaimed, showing them a blurry photo of what appeared to be a pale, shivering figure in glacial waters. The couple nodded politely, their untouched meals forgotten as Doug scrolled through what was clearly becoming an impromptu travel seminar.

"Doug, leave those poor people alone," Lin chided, though the corners of her mouth betrayed her. "You're terrifying them." Her warning came just as Doug attempted to demonstrate - complete with sound effects - exactly how cold the Siberian lake had been.

After lunch, we dove back into the exhibits. By this point, Doug was visibly flagging. "How many Dutch Masters can one museum possibly have?" he grumbled, slumping onto a bench in front of yet another Rembrandt portrait. "I mean, they're great and all, but come on."

"Artistic genius doesn't have a limit," I teased, nudging him playfully.

Despite his complaints, even Doug couldn't help but marvel at the Peacock Clock—a mechanical masterpiece that still functioned perfectly despite being centuries old. Watching the tiny birds preen their feathers and spread their tails elicited gasps from all of us.

By the time we finally emerged from the Hermitage, the heat had gone out of the sun and it was, casting a warm glow over Palace Square. Our legs ached, our feet throbbed, and our brains felt

stuffed to bursting with impressions of beauty and history. Yet none of us wanted the day to end.

As we strolled back toward our apartment, Brian summed it up perfectly: “That was exhausting—but worth every step.”

I nodded in agreement, feeling a deep sense of gratitude for these moments shared with my closest friends. Traveling together wasn’t always easy, but days like this reminded me why we kept coming back for more.

The morning sun filtered through the curtains of our cozy Airbnb apartment, casting a warm glow over the wooden floors. It was our final day in St. Petersburg, and the air buzzed with a mix of excitement and melancholy. We had grown fond of this city—its grandeur, its history, its quirks—and leaving felt like saying goodbye to an old friend.

"Same café for breakfast?" Lin suggested, tucking her well-worn notebook into her bag. The leather cover bore ink smudges from countless museums and cafés where she'd sketched onion domes or scribbled historical tidbits.

Doug's face lit up as he wrestled with his sneakers. "Only if they've got more of those honey-drenched pancakes," he said, already tasting the memory of yesterday's stack.

We spilled onto the street just as dawn's pale fingers stretched across Saint Petersburg's pastel façades. Brian adjusted his hat against the rising sun, its early warmth hinting at the sweltering

afternoon to come. "At this rate, you'll turn into one of those pancakes," he remarked, eyeing Doug's enthusiasm.

His phone screen glowed accusingly as Google Maps insisted on routing us through what our eyes could plainly see was a solid brick wall. "It says there's an alley here," Brian muttered, poking at the phantom passage with growing irritation.

"Your GPS has been wrong more often than a weatherman in London," I chuckled, steering him gently by the elbow. "Just follow the smell of coffee and common sense."

With an exaggerated sigh, Brian pocketed his phone. "Lead on, Magellan. But if we starve circling the block, I'm eating Doug's pancakes first."

The café's striped awning came into view like a mirage, its wrought-iron tables already filling with locals sipping espresso. We claimed our spot to the cheerful clatter of silverware and the rich aroma of brewing coffee - another day of adventures properly fueled.

After breakfast, we made our way to the General Staff Building, one of the most iconic landmarks in St. Petersburg. Its sweeping yellow façade stretched across Palace Square, crowned by a magnificent triumphal arch commemorating Russia's victory over Napoleon in 1812. As we approached, I couldn't help but marvel at its sheer scale and elegance.

“This building is incredible,” I said, pulling out my guidebook. “It used to house the Imperial Army headquarters and later became part of the Hermitage Museum complex. Now it’s home to some of the finest Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art collections in the world.”

Lin nodded enthusiastically. “And look at these columns! They’re Corinthian, right? So ornate.”

“Correct,” I replied, feeling a small swell of pride. “But wait until you see inside—it’s even better.”

Our magic skip-the-queue tickets worked their charm yet again, whisking us past the long line of tourists waiting to enter. Once inside, we were greeted by a breathtaking atrium bathed in natural light streaming through a glass roof. The walls were adorned with masterpieces from Monet, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Matisse.

“This place feels almost surreal,” Doug whispered, standing before Van Gogh’s *Lilac Bush*. “Like stepping into another world.”

“I think I liked this museum better than the main one,” I admitted, gazing around in awe. “If one can say that.”

Lin raised an eyebrow. “Really? You’re choosing modern art over Fabergé eggs?”

“It’s not about choosing,” I clarified. “They’re both amazing, but this feels... different. More intimate, somehow.”

By lunchtime, hunger drove us to a nearby bakery where the smell of freshly baked bread wafted invitingly onto the street. Brian immediately zeroed in on a display of pirozhki—small stuffed buns filled with everything from potatoes to cabbage to meat.

“These are perfect,” he declared, ordering four of them along with slices of rye bread slathered in butter. “Quick, cheap, and delicious. What more could you want?”

After devouring our meal, we headed to the Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood, one of St. Petersburg’s most famous sights. Its colorful onion domes rose dramatically against the gray sky, each one intricately patterned with mosaics depicting biblical scenes.

“The church was built on the exact spot where Emperor Alexander II was assassinated in 1881,” I explained as we craned our necks upward. “It’s designed to resemble traditional Russian Orthodox churches, which makes it stand out compared to the neoclassical buildings surrounding it.”

Inside, the interior was equally stunning. Every inch of wall space was covered in shimmering mosaics, creating a kaleidoscope of colors that seemed to dance in the dim light.

"It's like being inside a jewel box," Lin murmured, snapping photos furiously.

"Or a very expensive Easter egg," Doug quipped, earning an elbow nudge from Lin.

Our next stop was the Eternal Flame in the Field of Mars, where a century of Russian sacrifice flickered in a single granite brazier. "This was Russia's first revolutionary burial ground," I explained, watching the firelight dance across bronze plaques. "They buried heroes of the February and October Revolutions here first... then soldiers from every war since."

Fresh flowers covered memorial slabs bearing dates from 1917 to the present - crimson carnations for the Revolution, blue cornflowers for the Great Patriotic War, white roses recently placed beneath Afghanistan dates, fresh yellow ribbons whispering of more recent losses.. The flame connected them all, one continuous burn through a century of sacrifice.

Doug ran his fingers over a weathered inscription. "So this isn't just about 1917?"

"No," Lin said softly. "It's about how every generation has its martyrs." She pointed to newer wreaths with yellow ribbons - likely for those lost in Ukraine. The memorial didn't distinguish between conflicts; it only remembered the fallen.

We stood silent as an elderly woman in a black headscarf placed a single candle beside the flame. The wind carried its smoke westward, toward the Neva, as if delivering names to the sea.

With the afternoon slipping away, we hurried back to the apartment to freshen up for dinner. Tonight was special—we'd booked a table at an upscale restaurant to celebrate our last night in Russia. Everyone dressed a little nicer than usual, trading jeans for slacks and swapping sneakers for boots.

"Ready?" Lin asked, smoothing her hair in the mirror.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Doug replied, rubbing his hands together in anticipation "Let's eat like royalty."

The restaurant turned out to be everything we hoped for and more. Located in a historic building overlooking the Neva River, it exudes old-world charm with crystal chandeliers, velvet drapes, and candlelit tables. Our server greeted us warmly and recommended dishes featuring local ingredients like sturgeon, mushrooms, and wild berries.

For drinks, we ordered Georgian wine—a nod to Russia's southern neighbor—and raised our glasses in a toast.

"To Russia!" Doug proclaimed. "For showing us unforgettable landscapes, jaw-dropping architecture, and some truly bizarre train snacks."

“And for teaching us that charades really is a universal language,” I added with a laugh.

Just as we clinked glasses, the restaurant owner appeared at our table. A tall man with silver hair and a kind smile, he introduced himself as Ivan.

“I couldn’t help overhearing your toast,” he said, his English accented but clear. “I wanted to thank you for enjoying my country so much. Please, allow me to send you a round of drinks on the house.”

We thanked him profusely, and after delivering our complimentary shots of vodka, he lingered to chat.

“You remind me of when I first traveled abroad,” Ivan confessed. “Seeing my own country through someone else’s eyes made me appreciate it in ways I never expected.”

His words resonated deeply. Over the course of our journey, we’d discovered not only the beauty of Russia but also the warmth of its people. Despite the language barrier and occasional cultural misunderstandings, we’d been welcomed everywhere we went.

As the evening came to an end, we ventured outside into the twilight, which serves as night in late June in Russia. Across the river, the lights of St. Petersburg sparkled, casting the city in shimmering shades of gold and silver.

“What an adventure,” Lin sighed contentedly.

“And we’re only halfway done,” Doug reminded her, grinning.

“Next stop: Azerbaijan!”

We strolled back to the apartment, side by side. Tomorrow would bring new challenges and discoveries, but tonight, we simply embraced the magic of St. Petersburg—one final, unforgettable moment.

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Chapter Ten

Baku Azerbaijan

The alarm shrieked at an hour so early it probably wasn't even recognized by civilized society. Brian responded the only way a human could—by groaning like a wounded animal and fortifying himself under a blanket fortress. “This time of day is a personal attack,” he mumbled, barely audible through layers of cotton and self-pity.

Lin was already up and muttering about her gear's refusal to cooperate in her pack, wrestling her pointy-toed slippers she had bought in Mongolia into a slot so tiny it practically taunted her. She prepped her bag like Indiana Jones gearing up for a zany archaeology dig, ready to dodge booby traps and snag a cursed relic. If I didn't know her, I'd swear she'd outwitted ancient tombs before her morning coffee. Meanwhile, Doug was belting out an obnoxiously chipper cartoon tune, stuffing socks into every crevice of his bag like a hyperactive squirrel hoarding nuts for a doomsday winter.

“We should've booked a later flight,” Brian said with the tired venom of someone betrayed by the sun. He sat up just far enough to shoot Doug a bleary-eyed death glare. “You're suspiciously peppy. I don't trust it.”

Doug beamed like a Labrador on espresso. “But think of the excitement! Navigating a foreign metro system while still half-asleep! It’s thrill-seeking, but with luggage!”

Brian flopped back dramatically. “No thrills until I’ve had coffee. That’s not a request. That’s a warning.”

“You’re such a morning gremlin,” Lin said, tossing him a snack pouch like she was feeding a zoo animal. “Eat something. It might soften your glare.”

“I want caffeine, not squirrel food,” he grunted, catching the pouch with all the enthusiasm of someone handed homework.

Despite the ungodly hour, we left the apartment without incident—no forgotten passports, no missing train tickets, no accidental locking ourselves out. This was a personal best for us. The streets of St. Petersburg were eerily quiet under the soft glow of the never-setting June sun, casting long shadows across the cobblestones. We trudged toward the metro. Our backpacks bounced like conga drums against our spines as we trudged toward the metro.

“My pack feels heavier than usual,” I grumbled, adjusting my straps for the twentieth time.

“Welcome to backpacking,” Brian said sagely. “Where physics is optional, and your bag gains weight just by existing.”

The city felt alive in its own quiet way—a grand, historic place that had been endlessly fascinating but also oddly melancholic. I already missed it, even though we hadn't technically left yet.

The metro ride was, for once, completely uneventful. No wrong stops, no panic-induced dashes to the opposite platform, and no Doug attempting to communicate with locals through interpretive dance. It was almost suspicious how smooth everything was going.

As we sat on the train, Lin pulled out her phone and peered over her glasses. "Our host in Baku has arranged for a driver to pick us up," she announced casually.

Doug looked like someone had just stolen his favorite pair of hiking boots. "What? But we agreed—public transport only!"

"It's just this one time," Lin said firmly, not looking up from her phone. "The apartment is right outside the Old Town gates. And do you really want to navigate a new country's transport system after a flight?"

"That's what we have been doing the whole time, working it out!" Doug replied, his voice rising slightly. "We figured out Russia, didn't we? Why stop now?"

I chimed in before Lin could respond. "Apparently, public transport from the airport is nonexistent—that's why he's sending a car. At least that's what our host mentioned in his email."

Doug crossed his arms even more dramatically, leaning back against the metro seat. "So we're just giving up on principle because it's convenient? What happened to sticking to the rules?"

Brian patted his shoulder sympathetically. "We'll take all the buses you want tomorrow, buddy. Just let me survive today without having to decipher Azerbaijani transit maps."

"I can't believe you're siding with her," Doug muttered, turning to me. "Public transport is sacred!"

"I'm staying neutral," I replied quickly. "Besides, if it means avoiding another one of your charades attempts at the ticket counter, I'll support anything."

Doug gave me a mock glare but couldn't hide the hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Fine. But I'm keeping score. This counts as an exception, and we're not allowed any more until we've tried every other option first."

Lin rolled her eyes but smiled. "Deal. Now can we focus on enjoying Baku instead of arguing about how we got here?"

Doug nodded reluctantly, though his expression suggested he was already plotting his next public transport adventure. For now, though, the compromise stood—and so did the promise of a day full of exploration ahead.

At the airport, the first order of business was coffee—for Brian, obviously. He was teetering dangerously close to existential despair without it. We found a café, ordered breakfast, and sat down for what would be our final meal in Russia.

"I can't believe we're leaving," I said, taking a bite of a buttery croissant.

"We'll come back," Lin stated matter-of-factly, flipping through her notes.

Doug nodded enthusiastically. "Absolutely. Next time, we're ditching those dreary Dutch masters for some proper adventures—hiking gnarly trails or boating on the Neva River, gliding past palaces like we're in a Russian fairytale."

"That's not how itineraries work," Lin sighed, shaking her head, as if Doug's wild plans were a personal affront to her meticulously color-coded travel binder.

Brian, now halfway through his second cup of coffee, finally began resembling a functioning human being. "I will say, for a country where we spoke approximately four words of the language, Russia treated us very well."

"Agreed," I said. "The people were amazing."

Doug raised his coffee mug. "To Russia: land of incredible trains, friendly strangers, and lakes cold enough to nearly kill a man."

We clinked our cups together, full of nostalgia and caffeine, before boarding our Aeroflot flight.

The flight was blissfully smooth—no delays, no lost luggage, no Doug trying to charm the flight attendants with Russian songs he barely knew. When we stepped off the plane, the warm air of Azerbaijan enveloped us, a striking contrast to the cooler climate we had left behind in Russia.

Despite the heat that had begun to creep into St. Petersburg during our final days there, this was different—a humid, almost tropical warmth that clung to our skin as we made our way into the terminal. The city outside shimmered in the late afternoon sun, its skyline a blend of ancient minarets and modern glass structures, each telling their own story of resilience and progress. It was clear from the very first moments that Azerbaijan was going to be unlike anything we had experienced so far.

In the arrivals hall, a man held a sign with Lin's name. Our driver. Doug looked at him like he'd just been betrayed by his own shadow.

"I could've figured out the bus," he grumbled as we piled into the car.

The drive into Baku was breathtaking—glimpses of the Caspian Sea, grand boulevards, and sandstone buildings glowing gold in the sunlight. It wasn't long before we arrived at our apartment,

located just outside the gates of the Old Town. Perfectly situated for exploring, it was charming, cozy, and exactly what we needed after a long journey.

After dumping our bags, we wasted no time heading out to explore. The Old Town, or Icheri Sheher, was a labyrinth of narrow cobblestone streets lined with ancient mosques, crumbling fortifications, and tiny shops selling intricately woven carpets and delicate jewelry. As we wandered, I couldn't resist sharing a bit of history.

"Did you know," I began, "that Baku has been inhabited since the Bronze Age? The name itself comes from 'Bādkūba,' meaning 'wind-pounded city,' because of the strong winds that blow through here."

Lin nodded approvingly. "And it's also known as the 'City of Flames' because of the natural gas seeps that used to burn on the surface."

"Wow," Doug said, pretending to be impressed. "You two should start a trivia show."

We stopped at a quaint café tucked away in a corner of the Old Town. The smell of freshly baked pastries wafted through the air, tempting us inside. Brian, predictably, led the charge. "Look at this cake!" he exclaimed, pointing to a display case filled with golden treats. "It looks divine."

We ordered coffee and slices of traditional baklava. But when the bill arrived, Doug nearly choked on his drink. "Are you kidding me?" he sputtered. "This costs as much as dinner in Moscow!"

Lin patted his arm sympathetically. "Relax, Doug. It's worth it."

"Not according to my wallet," he muttered, referring back to the price for the rest of the day whenever someone suggested stopping for another treat.

"Maybe you should save your complaints for something important," Brian teased. "Like why there aren't any kebabs on this menu."

"Kebabs always come later," I reassured him. "Patience, my friend."

Continuing our exploration of the Old Town, we marveled at the Maiden Tower, its cylindrical shape standing tall against the skyline. Lin regaled us with stories of its mysterious origins—some believed it was built as a defensive structure, others claimed it held spiritual significance. Whatever its purpose, it was undeniably impressive.

As evening approached, hunger finally drove us to seek out dinner. Brian, naturally, took the lead, steering us toward a restaurant nestled in a leafy courtyard. The menu featured kebabs, salads, and other local specialties. We ordered enough food to feed a small army and settled in to enjoy the meal.

Over plates piled high with tender meat and crisp vegetables, conversation turned to our plans for the next day in Baku. "We should visit the Flame Towers," Lin suggested, consulting her notes. "They're supposed to be incredible at night."

"And maybe check out the Baku Old City for its historic charm," I added. "Imagine walking through those narrow streets where people have lived for centuries."

Doug grinned mischievously. "And I'll find some locals to chat with and learn about their stories along the way."

Lin smiled warmly. "That sounds more meaningful than your usual antics."

Brian chuckled. "Just promise me you won't end up starting an impromptu dance party with them—though knowing you, Doug, that might actually happen."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Doug replied innocently, though none of us believed him for a second. "But who knows? The locals might just teach us something amazing!"

As the night wore on, we made plans and laughed about the adventures ahead, knowing that whatever came our way, we'd face it together. With full bellies and tired feet, we returned to our apartment, already dreaming of the next day's discoveries.

By the time we got back to the apartment, the energy levels were dipping fast. Brian slumped onto the couch, letting out a

contented sigh. "That was good," he said, patting his stomach. "Now I can sleep peacefully."

Doug flopped onto the floor, stretching out like a cat. "Sleep sounds amazing. Though I might wake up in the middle of the night thinking about that ridiculous cake price."

"Stop obsessing," Lin said, rolling her eyes. "It's done and gone."

"But still," Doug persisted. "Forty-three manat for a dessert? That's highway robbery!" Doug sputtered, then paused, squinting as he calculated. "Wait, that's about thirty-nine Australian dollars—still a rip-off!"

"It's called inflation," I joked. "Welcome to the global economy."

"Speaking of which," Lin interjected, glancing at her watch, "we should probably set alarms for tomorrow. There's so much to see, and I don't want to waste a single moment."

"Fine," Brian groaned, getting up to grab his phone. "But if anyone tries to make me leave before sunrise again, I'm staying put."

Doug grinned. "Don't worry, Brian. Tomorrow's all about public transport—and maybe a little less cake."

With that, we each retreated to our corners of the apartment, exhausted but exhilarated, ready to dive deeper into the mysteries and wonders of Azerbaijan.

The next morning, we woke up feeling refreshed after a solid night's sleep. The apartment was bathed in the golden light of the rising sun, and for once, Brian didn't complain about the early hour. Doug was already pacing around the living room, tying his hiking boots. "Let's make this a day to remember!" he exclaimed, his enthusiasm almost palpable. "Baku, here we come!"

Lin rolled her eyes but smiled. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Today's all about exploring Baku properly. I've already planned out five must-see spots, so buckle up."

"Five?" Doug groaned. "That sounds exhausting. Can we stop for coffee halfway through?"

"I'll make sure there's a café near spot number three," Lin promised with a smirk.

Our first stop was the iconic Maiden Tower, an ancient cylindrical structure standing tall against the skyline. As we approached, Doug immediately struck a dramatic pose in front of it. "Behold!" he declared, throwing his arms wide. "The guardian of Baku!"

Brian snorted. "More like the tourist magnet of Baku. Look at all these people taking selfies."

Ignoring him, Lin began her history lesson. "The Maiden Tower dates back to at least the 12th century, though some historians believe parts of it are even older. Its purpose remains a mystery—some say it was used for defense, others think it had religious significance. There are also legends about a maiden who threw herself off the top to escape forced marriage."

"That's morbid," I commented, shuddering slightly.

"But romantic!" Doug countered, striking another pose. "Can someone take a picture of me pretending to leap dramatically?"

Lin sighed but pulled out her phone. "Fine, but only if you promise not to actually leap."

After climbing to the top, we marveled at the panoramic view of the city. "This is incredible," I said, pointing toward the Caspian Sea in the distance. "It's like the whole world opens up before you."

"Yeah, except my legs feel like jelly after those stairs," Brian muttered, leaning against the wall.

As we descended, Doug couldn't resist adding his two cents. "You know, this tower reminds me of something—a lighthouse, maybe? Or a beacon calling sailors home."

Lin nodded thoughtfully. "Some theories suggest it might have been used as a navigational aid for ships on the Caspian. Isn't that fascinating?"

"Fascinating or just practical?" Brian quipped. "Either way, I'm glad we don't have to climb any higher."

Our second stop was the Palace of the Shirvanshahs, nestled within the Old Town. This historic complex was once the residence of the rulers of Shirvan, a medieval kingdom that existed in present-day Azerbaijan. As we wandered through its courtyards and halls, Lin regaled us with stories of the dynasty that once ruled here.

"This palace wasn't just a home—it was a center of culture and learning," she explained. "There's even a mosque and a bathhouse within the grounds."

Doug whistled. "So they had everything they needed right here? That's impressive."

"And practical," Brian added, eyeing the intricate stone carvings. "Look at this craftsmanship. Whoever built this knew what they were doing."

We spent nearly an hour exploring the palace, marveling at the delicate details carved into the walls and the serene atmosphere of the courtyard. At one point, Doug tried to mimic the call to prayer coming from the nearby mosque, earning himself a sharp elbow from Lin.

"Stop embarrassing us," she whispered, though she couldn't hide her smile.

By the time we finished exploring the palace, the midday heat was starting to creep in. We decided it was time for lunch and headed to a nearby park where we'd spotted picnic tables earlier. A local vendor sold us freshly made sandwiches filled with tender chicken, crisp lettuce, and tangy pickles.

"This is amazing," Brian said between bites. "Who needs fancy restaurants when you can eat like this?"

Doug nodded enthusiastically. "And no one's judging me for eating too fast. Win-win."

Lin laughed. "Just don't spill anything on your shirt, Doug. We still have places to go."

As we sat under the shade of a tree, I couldn't help but reflect on how different Baku felt compared to the cities we'd visited in Russia. "It's so vibrant here," I said. "There's something about this place—it feels more Middle Eastern and less European, you know? Like we've stepped into an entirely new world."

"Definitely," Brian agreed, wiping sweat from his brow. "And it's not just the heat; it's the colors, the architecture, even the smells. Everything feels warmer, brighter, livelier."

Lin nodded thoughtfully, adjusting her sunglasses. "Exactly. In Russia, everything was grand and historic, but there was also this sense of melancholy, especially in those quiet summer evenings. Here, though, it's all energy and life. It suits us perfectly."

Doug chimed in with a grin. "Yeah, because nothing says 'adventure' like dodging taxis and eating street food in 30-degree heat!"

"Speak for yourself," Lin replied dryly. "I'll pass on the taxi-dodging part, thank you very much."

We all laughed, basking in the warmth of the moment—and the sun—as we prepared ourselves for whatever else Baku had in store.

Doug grinned mischievously. "Or maybe because I haven't drowned anyone in a freezing lake yet."

"Touché," Lin replied dryly.

After lunch, we moved on to our third destination: the Flame Towers. These futuristic skyscrapers, designed to resemble flickering flames, had become symbols of modern Baku. Standing in their shadow, we couldn't help but be impressed by their sheer size and design.

"They look like something out of a sci-fi movie," I remarked, tilting my head back to take in the full height.

"And they're lit up at night to look like real flames," Lin added. "I'm looking forward to seeing them later."

Doug grinned mischievously. "Maybe we can find a café nearby and watch the show from afar."

"Speaking of which," Brian interrupted, pulling out his phone, "there's one right over there." He pointed to a cozy café with outdoor seating. "Let's grab some tea and rest our feet."

Once seated, Doug couldn't resist teasing Brian about his love for comfort. "You know, if you weren't so obsessed with sitting down every chance you get, we could cover twice as much ground."

Brian shot him a playful glare. "And miss out on all the best snacks and drinks? Never."

While sipping our tea, Lin pulled out her phone and showed us pictures of the evening light show at the Flame Towers. "It's synchronized with music," she explained. "Apparently, it's quite spectacular."

"Perfect," Doug said, rubbing his hands together. "I'll bring my singing voice."

"Please don't," Lin groaned. "One bad performance per trip is enough."

Our fourth stop was the Carpet Museum, a building shaped like a rolled-up carpet—a nod to Azerbaijan's rich tradition of weaving. Inside, we marveled at the vibrant patterns and intricate designs displayed across multiple floors.

"These carpets tell stories," Lin said, pointing to one with geometric motifs. "Each pattern has meaning—some represent nature, others symbolize protection or good fortune."

Doug leaned closer, squinting at a particularly colorful piece. "Does this one mean 'beware of the maniac who keeps singing country songs'?"

Lin chuckled. "No, but maybe we should commission one that does."

As we explored the museum, Brian became fascinated by the process of making carpets. "It's incredible how much work goes into each one," he said, watching a video demonstration. "I never realized how labor-intensive it is."

"Exactly," Lin agreed. "That's why they're considered works of art—and why they're so valuable."

By the time we left the museum, the late afternoon sun was casting long shadows across the city.

Our final stop for the day was a local restaurant serving traditional Azerbaijani cuisine. The dishes were cooked in terracotta pots, giving them a unique earthy flavor. We ordered dolma (stuffed grape leaves), kebabs, and piti (a hearty lamb stew), along with fresh bread and salad.

"This is incredible," I said, savoring a bite of the tender kebab. "I could eat this every day."

Doug nodded enthusiastically. "And if anyone complains about the price, remind them how much cheaper it is than that ridiculous cake yesterday."

Brian raised an eyebrow. "Still holding a grudge about that, huh?"

"Absolutely," Doug replied with mock seriousness. "It's a matter of principle."

Lin chuckled but quickly refocused the discussion. "Alright, let's talk about what's next. We can't stay here forever, as much as I'd love to." She pulled out her notebook and flipped through her carefully organized pages. "We should definitely visit the mud volcanoes—they're supposed to be fascinating. Imagine little bubbling cauldrons of mud scattered across the landscape. And after that, we can head to Gobustan to see the rock carvings."

"And maybe spend a night somewhere along the way?" I added, leaning back in my chair. "It would be nice to break up the trip and not rush back in one go."

Brian perked up at the idea of slowing down. "That sounds perfect. A night under the stars, away from the city lights? Sign me up."

Doug, however, frowned slightly. "What about transportation? Are there buses or trains we can take?"

Lin hesitated before answering. "Unfortunately, public transport to these places isn't very reliable. Most people hire a driver for the day—it's the easiest way to get around without worrying about schedules or missed connections."

Doug groaned dramatically, sitting upright in his seat. "A driver again? Lin, you're killing me here! First the airport, now this? What happened to sticking to our rules?"

"It's not like we're doing it for fun," Lin shot back, though she couldn't hide a small smile. "These places are off the beaten path. If we want to see them properly, hiring a driver is the best option. Plus, think of all the time we'll save!"

Doug crossed his arms stubbornly. "I still don't like it. What if we miss out on some hidden gem because we're stuck in a car instead of exploring on foot?"

Brian patted his shoulder sympathetically. "We'll make sure to stop at any interesting spots along the way. And who knows? Maybe the driver will know some shortcuts or secret locations we wouldn't find otherwise."

"That's true," Lin added. "Our host mentioned that many drivers in Baku are locals who know the area well. They might even share stories or recommend places we wouldn't have thought of. I chimed in, waving my hands like I'd just cracked the code to the perfect trip. "Forget looping back to Baku—let's strike out toward Georgia, meandering in a gloriously vague direction,

hitting quirky sights along the way. Picture it: a few days of adventure, bouncing between a hired driver and some rickety local buses, stumbling across hidden gems like we're in a travel montage."

"Sounds like a plan," Lin said, perking up, her travel binder practically vibrating with possibility. "We could hit the mud baths for a messy detour, swing through Ganja for a dose of history, then roll into Sheki to gawk at its fairy-tale palace before sneaking across Georgia's remote northern border like the intrepid explorers we are."

Doug and Brian bobbed their heads like a pair of overeager dashboard figurines, grinning at the prospect of our haphazard Georgian odyssey. "Brilliant!" Doug declared, probably already imagining himself heroically navigating a creaky bus or wrestling a mud bath. Brian, with a rare smirk, added, "As long as there's no more 'cultural' painting nonsense, I'm in."

With the plan tentatively set, we paid the bill and stepped back into the warm evening air. As we walked back toward our apartment, the city buzzed around us—a mix of ancient history and modern energy that seemed uniquely Azerbaijani.

"I can't wait to see those mud volcanoes," Brian said, rubbing his hands together. "Do you think they'll let us bathe inside one?"

Doug grinned mischievously. "If they don't, I'll probably try anyway. Can't resist a good adventure."

Lin rolled her eyes but smiled nonetheless. "Just don't blame me when you end up covered in mud and stuck halfway up a hill."

The group laughed as we continued our journey home, already dreaming of the adventures awaiting us beyond the gates of Baku. Whether by bus, train, or—reluctantly—car, we knew one thing for certain: the road ahead promised to be just as exciting as the ones we'd traveled so far.

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Chapter Eleven

Gobustan Azerbaijan

Two days later, we were rattling along in a minivan that smelled like it had been steeped in garlic and the faint, unmistakable whiff of barnyard animals, as if a few rogue goats had set up camp in the back seat before we piled in. Yuri, our driver, turned out to be a gleeful Russian transplant with a penchant for belting out Russian folk songs at operatic volume, weaving through potholes like a stunt driver auditioning for a *Mad Max* sequel, much to Doug's unbridled delight.

Doug, our resident maestro of mayhem, had unearthed Yuri in a dingy Baku teashop, where a single cup of chai—overbrewed and suspiciously murky—had apparently forged an unbreakable bond. Doug stormed back to us, eyes blazing like he'd just stumbled upon the Holy Grail in a kebab shop, proclaiming Yuri the key to our grand Azerbaijani escapade. Lin, ever the skeptic, stared at him like he'd just proposed skydiving without parachutes.

"You're saying we're entrusting our lives to a guy you met over tea?" Lin asked, her arms folded so tight they could've doubled as a medieval chastity belt.

"Lin, chill!" Doug grinned, swatting her doubts away like gnats. "Yuri's a legend! Fluent English, ace driver—allegedly—and he knows Azerbaijan like the back of his hand."

“Famous last words,” Lin muttered, probably picturing her epitaph: “*Here lies Lin, victim of Doug’s teashop gambles.*”

Fast-forward 48 hours, and there we were, packed like sardines into Yuri’s rattling deathtrap of a minivan, hurtling toward Gobustan National Park as he unleashed a full-throated Russian folk ballad that could have woken hibernating bears. Doug, our self-proclaimed chaos conductor, joined in with the gusto of a man who’d mistaken the journey for a Eurovision audition, warbling with such reckless abandon it was a wonder the windows didn’t crack. Lin, wedged in the back, clutched her seatbelt and fixed them with a glare that could’ve fossilized the ancient petroglyphs we were headed to see, as if their caterwauling duet was a direct assault on her dwindling patience.

For the uninitiated—likely 99.9% of the planet—Gobustan is a UNESCO-crowned gem an hour south of Baku, flaunting petroglyphs older than your grandma’s grudges, mud volcanoes burping like cosmic indigestion, and landscapes so otherworldly you’d expect a Martian hitchhiker. It’s the kind of place where you half-anticipate tripping over a UFO or a gang of alien goats. Once Yuri and Doug finally wound down their ear-shattering rendition of some Russian folk banger—to the collective relief of our eardrums—Doug, predictably, had already commandeered the shotgun seat, unleashing a verbal avalanche of our past misadventures on Yuri like a man possessed by a travelogue demon. Doug waxed lyrically about our Gobi Desert

adventure (“We were one dune away from mastering the art of sand surfing!”), the Trans-Siberian train’s incredible journey (“You haven’t lived until you’ve napped on a bench soaked in history!”), and, for reasons only he could justify, the epic tale of his neighbor Jack’s rogue rooster. “This feathered fiend chased me like I’d swiped its prized corn stash!” Doug flailed dramatically, nearly launching Yuri’s dashboard bobblehead into orbit. “I’m dangling from a tree, and Jack’s just laughing like it’s a bloomin’ sitcom!”

Brian leaned over, his smirk sharp enough to cut glass. “Think Yuri’s keeping up with this drivel?”

I stole a glance at Yuri’s face, locked in a polite, vacant nod that could’ve won awards for enduring nonsense. “Not a hope,” I whispered. “He’s got that ‘smile through the madness’ look down to an art.”

Lin, squashed between two packs in the back, let out a snort, her amusement barely masking her exasperation. “What’s Jack’s deranged rooster got to do with petroglyphs? Is Doug suggesting the ancients were carving poultry dramas into the rocks?” Her raised eyebrow could’ve chiseled its own cave art.

Yuri, seizing a lull, redirected with the finesse of a diplomat. His English was crisp, laced with a Russian accent that hinted at his Moscow roots before his family relocated to Azerbaijan. He spoke warmly of his dual heritage, “one foot in each country,”

though Doug's barnyard epic might've made him question his career choices.

The drive to Gobustan was mostly smooth, if you ignore the potholes that tossed us like salad. Yuri dished out Azerbaijani history, pointed out landmarks, and fielded our questions with saintly patience. Doug, undaunted, kept the entertainment rolling. "Ever skinny-dipped in Lake Baikal, Yuri? Five degrees Celsius, mate—felt like a polar bear's revenge, but the vodka chaser was divine!"

Lin muttered under her breath, "He was *not* naked."

Brian grinned. "Why let the truth get in the way of a good story?"

Yuri blinked, his face a mix of amusement and mild alarm, like he was sizing up whether Doug was a thrill-seeker or just unhinged. "Crazy Australian," he mumbled, chuckling, probably praying the park would distract him.

When we finally spilled out at Gobustan, the landscape hit like a sci-fi movie set: rocky hills, scrubby patches, and distant mud volcanoes puffing smoke like lazy dragons. Yuri snapped into guide mode, arms sweeping wide.

"Welcome to Gobustan!" he declared, his voice brimming with pride. "Petroglyphs here—thousands of years old, some from 10,000 BC! Hunters, dancers, horses, boats. This was their

canvas, their sacred place. These rocks, they tell stories of ancient lives—how they hunted, prayed, and survived.”

He led us along dusty trails, the sun baking the ground like a cosmic oven, and pointed to a cluster of carvings etched into weathered stone.

“See here,” Yuri said, crouching beside a slab, his accent thick with reverence. “This is hunter with bow, chasing deer. Look at the lines—so precise! They used flint tools, no machines, just hands and time. Nearby, women dance in circle—maybe a ritual for good harvest or safe hunt. And there,” he gestured to a crude boat with stick-figure rowers, “they fished the Caspian, long before Baku was even a dream. These aren’t just pictures; they’re a window to souls who walked here 12,000 years ago.”

His eyes sparkled as he traced a carving of a horse, its legs mid-gallop. “Horses were power, freedom. This one? Maybe a chief’s prized steed or a spirit animal. Every mark meant something—life, death, hope.” He stood, dusting his hands. “UNESCO protects this now, but locals always knew it was holy. You feel it, yes? The rocks, they hum with old voices.”

Doug, predictably, couldn’t resist stealing the stage. At a petroglyph of hunters clutching bows, he struck a dramatic pose, brandishing an imaginary weapon.

“Behold, Doug, scourge of Gobustan! Tremble, ye wild beasts!” He mimed firing an arrow, complete with a theatrical “whoosh” sound effect.

Brian snorted. “Those hunters were probably fit. You look like you’re auditioning for a dad-bod calendar.”

“Rude!” Doug shot back, undeterred, and attempted a leap onto a nearby boulder to “survey his domain.” He misjudged the height, flailing mid-air before landing in a dusty heap.

Lin doubled over, cackling. “You okay, mighty hunter?”

“Totally planned,” Doug wheezed, brushing dirt off his shorts. “Performance art, you philistines

“Sure,” Brian deadpanned, snapping a photo for the group’s growing “Doug Fails” collection.

Yuri chuckled, shaking his head. “Careful, Doug. These hunters didn’t fall off rocks. They’d laugh at you, then offer you tea.” He waved us onward, pointing out more carvings—a bull with curved horns, a sun symbol, even a faint human figure that might’ve been a shaman. “Each one’s a puzzle,” he said. “We guess their meaning, but the truth? Only the ancients know.”

We gawked at the carvings, snapping pics like paparazzi at a red carpet. Brian squinted at one. “Deer or goat?”

“Deer,” I said, pointing to antlers. “Goats don’t prance like that.”

“Unless they’re Doug’s circus goats,” Lin quipped. “Bet they juggle.”

Then came the mud volcanoes—over 300 scattered across Azerbaijan, with Gobustan’s finest gurgling like primordial soup pots. Not true volcanoes, they’re called so because their bubbling eruptions of cold, sulfurous sludge resemble volcanic outbursts. Driven by methane gas and tectonic shifts, these geological wonders range from tiny, fizzing mounds to massive cones up to 700 meters tall, creating alien landscapes that have captivated scientists and artists for centuries.

The Mud Volcanoes Tourism Complex, shiny and new since June 2024, keeps visitors safe with boardwalks, a museum, and strict no-trespassing vibes due to gas hazards and sinkhole risks.

Yuri gestured at a gurgling mound. “Active. Smells bad, but locals say good for skin. Old remedy.”

Doug, naturally, saw his moment. Before we could blink, he was charading his way past a guide’s defenses, tiptoeing theatrically, miming an anchor rope, and flashing a cheesy thumbs-up. To our collective shock, the guide shrugged and waved him closer to a bubbling mud pit.

Lin groaned. “This is either comedy gold or a hospital bill.”

Doug slithered down the slope, all gangly limbs and zero grace, then crouched by the crater, peering in like a kid eyeing a

forbidden cookie jar. “It’s alive!” he roared, smearing mud on his face. “Therapeutic, baby!”

“You’re a walking disaster,” Lin said, snapping a pic. “Mud bandit.”

“Get back before that pit claims you!” I called, while Yuri, our ever-patient driver, muttered Russian prayers for his own sanity, probably regretting the day he met us.

Brian stood beside me, muttering under his breath, “If he goes in that pit, we’ll be fishing him out with a crane—or never see him again.” His tone dripped with the weary resignation of someone who’d long accepted Doug’s knack for diving headfirst into chaos.

Eventually, Doug had enough of playing in the mud and trudged back up the hill, caked in sludge from brow to chin, grinning like a Viking who’d just plundered a particularly squelchy treasure. Lin groaned again, her exasperation practically audible across the steppe. “Comedy gold or hospital bill, take your pick.”

“Therapeutic, my foot,” Brian grumbled, flicking a glob of mud off his sleeve with the disgust of a man who’d just realized his jacket wasn’t sludge-proof. “You’ve gone and invented extreme mud spa disasters.”

Yuri herded us to a vantage point where bigger volcanoes burbled, some spitting mud in lazy arcs, others dormant but ominous. The ground hummed faintly, a reminder of the earth’s

restless pulse. “No closer,” Yuri warned, eyeing Doug. “Gas dangerous, ground soft. People lost shoes—or worse.”

“Got it,” Doug said, though his smirk screamed trouble. Lin clamped his arm.

“Don’t even think about it,” she hissed. “I’m not fishing you out.”

The sulfur stench clawed the air. “Like a dumpster of rotten eggs,” Brian said, fanning his face.

“Or Doug post-taco night,” I added, dodging his playful shove.

“Anyone bathed in it, Yuri?” Doug asked, leaning perilously over the rail.

“Yes,” Yuri said, deadpan. “Bad idea. Mud heavy—stuck. Rescue took hours.”

“I’ll stick to smearing,” Doug relented, stepping back with rare wisdom.

The Gobustan Museum unraveled the science behind the mud volcanoes—methane surges, tectonic shifts—while the cracked, oozing landscape outside felt like Mars with no Wi-Fi. Housed near the Gobustan National Park, the museum showcases the region’s geological and cultural treasures. Displays include detailed exhibits on the formation of mud volcanoes, with models illustrating how methane gas and tectonic activity drive their eruptions. Visitors can explore artifacts from ancient

settlements, including tools and pottery, alongside vivid reconstructions of prehistoric life. The museum also highlights the area's famous petroglyphs, with replicas and interactive panels depicting the 40,000-year-old rock art of hunters, dancers, and animals, offering a deep dive into Azerbaijan's ancient past.

On the trek back to the car, Doug dawdled, roped into a photo op with a visiting Russian babushka. She was gesticulating wildly, unleashing a torrent of rapid-fire Russian, spinning some epic yarn. Doug, bless him, nodded along with the gravitas of a UN diplomat, as if he caught every syllable.

Lin shook her head, muttering under her breath,

"He's lost, isn't he?" Brian, never one for subtlety, bellowed, "He hasn't a clue what she's saying, has he?" I chuckled, nodding. "Yeah, but he's selling it like an Oscar winner." The crew snickered, marveling at Doug's poker-faced "enthusiasm" for a story he clearly didn't grasp.

Yuri clapped, rallying us. "Next stop tomorrow, Ganga temple—mountains, no mud. Behave, Doug."

"No guarantees," Doug said, smacking Yuri's shoulder, having extracted himself from the enthusiastic nana. Yuri's wince melted into a resigned smile—he was stuck with us.

Back in the van, Yuri outlined the evening. "Cottage by Caspian, near Baku. Simple, wooden, clean beach. Restful."

“Sounds divine,” Lin said, her skepticism thawing.

Doug puffed up. “I’ll catch a fish for dinner!” he declared, sparking a chorus of groans.

“You? Fish?” Brian scoffed. “Your last catch was a soggy boot.”

“We’ll starve,” Lin added. “I’m not surviving on vibes.”

“Ye of little faith!” Doug protested, grinning. “This is my moment!”

“Moment to flop,” Brian muttered, as laughter erupted.

I turned to Yuri. “What’s the cottage like?”

“Cozy,” he said, eyes softening. “Sea close, breeze nice. No mud, Doug.”

“Tragic,” Doug sighed, hamming it up.

“Keep it off the floors,” Lin warned, as Yuri’s chuckle rumbled.

Yuri cut in before Doug could escalate. “Dinner’s sorted. Housekeeper’s making *plov*—lamb, dried fruits, proper Azerbaijani.”

Cheers drowned Doug’s mock grumbling, his fishing dreams sidelined by the promise of a feast.

The road disintegrated into rubble, our van rattling like a tin can crammed with marbles on a rollercoaster. We limped up to a weathered wooden cottage, its charm dialed up to eleven by a sprawling garden that looked like it had sweet-talked every fruit

tree in Azerbaijan. Plums, apples, and apricots hung heavy, swaying in the breeze, each one practically posing for a Renaissance still-life masterpiece. Vines curled around the fence, and wildflowers tossed in a few splashes of color, as if the whole scene had been staged by a painter with a flair for the dramatic.

Yuri wrestled the van to a stop, muttering about parking it clear of the trees so he wouldn't have to scrape fruit off the windshield later. Out stepped Valentina, a woman whose smile could power a small city. She and Yuri embraced like they were auditioning for a telenovela, their Russian chatter a whirlwind of warmth or maybe a plot to steal the moon.

Brian leaned over. "This is peak authentic," he murmured.

"Full-on local," I agreed, soaking in the reunion.

Yuri spun to us, grinning. "Meet Valentina, your hostess! She'll show you your rooms. I'll park before I start a fruit massacre. Back soon!"

Valentina beckoned, leading us down a flower-choked path. Doug, king of chit-chat, sidled up, yammering away, oblivious to her English, likely topping out at "hello" and "vodka."

Brian whispered, "She doesn't speak Doug-ese."

"Nope," I said. "But he'd charm a lamppost if it blinked."

Inside, cool air greeted us like a refreshing splash, a sweet escape from the sun's merciless oven blast. Open windows invited the sea breeze to twirl through, while the verandahs stood guard, fending off the heat like seasoned bouncers.

Valentina ushered us to rooms—simple, pristine, with quilts that screamed “grandma’s love” and photos tracing her life, including a cousin who looked suspiciously like Gorbachev.

Lin peeked in. “This place is gorgeous, right?”

“Spot-on,” I said. “Pure magic.”

Doug materialized, snack radar pinging. “Valentina’s got food out there!”

“Vodka, you mean,” Lin said, rolling her eyes.

The living room opened to a verandah with Caspian views, gas rigs chugging in the distance like they were gunning for a fitness badge. A table groaned under snacks—cheese, bread, pickled veggies, maybe a sneaky sausage—plus a teapot, doll-sized cups, and vodka glasses lined up like they were reporting for duty.

Yuri popped in, beaming. “Valentina’s cooking dinner, but dig in—cheese bread, pickled walnuts, olives, kutab. Tea, and... a touch of vodka.” His wink promised “touch” meant “torrent.”

“Help yourselves,” he said. “I’m helping Valentina with chores. Dinner in an hour.” He vanished, his voice mingling with hers in

another part of the house, plotting global harmony or maybe gate repairs.

Lin, tea commander, poured with military precision. We grabbed snacks and tea, collapsing into verandah chairs built for maximum loafing.

Brian swirled his tiny teacup, squinting at it like it was a museum artifact. “Who makes cups this small? It’s like they’re for ants.”

“Or for sipping like royalty,” Lin countered, daintily lifting hers. “You’re just not refined enough.”

“Refined?” Doug snorted, waving a half-eaten olive. “This from the woman who yelled at a mud volcano today?”

“It was yelling at *you*,” Lin shot back, smirking. “For defiling it with your face mask stunt.”

I laughed, “Doug, you looked like a rejected spa ad out there. ‘Mud by Gobustan: Smell the Sulfur!’”

“Hey, my skin’s glowing,” Doug said, striking a pose. “Valentina’s gonna ask for my skincare secrets.”

Brian groaned. “She’ll ask Yuri to translate ‘please stop talking’ first.”

We sat there for a while in companionable silence sipping our tea sinking deeper into those gloriously lazy chairs, the garden buzzing with life around us. Birds zipped through the fruit trees like they were auditioning for a nature documentary, and the

Caspian Sea glimmered in the distance, its gas rigs puffing away like overzealous steampunk teapots.

After a bit, Brian hauled himself up from his chair, moving with the reluctance of a man abandoning paradise, and poured us each a tiny glass of vodka. We clinked glasses, the silence thick with contentment, and let the vodka—and the moment—sweep us away.

We sprawled on the verandah, The vodka—smooth, sharp, and dangerously generous—warmed our insides as we nibbled on pickled walnuts and kutab, the flaky, herb-stuffed flatbreads vanishing faster than Doug’s fishing dreams.

We swapped stories from the day, the petroglyphs and bubbling mud still vivid in our minds. “Those carvings were unreal,” I said. “Like, thousands of years ago, some guy was out there chiseling deer for fun?”

“Or for lunch,” Brian quipped. “Bet they didn’t have Doug’s chicken-chasing drama.”

“Don’t drag Jack’s rooster into this,” Doug said, mock-offended. “He’s a legend.”

Lin leaned back, grinning. “Yuri’s the real legend. Kept us alive *and* entertained through your nonsense.”

As if summoned, Yuri's voice rang out from the cottage. "Dinner, friends! Come, Valentina's ready!" His tone carried the glee of someone about to unveil a masterpiece.

We shuffled inside, the scent of saffron and lamb hitting us like a warm hug. The dining table groaned under a spread that could've fed a small village. Valentina beamed at the head, her smile bright enough to outshine Baku's skyline, with Yuri at her side, already pouring wine like a sommelier with a mission.

We plopped down, the table heaving with platters: the star, a steaming *plov*, its golden rice studded with tender lamb, caramelized carrots, raisins, and dried apricots, fragrant with cumin and barberry. Beside it sat *dolma*, grape leaves wrapped around spiced rice and minced beef, glistening with a tangy yogurt drizzle. A bowl of *dushbara*—tiny dumplings swimming in a minty lamb broth—beckoned, each one a perfect bite of comfort. There was also *lavangi*, a roasted chicken stuffed with a walnut-pomegranate paste that smelled like it could seduce a saint.

"Valentina, you're a wizard," I said, eyeing the feast.

Yuri translated, and Valentina's laugh filled the room. "She says you haven't tasted anything yet," Yuri relayed, handing out glasses of ruby-red Georgian Saperavi wine, its bold, fruity bite cutting through the richness of the food.

Doug raised his glass. “To Valentina, Yuri, and food that makes you wanna cry happy tears!”

We clinked, the wine flowing as freely as our chatter. The *plov* was a revelation—each grain of rice fluffy yet infused with flavor, the lamb melting like a whispered secret. The *dolma* had a zesty kick, and the *dushbara* dumplings were gone before Brian could claim seconds. “I’m moving here,” he mumbled, mouth full. “This beats my microwave dinners.”

“Don’t tempt fate,” Lin said, spooning more *lavangi*. “You’d burn water.”

Valentina’s voice sliced through the chatter. “When I was a girl,” she said, commanding attention like a seasoned performer, “my family left the icy wilds of eastern Siberia. Soviet factories were popping up in the Soviet States, calling folks west with the promise of work.” Her eyes sparkled. “We settled in Ganja, where I’d scramble up mulberry trees, hands stained purple, or sneak fresh shekerbura pastries from Mama’s kitchen, dodging her swatting spoon.”

Lin, leaning forward, soaked up every word, while Doug nodded like he was memorizing a script. Valentina’s tone grew heavier. “People think Soviet times were all grim, but in the later years, life was good. Steady jobs, neighbors like family, laughter that warmed you through.” The room quieted as her face tightened. “Then the Union fell apart. The ‘90s brought hard times. Food

was scarce, power vanished for weeks, and we hauled water from the well, like we'd slipped back a century."

She paused, her gaze drifting to the dark Caspian beyond the verandah, the weight of those years silencing even Brian's usual wisecracks. With a small nod, she pressed on. "But now, things are better. Azerbaijan's tapped the gas in the sea." She waved a hand toward the water, its waves glinting under the stars. "It's brought money, lights that stay on, and feasts to share."

Her words hung in the air, the sea's soft rhythm underscoring her resilience. Brian, never one for long silences, leaned back with a grin. "So, Valentina, you went from pinching pastries to outlasting tough times, and now you're living large?"

Yuri translated, and Valentina's laugh burst out, sharp and bright. "Living large? Ha! I still sneak pastries when my daughter's not looking," she fired back, winking. The group roared, Doug nearly spilling his wine. Lin raised her glass. "To surviving—and to pastries!" Glasses clinked, and Valentina's grin widened, her story weaving into the night's tapestry, threaded with grit and a dash of mischief, as the Caspian whispered its approval.

Her eyes lit up when she learned we'd just traveled across Russia, her birthplace, which she hadn't seen in decades.

"Moscow was amazing," I said, her eyes sparkling through Yuri's translation. "Red Square's breathtaking—like stepping into a history book with onion domes."

“What about the trains?” Yuri relayed her eager question. “The Trans-Siberian, you rode it?”

“Oh, yeah,” Brian said, leaning in. “We hopped on and off for weeks—an incredible experience. Every stop was a new world, from gruff vendors selling dumplings to stations that looked like tsarist palaces”.

”Valentina clapped, and Yuri passed along more: “Did you see Lake Baikal? The markets? Tell me!”

Doug, never one to miss a spotlight, jumped in. “Baikal? Stunning. I skinny-dipped there, you know. Five degrees Celsius, felt like wrestling a glacier!” He grinned, milking the tale.

Lin snorted. “He was *not* naked. He was in and out in an instant.” “Why let facts derail a juicy tale?” Brian said with a sly grin.

Valentina’s laughter rang out, and we swapped more tales—her memories of Russian snowstorms versus our stories of Siberian markets and train-car vodka toasts. She asked about Moscow’s bustle, the taiga’s vastness, and even Russian bread, her questions tumbling through Yuri’s steady translations. The wine kept our spirits high, and the food kept coming, each dish a love song to Azerbaijan’s heart.

Then came dessert. Valentina swept in with a *pakhlava*, a towering stack of flaky pastry layered with crushed walnuts and dripping with honey-sweet syrup. It crunched gloriously, each

bite a sugar-soaked dream. She poured fresh tea into those dollhouse cups, and—because no night is complete without it—more vodka appeared, glinting like liquid mischief.

“This cake,” Doug said, licking syrup off his fingers, “is why I’m never leaving.”

“You’d eat the table if it was sugared,” Lin teased, but her plate was just as clean.

By the end, we were stuffed to the gills, our bellies straining and our heads buzzing from the wine and vodka one-two punch. Valentina’s stories, Yuri’s translations, and the feast had woven a spell, making the room feel like home. We wobbled to our feet, thanking Valentina profusely—she waved it off with a grin, as if feeding us to bursting was just another Tuesday.

As we stumbled toward our rooms, Brian slung an arm around my shoulder. “Tonight? Top tier. Best one yet.”

“Agreed,” I said, the warmth of the evening lingering like the vodka’s burn. “Valentina’s a queen, and Yuri’s our hero.”

Lin unleashed a yawn that could’ve roused a hibernating bear. “I’ll confess, I was utterly convinced trailing after some random bloke was a one-way ticket to chaos, but this has turned out to be a proper triumph.”

“Ha! Knew it!” Doug bellowed, already halfway to their room, swaggering like a fortune-teller who’d called every shot. “Why you lot ever question my brilliance is beyond me.”

Lin just shook her head, too drained or speechless to unravel that mystery, and shuffled after Doug to collapse into bed.

We collapsed into our beds, the sea breeze whispering through the windows, and drifted off, certain this night would be the gold standard for the rest of the trip.

...

Chapter Twelve

Ganja Azerbaijan

I stirred awake to the soft glow of dawn sneaking through the curtains, paired with Valentina's gentle humming drifting through the cottage like a lullaby from a Russian fairy tale. Somewhere in the house, she was probably whipping up a breakfast to rival last night's plov extravaganza, which had left us stuffed to the gills and dreaming of lamb. Brian was already up, bustling about with the energy of a man either prepping for the day or chasing the siren call of Valentina's cooking. "Coffee's calling," he muttered, tying his shoelaces with unnecessary vigor.

A thunderous bang on the door nearly launched me out of bed. "Oi, you lot!" Doug's voice boomed, loud enough to wake the Caspian's fish. "It's a cracking day out there—move it!"

"On our way!" Brian hollered back, shooting me a look as I lounged in bed like a sultan on holiday. "Get up, you lazy sod. I'm off to hunt caffeine." He strode out, leaving me to savor a fleeting moment of peace.

"Be there in a tick," I called, stretching with the languid grace of a cat who'd just discovered yoga. I rolled out of bed, threw on clothes, and ambled after him, lured by the promise of breakfast and the faint clatter of plates.

Out on the verandah, my three travel companions—Doug, Lin, Brian—plus Yuri, were sprawled around a table that looked like it was auditioning for a food magazine cover. Fresh bread, still warm from the oven, sat beside jars of homemade jam—plum, apricot, and something suspiciously neon—plus creamy cheeses, tangy yogurt, and tiny sugar-dusted buns that seemed to whisper, “Eat me first.” A teapot steamed heroically, flanked by dollhouse-sized cups and a bottle of vodka, because apparently no Azerbaijani meal is complete without a boozy cameo.

“Goodness!” I said, pouring a coffee so dark it could’ve doubled as motor oil. “This spread’s a work of art.”

“Art?” Lin mumbled, her mouth stuffed with bread slathered in enough jam to stock a market stall. “It’s a masterpiece.”

Valentina swooped in, her smile brighter than Baku’s skyline, balancing plates of fluffy eggs, sizzling sausages, and pancakes so golden they could’ve starred in a breakfast commercial. “Eat, eat!” she urged through Yuri’s translation, her hands waving like a conductor at a culinary symphony.

“Gawd, what a feast!” Doug declared, rubbing his hands with the glee of a kid let loose in a candy shop. He piled his plate high, as if last night’s plov mountain hadn’t already stretched his stomach to new horizons.

Lin raised an eyebrow, her fork poised mid-egg. “How are you hungry? We ate enough last night to hibernate through winter.”

“Says you!” Doug shot back, grinning. “You’ve demolished half a loaf and a jam factory. Your plate’s a crime scene.”

Lin flushed, sheepishly scooping more sausage. “It’s just so good,” she mumbled, her defenses crumbling faster than the sugar-dusted buns.

We dove in, plates groaning under the weight of Valentina’s bounty. And so we ate. And ate. And ate. The pancakes were life-changing. The tea flowed. Someone poured vodka into their cup and tried to be subtle about it. (Brian. Obviously.)

As we lingered over the dregs of our tea, Yuri stood, clapping his hands like a camp counselor rallying wayward kids. “Okay, friends, time to hit road! Ganja awaits—long drive, big day.” His accent, thick as borscht, carried a mix of enthusiasm and mild dread, probably from wrangling us for days.

We exchanged glances, a touch of melancholy settling in. Leaving Valentina’s oasis felt like abandoning a five-star hug.

“This place,” I muttered, gazing wistfully at the Caspian Sea’s distant shimmer and its steampunk oil rigs belching like overworked kettles, “has ruined me for the real world.”

Doug nodded. “Valentina’s set the bar. And I don’t like it.”

Still, Ganja awaited. Second-largest city in Azerbaijan. Historic hotspot. Silk Road veteran. And, apparently, Lin’s new obsession. She was practically vibrating with excitement. “It’s

got everything—Persian poets! Russian forts! Epic mausoleums! We're staying with friends of Yuri's—very cultural."

"Oh, Lordy," Doug muttered to the air, slumping back. "She's already got a Ganja itinerary locked and loaded. I was banking on a lazy day by the river, maybe pretending to fish."

"Fishing?" I snorted, "There will be no time for fishing" "Ganja's no snooze-fest. It's Azerbaijan's second-largest city, over 2,500 years old—one of the oldest in the Caucasus. It's a Silk Road veteran with a wild past: Persian poets, Mongol invasions, Russian forts. Think Nizami Ganjavi's mausoleum, honoring the guy who wrote Persian love epics, and Javad Khan Street's old-school buildings. Plus, it's got parks that make you want to picnic forever."

Brian groaned, mock-dramatic. "Okay, history girl, save the lecture for Ganja. You and Lin can nerd out there." He stood, stretching. "Let's move—Yuri's probably warming up the van's goat-scented upholstery as we speak."

We trudged to our rooms, packing with the enthusiasm of kids leaving a theme park. My bag, stuffed with travel journals and questionable laundry, groaned as much as I did. Doug was already outside, yammering at Yuri about the van's "vintage charm". Brian muttered about needing more coffee to survive

Doug's energy, while Lin double-checked her itinerary like a coach prepping for the big game.

Back at the van, Yuri was grappling with the door, which screeched like it was practicing for a haunted house gig. The van, bless its Soviet soul, still reeked of garlic and livestock. "Home sweet home," Brian deadpanned, climbing in. "Smells like those goats have set up house and started a farm in here."

"Ungrateful beasts," Doug quipped, once again claiming shotgun and promptly fiddling with Yuri's bobblehead matryoshka, which wobbled in silent protest. Lin, squeezing in beside me, muttered, "If he breaks that, Yuri's serenading him to death."

Yuri, ever the optimist, started the van with a noise that suggested internal combustion was optional. "To Ganja!" he declared, launching into a folk song that may or may not have been about Cossacks and heartbreak. Doug, naturally, joined in, off-key enough to send wildlife fleeing for higher ground.

We waved a heartfelt farewell to Valentina, who stood on the cottage steps, her smile bright enough to power Baku. She tossed us a loaf of bread "for the road," which Doug immediately dubbed "my emergency carb stash." The Caspian glittered behind her, its rigs chugging like they were late for a steampunk convention. As we pulled away, the garden's fruit trees—plums and apricots practically posing for a still-life—faded, and I felt a

pang. “This place,” I said, “is the gold standard. Ganja’s got big shoes to fill.”

“Big muddy shoes,” Brian added, nodding at Doug’s still-caked boots from his Gobustan mud volcano stunt. “Let’s hope Ganja’s got a laundromat.”

“Or a hose,” Lin snorted, smirking. “For Doug and the van.”

Yuri chuckled, swerving around a pothole with fighter-pilot precision. “Ganja good city. Old, beautiful. No mud, Doug—promise.” His wink hinted he knew Doug’s chaos was unstoppable.

The road west unrolled in a blur of golden fields and sleepy villages, the occasional shepherd herding goats with more order than our crew. Doug, undeterred by Lin’s death stares, launched into a tale of his days as a jackaroo in the Australian outback, mustering cattle on horseback day after dusty day. “Picture me, mates, galloping through the scrub, wrangling steers like a proper cowboy—sunburnt, sweaty, and dodging rogue bulls!”

Lin snorted, her tea nearly escaping her nose. “You? A cowboy? Bet you fell off more than you rode.”

The van rattled on, Ganja’s promise luring us forward, Valentina’s warmth lingering like the vodka’s burn. As we bounced along, the Soviet relic of a van groaned under the weight of our adventure, carrying us from cozy memories into the dusty unknown. So there we were, rattling along the dusty

road to Ganja, the van creaking like it was as tired as we were. Brian had his headphones clamped on, head bobbing to some tinny beat, oblivious to the world. Lin was hunched over her notebook, scribbling like a woman possessed, probably jotting down every stray thought that crossed her mind.

Me, I was staring out the window of the van, watching a scraggly herd of goats chewing on what looks like the last tufts of grass in a dustbowl masquerading as a pasture, I was reminded of my long-standing, entirely unscientific economic model: the Goat Theory. Simply put, the more goats a country has, the poorer it probably is. Switzerland? Hardly a goat in sight. Chad? Goats on motorbikes. I've seen goats in alleys, goats in bars, goats on rooftops. And without fail, the local economy tends to be circling the drain. It's not that I have anything against goats—they're charming in a slightly malevolent, beady-eyed way—but when they outnumber the cars, it's rarely a sign of booming GDP.

Up front, Yuri was trying to teach Doug Russian, his deep chuckle rumbling every time Doug butchered another word. "Nyet, nyet, like this—khorosho," Yuri said, while Doug mangled it into something like "horrible-show." I bit my lip to keep from laughing.

Four hours later, we rolled into Ganja, the van coughing to a stop under a shady tree in a pretty little park. Yuri killed the engine

and turned to us, his grin wide as the Volga. “Valentina packed us lunch. Let’s eat before we explore.”

“Oh, good,” Doug piped up, yanking off his imaginary scholar’s cap. “I’m starving. Learning Russian’s hungry work.”

“Yeah,” I said, stretching my legs. “I’m famished too, though I’ve got no excuse after that breakfast we demolished.”

We piled out, dragging ourselves to a picnic table where Valentina’s spread awaited—fat sandwiches stuffed with grilled meat and tangy pickles, little honey cakes that looked too pretty to eat, and a thermos of tea sending up inviting curls of steam into the air. Brian took a bite, leaned back, and sighed, “Delicious,” sipping his tea like some contented czar.

We sat quietly munching our sandwiches, savoring the park and the cool shade of the tree, but our calm was broken when Lin sprang up, bustling to tidy up and muttering about schedules. “Lunch was great,” she said, “but let’s go—lots to see!”

“Oh, lord,” Doug groaned, rolling his eyes. “Here we go.” Lin ignored him, already marching back to the van to pester Yuri. Brian and I exchanged a look. I shrugged. “Best get moving,” I said, and we trudged after her, Doug trailing behind, muttering something about “slave drivers” under his breath.

“Right,” Lin announced, map in hand, eyes gleaming like a general plotting a campaign. “Walking tour. I’ve got it all planned.” Brian looked like he’d been sentenced to hard labor,

and Doug just sighed, resigned. I laughed, hooking arms with both of them. “Come on, it won’t be that bad. Might even be fun.” Brian muttered, “Traitor,” as Yuri waved us off, staying behind with the van. “He’ll meet us at the last stop,” Lin said, already charging ahead at a pace that’d shame a drill sergeant.

Our first stop was the Nizami Ganjavi Mausoleum, a grand thing just outside the city, all granite and quiet reverence, surrounded by gardens that looked like they’d been trimmed with nail scissors. “This poet,” Lin said, reading from her notebook like a tour guide, “wrote epic romances in the 12th century. A big deal.” Doug squinted at the towering column. “Looks like a giant pencil. Bet he wrote some long poems.” Brian snorted, and I elbowed him. “Behave. It’s cultural.” He grinned. “Culture’s just old stuff people forgot to throw out.” Lin shot him a look but kept marching.

Next, we hit the Juma Mosque, its red-brick minarets glowing in the afternoon sun. Lin was in her element, rattling off facts about Shah Abbas and Safavid architecture. Doug, trying to keep up, tripped over a cobblestone and cursed under his breath. “This place is trying to kill me,” he grumbled. I patted his shoulder. “You’re doing fine. Just don’t break the mosque.” Inside, the courtyard was cool and quiet, and even Brian shut up for a minute, staring at the intricate tilework. “Pretty,” he admitted, then ruined it by adding, “Bet they don’t have Wi-Fi, though.”

We shuffled on to the Chokek Hamam, a squat old bath house that looked like it hadn't seen a bath in centuries. "People used to gossip here," Lin said, pointing at a faded sign. "Like a spa with better stories." Doug perked up. "Gossip? Like what, who stole whose goat?" I laughed. "Probably spicier than that." Brian, poking at a cracked tile, muttered, "Bet it was cold. No wonder they gossiped—had to keep warm somehow." Lin sighed but didn't take the bait.

Javad Khan Street was next, a lively stretch of shops and fountains, with old facades polished up to look almost modern. Lin stopped to sketch a statue, while Doug haggled with a vendor over a tacky souvenir—a tiny bronze horse. "Five manat? That's robbery!" he said, but bought it anyway. Brian, munching on a kebab he'd grabbed from a stall, smirked. "You'll regret that when it falls apart tomorrow." I just soaked it in—the chatter, the smells of grilled meat and fresh bread, the kids running past. "This is the real stuff," I said. Lin nodded, still sketching. "Exactly."

The Bottle House was the weirdest stop—a whole house built from glass bottles, glinting like a fever dream. "Some guy made this as a memorial for his brother that went missing during WWII," Lin said, her voice softening. Doug tilted his head. "That's... actually kind of cool. Sad, but cool." Brian, for once, didn't have a snarky comment, just stared at the bottle walls, his fingers brushing a faded photo embedded in the glass. "War's

rough,” he said quietly. I nodded, and we stood there a moment, letting it sink in.

Finally, we reached the Imamzadeh Complex, its blue-tiled dome catching the last of the sunlight. Lin was practically vibrating with excitement. “This is the 8th-century, one of the holiest spots around!” Doug flopped onto a bench. “Holy or not, my feet are done.” Brian, leaning against a pillar, groaned. “I need a beer. Or a bed.” I laughed. “You two are hopeless. Look at this place—it’s gorgeous.” And it was, all serene and shimmering, like it held a thousand years of secrets. Lin dragged us around, pointing out every detail, while Doug muttered about needing a camel next time.

When Yuri’s van pulled up outside the complex, I nearly wept with relief. “Thank goodness,” I said, climbing in. “I’m knackered.”

“And starving,” Doug added, collapsing into his seat. Brian just nodded, too tired to complain.

Yuri, crunching the gears like he was grinding coffee, said, “We’re off to a hotel owned by a lovely couple I know. Their restaurant does proper Azeri food.”

“Sounds perfect,” I said, already dreaming of something hot and hearty.

We pulled into the hotel, a cluster of buildings around a shady courtyard where the restaurant sat, all twinkling lights and

woven rugs. Yuri was greeted like a long-lost son by Samir and Lala, the owners. Lala, in perfect English, said, “Welcome! Come, I’ll show you to your rooms.” Our rooms were cozy, decked out in bright Azeri textiles that made me want to curl up and nap forever. But Brian and I washed off the day’s dust and headed to the courtyard, where Lin and Doug were already parked with cold beers, chatting with Samir.

We joined them, a waitress bringing us frosty glasses of our own. Samir was a charmer, telling stories about Ganja’s old days while we sipped. “This city’s seen everything,” he said, “wars, poets, dreamers.” Lin nodded, hanging on every word. Doug, loosening up, asked, “Any good ghost stories?” Samir laughed. “Plenty. Stick around.”

When Samir left, promising dinner soon, Lin sighed. “What a lovely man. So hospitable.” Right on cue, the food arrived—a feast of dolma stuffed with lamb and rice, fragrant with dill and mint; plov with tender beef, carrots, and raisins, the rice golden with saffron; and lavash bread, warm and soft, with a side of tangy yogurt dip. Dessert was shekerbura, sweet pastries filled with ground nuts and sugar, crumbling in our mouths.

We dove in, the flavors hitting like a warm hug. “This,” Doug said, mouth full, “is worth walking for.” Brian grunted in agreement, too busy chewing to talk. Lin just smiled, savoring

every bite, and I couldn't help but think Ganja was starting to feel like home.

We lounged in a shaded, traditional courtyard tucked within the ancient building, its deep arched verandah casting cool shadows over timeworn stone. We were sprawled around a sturdy wooden table, savoring plates of mouthwatering local dishes and clinking frosty glasses of beer, the kind that hits just right after a long day. The scenery wasn't half bad either—lush greenery framed our little feast, a perfect backdrop for our well-earned meal.

Samir and Lala, popped by to share stories about Azerbaijan's past and how life was treating them pretty well these days. Their pride in their homeland was contagious, and we soaked it all in, nodding along. But as the evening wore on, my eyelids started staging a protest, drooping like they were ready to clock out. I polished off my drink, pushed my chair back with a satisfying scrape, and stood up.

"That's me done," I announced, stifling a yawn. "Bed's calling."

"Same," Lin chimed in, glancing at Doug. "You coming, Doug?"

He swirled the last of his beer, looking far too comfortable. "In a bit. Gotta give this drink the respect it deserves."

Lin gave a knowing nod, and we ambled off toward our rooms. The distant hum of the city mixed with the soft rustle of palm

trees in the courtyard, lulling me into a cozy haze as I drifted off to sleep.

Morning came with a jolt—bright, early, and just a touch bleary-eyed. We piled back into the Yuri-mobile, the nickname Brian had given our trusty van in homage to the UAZ that faithfully hauled us across Mongolia the Gaambaa - mobile.

Today's destination: Sheki, nestled at the foot of the Caucasus Mountains. First, though, a quick stop in Mingachevir, a lively town perched on the edge of a sprawling reservoir, its waters shimmering under the sun like a giant mirror.

As we bumped along, Lin was deep in her guidebook, plotting out Sheki's must-see spots. Brian leaned over, his voice low but urgent. "I'm really hoping Sheki's a little less busy, you know? Like, sipping tea under a tree, not sprinting around like we're on a scavenger hunt."

I nodded, picturing a shady spot and a lazy afternoons. Doug, catching our whispers, spun around and fixed Lin with a mock glare. "Lin, if you've got us racing through Sheki, there's gonna be a mutiny."

Lin peered over her glasses, her gaze sweeping us like a teacher sizing up naughty kids. Then she cracked a smile. "Alright, alright. We'll hit the fort and the Caravanserai, then kick back. Two months on the road—backpacks, vans, the works—I get it. We're all a bit road-worn."

The three of us exhaled in unison, the tension melting away. She wasn't wrong. Two months of constant motion, living out of bags, had us all a little frayed at the edges.

We rumbled into Mingachevir, pulling into a cafe parking lot. The scent of fresh coffee hit us like a warm hug, and Doug's eyes lit up. "Coffee," he muttered, practically levitating toward the door. Yuri, our ever-reliable driver, grinned. "Let's grab coffee and some lunch supplies, then head to the reservoir for a picnic."

"Brilliant plan," Brian said, already halfway to the caffeine. We stocked up on flaky pastries stuffed with meat and veggies, plus a dangerous amount of honey cake—our collective weakness. At the reservoir, Yuri parked at a scenic lookout, the water stretching out like a liquid postcard. Doug was off like a shot, camera in hand, snapping photos like he was documenting an alien invasion. Lin and I set up lunch on a picnic table, the spread looking almost too good to eat.

"Doug, food's ready!" Lin called. He grudgingly lowered his camera and joined us at the picnic table by the shimmering Mingachevir Reservoir.

As we munched on our meat-stuffed pastries and honey cake, Lin, ever the guidebook enthusiast, launched into a quick history lesson. "This place is more than just a pretty view," she said, gesturing at the sprawling water. "The reservoir, often called the Mingachevir Sea, was created in the 1940s when they built the

dam on the Kura River. It's the largest in the Caucasus, stretching 70 kilometers long and powering Azerbaijan's biggest hydroelectric station—424 megawatts after a big upgrade in 2018. The town itself, Mingachevir, was founded in 1948 to support the dam's construction, with help from about 10,000 German POWs and specialists from across the Soviet Union. It's got a deep history, too—archaeological digs found stuff dating back to 3000 BC, even a gold Scythian belt from the 7th century BC. They call it the 'City of Lights' because of all that power it generates.”

I could tell Lin was winding up for one of her epic lectures, but Yuri was growing restless, fidgeting as he faced the long drive to drop us in Sheki before racing back to Baku for his son's birthday. When Lin paused for a breath, I jumped in with a cheery, “Fascinating stuff, Lin!” while nodding toward Yuri's anxious tapping. She caught the hint in a flash and swiftly wrapped it up.

“Alright, folks,” I said, packing up the picnic scraps. “Let's hit the road.” Doug started to grumble, but Lin's raised eyebrow shut him down fast. He climbed into the van with a sheepish grin.

An hour later, we were winding into the Caucasus foothills, Sheki's ancient charm coming into view. This old Silk Road town had history baked into its cobblestones. Yuri pulled up to a high green wall, trees peeking over like curious neighbors. He

honked, and a cheerful babushka flung open the gate, greeting Yuri with a bear hug.

“This,” Yuri said, gesturing grandly at the house, “is your home for the next few days. Svetlana’s your host, a dear friend. She doesn’t speak English, but you lot are clever enough to manage.”

Doug leaned close, whispering, “Svetlana? Could she have been a prodinista on a Russian train?”—a nod to the nickname we’d given the string of carriage attendants during our Russian rail adventure. I nudged him with an elbow, muttering, “shhh.”

Yuri ignored our antics. “I’ve got to get back to Baku—promised my wife I’d be home for dinner. So, goodbye for now.” We hugged him, a bit misty-eyed. Yuri wasn’t just a guide; he’d become one of us. With a honk and a wave, he was gone.

Brian sighed. “The sights are great, but it’s the people—like Yuri—that make this trip unforgettable.”

“Absolutely,” Lin added. “Doug, I’ll admit, when you dragged us off with some random Russian in a van, I had my doubts. But you were right. Yuri was a gem.”

Doug froze, grinning like he’d won the lottery. “Wait, did Lin just say I was right? You both heard that, yeah?” We rolled our eyes, ignoring his theatrics.

“Come on,” Lin said, nodding toward Svetlana, who was waiting patiently. We hoisted our packs and followed her through the

green gates into a paradise of fruit trees and veggie patches. I stopped short, causing Brian to bump into me. “Oi, what’s the holdup?” he grumbled.

“Just look at this garden,” I said, awestruck. “It’s a desert out there, but this? Total oasis.”

Svetlana ushered us into the house and guided us to our rooms. Ours was peculiar, with no outside windows, only ones peering into the living area—strange, but tidy and clean, which suited us fine. After settling in, we convened on the terrace, sipping tea and admiring the garden’s lush greenery. I was eager for a few days of lounging here, birdwatching, savoring tea, and catching my breath. We would venture out to explore a bit, but this stop was all about soaking in the moment.

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Chapter Thirteen

Sheki Azerbaijan

The sun blazed down on a dusty street corner in Sheki, where we stood, wilting in the heat, waiting for a bus. Doug, ever the architect of impulsive schemes, had concocted a plan as bold as it was reckless: we'd head to a bus stop, board the first minivan that rolled by, and let fate decide our destination. It was the kind of half-baked adventure that felt oddly fitting for a small Azeri town nestled at the base of the towering Caucasus Mountains, their jagged peaks looming like silent sentinels in the distance. So there we were, squinting against the glare, sweat beading on our foreheads, with Doug practically dancing in the middle of the road, ready to flag down the next minivan that dared pass our way.

For the past two days, we'd been luxuriating in the shade of Svetlana's terrace, our temporary home in Sheki. Her hospitality was a balm—endless pots of fragrant tea, platters of her homemade dishes that left us groaning with satisfaction, and the kind of unhurried pace that made catching up on emails and journals feel almost meditative. Svetlana's terrace, draped in grapevines and cooled by a gentle breeze, had become our sanctuary. We'd spent hours swapping stories, savoring her buttery shekerbura pastries, and laughing over nothing in particular, content to let the world pass us by. But this morning, a

restless energy had stirred. Sheki, with its centuries of history woven into its streets and stones, beckoned us to explore. Over breakfast, as we debated visiting the famous fortress or the ancient caravanserai, Doug dropped his bombshell idea: why not skip the planning and hop on a random bus to see where it took us? Lin, ever the pragmatist, arched an eyebrow, her skepticism practically audible.

Brian and I nodded enthusiastically, we were up for the adventure —Sheki seemed small enough that getting lost felt like a long shot. After all, we'd stumbled through the Gobi Desert and crisscrossed Russia on little more than a wing, a prayer, and a half-baked plan; surely little old Sheki would be a breeze. What could possibly go wrong? That cocky thought dangled in the air, practically begging fate to throw us a curveball, but we shrugged it off with a grin.

Now, as we stood baking in the sun, Doug's enthusiasm took on a life of its own. Without warning, he launched into a frenzied dance in the middle of the road, arms flailing like a deranged chicken caught in a windstorm. "He's channeling Jack's rooster," Brian remarked, his voice dry as the desert, his eyes glinting with amusement. Miraculously, Doug's wild performance worked. A battered number 5 minivan screeched to a halt, its door sliding open with a groan to reveal a packed interior. A dozen babushkas, their headscarves vibrant against the dim light, stared at us with a mix of curiosity and suspicion,

their arms laden with bags of produce and parcels tied with string.

“Good grief, will we even fit?” Lin muttered, peering into the van’s gloomy interior, her eyes scanning for any hint of an empty seat.

“The golden rule of mini van travel - there is always room for a few more!” Doug declared with infectious cheer, already clambering aboard. “Come on, team!”

Reluctantly, we followed, squeezing ourselves into the cramped space. I found myself wedged between a stern-faced woman cradling an enormous watermelon, its weight threatening to crush her lap, and a bulging sack of rice that jabbed into my side with every bump. From somewhere in the van, Doug’s voice rang out, his butchered Russian filling the air as he attempted to charm his seatmate. I craned my neck to see him accepting a biscuit from a bemused babushka, his grin wide enough to light up the dim interior. Lin, sitting a few rows ahead, stared resolutely out the window, pretending she didn’t know him. Brian, squashed between two rather large babushkas on the seat in front, chuckled under his breath, clearly enjoying the spectacle.

The minivan trundled along Sheki’s uneven roads, the watermelon somehow migrating to my lap, its bulk a warm, unwieldy burden. Doug’s Russian grew more animated, his hands gesturing wildly as he spun a long, convoluted story that,

judging by the blank stares of his audience, was utterly incomprehensible. I caught snippets—something about a goat and a mountain?—and exchanged a glance with Brian, who shook his head in mock despair. “He’s a walking disaster,” he whispered, but his grin betrayed his fondness.

Suddenly, Lin, who’d been the only one paying attention to our actual route while Brian and I were distracted by the Doug show, shot to her feet. “STOP! Остановка!” she shouted, her voice cutting through the chatter. The driver slammed on the brakes, and the van lurched to a halt, sending the watermelon sliding dangerously close to the floor.

Doug was busy saying farewell to his new friends who pressed a packet of dates and a bag of nuts into his hands.

“Only Doug would charm locals into a snack haul mid-journey,” Brian muttered from his babushka sandwich, eyeing the loot with mock envy.

I chuckled, whispering to Lin, “He’ll probably try bartering those nuts for a camel by tomorrow.” Lin smirked, muttering, Lin smirked, muttering, “As long as he doesn’t scoff them all before we explore Sheki.”

We scrambled out blinking in the bright sunshine, and found ourselves standing before a massive, imposing structure, its stone walls weathered but grand. Lin swept her arm toward it with the flair of a tour guide.

“This, my friends, is the Sheki Fortress. Built in 1762 by Huseyn Khan to protect the Sheki Khanate. Its walls are river stone and lime, once dotted with watchtowers. Inside, you’ll find the Palace of the Sheki Khans, a masterpiece of intricate frescoes and colorful stained glass that glows like a jewel box. The whole complex is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.” She flashed a triumphant smile. “Pretty cool, right?”

“Very cool,” I agreed, already itching to explore. “Let’s go.” We crossed the road and stepped into the fortress, its heavy gates creaking open to reveal a sprawling complex of courtyards and buildings. For the next hour, we wandered, marveling at the palace’s vibrant murals—scenes of hunting and battles rendered in vivid blues and golds—and the delicate stained-glass windows that cast kaleidoscopic patterns on the stone floors. The air was thick with history, each corner whispering tales of khans and conquests.

Doug and Brian, predictably, got distracted by a giant chessboard set up in what was once the palace’s parade ground. They challenged each other to a match, though their enthusiasm far outstripped their skill. Lin and I found a shady spot nearby, bought ice creams from a vendor whose cart was parked under a tree, and settled in to watch the chaos unfold. “They don’t have a clue how to play chess,” I said, licking my vanilla cone as Doug dramatically pondered his next move. “Not a chance,” Lin

replied, her own cone dripping in the heat, “but they’re putting on a good show.”

Suddenly, a guttural war cry erupted from the chessboard. We looked up to see Doug straddling the knight piece—a massive wooden figure nearly as tall as him—charging across the board toward Brian’s queen, bellowing like a Mongol warrior on a rampage. He leaped off, planted the knight with a thud, and launched into a bizarre victory dance, arms flailing and hips shimmying. The vendor, catching the spectacle, burst out laughing, nearly dropping his scoop. “Did he win?” I asked, squinting at the board. “No idea,” Lin said, shaking her head. “But he’s convinced he did.”

Brian wandered over, wiping his brow and shaking his head. “He’s completely off his rocker. Just started galloping around on that bloody knight like it’s the Grand National. Utterly bonkers.” Doug, still buzzing with adrenaline, strutted up, his grin undimmed. “Right, what’s next?” Lin fixed him with a long, silent stare, then sighed. “The Caravanserai’s just down the road. Let’s go.”

“Lead on, fearless guide!” Doug sang, sweeping into an exaggerated bow. Lin rolled her eyes and marched out of the fortress, leading us down a gentle hill. We trailed behind, the sun still relentless but the promise of another historic gem keeping our spirits high. Soon, we stopped before a grand stone building,

its arched doorways and sturdy walls exuding an air of timeless resilience.

Lin turned to us, her voice taking on that guide-like tone again. “This is the Sheki Caravanseraï, built in the 18th century as a haven for Silk Road traders. They’d rest here with their camels, goods, and stories, a bustling hub of commerce and culture. It’s actually two caravanserais—Upper and Lower—joined together, with wide courtyards and rooms for travelers. Today, part of it’s a hotel, so you can sleep where merchants did centuries ago.” She smirked. “Minus the camels, of course.”

Brian’s eyes lit up. “Why didn’t we stay here? This place is incredible.”

I shrugged. “Yuri booked Svetlana’s before I knew about it. Besides, we wouldn’t get Svetlana’s cooking or her mother-hen vibes at a hotel. ‘Svettie’s’ has been our home base,” I said, using the nickname we’d coined in secret.

“True,” Doug conceded, peering up at the stone arches. “But this would’ve been epic.” We spent a while exploring, running our hands along the cool stone walls, imagining caravans of silk and spices unloading in the courtyard. “You can almost see the traders haggling,” Brian said, his voice soft with awe.

We continued downhill toward Sheki’s center, the streets narrowing and growing livelier. Eventually, we reached a sprawling park shaded by ancient trees, their branches heavy with leaves. Tables were scattered beneath, many occupied by

older men hunched over backgammon boards, their fingers moving pieces with practiced ease as they sipped tea from tiny tulip-shaped glasses. The air buzzed with the clack of dice and low, animated chatter.

We claimed a table under a massive oak, its shade a welcome relief. Within moments, a waiter appeared, delivering four delicate tea glasses and, bizarrely, a Snickers bar, meticulously sliced into equal portions and arranged on a small plate like a gourmet dessert. Doug's head swiveled, his eyes locked on the backgammon games, his fingers twitching with the urge to join in. Lin, reading him like a book, cut in sharply. "No, Doug, those nice people don't need you barging into their games."

He shot her a mock-wounded look and muttered, "Spoilsport," but stayed put, draining his tea in one gulp. Before he could set the glass down, the waiter reappeared, refilling our cups with ninja-like stealth. "Blimey!" Doug yelled, nearly dropping his glass. "He's like a genie from a lamp!"

We lingered in the park for what felt like hours, sipping tea, nibbling our Snickers, and watching life unfold. Doug, never one to let a gift go unshared, broke open the dates and nuts he had been given, passing them around with a grin like he'd just unearthed buried treasure. The rhythm of the games, the laughter of children darting between trees, the soft clink of glasses—it was a snapshot of Sheki's heartbeat, unhurried and alive. Reluctantly, we eventually left, heading back to Svetlana's to

wash off the day's dust. Tonight was our last in Sheki, and we'd made reservations at a restaurant we'd heard was a gem. A quick shower and a change of clothes felt like a reset after our dusty adventure.

The restaurant, tucked into a lush garden strung with fairy lights, was pure magic. Our waiter, a wiry man named Farid with a quick smile and a twinkle in his eye, greeted us like old friends. "Welcome, welcome! Tonight, you taste real Azerbaijan," he said, ushering us to a table beneath a canopy of jasmine vines. The air was thick with the scent of flowers and grilled meat, and the soft strum of a traditional tar drifted from a musician in the corner.

Farid brought out a spread that made our jaws drop. First came plov, the king of Azeri dishes, its saffron-infused rice studded with tender lamb, dried apricots, and chestnuts, served in a steaming copper dish. "This is our pride," Farid said, spooning portions onto our plates. Next, dolma arrived—grape leaves tightly wrapped around spiced beef and rice, their tangy bite perfect with a dollop of creamy yogurt. A bowl of dushbara, tiny dumplings swimming in a fragrant broth, followed, each one a burst of flavor. "Eat slow," Farid advised, his grin wide. "Let the taste stay with you." The star of the meal was piti, a rich lamb and chickpea stew slow-cooked in clay pots, its broth so savory it felt like a warm hug. We paired it with a local Savalan Valley

red wine, its deep, berry notes cutting through the richness like a perfect counterpoint.

Doug, predictably, tried his fractured Russian on Farid. “This piti... ochen vkusno!” he said, mangling the words with gusto. Farid laughed so hard he nearly spilled the wine. “You sound like my grandfather after too much arak! But I like you!” Lin groaned, burying her face in her hands, but Brian and I couldn’t stop chuckling. Farid kept the table lively, sharing stories of Sheki’s markets and his aunt’s secret dolma recipe, refilling our glasses with a conspiratorial wink. “Drink, live, be happy!” he toasted, raising his own glass of water.

Dessert was shekerbura and pakhlava, flaky pastries bursting with nuts and honey, served with more tea in those delicate tulip glasses. The garden hummed with life—couples laughing, the clink of cutlery, the musician’s soulful notes weaving through it all. We ate slowly, savoring every bite, reluctant to let the evening end.

After dinner, we wandered back to Svetlana’s under a sky glittering with stars, the weight of our final night in Azerbaijan settling over us like a soft blanket. We gathered on her terrace, cracking open a bottle of Savalan wine we’d bought earlier, its ruby glow catching the moonlight. The air was cool now, fragrant with the scent of nearby pines, and we settled into the wicker chairs, letting the silence stretch before the reflections began.

“Azerbaijan’s been a revelation,” I said, swirling my glass. “Baku’s all flash and hustle, but out here, in these mountains, it’s like stepping into a different world. The history, the people—it’s got a pulse you can feel.”

Lin nodded, her eyes distant. “I didn’t expect it to hit me like this. The fortress, the caravanserai, even Svetlana’s kitchen—it’s all so alive. Like every stone and every meal has a story.”

Brian leaned back, staring at the stars. “It’s the little moments that get you. The babushkas sizing us up on that bus, the old guys playing backgammon in the park. It’s not just a place; it’s people living their lives, and we got to be part of it for a bit.”

Doug, quieter than usual, sipped his wine, his usual bravado softened by the night. “I’ll miss the madness of it. That minivan, those biscuits, even my terrible Russian getting a laugh. It’s been... real.” He paused, then grinned. “Bet Georgia won’t have babushkas with watermelons.”

We laughed, but there was a bittersweet edge. Tomorrow, we’d cross the border into Georgia, new landscapes and stories waiting. Lin raised her glass, her voice steady but warm. “To Azerbaijan—its forts, its feasts, its gloriously mad bus rides, and the way it sneaks into your heart.” We clinked glasses, the sound sharp in the quiet night, and sat back, letting the moment linger, our last in this unexpected, unforgettable country.

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Chapter Fourteen

Georgia

The next morning, we dragged ourselves out of bed at an hour so absurdly early it felt like the universe was challenging our very will to live. Bleary-eyed and only half-conscious, we stood at the minivan station, waiting to board the bus to Georgia, the next chapter in our epic overland adventure. The air was cool but not cold, a refreshing reprieve that we savored, knowing it would soon give way to another scorcher of a day. The morning breeze brushed against our skin, waking us up as we stood on the scruffy patch of asphalt that passed for a station, surrounded by a ragtag collection of tin-roofed huts and a few flickering streetlights that looked like they were on their last gasp. The

world was draped in the soft gray of pre-dawn, and I clutched my backpack, feeling oddly energized by the cool air and the promise of the journey ahead.

For those yet to be initiated into the chaotic world of travel in this part of the globe, let me set the stage: minivans here operate on their own peculiar logic. Timetables? More like whimsical suggestions jotted down on a scrap of paper and promptly ignored. Buses don't leave on schedule; they depart when they're full—and I mean full in a way that redefines “packed like sardines.” Picture bodies crammed together so tightly you're not sure if that's your arm or your neighbor's knee jabbing into your ribs. It's a test of endurance, patience, and your tolerance for personal space invasions.

As I stood there, lost in a sleepy fog and marveling at the absurdity of it all, Lin snapped me out of it with a gentle nudge. She handed me a warm, silver-foiled packet, the heat radiating through the foil like a small gift from the travel gods. “Breakfast,” she mumbled, her voice rough with sleep. “Courtesy of Svetlana.” I peeled back the foil to reveal a soft bread roll stuffed with a fluffy, golden omelette, its edges crisped to perfection. The aroma was a warm embrace, cutting through the cool morning air. “Bless her,” I said, my stomach growling as I took a bite. “This is delicious.” Lin passed identical packets to Doug and Brian, and the four of us stood in a loose huddle, munching quietly, the cool breeze ruffling our hair. It was one of

those quiet moments of camaraderie, where a shared meal and a fresh morning make everything feel right.

Around us, the station was stirring to life. The minivan we were waiting for was already there, its engine idling with a low, impatient rumble. A handful of travelers shuffled about in the dim light, their faces etched with the universal look of those resigned to early mornings and long journeys. An old man in a worn cap smoked a cigarette with slow, deliberate puffs, while a woman in a colorful shawl balanced a basket on her hip, adjusting its weight as she prepared to board the van. The scene felt like a snapshot from a gritty travel documentary, teetering between chaotic and oddly serene, with the cool air keeping us just alert enough to function.

Suddenly, Brian's head snapped up, his nose twitching like a bloodhound catching a scent. "I smell coffee," he declared, his voice tinged with desperate hope. Before I could respond, he was off, weaving through the sparse crowd toward a tiny hut in the distance, its tin roof glinting faintly in the dawn. Doug, never one to pass up caffeine, was right behind him. They returned minutes later, clutching steaming paper cups that looked like they'd been recycled one too many times. Doug took a sip, grimaced, and said, "Tastes like motor oil mixed with old socks. But it'll do the job." Brian nodded grimly, as if they'd just endured a harrowing trial.

The people waiting for the minivan had ballooned into a full-blown, foot-tapping, watch-checking mob, and I was seriously wondering if we'd all cram into that sardine can of a vehicle. Moments later, Lin piped up, mirroring my panic. "How are we all going to fit?" she asked, her face looking like she'd just bitten into a lemon.

"Easy, Lin," Doug said, flashing a grin wider than the minivan's nonexistent legroom. "You forgetting the sacred gospel of minivan travel? There's always room for one more—plus their luggage, their cousin, and that guy's pet chicken!"

Just then, the minivan driver, a wiry man with a cigarette dangling from his lips and a no-nonsense glint in his eye, flung open the van's doors with a dramatic flourish. Chaos erupted. It was like someone had fired a starting pistol. The crowd surged forward, elbows flying, bags swinging, everyone scrambling to claim a seat. I got caught up in the frenzy, shoving my way toward the van with a determination I didn't know I had. Somehow, I managed to hurl my pack into the luggage compartment at the back, clamber aboard, and snag an aisle seat—prime real estate for avoiding being squashed against the window but no defense against the madness. I'd lost sight of Lin, Doug, and Brian in the chaos, and before I could check if they'd made it, the driver revved the engine like he was at pole position in a Grand Prix and peeled out of the station.

“Are we all here?” Lin’s voice cut through the din from somewhere near the front of the bus, sharp and slightly panicked. “Yes!” I croaked, my throat dry from the dust and excitement. “Here!” Brian and Doug chorused from the back, their voices muffled by the cacophony of the packed van. I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. We were all accounted for, miraculously.

The minivan was a rolling testament to human endurance. Every seat was taken, often with two or three people squeezed into spaces meant for one. The aisle—my unfortunate domain—was a standing-room-only nightmare, packed with bodies swaying precariously as the van careened around corners. From my aisle seat, I had a front-row view of the chaos, though it was hard to focus on the passing farmland and sleepy villages when I was dodging the armpit of a man standing next to me. His hygiene was, let’s say, questionable, a potent mix of sweat and something vaguely reminiscent of overripe fruit. I tried to breathe through my mouth, clinging to the memory of the cool morning air now lost in the stifling van.

The drive was a bumpy, jostling affair, the kind that makes you question why you ever left home. At one point, I turned around to check on my companions and nearly choked on my laughter. Someone—likely a mother with no lap space left—had plopped a chubby, drooling baby onto Doug’s lap. His face was a masterpiece of horror, eyes wide, mouth frozen in a silent

scream. He held the baby at arm's length, as if it might explode. Brian, sitting next to him, was doubled over, laughing so hard I thought he'd pass out. "You look like you're defusing a bomb!" Brian gasped, wiping tears from his eyes. Doug shot him a withering glare but eventually softened, awkwardly patting the baby's head as its mother smiled gratefully from the aisle.

Two hours of this madness later, we rolled up to the Azerbaijan-Georgia border, a dusty outpost that looked like it hadn't changed since the Soviet era. Extracting ourselves from the minivan was like escaping a collapsed sardine tin. I stumbled out, grateful to be free of Smelly Armpit Man, and stretched my cramped limbs, relishing the return of the fresh air, now warming under the rising sun. Lin, however, was a woman on a mission. She leapt off the bus with a wild look in her eyes and bolted past us, heading straight for a clump of trees in the distance.

"Toilet?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. "Sure looks like it," Brian replied, smirking. "And a dire emergency, by the looks of it." We all stood and watched her disappear into the foliage, her daypack bouncing with every frantic step.

While we waited for Lin, Doug, Brian, and I turned our attention to our packs, which the driver had unceremoniously dumped in a heap on the side of the road. We sifted through the pile, muttering curses as we untangled straps and dusted off our belongings. By the time we'd sorted ourselves out, Lin emerged

from the trees, her face a picture of relief and newfound composure.

“Better?” I asked, grinning. She shot me a mock glare but nodded. “Much.”

With our packs hoisted onto our backs, we set off on the 500-meter trek to the Azerbaijan border post. The sun was climbing higher, and the cool morning air was giving way to the heat we’d anticipated, sweat already prickling at the small of my back.

As we trudged toward the Azeri customs point, the sun beating down with a vengeance, I started to feel a prickle of unease. The place was eerily quiet—no bustle, no voices, no signs of life. It was like stumbling onto the set of a post-apocalyptic film, minus the dramatic music. The closer we got, the worse it looked: the doors were firmly shut, the blinds pulled down tight, and not a soul was in sight. I stopped dead in my tracks, causing Brian to slam into my back with a grunt. “What’re you doing stopping like that?” he said, rubbing his nose and sounding distinctly annoyed.

“Look,” I said, pointing at the desolate building. “It looks closed. Like, properly closed.”

“No, surely not,” Brian replied, his tone more hopeful than convincing. He marched up to the door, all confidence and bravado, and gave the handle a firm tug. It didn’t budge. He tried again, as if sheer willpower could unlock it, then turned and

shrugged, his face a mix of frustration and resignation. “Now what?”

Lin, ever the problem-solver, wandered around the side of the building, her eyes scanning for any clue. She stopped at a faded sign plastered to the wall, its text in Azeri squiggles that meant nothing to us. Holding up her phone, she tapped the screen, using her translation app like a seasoned detective. “Closed until 2 p.m.,” she read aloud, her voice tinged with exasperation.

“What’s the time now?” Doug asked, squinting at the sky as if it might hold the answer.

“Midday,” I replied, checking my watch.

“Merde,” Doug muttered to no one in particular, kicking a pebble across the dusty ground.

“Well, I guess we find a shady spot and make the most of it,” Lin said with a practical shrug. “Not much else we can do.”

And so, that’s exactly what we did. We scouted the area and found a rickety picnic table nestled under the sprawling branches of an old tree, its shade a small mercy against the rising heat. The air was now hot at noon, threatening to grow even hotter, the kind that makes your shirt cling to your back in a sticky embrace. We dropped our packs with a collective groan and pooled our resources to cobble together a makeshift lunch.

Brian rummaged through his bag, emerging triumphantly with a slightly squashed loaf of bread and a handful of crackers that looked like they'd seen better days. "Jackpot!" he declared, though the enthusiasm was undercut by the discovery of a dried sausage at the bottom of his pack, its origins dubious at best. "This has been in here since... Baku, maybe?" he said, sniffing it cautiously.

"Smells edible," Doug offered, ever the optimist when it came to food. He contributed a small bag of prunes and nuts, a gift from one of the many nanas he'd befriended along the way, and we spread our haul across the table like a band of scavengers.

"Gourmet," Lin said dryly, tearing off a piece of bread and passing it around. We sat there, munching on our odd assortment, the prunes chewy and sweet, the sausage surprisingly flavorful despite its questionable age. The crackers crunched loudly, and the nuts added a satisfying bite. It wasn't exactly a Michelin-star meal, but in the middle of nowhere, with the border post locked up tight, it felt like a feast. The tree above us rustled softly, casting dappled shadows across our faces, and for a moment, the absurdity of our situation was almost charming.

Doug and Brian, never ones to sit still for long, pulled out a deck of cards from Doug's pack and started a game of something that looked suspiciously like poker but with rules they seemed to be

making up on the spot. “You’re cheating,” Brian accused, squinting at Doug’s cards.

“Me? Cheating?” Doug replied, feigning offense. “You’re just mad because I’m winning.” Their banter filled the air, punctuated by the occasional laugh or groan as one outsmarted the other—or at least thought they did.

Lin and I, meanwhile, opted for quieter entertainment. I pulled out a battered paperback, its pages yellowed from too many journeys, and Lin scrolled through her phone, catching up on a travel blog she’d been following. “This guy says Georgian wine is life-changing,” she said, tilting her screen toward me. “We better find some tonight.”

“Deal,” I replied, turning a page. “As long as it’s better than that motor oil coffee the boys were drinking this morning.” She snorted, and we lapsed into a comfortable silence, the sound of Doug and Brian’s card game blending with the distant chirp of crickets.

Time dragged on, the sun climbing higher and the air growing thicker with heat. I kept glancing at my watch, willing 2 p.m. to arrive faster. Finally, a little after the appointed hour, signs of life stirred at the customs post. The blinds rattled upward, and the doors swung open with a creak that echoed across the empty lot. We leapt to our feet like kids released from school, grabbing our

packs and hustling toward the office. “About time,” Doug muttered, brushing cracker crumbs off his shirt.

Inside, the border crossing was a breeze—passports checked, stamps slammed down with a satisfying thud, no fuss. The customs officer, a stern-looking man with a mustache that could’ve starred in its own movie, barely glanced at us before waving us through. We stepped out the other side, officially stamped out of Azerbaijan, and I felt a small surge of triumph. One more border down, one more step in our journey.

Then came the walk across no-man’s-land to the Georgian side, a stretch of road flanked by open fields and the distant, jagged peaks of the Caucasus Mountains. As we crossed a rickety bridge, we all stopped, spellbound. Below us, a river roared down from the mountains, tumbling over smooth stones in a frothy cascade. The water sparkled in the sunlight, and the towering peaks in the background looked like something out of a fantasy novel.

“Wow,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

“This might be the most beautiful border crossing I’ve ever seen,” Doug added, his usual sarcasm replaced by genuine awe. We stood there for a long moment, watching the river carve its path through the valley, the sound of rushing water mingling with the warming air. It was one of those rare moments when the

chaos of travel fades, and you're reminded why you endure the cramped vans and questionable hygiene.

Eventually, we tore ourselves away and continued to the Georgian border post. Clearing customs was a breeze, and we found an ATM conveniently positioned to dispense crisp Georgian lari. Just like that, we were in a new country, standing on a deserted stretch of road with nothing but open sky and rolling hills around us. This border was classified as "remote," and it lived up to the name. No towns, no shops, just a lonely border post manned by a couple of guards who seemed thrilled to see anyone at all. Their bored expressions lit up as they waved us through, as if we were the highlight of their day.

"Now what?" Brian asked, squinting into the vast emptiness.

Doug, who'd been admiring his fresh passport stamp like it was a fine piece of art, looked up and said with unshakable confidence, "Someone will come." As if on cue, a cloud of dust appeared on the horizon, and a battered taxi screeched to a halt in front of us. Lin, ever the negotiator, haggled with the driver in a mix of broken English and wild gestures, securing a rate for the 90-kilometer ride to our guesthouse in Telavi. We piled in, and the driver took off like he was auditioning for a Mad Max sequel, tires squealing as he swerved across the road.

Georgian drivers, we quickly learned, operate on a different plane of existence. Road rules? Optional. Speed limits? A

suggestion. Common sense? Nonexistent. The taxi careened through the countryside, weaving around potholes and the occasional stray goat with reckless abandon. I clung to my seatbelt, eyes half-closed, deciding it was better not to watch the chaos unfolding outside. Brian caught my eye, one eyebrow raised in silent judgment, and I just shrugged. Sometimes, you just have to roll with the madness.

A couple of hours after our chaotic taxi ride, we rolled into Telavi, the late afternoon sun casting a golden glow over the town. As we sped past, I caught a glimpse of the stunning fort perched high on a hill, its ancient stone walls standing proud against the backdrop of rolling green slopes. It looked like something out of a fairy tale, all weathered grandeur and quiet majesty. Inside the taxi, Lin was in the front seat, valiantly trying to communicate the address of our guesthouse to the driver. She waved her phone, pointing at the screen with increasing frustration, while the driver nodded enthusiastically, his head bobbing like one of those dashboard figurines. But his eager nods did little to inspire confidence.

“Not sure the driver has a clue where he’s going,” Doug observed, leaning back in his seat with a skeptical smirk.

“He doesn’t,” Brian replied, his eyes glued to his phone. “I’m tracking it on my GPS, and we’re three blocks away heading in the wrong direction.” Doug raised an eyebrow, biting back a

comment about Brian's less-than-stellar track record with navigation. We'd all learned the hard way that Brian's GPS skills were a bit like his cooking—well-intentioned but often disastrous.

Suddenly, the driver yanked the wheel, executing a dramatic U-turn that sent us lurching in our seats. He took a hard left, tires squealing, and screeched to a halt 100 meters later. With a series of wild hand gestures that could've doubled as a performance art piece, he indicated we'd arrived. Lin looked skeptical, her brow furrowed as she double-checked her phone. Brian, still fixated on his GPS, shook his head and muttered under his breath, "This is not right." But the driver had already taken matters into his own hands, leaping out of the car and yanking our bags from the trunk with the energy of a man possessed.

We exchanged wary glances. "Guess this is the end of the road," Brian said with a resigned shrug. "Best get out. We'll continue on foot. I don't think we're far."

We clambered out of the taxi, the cool evening air a welcome relief after the stuffy ride, and gathered our luggage while Lin settled up with the driver, who sped off in a cloud of dust. Brian, ever the optimist, stood in the middle of the street, spinning slowly with his phone held aloft like a divining rod, trying to pinpoint the right direction.

“Oh dear,” Lin said, watching him with a mix of amusement and dread. “Here we go. We could end up anywhere.”

“Oh ye of little faith,” Brian shot back, undeterred, as he set off at a brisk pace, his backpack bouncing with every step.

“Lead on,” Doug said, falling in behind him with a grin. Lin and I exchanged a look—half exasperation, half resignation—but we had little choice but to follow, our boots crunching on the cobblestone street.

After a few wrong turns (and some choice words from Lin), we finally stood in front of our guesthouse, a charming two-story building with ivy crawling up its walls. “Ha!” Brian crowed, puffing out his chest. “Now you can all apologize.”

“Well done, honey,” I said, giving his shoulder a playful pat as I brushed past him and pushed open the creaky gate into the garden. The others followed, and we stepped into a shady courtyard filled with blooming flowers and the faint hum of bees.

Our hostess, Maria, greeted us with a warm smile, her dark hair tied back in a loose bun. She didn’t speak English but launched into fluent German, which, as it turned out, was one of Brian’s many hidden talents. He dove into a conversation with her, his German surprisingly polished for someone who usually relied on hand gestures and charm to get by. Maria led us through the house to our rooms, which opened onto a spacious balcony

adorned with cushioned wicker chairs and a low table. The balcony overlooked a lush garden, where fruit trees cast dappled shadows on the grass. It was the kind of place that made you want to sit and stay forever.

“Surreal,” Doug muttered, watching Brian and Maria chat away in German. “You think you know someone,” he added, shaking his head with a grin.

“Very,” Lin agreed, leaning against the balcony railing. Maria, still smiling, explained (via Brian’s translation) that breakfast would be served on the balcony at 9 a.m. She pointed out a small fridge tucked in a corner, stocked with cold drinks and snacks, and recommended a nearby bar and restaurant for dinner. With a final wave, she left us to settle in.

We wandered into our rooms, each one cozy and inviting with soft beds and colorful woven rugs. After washing off the day’s dust and grime, we reconvened on the balcony, the evening air starting to cool after a long hot day. “Who wants a drink?” Doug asked, swinging open the fridge door with a flourish. “We’ve got beer, some kind of wine—rosé, maybe?—water, and what looks like juice. Oh, and homemade yogurt and some fruit.”

“Rosé for me,” I said, sinking into a chair.

“Rosé,” Lin called, already eyeing a jar of olives she’d found on the table.

“Beer,” Brian said, finally looking up from his phone.

Doug distributed the drinks, and we sat in contented silence, sipping and nibbling on olives, the garden below us alive with the soft rustle of leaves.

“I’m ready for an early dinner,” Doug said, breaking the silence. “We barely ate anything for lunch, and breakfast feels like ages ago.”

“Same here,” Brian agreed, finishing his beer. “Maria said that the restaurant she recommended is open all day, so we can go whenever.”

“Perfect,” Lin said, standing and stretching. “Let’s go now. I’m starving.”

We headed out, the short walk taking us through Telavi’s winding streets, where old stone buildings glowed in the fading light. The restaurant was a lively courtyard buzzing with locals and travelers, its tables draped in checkered cloths and lit by strings of fairy lights. Waiters flitted between tables, balancing trays of steaming dishes and clinking glasses. The air was thick with the scent of grilled meat and fresh herbs. We let our waiter, a cheerful man with a thick mustache, guide us through the menu, and he recommended a spread of traditional Georgian dishes paired with a local wine.

Soon, our table was laden with a feast that looked like it could feed a small army. There was khachapuri, a golden, boat-shaped bread filled with molten sulguni cheese, its surface glistening

with a perfectly baked crust. Next came khinkali, plump dumplings stuffed with spiced pork and beef, their twisted tops begging to be nibbled. A platter of mtsvadi—grilled skewers of tender lamb—arrived, charred to perfection and served with a tangy tkemali plum sauce. Bowls of pkhali, vibrant vegetable patties made with spinach, beets, and walnuts, added pops of color, while a fresh mchadi cornbread sat alongside, its crumbly texture perfect for soaking up sauces. To wash it all down, the waiter poured glasses of Saperavi, a deep ruby-red wine with bold, fruity notes and a hint of spice that warmed the throat.

“This is incredible,” Lin said, tearing into a khachapuri and pulling a string of cheese that stretched like a cartoon. “I could live on this bread alone.”

“Careful with the khinkali,” Brian warned, demonstrating the proper technique—bite the top, sip the broth, then eat the rest. “You don’t want to waste the soup inside.”

“Too late,” Doug said, laughing as broth dribbled down his chin. “This is harder than it looks!”

“Amateur,” I teased, managing a semi-successful bite of my own khinkali. The flavors exploded—savory meat, a kick of black pepper, and that rich, steaming broth. “This wine, though,” I added, taking a sip of the Saperavi. “It’s like drinking a vineyard in a glass.”

“Agreed,” Lin said, raising her glass. “To Georgia, chaotic drivers, and food that makes it all worth it.”

“Cheers!” we chorused, clinking glasses as the courtyard hummed around us.

We ate until we couldn’t move, swapping stories and laughing over Brian’s GPS mishaps and Doug’s brief stint as a baby holder on the bus. The waiter kept our glasses filled, and the Saperavi flowed, its bold flavor the perfect match for the hearty meal. By the time we finished, the sky was dark, and the fairy lights cast a warm glow over the courtyard.

We strolled back to the guesthouse, the cool night air a soothing end to a long day. Back on the balcony, we lingered for a moment, too full and content to speak. One by one, we retreated to our rooms, fell into our soft beds, and were soon fast asleep, the sounds of Telavi fading into the distance as dreams of forts and feasts took over.

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Chapter Fifteen

Telavi Georgia

The next morning, we gathered on the Telavi guesthouse balcony for breakfast, where Maria had outdone herself, rolling out a spread that promised to ruin us for all future meals. The sun crept over the garden, bathing the fruit trees in a golden glow like an artist with a double-shot espresso. The table sagged under a feast fit for Georgian royalty: khachapuri leaking sulguni cheese like a gooey volcano, crisp mchadi cornbread, homemade apricot jam that captured summer in a jar, a stack of golden pancakes fluffy enough to make clouds jealous, creamy homemade yogurt smoother than a jazz ballad, and coffee so robust it could erase the memory of that vile border café brew in one sip. Maria, our breakfast maestro, had set a bar we'd be chasing the whole trip. The air was cool, bees droned their lazy morning tune, and we lingered, forks poised, already in love before the first bite.

Doug gawked at the spread, eyes gleaming. "This looks unreal. Those pancakes are practically glowing, and that yogurt? It's begging to be eaten."

Lin grinned, spreading jam on a piece of khachapuri. "This cheese bread is my new best friend. Look at that ooze—it's practically winking at me."

“I’m just saying,” Brian added, pouring coffee, “if this is day one’s breakfast, I’m worried we’ll need stretchy pants by the end of the week. Maria’s on a mission to spoil us.”

“No kidding,” I said, cutting into a pancake. “This jam and yogurt combo? It’s like sunshine and comfort had a lovechild. Cereal’s canceled forever.”

Just then, a lively young woman bounded up the stairs, her energy crackling like a live wire. “Good morning!” she chirped, her English so polished it could charm a room full of skeptics. “I’m Nino, Maria’s daughter. Mama says you’re here for a few days, so I’m kidnapping you for a Kakheti tour. Winery, Chavchavadze House, Gremi Castle, Nekresi Monastery. It’s a lot, but you’ll love it.” Resistance was futile—Nino’s enthusiasm was a force of nature, like a whirlwind with a tour guide’s itinerary. We exchanged glances, forks still hovering, already swept up in her infectious zeal.

“Wine in the morning?” Doug asked, eyes gleaming like he’d just heard the meaning of life.

“Not just wine,” Nino replied, smirking. “History, culture... but yeah, wine too.” Doug was already sold.

We piled into Nino’s ancient Lada, a car that looked like it’d seen more adventures than Indiana Jones. It groaned under our weight, the dashboard’s bobblehead dog nodding like it knew what was coming. The engine sputtered to life, and we were off

—well, “off” is generous. Nino drove like she was auditioning for a *Fast & Furious* sequel, but with goats and tractors as her co-stars. Potholes? Swerved at the last second. Curves? Mere suggestions. The bobblehead dog braced for impact with every turn.

“Is this normal?” Brian whispered, clutching his seatbelt like it was a lifeline.

“Totally,” Nino said, unfazed, weaving past a stray cow with the grace of a matador. “You’ll get used to it.”

“Not sure I ever will,” Lin muttered, clutching Doug for dear life as we braced ourselves in the lurching Lada.

The road stretched into Kakheti’s vineyard country, where the air smelled like grapes and dreams. Our first stop was a family-run winery, nestled among sun-dappled vines and shaded by a walnut tree that’d stood witness to countless clinking glasses and heartfelt stories.

Giorgi, the winemaker, greeted us with a warm, weathered smile, setting out glasses for a tasting that promised to weave us into Kakheti’s ancient tapestry. “This is where wine began,” Nino translated as Giorgi launched into his story. “Eight thousand years of grape-crushing wisdom. Qvevri—giant clay pots buried in the ground—ferment grapes with their skins, stems, and wild yeast. No chemicals, just time and tradition.”

As Giorgi guided us through the wines, we sipped and chatted about the region's history—none of us realized Kakheti's winemaking roots stretched back millennia—and marveled at how superb each pour was. First up was Rkatsiteli, crisp and floral, like a spring meadow caught in a glass. "This is like drinking a sunny day," Lin said, swirling her glass. Mtsvane followed, its green tint and citrus snap evoking a shady lemon grove. "Tart but smooth," Brian noted, nodding approvingly. Chinuri came next, delicate with whispers of apricot and herbs, so refined it felt like it should have its own butler. "Fancy stuff," I said, raising an eyebrow. Finally, Giorgi poured the Saperavi, a deep red elixir so bold it seemed to carry the weight of centuries. Each sip pulled us deeper into Georgia's soul, like a liquid time machine. Doug gripped his glass of Saperavi like it was a winning lottery ticket. "This wine," he declared, voice hushed, "makes every other drink I've had feel like a mistake."

As we lingered under the walnut tree, savoring the last drops, Lin picked up a leaflet about Georgian supras, the legendary feasts where wine and words flow in equal measure. "These are no ordinary dinners," she said, eyes widening. "They're like storytelling marathons, with a tamada—a toastmaster—who leads everyone in poetic tributes to life, love, family, even the tough stuff like loss. No one drinks until the tamada delivers their speech, and each toast is a little masterpiece." We all nodded, agreeing what a fabulous idea a supra sounded—part

feast, part poetry slam, all heart. “Though,” Doug added with a grin, “it does sound a bit like a drunken night at the local football club back in Sydney, just with better wine and fancier speeches. You know, our mate Jack would be the perfect tamada—after a few too many, he’d be up there spinning epic toasts about footy, mateship, and that time he lost his shoe in a pub brawl, holding everyone captive till he’s done.” We laughed, imagining Jack, half-sloshed in Sydney, commanding a supra table with his boozy, heartfelt rants.

We left the winery, warm with wine and stories, and piled back into the Lada. Nino’s driving hadn’t mellowed, but the wine had made us braver. The road to Tsinandali wound through sun-soaked vineyards and sleepy villages, Nino’s Lada rattling along with its bobblehead dog frozen mid-bounce, as if praying for a smoother ride. The Chavchavadze Estate emerged from the heat haze like a scene from a period drama—an elegant two-story manor framed by towering cypresses and gardens so pristine they could star in a romance novel.

We piled out, the Lada wheezing in relief, and I squinted at a sign by the gate. “Alexander Chavchavadze,” I read aloud, “19th-century nobleman, poet, and winemaking trailblazer. Born in 1786, he was a godson of Catherine the Great, schooled in Russian courts, and a romantic poet who penned odes to love and liberty. He fought in wars against Persians and Ottomans, introduced European winemaking techniques to Georgia, built

the country's first French-style winery right here, and hosted literary salons with heavyweights like Pushkin and Griboedov. Oh, and he basically invented Georgian sparkling wine. This guy was juggling more talents than a circus act.”

Inside, the house was a time capsule of Georgian aristocracy, dripping with old-world charm. Crystal chandeliers caught the light like frozen starbursts, velvet-upholstered chairs begged for a lazy afternoon with a book, and polished wooden floors creaked with the weight of history. Bookshelves lined the walls, stuffed with tomes in French, Russian, and Georgian—philosophy, poetry, and military treatises, hinting at Chavchavadze's eclectic mind. A portrait of the man himself gazed down, his expression equal parts dreamer and commander, as if he was still plotting his next verse or battle strategy.

The drawing room, with its ornate fireplace and delicate piano, felt like a stage for the literary salons Chavchavadze hosted, where Russian and Georgian intellectuals swapped ideas over glasses of his pioneering wines. A guide pointed out a corner where Pushkin allegedly recited poetry, his words mingling with the clink of glasses and the scent of candle wax. Chavchavadze wasn't just a host; he was a cultural bridge, blending Russian sophistication with Georgian soul, his poems fueling a national awakening while his winery modernized a millennia-old tradition.

Downstairs, the wine cellar was a cool, shadowy sanctuary, its arched stone ceilings cradling rows of massive qvevri, those ancient clay pots half-buried in the earth like sleeping giants, alongside rooms of bottle racks that stretched into the dimness, seemingly endless, as if guarding secrets from centuries past. Dusty bottles, some labeled with Chavchavadze's own vintages, lined the racks, whispering tales of 19th-century soirées, while the qvevri stood as a nod to Georgia's ancient winemaking roots, married to his European-inspired vision. You could almost hear the echo of toasts and laughter, as if the walls still hummed with the energy of Chavchavadze's gatherings. "Poet, warrior, winemaker," Lin said, clearly impressed, as we lingered by a display of Chavchavadze's handwritten poems. "This guy was out here writing love sonnets, battling Persians, and inventing sparkling wine while I can barely manage my inbox. I need to step up my game."

Brian nodded, peering into the cellar. "And he built this? The guy had vision. Turning Georgia into a wine powerhouse while hosting literary rockstars? That's next-level." I ran my hand along a bookshelf, imagining Chavchavadze's life—a nobleman caught between empires, using his Russian education to elevate Georgian culture while pouring his heart into romantic poetry that inspired a nation. His estate, now a museum, felt alive, as if the walls were still reciting his verses or debating the merits of qvevri versus oak barrels.

Outside, the gardens were a balm for the soul, with rose-covered trellises weaving fragrant tunnels and a gurgling fountain that drowned out the summer heat. The estate's grounds, sprawling and meticulously tended, reflected Chavchavadze's love for beauty and order, a place where he could escape the chaos of war and politics. We wandered through the paths, pretending we were aristocrats debating literature or the finer points of Saperavi, half-expecting to spot Chavchavadze himself strolling with a glass in hand. Nino, ever the taskmaster, rounded us up with a grin. "Time to move, lords and ladies!" she teased, herding us back to the Lada, which groaned back to life like it was dreading the next leg.

Next stop: Gremi Castle.

The road from Tsinandali twisted upward, the hills growing steeper as the Alazani Valley opened wide below us, a dazzling sprawl of vineyards and golden fields framed by the jagged Caucasus Mountains. Nino piloted the Lada with the instincts of a rally driver, weaving through hairpin turns like she had a telepathic map, while the bobblehead dog on the dashboard bobbed in silent panic. We were still buzzing from the Chavchavadze Estate, our heads full of Alexander's poetry and wine-soaked legacy, when Gremi Castle rose into view, perched on a hill like a stone sentinel basking in the late afternoon sun. Its church and watchtower glowed with a warmth that screamed,

“I’m ready for my close-up,” as if the whole scene was plucked from a medieval epic.

We clambered out of the Lada, legs wobbly from Nino’s driving and the day’s relentless pace, and trudged up the narrow stone stairs to the castle, puffing in the heat. Gremi, we learned, wasn’t just any old fortress—it was the beating heart of the Kakheti Kingdom in the 16th century, the capital under King Levan, who ruled from 1518 to 1576. This place was a powerhouse, a hub of trade along the Silk Road, where merchants haggled over spices and silks, and royals schemed over power and alliances. The castle’s walls, now partly ruined, once sheltered a thriving court, with the Church of the Archangels at its core, its domed roof and intricate brickwork a testament to Kakhetian craftsmanship.

Standing at the top, I gazed out over the valley, the view so stunning it felt like the landscape was flexing for us.

“Imagine being a king up here,” I said, half-dreaming of velvet robes and a crown. “You’d feel like you owned the world.”

“Until the Persians crashed the party,” Brian cut in, nodding at an info board with a grimace. “Shah Abbas and his army rolled through in 1615, torched the place, and left it in ruins. Kakheti had to pack up and move the capital elsewhere. The church held on, though, like it was too stubborn to fall.”

He was right—Gremi’s golden age ended in flames when the Persian invasion gutted the city, reducing its palaces and markets

to rubble. Yet the Church of the Archangels stood firm, its stone walls defying the chaos, and the watchtower, once a lookout for archers scanning for invaders, still loomed proudly, whispering tales of a kingdom that refused to fade entirely.

Inside the church, the air was cool, heavy with the scent of old wax and stone. Faded frescoes of saints and monarchs, painted over 500 years ago, stared down with solemn, serene eyes, as if they'd seen everything from royal feasts to Persian sieges and now our sweaty, camera-snapping selves. A small museum in the tower displayed relics of Gremi's glory—clay pots, rusted swords, and a replica of King Levan's crown that made me want to try it on, just for a second.

Nino lowered her voice, pointing to a corner where candles flickered. "People still come here to pray and marry," she said, her tone soft with respect. The silence wrapped around us, a gentle nudge from history, connecting us to the countless souls who'd stood here, from kings to modern brides.

Lin, still riding her self-appointed guide high, studied a fresco of an angel. "This place was the center of everything—trade, power, culture—and it's still got that magic. From Silk Road deals to wedding vows, it's like Gremi's never stopped living."

By now, we were hot and tired, our faces pink from the sun and our legs whining from the day's adventures. As we piled back into the Lada, its engine sputtering like it was as exhausted as we

were, Nino flashed her signature grin. “Still want to see the monastery?” she asked, her enthusiasm undimmed.

Brian slumped in his seat, muttering, “I’d rather head back to the guesthouse and sip a cold beer in the garden.” He shot a hopeful glance around, but Lin, our ever-enthusiastic self-appointed guide, overrode him with a gleeful, “Of course we do!” Her eyes sparkled, completely ignoring the dark look Brian aimed her way, as if she was personally offended by the idea of skipping history for hops. With Nino at the wheel and Lin’s zeal leading the charge, resistance was pointless—we were monastery-bound.

Nekresi Monastery was the cherry on this Kakheti sundae, perched high above the Alazani Valley like it was meditating over the view. The road was a beast—too steep to hike without regretting your life choices, too narrow for the Lada’s questionable brakes. We opted for the monastery’s minibus, which chugged up the hill like a grumpy goat, through forests that cooled the air and soothed the soul. Just when it felt like the bus might surrender, the trees parted, revealing Nekresi’s ancient cypresses and stone churches, with vineyards and mountains sprawling below.

Dating back to the 4th century, Nekresi was one of Georgia’s oldest Christian sites, its modest chapels heavy with the weight of centuries. We wandered the grounds, our footsteps soft on

mossy stones, feeling the pull of history in every worn step. A smug cat strutted across the courtyard, eyeing us like we were unworthy intruders, and honestly, it was hard to argue.

The main church, built in the 600s, was dim and cool, smelling of wax and stone. No gold or glitz, just candles and quiet—a monastery that was still a living, breathing place.

What struck us most wasn't the age or the breathtaking view—though both were stunning—but Nekresi's quiet resilience. It had weathered Persian invasions, political upheavals, and probably some monk squabbles over chores, yet it stood serene, watching over the valley like a stone guardian. We lingered on the terrace, sipping water and pretending we were contemplative monks, until the minibus honked, signaling our descent.

Back in the Lada, Nino's spark was still undimmed, though the bobblehead dog looked like it needed a vacation. The day had been a whirlwind—wine that rewrote our souls, a poet's manor that screamed sophistication, a castle that survived empires, and a monastery that whispered peace. Kakheti wasn't just a place; it was a story, told through grapes, stones, and Nino's fearless driving. As the Lada rumbled back to Telavi, we were quiet, not from exhaustion but from awe. Georgia had us hooked, and we were already plotting the next adventure.

We arrived back at the guesthouse and stumbled into the shady garden with the relief of travelers who'd survived a day of wine,

history, and Nino's driving. The air was cool under the fruit trees, a welcome reprieve from the sun's relentless glare.

Maria, our hospitality queen, greeted us with a tray of chilled drinks—lemony tarragon soda and frosty beers—alongside a plate of snacks: crunchy pkhali patties, tangy cheese bites, and fresh herbs that smelled like the countryside itself. We sank into comfortable chairs beneath the rustling leaves, the garden's tranquility enveloping us like a gentle hush, and settled into a companionable silence, each of us sipping a cold beer and quietly reflecting on the day's whirlwind. The taste of Saperavi, the elegance of Chavchavadze's manor, Gremi's stubborn survival, and Nekresi's ancient calm swirled in our minds, a tapestry of Kakheti's soul.

No one spoke for a while, the only sounds the clink of glasses and the hum of bees, as if we were all too full of the day's wonders to put them into words just yet. Brian, finally getting his longed-for beer, let out a contented sigh, while Lin, still glowing with her guide-like zeal, gazed at the garden as if plotting tomorrow's adventure. Doug leaned back, beer in hand, staring at the sky where the first stars were

peeking out, and I couldn't help but feel we'd been woven into Georgia's story, if only for a day. We knew Lin was already scheming tomorrow's itinerary, but for now, we basked in the garden's quiet peace.

The next morning, we gathered on the guesthouse balcony for another of Maria's legendary breakfasts, the table brimming with her signature Georgian spread. The sun glowed over the garden, fruit trees catching the light, and bees hummed lazily below. We dug in, energized for our final full day in Telavi, though Brian was already muttering about needing coffee to keep up with Lin's plans.

"This better fuel us for the marathon," Doug said, sipping his coffee with a grin. Lin, flipping through her notebook like a commander plotting a campaign, brushed off Brian's grumble. "It's Telavi day—Batonis Tsikhe, Giant Plane Tree, Nadikvari Park, the bazaar, and Erekle II Street."

Brian sighed, but I chuckled, knowing Lin's enthusiasm was unstoppable. We set off on foot for our day exploring Telavi.

First stop: Batonis Tsikhe, the 17th-century "Fortress of the Master," home to King Erekle II, Georgia's modernizing monarch. Its stone walls towered over Erekle II Avenue, whispering tales of royal decrees and battles. The Telavi History Museum inside sparkled with Bronze Age relics and royal artifacts, while the Ketevan Iashvili Art Gallery added vibrant paintings. Lin was glued to every plaque. "Erekle II fought Persians and built schools—total legend," she said. Brian, eyeing a sword display, muttered, "Bet he didn't have to follow a

tour schedule.” The Persian-style arches and town views made us feel like we’d slipped into a king’s court, sans crown.

Next, we strolled to the Giant Plane Tree, a 900-year-old sycamore looming over Telavi’s central park like the town’s wise old granddad. Its massive trunk and sprawling branches drew selfie-snapping locals and wish-makers. “This tree’s seen centuries of drama,” I said, awestruck. Doug squinted upward. Lin insisted we make wishes, but Brian muttered, “I wish for shade and a break,” earning her classic eye-roll.

By midday, we were at Nadikvari Park, a hilltop oasis with flowerbeds, sculptures, and jaw-dropping views of the Alazani Valley and Caucasus Mountains. We flopped onto the grass for a quick lunch—sandwiches stuffed with cheese and herbs, paired with fizzy tarragon soda. “This view’s worth the hike,” Lin said, snapping photos. Brian, munching happily, admitted, “Stunning.” Doug stretched out, grinning. “Picnic with epic scenery? I’m sold.”

Refueled, we dove into the Telavi Bazaar, a riot of color and scent in the town center. Stalls brimmed with churchkhela, spices, and fruit leather that could double as art. Lin haggled like a pro, snagging a bag of walnut-stuffed churchkhela. “New favorite snack,” she declared, taking a bite. I grabbed dried apricots, while Doug, sniffing spices, sneezed theatrically. “Give

a guy a warning!” he laughed. Brian, eyeing a cheese stall, finally perked up. “This is my kind of history.”

Our final stop was Erekle II Street, where 19th-century brick houses sported carved wooden balconies, straight out of a vintage postcard. QR codes (thanks, Telaviin project) spilled their stories in English, and we climbed a wooden staircase to a Cultural Centre balcony for a panorama of rusted rooftops and rolling hills. “These houses are time machines,” Lin said, scanning a QR code about a local poet. Doug framed a photo. “Beats my usual scenery,” Brian said, leaning on the railing with a faint smile. “This view’s got some kind of magic, but I’m ready for a rest.”

As evening fell, we headed to a cozy Georgian restaurant, all wooden beams and checkered tablecloths, the air thick with the aroma of khinkali and grilled meat. We ordered a supra-worthy feast: khinkali dumplings, juicy mtsvadi skewers, badrijani nigvziani eggplant rolls, and a jug of amber Rkatsiteli wine. The tamada, a jolly older man, led toasts to friendship, Georgia, and “brave tourists,” making us laugh and sip in sync. Doug raised his glass. “To Kakheti and Telavi, an amazing place most people have never heard of.” Lin clinked hers, ignoring Brian’s mock groan. “This is living,” she said, as we devoured the spread, hearts as full as our plates.

After dinner, we wandered back to the guesthouse and sank into chairs in the garden. The cool evening air was a balm after the day's whirlwind. Maria's husband, Mikheil, a wiry man with a mischievous twinkle, joined us with a bottle of chacha, Georgia's potent grape spirit—clear as crystal, smelling faintly of fruit, with a fiery kick that warmed like a hug from a dragon. "Homemade, from our vines, and flavored with thyme from the garden," he said, pouring it into small glasses. We sipped cautiously, the chacha blazing down our throats but settling into a cozy glow. Mikheil and Maria settled into chairs, their faces softening as they shared stories of their youth in Moscow, where they studied engineering and snuck into jazz clubs, before moving to Georgia to work in design departments at Soviet factories dotted across the country.

"Not long after we settled here, the Soviet Union fell in 1991," Mikheil said, his voice hushed. "Factories closed, power was out for days, jobs vanished. Like so many, we had nothing."

"But we had this house and garden," Maria added, her gaze far-off. "We grew our food, brewed our own chacha. Kakheti showed us how to endure. Years later, when tourists started arriving, we opened this guesthouse."

We listened, spellbound, the chacha loosening our tongues as we sat under the rustling fruit trees, stars twinkling above. No one spoke for a while, the only sounds were the clink of glasses and

the soft chirp of crickets, as if we were all too full of the day's wonders to put them into words just yet. Brian, savoring his chacha, let out a contented sigh, while Lin, still glowing with guide-like zeal, gazed at the garden, clearly scheming our next destination. Doug leaned back, glass in hand, staring at the sky where stars multiplied like fireflies, and I couldn't help but feel we'd been woven into Georgia's story, if only for a few days. We knew Lin was already plotting our next move, but for now, we basked in the garden's quiet peace.

The next morning, Lin was back at it, waving her notebook like a battle flag, ready to drag us to more Kakhetian treasures. But Brian and Doug had had enough. "No more castles, no more monasteries," Brian declared, folding his arms like a stubborn mule. "I'm parking myself right here with a book and a beer."

Doug nodded, sprawled on the balcony with a novel he'd barely opened. "Lin, I'm with Brian. My legs are on strike after that Telavi marathon."

Lin's eyes narrowed, but even her guide-like zeal couldn't crack this revolt. I shrugged, secretly relieved. "Fine, let's call it a rest day," I said. Brian muttered, "Or two rest days," and Lin, outnumbered, tossed her notebook aside with a dramatic sigh. "You're all philistines," she muttered, but there was a grin tugging at her lips.

For the next two days, we embraced the art of doing nothing. Mornings found us on the balcony, the garden's fruit trees casting dappled shade as we sipped coffee and flipped through books—Lin with a travel guide, Brian with a dog-eared thriller, Doug with a sci-fi paperback he kept dozing through, and me with a journal, scribbling notes about Kakheti's magic. Afternoons, we migrated to the guesthouse garden, sinking into chairs under the rustling leaves, the hum of bees our only soundtrack. Maria kept us supplied with chilled tarragon soda and snacks, her hospitality as warm as the sun. Brian, true to his word, cradled a beer, looking more content than he had all trip. "This is the life," he said, stretching like a cat. Doug chuckled, "Told you we'd win this round, Lin." Lin just rolled her eyes, but even she was caught reading under a tree, her planning on pause. Evenings, we wandered to a local bar we'd stumbled upon, a cozy hole-in-the-wall just off Erekle II Street with mismatched chairs and a chalkboard menu. The food was simple but soul-warming—lobio bean stew, crusty bread, and platters of grilled sausages—paired with glasses of crisp Saperavi that glowed ruby in the dim light. We sat around a wobbly table, trading stories of the trip: the winery's liquid time machines, Chavchavadze's poetic swagger, Gremi's stubborn survival, and Nekresi's ancient calm. Lin tried to sneak in plans for tomorrow, but Brian cut her off with a raised glass. "To chilling out," he toasted, and we clinked, laughing as Doug added, "To surviving

your tour schedule!” The wine flowed, the bar’s hum wrapped around us, and Telavi felt like a second home.

And then, just like that, it was time to go. Bags packed, we gathered on the balcony one last time, the garden below shimmering in the morning light. Maria and Mikheil saw us off with hugs and a small bottle of their homemade chacha, a parting gift that promised to keep Kakheti’s fire alive. Lin was already flipping through her notebook, mapping our next adventure, but Brian was still basking in the victory of his rest days. Doug slung his bag over his shoulder, grinning. “Telavi’s gonna be tough to beat,” he said. I nodded, my journal heavy with memories of vineyards, fortresses, and this magical garden. As we stepped away from the guesthouse, the bees humming farewell, I felt Georgia’s story lingering in my bones, a chapter we’d carry wherever Lin’s zeal took us next.

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Chapter Sixteen

Sighnaghi Georgia

A horn blared behind me like the scream of a vengeful goat, and before I could even process what was happening, a firm hand yanked me unceremoniously to the side. A minivan shot past us at what I could only assume was warp speed. I swear I saw the driver sipping coffee and scrolling Instagram as he flew by.

“Careful!” snapped Brian, with the exasperation of someone who had saved your life and now regretted it. “You’ll get flattened if you keep wandering around like a stunned mule.”

We were at the Telavi minivan station—though “station” was perhaps too organized a word. It was more like a minivan battleground. Engines revved, exhaust fumes swirled, and minivans darted about like caffeinated wasps. It was every man, woman, and vehicle for themselves. We, a humble band of dazed foreigners, wandered around with the grace and confidence of confused penguins at a NASCAR event.

Our destination was Sighnaghi, a picturesque hilltop town two hours from Tbilisi, rumored to be well worth the journey’s chaos. The task? Tracking down the right minivan in a sea of vehicles at the bustling station. It sounded simple enough—each van had a colorful sign in its window, proudly displaying its route.

But there was a catch: the signs were written in Mkhedruli—*მხედრული*—Georgia’s flowing, ornate script that looked like poetry in motion. To us, though, it was pure, indecipherable chaos, like a calligrapher’s fever dream or a chicken’s wild scribble across a page. We were supposed to find a sign reading ***სიღნაღი***, but every sign blurred into a tangle of elegant curls and loops. We stood there, squinting at the vans, utterly lost in a sea of beautiful but baffling script.

Enter Lin, our fearless organizer and translator-in-chief. With her phone gripped like a sword, she was deep in conversation with a man who looked like he’d wrestled bears for fun—and probably still did. She was typing feverishly into her translation app, her brows furrowed so tightly it looked like her forehead was trying to escape her face. This was the fourth person she’d tried, and the frustration levels were rising fast.

Brian and I trailed behind like two useless extras in a low-budget travel documentary. We’d learned the hard way: never interrupt Lin when she’s on a mission. That path only ended in suffering.

“Where’s Doug?” I whispered to Brian, watching Lin now trying to interrogate a tiny elderly woman who appeared to be pushing a shopping cart filled entirely with aubergines.

“No idea,” Brian replied. “Last I saw, he was chatting with some old guy by the gate. He could be in Azerbaijan by now.”

Just as Lin managed to crack the aubergine mystery, she spun around and gave us a triumphant smile. She had, it seemed, located the correct bus. Or so we hoped. But then her expression darkened.

“Uh-oh,” muttered Brian. “She’s realized we’ve lost Doug.”

“Where’s Doug?” she demanded.

We responded with matching shrugs. It was not helpful, and Lin’s eyes began to twitch.

But then, as if summoned by our collective guilt, Doug appeared beside us like a cheerful wizard. “I was just over there,” he said brightly, nodding toward a nearby bench. “Sipping tea with that old guy. No need for us all to search—I knew you’d find it, Lin.” He patted her arm with the unshakable confidence of someone who’s never been decked. Holding up a bag, he grinned. “The old fella gave me these local tea leaves—swore they’re top-notch. Smells like camel dung, but he says that’s the magic of it!”

Lin stared at him, sighed, and turned on her heel. We followed her to a minibus parked in the farthest corner of the station, discreetly dodging more minivans that seemed to be auditioning for a Georgian remake of *Fast & Furious*.

We loaded our bags into the back of the van, which had all the structural integrity of a baked potato, and climbed aboard.

“Lin, how do you know this is the right bus?” Doug asked, as we settled into seats designed for toddlers.

“Well,” she replied, pointing vaguely, “that lady over there told me it was.”

Brian raised an eyebrow. “So... we don’t actually know. We could be headed anywhere.”

“Ye of little faith,” Lin said with a smirk. “How about showing some trust?”

“Besides,” Doug added, “isn’t the thrill of adventure part of it? Landing in some random place could be exciting!”

There was a pause as we considered this. Then the driver hopped in, lit a cigarette with a look of bored inevitability, and started the engine with a sound that suggested the vehicle was not so much starting as protesting its own existence.

With a screech of brakes and a cloud of dust that enveloped a nearby fruit vendor, we were off—hurtling toward the unknown, possibly Sighnaghi, possibly somewhere entirely different. But hey, we had Doug, tea, and a sense of adventure.

What could possibly go wrong?

We rattled along in the jam-packed minivan, bouncing over uneven roads for what felt like an eternity. I was wedged tightly between a stout woman clutching an enormous, lumpy sack of potatoes that seemed to take up half the van and a small child

with a perpetually runny nose, sniffing loudly every few seconds. The air was thick with the scent of dust, sweat, and something vaguely like boiled cabbage. From somewhere deep in the bowels of the vehicle, Doug's booming voice carried over the rumble of the engine, spinning wild, animated tales of bears, the Russian tundra, and who-knows-what-else to a cluster of passengers. I'd wager my last lari they didn't understand a single word of his enthusiastic monologue, their blank stares betraying polite confusion. But that never stopped Doug—he had a knack for storytelling that bordered on performance art, oblivious to whether his audience was captivated or just bewildered.

Craning my neck awkwardly over the potato sack, which seemed to shift and jab me with every bump, I caught fleeting glimpses of the countryside flashing by through a grimy window. Kilometers of lush, rolling wine country stretched out, vines heavy with grapes under the golden Georgian sun. The landscape gradually shifted as we moved into hilly terrain, the flat vineyards giving way to rugged slopes dotted with scrubby bushes and occasional bursts of wildflowers. The woman beside me, her face weathered but kind, suddenly elbowed me in the ribs—hard enough to make me wince—and pointed to a village perched like a crown atop a distant hill.

“Sighnaghi,” she declared with a nod—at least, I think that's what she said. My grasp of Georgian was, let's be honest, nonexistent. Still, I nodded back with exaggerated enthusiasm,

aiming for friendly camaraderie and hoping it didn't read as total confusion.

The van soon began its ascent, the engine groaning as our driver—with a cigarette perpetually dangling from his lips—treated the mountain like a personal gauntlet thrown down by fate. He gunned the engine with reckless abandon, flinging us around hairpin turns with a screech of tires and a spray of gravel that pinged off the van's sides like gunfire. In front of me, Brian clung to the seat ahead, his knuckles white, his face a mix of terror and resignation. From behind, Doug let out a whoop of pure delight, as if this death-defying ride was the highlight of our trip. The local passengers, meanwhile, sat serene, unfazed by the madness, their calm suggesting this was just another Tuesday for them.

With a final, dramatic screech, we lurched into a dusty car park, the van shuddering to a stop. We spilled out, stiff and disoriented, blinking in the bright sunlight. Doug, ever the social butterfly, was already saying fond farewells to his new friends from the back of the van. They pressed a bulging bag of fruit—oranges, apples, and a few bruised peaches—into his hands, along with a massive, glistening salami that looked like it could double as a club. With smiles, bows, and a few incomprehensible phrases, they parted ways, leaving us standing in the empty lot, the dust settling around us like a fading curtain.

“Right,” I said, squinting across the road, where a faded sign suggested our destination. “I think our guesthouse is just over there.”

“Lead on!” Doug declared, brandishing his salami like a knight wielding a broadsword, his grin as wide as the valley below.

Minutes later, we stood in the courtyard of the guesthouse, our bags slung over our shoulders, eyeing the place with a mix of curiosity and skepticism. Some might call it quaint, with its peeling paint and sagging wooden beams; I called it old and tired, like a house that had given up on impressing anyone.

“Dear oh dear,” Lin muttered, her brow furrowed as a woman emerged from the shadowy depths of the building to check us in. “This is not what the photos promised on the website.”

“Never mind,” Brian said with a philosophical shrug, brushing dust off his jacket. “We’ve stayed in some fantastic spots on this trip—our luck was bound to run out eventually.”

The rooms, to be fair, were clean, if a bit cramped, with creaky floors and faded curtains that smelled faintly of mothballs. They’d do for a few days. We dumped our bags and set off to explore the tiny hilltop town, our footsteps echoing on the uneven cobblestones.

As we wandered Sighnaghi’s winding streets, I felt like we’d stumbled into a living postcard, its colors vivid but its edges frayed, like a memory half-forgotten. The town, perched high

above the Alazani Valley, had a quiet magic—stone houses with carved wooden balconies, cobblestones worn smooth by centuries of footsteps. Doug was a few steps ahead, fiddling with his camera, snapping shots of the ancient houses as if he were documenting a treasure hunt from his new friends on the van, while Brian lagged behind, squinting at a map that looked older than the town itself. Lin, ever the historian of our group, walked beside me, her eyes scanning the streets like she was reading a book only she could see.

“Alright, gather round,” she said, stopping us near a crumbling stone wall that leaned over the valley. “This place has a story, and you lot need to hear it.”

“About time we got some context,” Brian muttered, folding his map with a sigh. “I’m still recovering from that van ride.”

Lin shot him a look but launched into it. “Sighnaghi, the ‘City of Love,’” she said, gesturing to the sweep of buildings. “It’s in Georgia’s Kakheti region, famous for wine that’ll knock your socks off. Back in the 18th century, King Erekle II turned this town into a fortress. See those walls?” She pointed to the weathered stones behind us, some still standing tall, others crumbling into the earth. “He built them to fend off Persian and Ottoman invaders. This spot, high above the Alazani Valley, was perfect—strategic, hard to reach. Sighnaghi was a big deal back then, a hub for trade and culture.”

“Sounds like my kind of town,” Doug said with a grin, leaning on the wall. “Wine, merchants, and old stones with stories to tell.”

Lin rolled her eyes but nodded. “Exactly. The streets were packed with merchants and rich families who built these gorgeous homes.” She waved a hand at a nearby house, its wooden balcony intricately carved, though the paint was peeling. “They mixed Georgian and European styles—those balconies, the elegant facades. Every corner here feels like it’s hiding a story.”

I nodded, taking it all in. The town’s charm was undeniable, but as we roamed, I noticed the abandoned buildings scattered like ghosts among the living. Crumbling relics of grander days, their windows dark, plasterwork chipped, balconies sagging like tired shoulders.

“What’s with all the empty houses?” I asked, pointing to one with a caved-in roof. “They look like they were something special once.”

Lin’s face grew serious. “They were,” she said. “Those belonged to the wealthy elite before the Bolsheviks rolled in back in 1921. After the Russian Revolution, the Soviets seized all the fancy properties. The families who lived here? Gone. Their homes were left to rot.” She paused, kicking a loose cobblestone. “For

over 70 years of Soviet rule, nobody took care of them. The ornate plasterwork, the balconies—time just ate it all away.”

“Seventy years?” Brian whistled, shaking his head. “That’s a long time to let things fall apart.”

“Yeah,” Lin agreed. “And when the Soviet Union collapsed, Georgia was on its own, dealing with economic chaos. Nobody had the money or the will to fix these places up. They just stood here, fading, like a reminder of everything the town went through.”

Doug, inspecting a crumbling wall, looked up. “So, what, they’re just gonna stay like this? Kind of depressing for a place called the ‘City of Love.’”

Lin smirked. “Not anymore. Look over there.” She pointed to a building across the street, its facade freshly painted, scaffolding hugging its sides. “They’re restoring a lot of these now. Turning them into guesthouses, cafes, even homes. Sighnaghi’s waking up again.”

I followed her gaze, noticing more signs of life—workers hauling timber, a new sign for a wine bar. “That’s kind of hopeful,” I said, feeling the town’s pulse stirring. “Like it’s getting a second chance.”

“Exactly,” Lin said, her voice softening. “These buildings are starting to tell new stories. The history’s still here, but it’s not just about decay anymore. It’s about what’s next.”

“New stories, huh?” Doug said, adjusting his camera strap as he snapped a photo of a freshly painted balcony. “Gotta come back to one of these cafes later for a glass of that famous wine.”

Brian nodded in agreement. “Sounds like a plan, mate.”

We continued our wander through Sighnaghi’s winding streets, the town’s charm wrapping around us like a warm breeze. The cobblestones, uneven and polished by time, led us to a viewpoint overlooking the valley below. We leaned against a weathered stone wall, its rough surface cool under our hands, and gazed out at the rolling green hills, vineyards stretching like patchwork under the golden Georgian sun. Doug, a few steps ahead, was fiddling with his camera, zooming in on the distant landscape as if he could capture the valley’s soul in a single frame. Suddenly, he straightened, his lens pointed across the ravine. “Look!” he exclaimed, voice brimming with excitement. “A zip line! Bloody brilliant—that’s me tomorrow!” Sure enough, slung across a deep valley to the opposite hill, a zip line gleamed like a silver thread against the sky.

Lin and I exchanged a glance, her eyes narrowing skeptically. “You really want to trust that thing?” she asked, folding her arms. “This town’s full of crumbling buildings and ancient walls. How do you know that zip line’s safe?”

“Oh, come on, Lin,” Doug said, snapping a quick shot of the line’s distant platform. “It’s modern enough. It’ll be fine—pure adventure!”

“Famous last words,” Lin muttered, shaking her head as she turned to walk away. Brian and I followed, keeping out of the brewing argument. We both knew Doug’s enthusiasm was unstoppable, and by tomorrow, we’d be watching him soar across the valley like a gleeful lunatic. Brian, still clutching his tattered map, chuckled under his breath. “He’s gonna do it, Lin. You know he is.”

“Don’t remind me,” Lin shot back, already halfway down the street. I just grinned, picturing Doug’s inevitable triumph.

The next morning, we gathered for breakfast at the guesthouse, included in the deal but hardly a treat. We sat around a rickety table, staring at the dismal spread: an over-processed sausage that looked like it could outlast a nuclear winter, two slices of overripe tomato, and a piece of cheese resembling a dish sponge. A jug of powdered orange juice and a pot of coffee—smelling suspiciously like instant Nescafé—completed the grim scene.

“What is this, yesterday’s sponge?” Brian said, prodding the cheese with his fork, his face twisted in disgust.

“We’ve gone from Maria’s amazing breakfasts to... this,” Doug lamented, pushing his sausage around the plate while snapping a

photo of the sad meal, probably for some ironic social media post.

“Dreadful,” I said, sniffing my coffee before shoving it across the table. “Smells like dishwater.”

“Righto,” Doug declared, setting his camera down and standing up. “Let’s skip this and head for the zip line. We’ll grab something better on the way—and no, Lin, I haven’t forgotten about that zip line.” He flashed a grin, and we scrambled to follow as he strode out, camera bouncing against his chest.

A short trek later, we reached the top of a hill where the zip line’s platform perched precariously over a steep ravine. Doug was practically vibrating with excitement as a worker strapped him into a harness.

Lin stood beside me, arms crossed. “Mad,” she muttered. “How I ended up with a madman like him is beyond me.”

Doug, adjusting his helmet, just grinned wider. “You love it, Lin.”

Brian and I opted to watch from a nearby café, sipping surprisingly decent coffee and munching on lobiani—a warm, bean-filled pastry that more than made up for the morning’s disaster. Suddenly, Doug let out a whoop and launched himself off the platform. Lin inhaled sharply, holding her breath. Brian and I cheered from our table, raising our coffee cups as Doug soared across the ravine, arms spread like a deranged bird,

whooping the whole way. In seconds, he landed in an undignified heap on the far platform, then popped up, disentangled himself from the harness, and gave us a theatrical bow. We clapped and hollered, laughing at our friend, the fearless madman.

Lin sank into a chair beside us. “That man’s going to give me a heart attack one day,” she said, glaring at no one in particular.

“Ah, but what fun you’ve had along the way,” Brian said with a smirk.

Doug eventually huffed up the hill and dropped into a chair, flushed and grinning. “Absolutely amazing!” he panted, taking the camera back from Lin and flicking through the handful of photos she’d taken. “Wait, that’s it?” he said, mock-offended. “You had one job!”

“Try taking photos while worrying you were going to fall down the ravine,” Lin shot back.

Doug chuckled and patted her knee. “I was fine.”

We lingered at the café, savoring the view, the coffee, and the cozy vibe, while Doug continued to shake his head, scrolling through the sparse gallery. “Tragic,” he muttered. “A once-in-a-lifetime moment and I’ve got half a photo of my elbow.” Then he leaned back, still beaming. “Still—just fabulous. How many people can say they’ve zip-lined across a massive ravine in a tiny Georgian village?”

“Not many,” I agreed, grinning. “Not many at all.”

Over the next few days, we explored Sighnaghi’s historic heart. The fortress was a highlight—its thick stone walls, some still intact, wrapped around the town like a protective embrace. We climbed a restored section, tracing the outlines of old watchtowers and imagining the soldiers who once stood guard against invaders. The local museum, housed in a charmingly creaky building, offered a glimpse into Sighnaghi’s past through artifacts—ancient wine jars, traditional clothing, and faded photos of the town’s merchant days. The war memorial honored local soldiers lost in World War II and later conflicts. Its simplicity was striking, a quiet tribute amid the town’s colorful chaos, with fresh paint on nearby buildings signaling Sighnaghi’s revival.

On our final night, we dined at Pheasant’s Tears, a restaurant tucked into a lovely courtyard strung with fairy lights. The menu was a celebration of Georgian cuisine: khinkali (juicy soup dumplings filled with spiced pork), mtsvadi (grilled pork skewers with a smoky char), badrijani nigvzit (eggplant rolls stuffed with walnut paste and topped with pomegranate seeds), and a fresh chakapuli (lamb stew with tarragon and white wine). We paired it with crisp bread and a tangy tomato-cucumber salad, all washed down with a bold red Saperavi from the restaurant’s own vineyard.

Doug raised his glass, the rich Saperavi glinting under the courtyard's fairy lights. "Here's to this beautiful village and a thriving future," he said, grinning. "And to zip lines and savoring every drop of this incredible wine tonight!" We raised our glasses to Doug's toast, the clink echoing in the warm night air.

I stared at the restored and half-restored facades surrounding us, their hues softened in the dimming light. I found myself wishing more of these grand old buildings would be revived, that the town's understated charm would keep blooming, one balcony, one doorway at a time. But as lights began to twinkle across the hillside, my mind wandered ahead—past this historic, slightly weathered village to Tbilisi's winding streets, and beyond, across the border into Türkiye, the final chapter of this long, unforgettable journey.

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Chapter Seventeen

Tbilisi Georgia

The morning sun spilled golden light across the cracked earth of Signaghi's dusty car park, where we stood, bags slung heavily over our shoulders, waiting for the bus to Tbilisi. The enchanting hilltop town, with its cobbled streets and timeless charm, had woven a spell over us, but Georgia's bustling capital beckoned as our final stop in the Caucasus. A faint breeze stirred the air, carrying the scent of pine and distant vineyards, while Brian muttered under his breath about the lack of coffee. Doug, meanwhile, was elbow-deep in his backpack, rummaging with the intensity of a man on a mission.

"Lin," Doug called out, his voice tinged with accusation, "what happened to my salami? You know, that giant one those nice folks on the last bus gave me?"

Lin raised an eyebrow, her expression a mix of amusement and exasperation. "No idea, Doug. None at all."

Before she could say more, Doug's face lit up as he yanked the prized salami from the depths of his bag, brandishing it like a trophy. "Found it! Anyone want some?" he said, waving it triumphantly in the air.

Lin wrinkled her nose, eyeing the sausage with suspicion. “Not if it’s been cozying up with your dirty socks in there,” she said, nodding toward his bag.

Doug looked at her as if she’d suggested the moon was made of cheese. “It’s fine, Lin. Just give it a quick dust-off.”

“Ugh, disgusting,” Lin shot back, shaking her head. Before the debate could escalate, the low rumble of the bus saved us from further salami discourse. It rolled into the car park, kicking up a cloud of dust, and came to a halt. We clambered aboard, settling into the worn seats with a collective sigh. This driver, unlike the speed demon who’d brought us to Sighnaghi, was mercifully sedate, and we traveled in relative comfort toward Tbilisi. The rolling hills and vineyards of Kakheti faded behind us, replaced by the urban sprawl creeping into view as we approached the capital. At last, we pulled into a chaotic bus terminal, a whirlwind of honking horns, shouted directions, and the faint aroma of grilled meat wafting from nearby stalls.

“Right then,” Brian declared, hoisting his bag with the confidence of a seasoned general. “I’ve studied this. There’s a metro nearby that stops close to our hotel. Follow me.”

Lin and I exchanged a glance, a silent agreement that Brian’s navigational track record had been decent lately. Without protest, we trailed behind him through the bustling terminal, dodging vendors and stray luggage. We descended a steep

escalator that seemed to plunge into the earth's core, emerging in a metro station that felt like a time capsule. Doug paused, squinting at the tiled walls and arched ceilings.

"Hey," he said, "this looks like one of those Moscow metro stops. Just, you know, less fancy."

He had a point. The Soviet influence was clear in the station's stark, functional design, a lingering trace of Georgia's history carved into its bones. We hopped on a train, its carriage clattering through a few stops before we stepped off and rode a steep escalator to the surface, squinting into Tbilisi's blazing sunlight. Brian, unfazed, charged down a sharp footpath, eyes locked on some unseen goal ahead.

"Does he even know where he's going?" Lin whispered to Doug, her tone skeptical.

"No clue," Doug replied, grinning. "But he's got that look. Come on, hurry, or we'll lose him."

Brian vanished around a corner, and we scurried to keep up, our bags bouncing against our backs. He led us down the hill like a man possessed, heading straight toward the glinting ribbon of the Kura River in the distance. We followed like ducklings, knowing better than to question Brian when he was in mission mode. At the foot of the hill, we crossed a bridge, the river's surface shimmering below us. Then, without warning, Doug

planted his feet and stopped dead in his tracks. Lin, caught off guard, bumped into him.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, brushing herself off.

Doug folded his arms, his face set in a stubborn scowl. “I’m hungry. And thirsty. There’s a café over there, and I’m getting something to eat and a cold drink.” He marched toward an empty table at a nearby riverside café, its umbrellas casting inviting pools of shade. Lin hesitated, then followed, and I shrugged, joining them. Brian, oblivious to the mutiny, continued up the road, his figure shrinking in the distance.

“He’ll figure it out eventually,” I said, settling into a chair. Sure enough, a few minutes later, Brian reappeared, flopping into a seat with a dramatic sigh.

“Disobedient serfs,” he muttered, though the corner of his mouth twitched with a reluctant smile.

The café was a welcome oasis. We ordered cold drinks—fizzy Georgian lemonade for me, a beer for Doug—and plates of khachapuri, the cheese-filled bread that had become our guilty pleasure. The warm, gooey cheese and crisp crust worked wonders, melting away the morning’s irritations. Refueled and in far better spirits, we resumed our trek, passing Tbilisi’s famed sulfur bathhouses, their domed roofs peeking out from the earth like ancient hobbit homes. The faint, eggy scent of sulfur hung in the air, a reminder of the city’s geothermal heart.

Our hotel loomed above, its stone facade gazing over the river and the ancient Narikala Fortress in the distance. We trudged up the final stretch, legs aching but spirits buoyed by the thought of rest. Halfway up, a woman at least twice my age, hauling a massive bag of vegetables, overtook me. She paused, gave me a pitying shake of her head, let out a sharp “tsk tsk,” and powered past like I was standing still, leaving me in her dust with my pride in tatters. I made a mental note to get a bit fitter.

At the top, Lin paused, gazing out at the view. The Kura River wound through the city, flanked by a patchwork of red-tiled roofs, modern glass buildings, and the fortress’s weathered stone walls. The air was warm, carrying the faint hum of Tbilisi’s energy—street musicians, distant traffic, the clink of wine glasses from a nearby terrace.

“This will do just fine for a few days,” Lin said, her voice soft with contentment.

“Indeed it will,” I agreed, setting my bag down and taking in the panorama. The city sprawled before us, a vibrant blend of old and new, East and West, where history whispered in the cobblestones and modernity pulsed in the streets. Tbilisi felt alive, a city that wore its scars and triumphs with equal pride.

We checked into the hotel, our rooms small but cozy, with balconies that offered sweeping views of the river and fortress. After we dumped our bags in our rooms, we met on the balcony.

Doug pulled out a small bottle of Georgian wine he'd bought in Signaghi, offering to pour us each a glass. Lin accepted with a grin, and even Brian relented, sipping thoughtfully as he stared out at the city.

"Tomorrow," Brian said, putting his glass down, "we explore. The fortress, the old town, maybe a bathhouse if you lot can handle the smell."

"Speak for yourself," Lin retorted with a playful smirk. "But you're right—we've only got one full day here, so we'd better make it count." We exchanged glances, catching the spark in Lin's eyes as her mind clearly kicked into gear, already mapping out a whirlwind tour of this ancient city.

Our epic overland journey was nearing its end. With a fixed date to reach Istanbul looming ever closer, we had chosen to allocate just a short stay in Tbilisi, saving more time for Turkiye. Gazing out at the breathtaking view—the Kura River winding through a tapestry of red-tiled roofs, modern skyscrapers, and the ancient Narikala Fortress—I couldn't help but second-guess our decision. But then I shrugged inwardly; Tbilisi's charm would still be here for another visit.

The next morning, we gathered in the dining room for breakfast, sunlight streaming through tall windows, bathing our table in a golden glow. The rich scent of strong Georgian coffee blended with the aroma of freshly baked mchadi—crisp, warm cornmeal

cakes straight from the griddle. Plates brimmed with ripe pomegranates, figs, and juicy grapes, paired with bowls of creamy yogurt drizzled with golden Kakhetian honey. Beyond the glass, the Kura River shimmered under a soft morning haze, and Tbilisi stirred to life, its eclectic skyline a blend of ancient spires and modern glass. Lin, our self-appointed guide, sat with her notebook open, scribbling with the precision of a strategist plotting a military campaign. Brian, Doug, and I leaned in, sipping coffee and ready for her to lay out the day's battle plan.

"Right, team," Lin said, tapping her pen on the table with authority. "We've got one full day in Tbilisi, and we're making it count. Here's the itinerary: we start with the cable car to Narikala Fortress for history and panoramic views. Then, we'll wander through Old Town—churches, bazaars, the whole vibrant mess. After that, we hit the sulfur baths in Abanotubani for an authentic Georgian experience. We'll wrap up with dinner at a local restaurant, because we're not leaving without stuffing ourselves with khinkali. Sound good?"

Doug, tearing into a slice of khachapuri with the enthusiasm of a man who hadn't eaten in days, grinned, a string of cheese dangling from his chin. "As long as there's food involved, I'm sold. But those baths—do they really smell like rotten eggs?"

Lin smirked, unfazed. "You'll survive, Doug. They're iconic. Tbilisi's name comes from 'tbili,' meaning 'warm,' because of

the natural hot springs. Legend has it King Vakhtang Gorgasali founded the city in the 5th century after his falcon fell into a hot spring while hunting. He was so impressed by the geothermal waters that he decided to build a city here.”

Brian raised an eyebrow over his coffee, his skepticism as predictable as the sunrise. “A falcon? Sounds like something out of a medieval fairy tale.”

“It’s a legend, Brian,” Lin said, rolling her eyes with exaggerated patience. “The point is, those springs are the reason Tbilisi exists. They’ve been drawing people here for centuries. Now, finish up. We’re heading to Rike Park for the cable car in thirty minutes.”

We polished off breakfast, the steaming plate of chvishtari—cornbread with melted cheese—giving us just the boost we needed for the day ahead.

We grabbed our daypacks, stuffed with water bottles, cameras, and Doug’s ever-present snacks, and set off. The walk to Rike Park was brisk, the morning air crisp with the promise of a warm day. The park itself was a modern oasis, its sleek fountains and geometric sculptures gleaming under the sun—a stark contrast to the ancient city beyond. Families strolled along the paths, and street musicians strummed guitars, adding a lively hum to the morning. The cable car station loomed ahead, its glass cars

gliding up to Narikala Fortress like futuristic pods scaling the ancient hillside.

“Time for a history lesson,” Lin said, flipping open her guidebook as we queued for tickets, each costing a mere 5 GEL—a steal for the view we were about to get. “According to this, Narikala Fortress dates back to the 4th century, built by the Kingdom of Iberia. It’s weathered invasions from Persians, Arabs, Mongols, you name it. The walls are crumbling now, but the views? They’re unbeatable. You’ll see all of Tbilisi and the Caucasus Mountains in the distance.”

Doug squinted up at the fortress perched atop Sololaki Hill, its weathered stones stark against the clear blue sky. “Looks like it’s seen some serious battles.”

“More than you can count,” Lin replied. “Tbilisi’s been sacked 26 times—by Persians, Arabs, Mongols, Ottomans, and Russians, among others—but it always rises from the ashes. That’s why Narikala is such a symbol of resilience.”

The cable car doors slid open, and we piled in, the glass walls offering a heart-stopping view as we ascended. The Kura River sparkled below, winding through Old Town’s patchwork of colorful rooftops, Soviet-era concrete blocks, and sleek modern buildings. Doug pressed his face to the window, grinning like a kid on a roller coaster. “This is wild! Check out that bridge down there—the one shaped like a giant bow.”

“That’s the Bridge of Peace,” Lin said, pointing to the glass-and-steel structure below. “Built in 2010 by Italian architect Michele De Lucchi. Locals are split—some call it a spaceship, others love its modern flair. It connects Rike Park to Old Town.”

At the top, we stepped onto Narikala Hill, the fortress’s ancient stone walls looming before us, their weathered surfaces telling stories of centuries past. The air was cooler up here, with a pine-scented breeze wafting from the nearby Botanical Gardens. The Mother of Georgia statue, Kartlis Deda, stood tall nearby, her 20-meter aluminum form glinting in the sunlight—one hand holding a wine cup for friends, the other a sword for enemies.

“Kartlis Deda,” Lin said, gesturing to the statue. “She’s the symbol of Georgian hospitality and strength. Built in 1958 to mark Tbilisi’s 1,500th anniversary, she embodies the nation’s spirit—welcoming to allies, fierce to foes.”

Brian snorted, adjusting his sunglasses. “Wine and a weapon? My kind of lady.”

As we explored the fortress, weaving through its crumbling ramparts and narrow paths, we noticed clusters of tourists striking poses for Instagram—pouting lips, tilted hats, and dramatic gazes into the distance, all chasing the perfect shot. Doug nudged Brian, a mischievous glint in his eye. “Look at these influencers. Think they’ve nailed the ‘epic travel moment’ yet?”

Brian grinned wickedly. “Let’s give ‘em a masterclass.” He struck an exaggerated pose, hand on hip, chin tilted skyward like a brooding fashion model. Doug joined in, tossing his scarf over his shoulder and pouting dramatically, one hand raised as if framing a selfie. “Hashtag TbilisiVibes,” Doug declared, loud enough to draw chuckles from a nearby group of tourists.

Lin laughed, pulling out her phone to snap a photo of their antics. “You two are ridiculous. But yeah, this place is an Instagram magnet.”

I couldn’t resist joining the fun. “Come on, Lin, show us your influencer game.” She groaned but obliged, leaning against a stone wall with a mock-serious expression, holding her water bottle like it was

a glass of fine wine. We collapsed in laughter, earning amused glances from passersby who probably thought we were the real influencers gone rogue.

We climbed the fortress’s ancient steps to its highest point, where Tbilisi sprawled below in all its glory—a vibrant mosaic of medieval churches, Soviet-era blocks, and modern skyscrapers, framed by the distant, snow-dusted Caucasus Mountains. Doug snapped photos with his camera, capturing the city’s eclectic beauty, while Lin pointed out landmarks like a seasoned guide.

“See that gold-domed cathedral across the river?” she said, gesturing to a gleaming structure. “That’s Sameba, the Holy Trinity Cathedral, built in 2004. It’s one of the largest Orthodox cathedrals in the world. And those domed roofs down there? That’s Abanotubani, the sulfur bath district, we’ll stop there later.”

I leaned against the parapet, soaking in the view. “Hard to believe this city’s been through so much and still looks this incredible.”

Lin nodded, her eyes scanning the skyline. “Tbilisi’s a phoenix. Persians, Arabs, Mongols, Ottomans, Russians—they all left their mark. The 12th-century Georgian Golden Age brought independence, but it’s been a rollercoaster since. That’s why the architecture’s so wild—Persian domes, Soviet brutalism, and modern glass all mashed together.”

We spent an hour exploring the fortress, clambering over uneven stones and weaving around Instagram hopefuls perfecting their poses. The views were worth every step, and we were all quietly taken with the city’s charm. We took the cable car back to Rike Park, the descent just as exhilarating, the glass walls framing Tbilisi’s beauty like a slow-moving postcard.

From there, Lin led us across the Bridge of Peace, its glass canopy glinting in the midday sun. The bridge’s modern design felt almost alien against the ancient city, but it was a perfect

symbol of Tbilisi's blend of old and new. We entered Old Town, or Kala, its cobblestone streets a labyrinth of colorful wooden balconies, ancient churches, and hidden courtyards buzzing with life.

"Old Town is Tbilisi's heart," Lin said as we strolled down Shardeni Street, lined with trendy cafes, hookah bars, and art galleries. "This area's over 1,500 years old. You've got Sioni Cathedral from the 6th century, Anchiskhati Basilica—the oldest surviving church—and hidden gems like the Church of Saint Abo Tbileli, tucked under Metekhi Rise."

Doug stopped to admire the quirky, leaning clock tower of the Rezo Gabriadze Marionette Theater, its mismatched stones and off-kilter design looking like something from a fairy tale. "This thing looks like it's had one too many chachas."

Lin smiled. "Built in 2010 from 19th-century materials. They do a 'Circle of Life' puppet show daily—pure Tbilisi quirk. It's a nod to the city's love for art and storytelling."

We wandered deeper into Old Town, the narrow streets alive with the chatter of locals, the clink of coffee cups, and the occasional strum of a panduri from a street musician. At every turn, we spotted more Instagram hopefuls—tourists posing against pastel walls, under vine-draped balconies, or in front of

ancient wooden doors, all chasing that perfect shot. Brian elbowed Doug, grinning. “Round two, mate?”

Doug didn’t hesitate, striking a pose with an imaginary selfie stick, pouting exaggeratedly and flipping his scarf for dramatic effect. “Hashtag OldTownGoals,” he said, loud enough to draw giggles from a nearby group of locals. Brian joined in, pretending to adjust nonexistent sunglasses, muttering, “Work it, darling.”

Lin shook her head, laughing so hard she nearly dropped her notebook. “You’re scaring the locals. Keep moving, influencers.”

We passed Sioni Cathedral, its golden frescoes glowing in the dim interior, and the Meidan Bazaar, where stalls overflowed with handmade jewelry, bottles of amber wine, and vials of chacha, Georgia’s potent grape spirit. Doug, ever the charmer, haggled for a bottle of chacha, winning over the vendor with his enthusiastic gestures and broken Georgian phrases. “Qvela kargad!” he said, attempting to say “everything’s good,” which earned a hearty laugh from the vendor.

“Lin, you weren’t kidding,” Brian said, dodging a tour group snapping photos of a carved wooden balcony. “This place is like a time machine with Wi-Fi.”

“That’s Tbilisi,” Lin replied, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “Soviet mosaics next to hipster bars, medieval churches beside glass skyscrapers. It’s chaotic, but it’s magic.”

By early afternoon, the sun was high, and our legs were starting to protest. Lin guided us to Abanotubani, the sulfur bath district, where domed brick bathhouses nestled into the earth, their tiled roofs glinting like jewels. The faint, eggy smell of sulfur hung in the air, and Doug wrinkled his nose dramatically.

“Here we are,” Lin said, stopping outside Chreli Abano, its turquoise and pink facade a standout among the bathhouses. “These baths date to the 17th century, built over natural hot springs. The water’s packed with minerals, supposedly great for your skin and stress. Tbilisi became the capital over Mtskheta partly because of these springs.”

Doug looked skeptical, sniffing the air. “So we’re soaking in egg water?”

“Pretty much,” I said, laughing. “It’s a rite of passage.”

We booked a private room for 70 GEL per hour, a cozy space with a steaming, mineral-rich pool and intricately tiled walls. As we changed into swimsuits, Lin continued her history lesson. “In the 1990s, when running water was scarce after the Soviet collapse, these baths were a lifeline. Locals came daily to bathe and socialize. Now they’re a mix of touristy and traditional. Public baths are nude, but I figured we’d prefer privacy.”

“Good call,” Brian said, easing into the warm water with a contented sigh. “This is... actually amazing.”

The hot, sulfur-scented water enveloped us, soothing our tired muscles and washing away the dust of the day. Brian, ever the cheerful optimist, let out a contented sigh, his face lighting up with a broad, relaxed smile. After an hour, we emerged feeling rejuvenated, our skin tingling from the minerals.

Doug, however, wasn't ready to leave. Towel draped over his shoulders, he wandered outside to where a group of elderly Georgian women—nanas—sat on a bench, peeling oranges and chatting animatedly in Georgian. None spoke English, but Doug, undeterred, launched into an animated game of charades. He mimed soaking in the baths, rubbing his shoulders, and giving an exaggerated thumbs-up, earning peals of laughter from the women. One nana, her face creased with laugh lines, offered him an orange, gesturing enthusiastically as she mimed her own bath routine.

“Doug's at it again,” I said, watching him point to his back and mimic relief, clearly trying to communicate about the baths' healing powers. “He's got them eating out of his hand.”

Lin grinned, drying her hair with a towel. “He's a nana whisperer. Bet he's learning more than we are.”

Doug returned, beaming, orange in hand. “These ladies are legends! That one—call her Nana Tamar—says the baths fixed

her arthritis. Well, I think that's what she meant. Took a lot of pointing, smiling, and bad miming to figure it out."

Lin laughed. "You got all that from charades?"

"Yeah," Doug said, peeling the orange with a grin. "She mimed her grandmother bringing her here as a kid, splashing water and all. It's like a community hub for them. She wants us back tomorrow for homemade chacha—think I got that right from her bottle-pouring gesture."

As the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in shades of orange and pink, we dried off and headed to Usakhelouri, a cozy restaurant near the bathhouses. The air inside was thick with the scent of grilled meat, fresh herbs, and baking bread. We settled at a wooden table, its surface worn smooth by countless diners, and ordered a feast: plump khinkali dumplings, sizzling mtsvadi (grilled pork skewers), more khachapuri (because we couldn't resist), and a carafe of amber wine, its rich, nutty flavor a perfect match for the meal.

Lin raised her glass, the wine catching the candlelight. "To Tbilisi—one day, but what a day. To history, hot springs, and Doug's nana crew."

We clinked glasses, laughing as Doug recounted his charades with Nana Tamar, complete with exaggerated gestures. "To epic journeys," he added, "and coming back for that chacha."

The food arrived, steaming and fragrant, and we dug in, the khinkali's juicy filling bursting with flavor, the mtsvadi tender and smoky. Outside, Tbilisi's lights twinkled, the city alive with the hum of evening—street musicians, laughter from nearby terraces, the distant rush of the river. Tbilisi had wrapped us in its magic, and though our time was short, we knew its stories would linger. We'd return someday, maybe for Nana Tamar's chacha, but for now, we savored every bite, every moment, in this city that felt like home.

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Chapter Eighteen

Türkiye

The sun had barely peeked over the horizon, casting a soft golden glow across the mist-draped hills of Georgia, when we found ourselves crammed onto a bus bound for Türkiye. It was one of those crisp, early mornings where the air feels sharp and full of promise, the kind that makes you feel like an adventurer even if you're just sitting in a slightly sticky bus seat. Doug, our group's unofficial comedian, had already christened this beast a "grown-up" bus, a term that made us all chuckle as we settled in. By "grown-up," he meant it was a proper, full-size coach—none of those rickety minivans we'd been rattling around in for weeks, dodging stray chickens and sacks of potatoes that seemed to have lives of their own. This bus had allocated seats, a luxury that felt almost decadent, though the illusion of sophistication was shattered by the relentless Georgian disco music blasting from the overhead speakers. It was the kind of music that made you wonder if someone had fed a synthesizer too much coffee and let it loose in a recording studio.

I glanced around at my travel companions, each of us in various stages of morning grogginess. Lin was already nose-deep in her journal, scribbling furiously as if the world's secrets depended on her pen. Brian, ever the skeptic, was adjusting his glasses and muttering about the coffee he hadn't had time to finish. Doug,

meanwhile, was humming along to the disco beat, albeit with a sarcastic grin that suggested he was both mocking and secretly enjoying it. We'd been on the road together long enough to know each other's quirks, and this bus—despite its disco soundtrack and questionable upholstery—felt like a small victory after the chaos of our previous rides.

As the bus left Tbilisi's urban sprawl, the countryside unfolded, steeped in history. We passed crumbling Soviet factories, their broken concrete and rusted frames like ghosts of a lost era. Once vital to the Soviet economy, producing gases and chemicals, they now stood silent, overtaken by weeds. Each shattered window whispered of workers laboring under quotas, their world gone quiet.

Georgia, though, was never just a Soviet cog. It held a fierce individuality, tied to Stalin's birthplace in Gori—a source of both pride and burden. The Georgian language's ancient script and the unyielding Caucasus mountains guarded its distinct identity. The people, warm yet independent, balanced Soviet loyalty with cultural pride.

The bus wound through hills, and I reflected on Georgia's role as a Soviet elite escape. The Black Sea's Sukhumi and Gagra resorts, with palm-lined walks and blooming air, offered respite from Moscow's grind. Borjomi and Tskaltubo, with their radon baths, were sanctuaries; legends claimed their waters soothed

both body and soul. Stalin himself reportedly soaked in Tskaltubo's carved retreats. Bakuriani's snowy slopes saw officials swap briefcases for skis, gliding through silent firs.

Now, these places linger in limbo—part ruin, part reborn as boutique hotels. Their faded grandeur reflects Georgia's complex Soviet ties: vital yet apart, a land of beauty and independence that endured as the empire's soft underbelly.

I shook myself from my reverie, the disco music snapping me back to reality. Lin was still scribbling, her pen moving with the urgency of someone documenting a revelation. "What time do we hit the border?" I asked, leaning over to catch her eye. She paused, glanced at her watch, and did some quick mental math. "About six hours, plus a stop in Batumi. Should be there around 5 p.m. The hotel's only 10 km past the border, so we'll be sipping tea in Türkiye before dark."

Doug, sprawled across two seats like he owned the bus, perked up. "Heard the Sarpi/Hopa border is a nightmare." Lin shot him a look that could've curdled milk. "Who told you that?" she demanded, her tone suggesting she was ready to debunk his source as pure fiction. "Some bloke at the bus station," Doug replied, unfazed. "Said it's the main crossing from the Caucasus to Türkiye, and since Armenia's border is a no-go, it's chaos central. Total madness, apparently."

Brian, adjusting his glasses for the hundredth time, let out a sarcastic, “Well, that sounds like a delightful afternoon.” We all laughed, though there was a nervous edge to it. Borders in this part of the world were rarely straightforward, and Doug’s tale of chaos didn’t exactly inspire confidence.

The rain began as we approached Batumi, Georgia’s seaside resort town, its skyline a mix of Soviet-era concrete and shiny new hotels. The bus wound along the foreshore, past fairgrounds that looked forlorn in the drizzle, their colorful signs faded and their rides shuttered. Beach umbrellas, battered by wind and rain, flapped like sad flags of surrender. The air smelled of salt and wet pavement, a sharp contrast to the dusty heat we’d been living in for weeks. We welcomed the rain at first—it felt like a cleansing, a break from the relentless sun. Little did we know we’d soon be cursing every drop.

The bus pulled into Batumi’s station with a groan, its brakes wheezing like an old man after a long climb. Passengers spilled out, stretching and shaking off the stiffness of hours on the road. Bus stops here were a game of guesswork: was this a quick drop-off, or did we have time to hunt down a bathroom and a cup of tea? No one ever quite knew, and the fear of being left behind kept us tethered to the bus like anxious puppies. Lin, ever the group mom, fixed Doug with a stern glare. “Don’t wander off, or we’ll leave you to fend for yourself with the seagulls.” Doug

muttered, “Spoilsport,” under his breath, but the twinkle in his eye said he was already plotting a quick dash for a snack.

We milled around the station, stretching our legs and breathing in the damp, salty air. The station was a bustle of activity—vendors hawking pastries, drivers shouting destinations, and passengers scurrying like ants. Before long, the driver reappeared, climbed aboard, and revved the engine with a puff of exhaust that smelled like burnt dreams. The horn blared, a sound so loud it could have woken a coma patient, and we scrambled back onto the bus, settling in for the 40-minute ride to the border.

As we neared the Sarpi/Hopa crossing, the conductor stood and unleashed a torrent of rapid-fire Georgian. We stared blankly until a young woman at the front raised her hand shyly. She’d been nominated as our English translator, though her accent was so thick it was like deciphering a code. From what I could gather, we were to grab our bags, get stamped out of Georgia, stamped into Türkiye, and meet the bus on the other side for the short ride to our hotel. It sounded simple enough, but the nervous flutter in my stomach suggested otherwise. I exchanged a glance with Brian, who just shrugged. “What could go wrong?” I muttered, instantly regretting the jinx.

The border was a vision of chaos, like someone had taken every stereotype of a busy crossing and turned it up to eleven. Trucks groaned under towering loads, vans honked impatiently, and cars

jockeyed for position like they were in a demolition derby. People darted through the mess, clutching bags and shouting in languages I couldn't place. "Gosh," Lin whispered, her eyes wide as she took in the scene. It was less a border crossing and more a human stampede.

We grabbed our packs from the bus's underbelly, the metal creaking as we wrestled them free, and plunged into the fray. The crowd was a living thing, pushing and shoving with a ferocity that made me clutch my bag tighter. "'It's like the Running of the Bulls in Pamplona, only worse,'" Doug said, dodging an elbow that nearly took out his ribs. We inched through the Georgian border control, passports stamped with a bored thud, then shuffled toward the Turkish border control. The rain, which had been a gentle drizzle in Batumi, was now a full-on downpour, soaking us to the bone. My hat, a trusty companion since Mongolia, vanished in the melee, probably trampled underfoot by an overzealous traveler.

By the time we emerged in Türkiye, we looked like survivors of a shipwreck. Doug's hair was a wild mess, sticking up like he'd been electrocuted. Brian's glasses were so askew they were practically on his ear. Lin, usually unflappable, had a frazzled look that said she was one shove away from losing it. I was hatless, drenched, and starting to question my life choices. The rain was torrential now, and there was no shelter in sight—just a muddy, crowded patch of nowhere. We rummaged in our packs

for raincoats, last used in Mongolia's steppes, and stood there, waiting for the bus that was supposed to whisk us to our hotel.

An hour passed. An hour of standing in the rain, our optimism dissolving with every drop. Doug, who usually found humor in everything, was reaching his limit. His face was red, his jaw tight, and I could practically see the steam rising from his head. "That's it!" he bellowed, making us all jump. "This damn bus isn't coming. I'm finding a taxi!" He stormed off toward what looked like a taxi rank, his boots splashing through puddles. Brian shrugged, and we followed, too soggy to argue.

For the next 40 minutes, Doug played a losing game of taxi roulette. Every time he reached for a cab door, someone would swoop in like a vulture and claim it. His face went from red to a shade I can only describe as volcanic. "He's gonna explode," Brian muttered, half-amused, half-worried. "Can't blame him," I said, feeling water trickle down my back. "This is ridiculous."

Just as Doug looked ready to start a one-man revolution, Lin shouted, "The bus!" Sure enough, our bus came barreling toward us, two and a half hours late, with a new driver who looked as fed up as we felt. We scrambled aboard, dripping and shivering, and collapsed into our seats. Doug sank next to Lin, who patted his leg gently. "You okay?" she asked. He just shook his head, clearly still reeling from the border debacle.

The short ride to Hopa's bus terminal felt like salvation. We checked into our hotel, where hot showers and dry clothes were nothing short of miraculous. Later, we gathered at a nearby restaurant, the warm glow of lights and the smell of fresh pide lifting our spirits. Doug, now recovered, was back to his grinning self.

Lin finally spilled the full story: "The driver got denied entry. Something in him just... snapped. He left the bus running and sprinted for the border. Like, Olympic sprinting. Guards are shouting, people screaming, and he's *dodging barriers* like he's in an action movie. Ten officers tackled him to the ground. Dust flying. Drama. They hauled him off, and the bus just sat there, abandoned, until Batumi sent another guy."

"How do you even know this?" Brian asked, eyebrows shooting up.

"The hotel receptionist spilled the tea," Lin replied. "It's the talk of the town, apparently."

"They could've told us," Brian grumbled, sipping his tea. "They did," Lin said, "but the message got lost somewhere in that chaos."

"All well," I said, raising my tea. "We made it, and this'll be the story we tell for years. Remember that time at the Turkish border?"

“Too true,” Lin said, clinking her cup. “To Türkiye, and the next adventure.”

We toasted, our laughter echoing in the cozy restaurant, ready for whatever this new country would throw at us.

The next day, there we were—crammed into yet another bus, rattling our way east across Türkiye like a sack of potatoes on a trampoline, destination: Kars. Why Kars, you ask? Excellent question. It's not exactly on the glossy foldout of your average travel brochure. But rest assured, this detour into the obscure was entirely my fault.

Long ago—probably during a bout of temporary madness—I'd read about the Doğu Express, a train that allegedly (and I stress *allegedly*) chugs across the whole country from Ankara to Kars, slicing through Anatolia like a steel worm on a mission. It was once part of something grandly named the Great Overland Trail, which, to my overactive imagination, sounded suspiciously like something Indiana Jones might take if he were into low-budget rail travel. That single romantic tidbit burrowed into my brain like a tick and refused to leave.

Naturally, I pitched the idea to my unsuspecting travel companions as if we were embarking on an epic quest—part Tolkien, part travel disaster. “Kars is the jumping-off point!” I said, eyes gleaming with misplaced confidence. “And it has Ani nearby—a whole ruined city!” That last part really sold it.

Everyone loves a good ruin. Especially when it's full of crumbling cathedrals, dramatic cliffs, and the ghosts of medieval Armenians silently judging your footwear.

And so, with dreams of ancient grandeur and only the vaguest grasp of geography, we hurtled eastward in a vehicle that may or may not have been held together with duct tape and hope.

If you're wondering how this ends—don't worry. So were we.

The bus rumbled its way through valleys and mountains, winding deeper into northeastern Türkiye. The landscape shifted gradually from cultivated plains to more rugged, dramatic terrain. Along the way, we passed an enormous construction site—a colossal dam project that stretched across the valley like a scar.

“A bloke at the bus station told me this is the Yusufeli Dam,” Doug said, leaning over to get a better look. “It's a massive hydro project. They've relocated entire villages to build it. Big controversy.”

“It's certainly impressive,” I said, watching the chaos of concrete, cranes, and trucks as we passed by. “Also slightly terrifying, knowing it's going to flood the whole valley.”

We stopped at a roadside eatery not long after. Starving, we each grabbed wraps filled with grilled lamb, fresh herbs, crisp salad, and a generous drizzle of yogurt-garlic sauce. The flavors exploded in our mouths—smoky, tangy, rich, and earthy.

“This is incredible,” Doug said with his mouth full, juice running down his fingers.

“Truly delicious,” Brian agreed, already heading back to the counter. I watched him haggle with the cheerful vendor, who chuckled and threw in a few falafel balls for good measure.

Moments later, the driver climbed aboard and gave a sharp honk. We hurried back onto the bus, and soon we were climbing again, the road narrowing and the air growing thinner. Eventually, we leveled out on a high, broad plateau covered in waving grasses and scattered wildflowers.

“We must be above 2,000 meters now,” Lin observed, glancing at her GPS. “This is officially an alpine meadow.”

Across the wide open fields, we saw the domed tents of nomadic beekeepers—small clusters of white canvas, like tiny moons scattered on green earth. They bring their hives up here in summer to let the bees feast on wild mountain flowers.

“I bet that honey is unbelievable,” Lin said. “Let’s try and find some in Kars.”

By late afternoon, around 4 p.m., we rolled into Kars. The first impression was striking—this was not the dusty backwater we’d half-expected. Instead, the town revealed itself to be charming, curious, and quietly dignified. Wide, tree-lined boulevards were immaculately clean, lined with a mix of historic stone buildings and newer, functional blocks. The air was cooler—crisp, even—

and the entire town was watched over by an imposing black-stone fortress perched on a hill.

Kars felt distant, both geographically and emotionally, from the rest of Türkiye. It had an edge-of-the-world quality, as if it were more a frontier town than part of a bustling modern republic. And to the locals, we—four dusty foreigners with oversized packs—were clearly something of a novelty.

As we started the walk to our hotel, Brian turned and grinned. “Alright then, which one of you history girls is going to give us the lowdown on this mysterious city?”

Lin and I exchanged glances. I shrugged and launched into an impromptu lecture.

“Kars has been a crossroads for centuries—Armenians, Byzantines, Seljuks, Ottomans, and even Russians have all ruled here,” I began. “It was actually part of the Russian Empire for decades in the 19th century, which explains some of the architecture. You’ll see it—big, solid stone buildings, quite different from the Ottoman style we’ve seen elsewhere. And of course, it was a key frontier post during the Russo-Turkish wars.”

“Sounds like this place has seen some action,” Doug said, looking around.

“It’s layered with history,” I added. “And just wait until we get to Ani tomorrow—it’s one of the most atmospheric places in the country.”

We were nearing our hotel as I was wrapping up my little speech. Then we stopped—literally stopped dead.

Before us stood a grand, stately building surrounded by lush gardens. A fountain sprayed water in delicate arcs, and peacocks strutted casually across the lawn as if they owned the place.

“Whoa,” Doug said. “This looks *very* posh.”

“And probably costs *way* too much,” Brian muttered.

“It is posh,” Lin said, smiling mischievously. “But I decided we deserved a little splurge. And don’t worry—I found a deal.”

With that, she walked confidently through the glass doors into the elegant lobby. The rest of us followed behind, still dusty, still tired—but suddenly feeling very ready for a soft bed and perhaps even a bit of luxury.

Our hotel was nothing short of spectacular, a haven of luxury that exceeded every expectation. The beds were enormous, piled high with plush linens and pillows so soft they felt like sinking into a cloud. The marble bathtubs, gleaming under soft lighting, were practically the size of small swimming pools. Brian, predictably, couldn’t resist. He turned on the faucet, filled the tub to the brim with steaming water and fragrant bubbles, and spent

nearly an hour lounging in blissful indulgence, humming contentedly. “Come on, get out already,” I called from the bedroom, chuckling. “You’re going to turn into a prune!”

With a dramatic sigh, Brian finally emerged, his skin slightly pink from the long soak. He dried off, threw on a light shirt and trousers, and joined me on the balcony. I was sprawled on a cushioned wicker chair, a book open on my lap and a frosty mint mojito in hand, the ice clinking softly as I sipped. The balcony overlooked a lush garden, where the warm evening air carried the scent of jasmine and the distant hum of cicadas. The sun had just dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in hues of coral and lavender.

A loud, insistent knock at the door broke the serene moment. Before we could answer, the door swung open, and Doug and Lin burst in, their energy filling the room. They stepped onto the balcony, Doug’s broad grin leading the way. “Ready?” he asked, rubbing his hands together. “I’m starving.”

“You’re *always* starving,” Lin quipped, her tone dry but affectionate, her eyes rolling as she adjusted the strap of her sundress. Doug, unfazed, just laughed and waved her off, already heading for the door with the confidence of a man on a mission. We followed, the promise of dinner pulling us along.

The hotel’s garden restaurant was a vision straight out of a dream. We dined beneath pergolas draped with tangled vines,

their leaves forming a natural canopy above us. Strands of delicate fairy lights twinkled like stars, casting a warm glow over the tables. In the background, a soft melody played—perhaps a violin or a guitar, subtle enough to blend into the ambiance without overpowering our conversation. The air was balmy, carrying the faint scent of grilled herbs and blooming flowers.

The food was extraordinary, each dish a small work of art. Plates arrived adorned with vibrant colors and intricate garnishes: seared scallops with a citrus glaze, herb-crusted lamb paired with roasted vegetables, and delicate pastries filled with creamy goat cheese and figs. The waiters, attentive yet unobtrusive, anticipated our every need, refilling glasses and clearing plates with a practiced grace. Midway through the meal, the hotel manager approached our table, his face beaming with pride. Delighted to have guests from so far away, he presented us with a bottle of exquisite local wine, its deep ruby hue catching the light. “A gift for our honored visitors,” he said with a slight bow. We toasted to new experiences, the wine smooth and rich, perfectly complementing the meal.

Laughter and stories flowed as freely as the wine. Doug recounted a ridiculous tale from his last trip, Lin teased him mercilessly, and Brian and I chimed in with our own anecdotes, the night growing warmer with each shared moment. By the time dessert arrived—silky panna cotta drizzled with honey and fresh berries—we were utterly content, our hearts and stomachs full.

Eventually, we made our way back to our rooms, the garden's fairy lights fading into the distance behind us. Exhausted but happy, we sank into those glorious, cloud-like beds, the memory of the evening lingering like the last sip of wine. Sleep came easily, wrapping us in the same gentle luxury that had defined the entire day.

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Chapter Nineteen

Kars Türkiye

The summer sun was climbing, steady and deliberate, like a storyteller setting the stage, its golden rays brushing the rooftops of Kars and warming the ancient stones awake. At our hotel's breakfast table, Doug, Lin, Brian, and I lingered over cups of Turkish coffee, its bitter kick mingling with the crunch of simit crumbs scattered like a treasure map across the tablecloth. The scene was gloriously chaotic in that way only travel can make feel right: half-spoken stories, sticky menus plastered with colorful photos, and napkins crumpled into tight balls of satisfaction. Outside, Kars was stirring, its streets a patchwork of centuries—Seljuk arches, Ottoman ambition, Russian winters—each corner a page in a living scrapbook, waiting for us to read it aloud.

Lin and I huddled over her dog-eared guidebook, its pages softened from overuse, maps folded into shapes only she could decode. We fancied ourselves the group's unofficial historians, ready to dazzle Doug and Brian with tales of Anatolian empires and forgotten fortresses. But Doug had a singular obsession: Mount Ararat. He leaned toward the window, squinting as if he could will the mountain into view. "Look at that sky," he said, voice hushed with reverence. "Not a cloud. Today's our day." Brian, always up for a chase, gave a nod that wasn't just agreement—it was a vow to hunt down that elusive peak. "Let's see if Ararat plays nice."

We spilled onto the streets, bellies full of bread and caffeine, the air thick with the scent of grilled corn and the hum of morning bustle. Kars was alive, its wide boulevards lined with stone buildings that seemed to whisper secrets of empires past. Our first stop was the Cathedral of Kars—now Kümbet Mosque, though its soul hadn't changed with its name. Its dome gleamed like a polished coin under the sun, and I couldn't resist launching into my spiel. "Tenth century," I said, gesturing to the weathered stone. "Built as an Armenian church, flipped to a mosque, then a church again, now a mosque. It's seen it all."

Lin, flipping through her guidebook, pointed to the intricate carvings curling along the arches. "These aren't just pretty," she said. "They're history etched in stone, tying this place to Ani." Doug ran a finger over the patterns, his eyes drifting southeast.

“Ararat’s out there,” he muttered, as if the mountain was listening. Brian, quieter than usual, studied the geometric designs overhead and grinned. “This place is *something*.”

We headed for the Kars Citadel next, climbing a steep hill past stone houses and pastel facades faded like old photographs. “These are from the 1800s,” Lin explained, nodding at a lilac-painted railing. “Russian era, when Kars was their outpost. Like a slice of St. Petersburg dropped into Türkiye.” Doug’s camera clicked, capturing the scene. “That’s wild.” Brian, taking it all in, just nodded, his silence saying plenty.

At the citadel’s base, I rattled off its history—Seljuk roots, Mongol sieges, Ottoman resilience—while sweat beaded on my forehead in the rising heat. “It’s been through everything,” I said, fanning myself with a guide book. Doug barely glanced my way, his gaze fixed up the path. “Ararat’s gotta show from the top.” I pointed east. “Clear day like this? You might get lucky.”

Inside the citadel grounds, wildflowers erupted from cracks in the basalt, defiant bursts of color against the stark stone. The Kars Valley sprawled below, the river glinting like molten silver. Lin pointed to the Taşköprü, an Ottoman bridge arcing over the water with timeless grace. “Five hundred years old,” she said, pride in her voice. Brian whistled. “Built to last.”

Then, out of nowhere, Doug let out a whoop that bounced off the walls. He scrambled onto a rocky outcrop, arm outstretched,

finger pointing like a divining rod. “There! It’s there!” And there it was—Mount Ararat, snow-capped and ghostly, shimmering in the distance like a dream made solid. Doug fist-pumped like he’d summited it himself. Brian clapped his shoulder. “Good eye, mate.”

Wandering the grounds, we spotted a family sprawled on a vibrant blanket, their picnic a feast of flatbreads, grilled vegetables, and steaming tea glasses. The mother waved us over with a smile that could’ve warmed the whole valley. Her kids giggled, tugging her sleeves. We hesitated—our Turkish was shaky at best—but Doug, ever led by his stomach, was already striding over.

We joined the welcoming family, their warm smiles inviting us to share a picnic spread on a colorful, woven kilim under a sprawling fig tree. They offered us crusty, sesame-crustéd simit bread, still warm from a local bakery, paired with juicy mercimek köftesi, zesty ezme salad with tomatoes and peppers, and plump sigara böreği filled with tangy feta and herbs—a perfect Turkish picnic feast that radiated comfort and tradition. Through lively charades and the eldest son’s halting English, we stitched together a conversation filled with laughter, their animated gestures bridging our language gap. With sparkling eyes and enthusiastic waves, they shared their love for the nearby citadel’s ancient stones and insisted we visit their cousin’s vibrant textile shop in the heart of the downtown bazaar.

We promised we would, parting with heartfelt waves, their glowing faces a universal expression of kindness that lingered like the taste of their meal.

Evening crept in as we climbed the citadel's highest tower, squeezing onto a narrow ledge like sparrows vying for the best view. The valley glowed amber, the air cooling fast. Doug, still high on spotting Ararat, kept pointing southeast, where the mountain faded into the dusk like a fading memory. Then the call to prayer rose, soft and haunting, weaving from minaret to minaret like a thread through time. We sat in silence, letting it wrap around us, the weight of centuries in every note.

"This is why we travel," Lin whispered, eyes closed. Doug, for once, skipped the quip and just nodded. Brian gazed at the horizon. "Something special," he murmured.

And it was. Kars had bared its soul—not just its stones and stories, but its people, its warmth, its open heart. From the picnic's laughter to the prayer's echo, from Ararat's distant tease to the cathedral's quiet strength, it all wove into something bigger than a single day. As we trudged back to our hotel, the sun sinking in the western sky, its last rays gilding the rooftops, we felt it settle into us. By the time we reached the grand lobby, stars were pinpricking the sky, and we knew—this day would linger like a photograph tucked into memory's album, a chapter of heat

and heart, laughter and longing, in a summer that refused to fade quietly.

But Kars was just the opening act. The next morning, we were up with the dawn, chasing the next chapter: Ani, the ancient Armenian capital on Türkiye's border with Armenia, a city of ruins and whispered legends. The morning sun bathed Kars in a golden haze, softening its rugged edges. Brian, Lin, and I stood at the edge of a chaotic bus terminal, squinting at a tattered schedule pinned to a cracked wall. Our mission was Ani, but first, we had to navigate the terminal's madness—and find Doug, who'd vanished again.

"This schedule's a riddle," Brian grumbled, tilting his baseball cap to block the glare as he studied the Turkish scrawl. "And where's Doug? He was right here."

Lin, scrolling her translation app, scanned the crowd. "Platform üç—three, I think. But yeah, Doug's AWOL. Classic."

I peered through the bustle of vendors hawking tea and simit. "Bet he's off charming someone. Let's check over there." We wove through the chaos, dodging buses and bags, until Lin pointed. There was Doug, sprawled on a rickety bench by a çay stall, sipping tea and munching pistachio-dusted baklava with two elderly men in flat caps, their faces creased with laughter.

"Seriously, Doug?" Lin called, striding over. "We're hunting the Ani bus, and you're hosting a tea party?"

Doug grinned, unapologetic, raising his glass. “Chill, Lin. Mehmet and Ali invited me to sit. Couldn’t say no to their baklava. Want a bite?” He gestured to the flaky pastry.

Mehmet, the older man, chuckled, eyes twinkling. “Your friend, he funny. Good company. You go Ani? Beautiful place.”

Lin softened, smiling. “Yeah, we’re headed there. But we need that bus.”

Ali pointed to a corner where a battered minibus idled. “That one, for Ani. Good driver.”

Brian snorted. “Only you, Doug, could disappear and end up with cake and mates.”

Doug shrugged, popping another bite. “It’s a talent. Now let’s move before you miss the bus.”

We thanked Mehmet and Ali, who waved us off with warm grins, and hustled to the minibus. “Merhaba,” I said to the driver, my Turkish wobbly. “Ani? This bus?”

“Evet, Ani,” he replied, flicking his cigarette. “Otuz lira.” We paid, squeezed into creaky seats, and the bus jolted to life, winding through Kars’s outskirts into the open steppe.

The road to Ani cut through rolling plains, wildflowers blazing red and yellow under the June sun. The Akhurian River appeared to the east, its gorge marking the Türkiye-Armenia border. Armenian watchtowers loomed across the ravine, mirrored by

Turkish patrols on our side—a quiet reminder of the border’s tension. I patted my camera bag. “Keeping this thing off,” I said. “No drone shots here—I’m not fancying a Turkish jail.”

Lin nodded, eyeing the distant towers. “Smart. I read drones are banned near the border. This place doesn’t need extra drama.”

The bus lurched to a stop at Ani’s entrance, a simple gate with a ticket booth. We paid, grabbed a map, and stepped into the ruins. Ani unfolded like a faded tapestry, its pinkish tuff stone structures scattered across a windswept plateau, framed by the Akhurian’s ravine and the Tsaghkotsadzor valley. Known as the “City of 1,001 Churches,” Ani was the heart of the Bagratid Armenian kingdom from 961 to 1045, a Silk Road hub of trade, faith, and art. Its 50 churches and 33 cave chapels, scarred by Mongol invasions and a 1319 earthquake, stood as silent sentinels of its past.

The Cathedral of Ani rose first, a masterpiece of Armenian architecture. Built between 989 and 1001 by architect Trdat, its ribbed vaulting hinted at Gothic designs centuries later, though its dome had long since crumbled. The walls, etched with crosses and patterns, glowed in the sunlight.

“This is unreal,” Brian said, running a hand along the stone. “Like walking into a legend.”

Lin’s camera clicked. “Picture it in its prime—bells ringing, markets alive, caravans rolling through.”

Doug, still licking pistachio crumbs, pointed to an Armenian inscription. “They built this with pride. You can feel it.”

I pulled out my camera, framing the cathedral’s arches. “It’s humbling. This was an empire’s heart, still beating.”

We wandered to the Church of Saint Gregory of the Abughamrents, its circular design and intact walls a gem among the ruins. Lin traced the inscriptions, her fingers lingering. “These are so vivid. Ani’s still speaking.”

Brian grinned, kicking a pebble. “Yeah, but it’s a whisper. You gotta listen close.”

Doug smirked. “Getting poetic, Brian? That baklava’s working wonders.”

“Shut it,” Brian laughed, lobbing a pebble his way. At the Church of Christ the Redeemer, split by lightning yet defiantly upright, we paused. The jagged divide was haunting, a wound that added to its beauty. “It’s like Ani’s soul,” I said, snapping photos. “Broken but proud.”

Lin nodded. “That’s why this place matters. It’s resilience in stone.”

We reached the Menuçehr Mosque, perched at the gorge’s edge, its minaret leaning slightly. Built in the 11th century by the Shaddadid dynasty, it blended Armenian and Islamic artistry, its geometric patterns echoing the churches. Some claimed it was

repurposed from an Armenian structure, a nod to Ani's layered history.

Brian leaned against an old, weathered wall, looking out at the Akhurian River where Armenian watchtowers stood across from Turkish patrols. "This border's got a story," he said softly, his voice thoughtful. "Armenia and Türkiye have a complicated past—lots of pain and disagreement from way back. Some call it the Armenian tragedy from 1915, with so many lives lost during the Ottoman era. Türkiye sees it differently, more like losses from a tough time. And there's ongoing tension with other disputes keeping this border closed since '93. Those towers and soldiers? They're part of a bigger tale."

Lin frowned, staring at the river. "It's heavy. Ani's trapped in that shadow."

Doug nodded, brushing crumbs from his shirt. "But it's still here, outlasting all that."

We ate lunch by the mosque—bread, cheese, olives—the breeze carrying scents of wildflowers. Ani's silence was profound, broken only by the wind's soft hum. I photographed the ruins, their forms vivid through my lens. "This place feels alive," I said. "Like it's watching us, sharing its secrets."

Brian chewed thoughtfully. "Makes you wonder what'll be left of our cities in a thousand years."

Lin smiled. “Hopefully they’ve got Ani’s magic. This isn’t just old—it’s sacred.”

Doug raised an eyebrow. “Sacred’s a strong word. But yeah, this place sticks with you.”

We explored further, finding a Zoroastrian fire temple, its altar worn smooth, and a small Ottoman fort overlooking the gorge. The fort’s view was breathtaking, the river carving through a timeless landscape. Ani’s layout—churches, mosques, temples, traces of markets—spoke of a cosmopolitan city, thriving despite its precarious perch on the Silk Road.

We discussed Ani’s history as we walked. The Bagratid kings made it a beacon of Armenian culture, their architects blending Byzantine, Persian, and local styles. The cathedral’s design influenced buildings across the region, while Ani’s manuscripts and frescoes were medieval treasures. Its decline was brutal—sacked by Mongols, shattered by earthquakes, and overshadowed by modern politics. The entrance sign listed every empire that ruled Ani—Byzantine, Seljuk, Ottoman—but omitted the Armenians who built it.

Lin sighed. “Ani deserves better. It’s a world heritage site, not a political pawn.”

I nodded, framing a photo of the ruins. “Ani doesn’t care about borders. It just stands, speaking to anyone who listens.”

The sun dipped, casting long shadows across the plateau. We lingered at the Cathedral of Ani, its silhouette blazing against the amber sky. “This is my favorite,” Brian said. “It’s the city’s heart.”

“Same,” I agreed, capturing one last shot. “Proud, despite everything.”

We returned to the entrance, where the bus waited. The ride back to Kars was quiet, Ani’s spell lingering like a half-forgotten song. The ruins had woven themselves into us, their beauty and endurance a quiet force.

In Kars, over steaming glasses of çay, we reflected. “I’m glad we went,” Lin said softly. “Ani’s more than stones. It’s people, faith, survival.”

Brian nodded. “Heavy, but the good kind. Makes you think about what lasts.”

Doug sipped his tea, his usual skepticism softened. “What lasts is places like this. They outlive empires, wars, even dodgy bus schedules.”

I set my glass down, my camera resting on the table, its photos a gallery of Ani’s timelessness. “Ani’s the hero here,” I said, smiling at Doug’s quip. “It’s been through hell, but it’s still standing, singing its silent song.”

“Agreed,” Doug said, setting his tea glass down with a clink next to mine, the amber liquid catching the lamplight. “And now it’s time for dinner. I’m *starving* for some delicious Turkish grub.”

Lin shot him a look, her lips twitching. “What you’re starving for is the belly dancers.”

“Me?” Doug said, pressing a hand to his chest with mock innocence. “Never.”

Lin snorted, rolling her eyes as she stood and headed up the street toward the restaurant we’d planned to visit that evening. The place came highly recommended by our hotel manager, a jovial man with a twinkle in his eye. He’d leaned in, calling it “authentic” with a grin, and, with a conspiratorial wink to Doug and Brian, whispered it was renowned in Kars for its stunning belly dancers.

The restaurant was a burst of life when we arrived, a kaleidoscope of sound and color tucked into a stone-walled courtyard strung with fairy lights. Live music spilled into the night—zurna reeds wailing, darbuka drums thumping—a rhythm that pulsed through the air. Waiters wove between packed tables, hoisting platters of sizzling kebabs and golden börek high above their heads, their steps as nimble as dancers. Laughter and clinking glasses filled the space, mingling with the scent of grilled lamb and fresh mint.

A man in a crisp vest approached, his smile wide enough to light the whole place. “Ah, the Australian visitors!” he exclaimed, clapping his hands. “Come, come!” He ushered us through the crowd to a table near the front.

“I think we’re famous,” Brian whispered in my ear, his grin lopsided.

“Not many Aussies out here, I reckon,” I whispered back, taking in the curious glances from nearby tables.

We settled in, the table quickly buried under platters of food: smoky adana kebabs, creamy hummus swirled with olive oil, stuffed grape leaves glistening with lemon, and baskets of warm, pillowy bread. Jugs of frosty ayran, tangy and laced with mint, arrived in a clatter of glasses. We dove in, laughing and passing plates, soaking up the electric atmosphere of this vibrant place. Smiles and nods from other diners made us feel like honored guests in a far-flung corner of the world.

Suddenly, the lights dimmed, and a hush of anticipation rippled through the room. We exchanged puzzled glances, forks paused mid-bite, as the music swelled—a lively crescendo of strings and percussion. Then they appeared: the belly dancers, gliding into the spotlight with a grace that seemed to defy gravity, accompanied by a spirited band. The dancers were a vision, their costumes shimmering in deep jewel tones—emerald, sapphire, crimson—adorned with delicate coins that jingled with every

sway of their hips. Their movements were fluid yet precise, a mesmerizing blend of strength and elegance, their arms tracing sinuous patterns in the air. The band drove the rhythm: a saz player strumming intricate melodies, a clarinet weaving soulful notes, and a drummer pounding the darbuka with infectious energy, his grin as bright as the dancers' sequins.

Across the table, Doug was practically vibrating, his foot tapping, his chair creaking as he jiggled to the beat. I caught his eye and smirked—he was itching to join in. Sure enough, a dancer with a cascade of dark curls glided to our table, her bangles chiming as she beckoned Doug with a playful tilt of her head. That was all it took. With a whoop, Doug was up, sashaying into the center of the room to the delight of the clapping crowd.

Brian and I cheered, laughing so hard my sides ached, as Doug twirled with surprising flair, mimicking the dancer's hip shakes with exaggerated gusto. Lin buried her face in her hands, shaking her head, but I caught the smile tugging at her lips—she adored his ridiculous charm. The music quickened, and a rope appeared, stretched taut by two waiters. Doug, never one to back down, dove into a limbo, shimmying under the rope as it dropped lower and lower. The crowd roared, clapping in time with the frenzied beat, egging him on. Lower, faster, lower—until, with a dramatic wobble, Doug's legs betrayed him, and he crashed flat on his back, arms splayed, to a wave of delighted cheers.

He staggered back to our table, red-faced and grinning, turning to the crowd for a theatrical bow, sweeping his arm like a stage star. “Not sure I’ll walk tomorrow,” he muttered through gritted teeth, collapsing into his chair.

Lin just stared at him, her expression a mix of exasperation and affection. Brian and I raised our glasses in a mock salute. “To Doug, the limbo legend,” I said, and we clinked, laughing as Doug groaned.

The night stretched on, filled with more food, more music, and endless banter. When it was time to leave, the farewells were a production. The restaurant owner insisted on photos, pulling us into a group shot with the dancers and band, all of us grinning like old friends. Waiters clapped us on the back, diners waved, and the manager pressed small bags of pistachios into our hands, urging us to return. We stumbled into the cool night, our laughter echoing down Kars’s quiet streets, the glow of the evening lingering like a warm ember as we made our way back to the hotel. Lin linked arms with Doug, teasing him about his “dance career,” while Brian and I trailed behind, recounting the limbo catastrophe with fresh giggles.

The next few days in Kars were a gentle unwind, a chance to savor the town’s quiet charm. We lounged in the hotel’s lush courtyard, sipping tea under the shade of a gnarled fig tree. We wandered the streets, marveling at the blend of Russian-style

mansions and Ottoman minarets, their stones warmed by the sun. Everywhere we went, locals offered çay in delicate tulip-shaped glasses, their hospitality as endless as the tea itself. We browsed tiny shops, picking up jars of wildflower honey from the alpine meadows we'd seen en route, its golden glow a taste of Kars's summer. We swapped stories with shopkeepers, laughed with kids playing football in the alleys, and soaked in the rhythm of a town that felt like a secret we'd been let in on.

Then, all too soon, our time in Kars drew to a close. There we were, standing on a chilly platform at midnight, our breath puffing in the crisp air, waiting to board the Dogu Express to Ankara. The train was real—gloriously, impossibly real—and we were about to embark on the final leg toward Istanbul. Somehow, crossing Türkiye by train felt like the perfect coda to our adventure, a slow, swaying journey through the heart of a land that had stolen ours.

The platform buzzed with quiet anticipation, travelers clutching bags and blankets, the train's headlights glinting in the distance. Doug, wrapped in a scarf, looked wistful. "Kars got under my skin," he said. Lin nodded, her eyes on the stars. "It's special. Like Ani, it's got a soul." Brian, usually sparing with words, added, "Feels right, ending here. This train's gonna be epic."

I shifted the weight of my overstuffed backpack—part portable wardrobe, part emergency snack depot—and glanced down the

platform. “It’s been a hell of a ride,” I said. “And it’s not over yet.”

The Dogu Express pulled in and let out a whistle—sharp, insistent, and entirely unnecessary at that hour.. We hoisted our gear and climbed aboard, ready to be carried westward toward Ankara and finally Istanbul and whatever strange and wonderful tales lay ahead.

We were greeted by our carriage attendant, a wiry man with a mustache that curled at the ends like it had its own personality and possibly its own passport. Doug, in classic form, dubbed him *Svetlano*—a nod to the many quirky carriage attendants who had shepherded us across the vast expanse of Russia.

The train itself had a familiar feel, like its Russian cousins, but this time the compartments were downright swanky: two berths instead of four, our own little wash basin, a fridge, and—most gloriously—air conditioning that actually worked. A true marvel of modern train luxury, and our home for the next 40 or so hours.

Lin popped her head into our cabin. “Nice, isn’t it?” she said, as Brian eagerly unpacked the complimentary goodie bag: a bottle of water, some crisps, a fistful of nuts, and a mysterious sponge cake featuring a stripe of fluorescent pink icing that looked suspiciously unfoodlike. “See you in the morning,” she added, cheerily, before slamming the door shut with gusto.

We climbed into our bunks and, rocked gently by the motion of the train, drifted off to sleep as the Dogu Express rolled out into the night.

Chapter Twenty

Türkiye : The Doğu Express & Istanbul

I woke to the rhythmic clack-clack-clack of train wheels, the unmistakable lullaby of long-distance travel. Sunlight streamed in through the window and slapped me full across the face like an overly enthusiastic customs officer. I blinked at the ceiling, briefly wondering which country, century, and identity I belonged to—then it came back to me. Türkiye. On a train. Heading west. Somewhere between the dusty spine of Anatolia and the distant glitter of Istanbul.

I sat up and peered out the window, expecting perhaps a glimpse of civilization, or at least a petrol station. Instead, I was rewarded with vast brown hills, a cloudless cobalt sky, and a river doing its best impression of a mountain goat—leaping and crashing over rocks like it had somewhere very important to be. It was beautiful. Wild. Empty. And—judging by the lack of movement above me—I was talking to a pile of blankets.

“Wow. Incredible scenery,” I said to the lump in the top bunk, assuming it was Brian. It wasn’t. Upon closer inspection, the lump turned out to be just that—a lump. No sign of Brian, unless

he'd somehow evolved into a sentient doona. I threw on yesterday's shirt, today's enthusiasm, and set off to find him.

I tracked him down in the dining car, where he was already two coffees deep and nodding sagely at Lin and Doug like a man who had seen things. Important things. Like pastry. I slid into a seat, and before I could utter a word, a waiter appeared at my elbow and placed a steaming cup of coffee in front of me with all the flourish of a stage magician. I half expected him to pull a rabbit out of the sugar bowl.

"Stunning, isn't it?" said Lin, gesturing at the endless expanse outside the window. "We're up on the Anatolian Plateau. High desert, endless plains, all drama and no shade. Like a Turkish version of Outback Australia, but with better tea."

"It is indeed," I said, taking a sip of coffee that could revive a coma patient. Then I got to the important bit. "Is there breakfast?"

Doug grinned and signalled wildly at the waiter like a man drowning in mimed hunger. "Apparently there's börek," he said, just as a plate the size of a hubcap arrived at our table, loaded with golden pastry deliciousness. The börek was still warm—layers of flaky pastry wrapped around cheese and herbs with the occasional smug fleck of minced meat. We devoured it with the grace of wild dogs at a picnic and spent the next hour drinking

tea, watching the scenery blur by, and spotting goats. Many goats.

“The goat economy is alive and well in this part of Türkiye,” I muttered to no one in particular. Around 1pm, the train began to slow, the clack of the wheels softening as if the train, too, needed a nap.

Civilization appeared in the distance—low buildings, crooked rooftops, and what looked suspiciously like a castle on a hill.

Lin peered out the window and sipped her tea. “That’s Divriği,” she said. “Tiny now, but in the 13th century it was the capital of its own little beylik. You know—one of those medieval breakaway republics that said, ‘To hell with central government, we’ll have our own caliphate and possibly a decent cheese market.’”

Doug shaded his eyes. “What’s that thing on the hill?”

“The citadel,” said Lin, pointing. “The walls have been restored, but inside? Not much more than rubble, ghosts, and some very bold weeds.”

Brian looked up from his third biscuit. “What about the mosque?”

“Oh, that’s the main event,” Lin nodded. “The Great Mosque and Hospital of Divriği. Built in 1228. UNESCO-listed. Covered in stone carvings so intricate it’s like someone weaponised

calligraphy. No two panels are the same. It's the architectural equivalent of a mic drop."

Doug stretched. "Shame we're not stopping."

"We are," said Lin with a grin. "Three-hour stop. Enough time to see the mosque, wander the old town, maybe even fit in lunch."

Brian straightened. "Did someone say lunch?"

The train gave a gentle jolt and hissed to a stop. We disembarked and were instantly assaulted by the heat.

"Golly, it's hot," said Doug, fanning himself with a train ticket.

"Forty-one degrees and climbing," said Brian, consulting his phone like a meteorological oracle.

"I hate forty," I muttered. "Just hate it."

Lin, sensing a possible escape attempt on my part, looped her arm through mine. "It's only a kilometre into the old town. Come on."

"May as well be a hundred in this heat," I grumbled, shuffling forward. "I wish I hadn't lost my hat at that insane border crossing. My head's going to cook like an egg in a skillet."

We trudged into town, my inner monologue getting increasingly dramatic with every bead of sweat. The village eventually appeared like a mirage, all winding lanes and timber-framed houses sagging together like drunk uncles at a wedding.

Up the hill we went, until we stood in front of the mosque—an enormous sandstone structure so grand it looked like it had been air-dropped from another planet. Information boards lined the path, each one breathlessly describing its dual role as mosque and hospital, its history, and the stonemason’s obsessive attention to detail. Some carvings looked like lacework. Others like puzzles only the universe could solve.

We stood on a gantry that surrounded the ancient building, staring in awe at the intricate stonework.

“This looks like something from another planet,” Brian said suddenly, his voice hushed. “Just like in Stargate when they travel through the portal and end up on that desert world. You know, with Daniel Jackson trying to decode the symbols and stop the Goa’uld from destroying everything.”

We all turned to look at him.

Doug squinted. “You okay, mate?”

Lin raised an eyebrow. “Did the sun melt your brain, or have you just been holding that one in for the last 300 kilometers?”

Brian looked unbothered. “I’m just saying. These carvings are wild. Alien-level craftsmanship.”

I nodded slowly. “Right. Stargate. Got it.”

“Don’t encourage him,” Lin said, shaking her head with a grin.

“Shame half of it’s wrapped in scaffolding and hessian,” Doug muttered.

It was true. Most of the building was hidden behind protective cloth, and a high fence kept us at a frustrating distance.

“They’ve got to protect it,” Lin said. “It’s nearly 800 years old. You know what people are like—crawling over ancient monuments like it’s a playground. Instagram posers. Tbilisi was full of them.”

We snapped a few photos, admired what we could, and baked under the sun until Doug declared, “I’m roasting. Time for lunch.”

We traipsed back down the hill like heat-stroked pilgrims and stumbled upon a small restaurant pulsing with delicious smells. I poked my head in and was waved enthusiastically toward a table by a young woman.

“This looks good,” I called. “Also, I refuse to walk another step.”

There wasn’t a word of English on the menu, in the restaurant, or anywhere in town—and in truth, it had been ages since we’d heard anyone speak it. Our Turkish was limited to “hello,” “thank you,” and a hopeful “is this chicken?” Still, the owners were delighted to have foreign visitors and responded by delivering an endless stream of dishes: dolmas, grilled meats, rice, warm bread, and mint tea strong enough to revive the dead.

Doug, of course, began trying to talk to the table next to us using a language that bore only a passing resemblance to anything on Earth.

“What language is he trying to speak?” Lin asked, suspiciously eyeing Doug’s gesticulations.

“Bit of Russian, some Spanish, possibly some French,” said Brian. “Dougese.”

We listened as Doug told a long, animated story involving bears, trains, and something about Jack’s rooster. The locals nodded politely, looking both amused and vaguely alarmed.

“Doug,” Lin said, “leave those poor people alone.”

“What? They’re loving it!” he protested.

“They have no idea what you’re saying.”

Before things could descend into an international incident, Brian checked his watch and announced, “We need to get back. Next train’s in three days. Let’s not get stuck in a medieval goat town.”

As we left, the restaurant owner pressed a warm bag into my hands. Inside: foil-wrapped shawarmas and little tubs of something wonderful.

“Incredible hospitality,” Lin said.

“Turkish magic,” I agreed.

We arrived back at the train hot, sweaty, and thoroughly worn out after a long, dusty day of wandering. Brian, ever the hero, had ducked into a corner shop on the walk back and emerged triumphantly with a plastic bag of cold beers, which we treated like precious treasure. We clambered aboard the train with about fifteen minutes to spare, just enough time to catch our breath before it lurched into motion again.

Unanimously, and without much discussion, we decided to retreat to our cabins for a while—to cool down, collect ourselves, and shake off the heat of the day. We planned to reconvene later in the dining car to enjoy the feast we'd been gifted by the kindly restaurant owner: still-warm dolmas, grilled meats, rice, and flatbread wrapped in newspaper, infused with the scent of charcoal and spice. The mint tea would have to wait, but the beers were already cold and waiting.

As for me, I made a beeline for my bunk, peeled off my dusty shoes, and lay back with my shawarma tucked under one arm like a well-earned comfort object. Within minutes I was half-asleep, dreaming of mosque domes shimmering in the sun, goats perched impossibly on cliff faces, and Doug's inexplicable rooster—still the strangest companion of the trip. The rhythmic clatter of the train lulled me deeper, the scent of grilled meat lingering in the air.

At seven sharp, we gathered in the dining car, a little sunburned, a little rumpled, but in good spirits. The compartment had that gentle, lived-in glow from a few low-hanging lamps and the fading light outside. We unpacked our bundles like treasure: dolmas glistening with olive oil, tender grilled meats wrapped in foil, seasoned rice still warm, and chewy flatbread perfect for scooping up every last morsel.

The cold beers cracked open with a satisfying hiss, and we raised a quiet toast to good food, kind strangers, and trains that ran on time. As we ate, the Turkish countryside slid by beyond the windows—rolling hills, sleepy villages, the occasional shepherd waving from a field. The sky turned from gold to dusky blue, and then finally, black, the silhouettes of minarets and treetops dissolving into the night.

Conversation ebbed and flowed, punctuated by laughter and the occasional debate over who had received the best cut of lamb. Eventually, the gentle motion of the train began to lull us again, and we fell into companionable silence, sipping the last of our beers and letting the rhythm of the rails carry our thoughts.

At last, Doug pushed back his chair, stretched, and declared, “Right—time for bed.” No one argued. We filed out of the dining car single file, swaying gently as we made our way along the narrow corridor, the train rocking softly beneath our feet.

Back in my cabin, I climbed into my bunk, the sheets cool against sun-warmed skin. Outside, the darkness was complete. I listened to the steady clack of wheels on rails, that hypnotic, metallic lullaby, and drifted off to sleep for the second night in a row, somewhere deep in the heart of Türkiye.

The next thing I knew, a thunderous banging on the cabin door yanked me from a dream where goats were staging a coup in a mosque. The hallway echoed with shouts—Turkish, urgent, and not remotely soothing. From the bunk above, Brian unleashed a string of curses that would’ve made a sailor blush, muttering something about the unholy hour and the criminal lack of coffee. I blinked into the dimness, my brain still half-buried in Anatolian dreamscapes, and hauled myself out of bed. Brian sat upright, looking like he’d been dragged through a bazaar by his ankles—hair a mess, eyes bleary, shirt rumpled like it had lost a fight with a kebab.

“Come on,” I said, rubbing sleep from my eyes. “Sounds like we’re rolling into Ankara.”

He groaned, swinging his legs over the bunk’s edge with the enthusiasm of a man facing a tax audit. “This better be worth it,” he grumbled, fishing a stray sock from under his pillow. We scrambled to pack, shoving random socks, crumpled shirts, and a rogue toothbrush into our bags with all the finesse of a toddler stuffing a piñata. My backpack looked like it was having an

identity crisis, bulging in all the wrong places. Lin and Doug were probably already sorted, their bags neatly zipped while we played laundry tetris.

The train gave a final lurch, like it was as fed up as we were, and screeched to a stop. Just like that, we were ejected onto the platform in Ankara, surrounded by our battered luggage like shipwreck survivors washed ashore. The station buzzed with chaos—porters yelling, trolleys rattling, and the sharp tang of diesel mixing with the aroma of fresh simit from a nearby vendor. I squinted into the morning glare, my head still catching up with my body. We’d crossed 1,310 kilometers of Türkiye’s sprawling, soul-stirring landscape—from Kars’s alpine meadows and historic Ani to this humming capital—rattling through high deserts, goat-dotted hills, and villages that felt like they’d been plucked from a medieval tapestry. The Doğu Express had hauled us through it all, a creaky old beast that groaned but never quit.

Brian leaned on his bag, blinking sleepily but grinning like a kid who’d just spotted a sweet shop. “Thirteen hundred kays of pure magic. Reckon there’s a coffee stall in this chaos? Need one to wake up properly.”

I grinned. “It was magic, this journey. Alien carvings, your Stargate obsession, Doug’s rooster obsession—coffee’s just the final flourish.”

Lin appeared, looking infuriatingly composed, with Doug trailing behind, already eyeing a simit cart. “End of the line,” Lin said, her voice tinged with something like regret. “What a ride.”

We stood on the Ankara platform, bags at our feet, the station a chaotic swirl of porters, trolleys, and the warm, doughy scent of simit carts. Now, one final push lay ahead: a commuter train to Istanbul, the sprawling city straddling two continents.

A couple of hours and several cups of brain-jolting coffee later, we were crammed onto a sleek, modern train bound for the metropolis. After months rattling through the region's backblocks in rickety minivans and dubious contraptions that passed for transport, this shiny beast—complete with bright lights, Wi-Fi, and sharply dressed commuters—felt like we’d stumbled into a sci-fi film. Brian, still half-asleep but grinning, clutched his third coffee like a lifeline. “Civilization,” he muttered, peering at a businessman tapping away on a laptop. “Feels wrong.”

We rolled into Istanbul late in the afternoon, our train dumping us on the Asian side of the Bosphorus. Our hotel, the Celine Hotel - Ottoman Mansion, waited on the European side, promising cloud-like beds and killer views. The plan? Catch a taxi across the water. Simple, right? Wrong. At the taxi rank, cabs swooped in and out like vultures, snatching up locals and ignoring us like we were invisible. Doug, fed up, finally lost it

and strode into the road, arms flailing like a deranged air-traffic controller. A taxi screeched to a halt—more to avoid flattening him than out of kindness. I watched Doug gesticulate wildly, the driver shaking his head before peeling off. This happened three more times before Doug stomped back to us, fuming. “Not one of ’em will cross the Bosphorus,” he growled. “Too far, too busy, apparently.”

We stood there, bags sagging, brains frying, until Brian yanked his phone out like a gunslinger drawing a pistol. “Right, there’s gotta be a train,” he said, half to himself, tapping furiously at the Google oracle. “Yep, platform 16, 25 minutes. Goes under the Bosphorus to Sultanahmet, then a tram to our hotel. Follow me.”

Lin and I exchanged a look. “Could end up in Narnia,” she muttered. I nodded, but Brian was already off, phone held like a divining rod, leading us up one street, down another, up stairs, down stairs, around a roundabout—twice. We gave up trailing him and stood on the kerb, watching him charge up and down like a man possessed, arm outstretched, staring at his screen with the intensity of a treasure hunter. Finally, he circled back, pointing to a gate 50 meters behind us. “Bloody GPS is drunk,” he said. “It’s through there.”

“GPS is drunk,” Doug scoffed. “Sure it is.”

We climbed the stairs and, sure enough, found the train waiting. It whisked us under the Bosphorus, a surreal tunnel ride that felt

like cheating geography. We emerged in Sultanahmet's insanely busy square, only to be greeted by a downpour—thick, relentless sheets of rain that turned the streets into rivers. We tried three trams, each one packed tighter than a sardine tin, our bags making us about as welcome as a skunk at a picnic. In the chaos, Brian and I lost Lin and Doug, nearly losing our minds in the sodden, shoving crowd. Finally, Brian threw up his hands. "Hotel's a kilometer away. Let's walk."

So we did, trudging through Istanbul's steep, slippery streets, the rain turning our packs into soggy beasts. Halfway, we ducked into a tiny, packed café, grabbing sandwiches that tasted like salvation—spiced meat, fresh bread, and a fleeting moment of warmth. Drenched and disheveled, we finally reached the Celine Hotel - Ottoman Mansion. It delivered on its promises: plush beds that felt like sinking into a cloud, a minibar Brian immediately declared off-limits with a stern "Nobody touches that," and a balcony with jaw-dropping views of the Bosphorus, its waters glinting even through the rain.

In the foyer, we found Lin and Doug, bone-dry and sipping tea like they'd just strolled in from a spa. "Some bloke at the tram stop gave us a lift," Lin said, a touch sheepish. "We looked for you, but you vanished."

"No worries," I said, wringing out my shirt. "We're here now. That's what counts."

We had two nights and one full day in Istanbul, a deliberate choice—we'd long ago agreed to spend more time in Türkiye's lesser-known gems than its mega-cities. The next day, we dove into the city's chaos. The Grand Bazaar was first, and I was curious to see how it had changed since my visit a decade ago. Back then, it was a vibrant mix of tourist tat and local treasures—spices, handicrafts, and food stalls serving apple tea so good it felt like a hug in a cup. Now? Row after row of pure tourist schlock—knockoff handbags, garish souvenirs, and T-shirts screaming “I ♥ Istanbul.” The charm was buried under a tidal wave of mass-produced junk, though we did find one stall with decent pistachios, which Brian haggled for like he was buying a camel.

Next, we hit the Blue Mosque, its domes and minarets still breathtaking despite the selfie-stick hordes. Topkapi Palace dazzled with its opulent rooms and Bosphorus views, though Doug got oddly fixated on a sultan's dagger display. The Basilica Cistern was the highlight—eerie, cool, and otherworldly, its columns reflected in shallow water like a forgotten underworld. Istanbul had changed, grown glitzier and more crowded, but its magic still flickered in those ancient corners, even if it took some squinting to find it.

That night, we perched in a rooftop restaurant, the kind of place that makes you feel like you've momentarily hacked the good life. Before heading up, we'd rummaged through our packs,

digging out our best clothes from the bottom—slightly crumpled shirts and trousers that hadn't seen daylight since Moscow, smelling faintly of adventure and laundry neglect. Dressed in our finest (or least grubby), we looked almost respectable, though Brian's collar was rather askew. The Bosphorus glittered below, catching the last fiery streaks of a sunset that bathed the Blue Mosque's domes in gold and pink. We sipped cocktails—mine a zesty blend that tasted like a lemon grove had danced with a gin distillery—while Istanbul hummed beneath us, its minarets and ferries silhouetted against the fading light. This was our final night, the curtain call on an odyssey that began nearly three months ago in Mongolia's dusty sprawl. Tomorrow, Lin and Doug would fly to London, while Brian and I were bound for Bulgaria and Serbia, eventually looping back to France.

We sprawled across cushioned chairs, plates heaped with meze—hummus as smooth as a jazz solo, smoky baba ganoush, and stuffed vine leaves that popped with flavor. The air carried the Bosphorus's salty tang and the distant, haunting call to prayer. Brian, his eyes bright with the glow of their journey's memories, raised his glass with a wide, contented grin, as if he'd uncovered a hidden gem in their adventure. "To surviving dodgy minivans, rogue goats, and Doug's rooster obsession," he said, his voice warm with nostalgia.

Lin clinked her glass against his, laughing. “To those alien carvings and your Stargate theories. And not getting lost forever in Ankara’s chaos.”

Doug, already eyeing a baklava tray, joined in. “To shawarmas from strangers and that Sultanahmet downpour.”

I raised my glass in a silent toast, the others following, our eyes locking in a quiet nod to the madness we’d shared. We’d rumbled 1,750 kilometers across Türkiye’s untamed heart on a train that swayed like a tipsy storyteller, from the windswept alpine meadows of Kars and the ancient whispers of Ani’s ruins to Istanbul’s vibrant, sprawling embrace. It was the final leg of a three-month odyssey that had carried us through Mongolia’s endless steppes, Russia’s sweeping landscapes and cultured cities, the Caucasus

with its heady wines and drivers who treated roads like racetracks, and Türkiye’s rugged backroads in vehicles that scoffed at safety manuals. The stories we’d collected—some true, others gloriously embellished—were destined to light up pub nights for years: goats with mischievous glints in their eyes, mosques adorned with carvings that looked plucked from a sci-fi saga, and Doug’s bizarre, unstoppable tales of rogue roosters. Now, as we dined on a terrace overlooking the Bosphorus, its waters glinting like liquid gold under the fading sun, I felt the weight of straddling continents—not just geographically, but in

the stories, laughter, and friendships we'd forged. I sipped my cocktail, the tart sweetness mingling with the salty breeze, and let the moment settle. This journey's end, with Istanbul's minarets piercing the twilight, wasn't a full stop—it was the spark for the next adventure waiting just beyond the horizon.

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Epilogue

The train rattled gently beneath me, carrying us toward Bulgaria. Across from me, Brian gazed out the window, his eyes tracing the blurred contours of the Turkish countryside. I wondered if he was doing what I was—sifting through the mosaic of memories from the journey we’d just completed, an odyssey that felt both fleeting and eternal.

That morning, we’d said goodbye to Lin and Doug, farewells marked by warm hugs and quietly shared glances. Now, as the train rolled through European Türkiye, Brian turned to me, his voice soft but certain.

“Thirteen thousand kilometers,” he said, almost to himself. “Ten thousand of those overland—buses, trains, the occasional taxi. And that’s not counting the two thousand we wandered in the Gobi.”

I grinned. “Don’t forget the camels.”

He chuckled, eyes crinkling. “Yeah, the camels. How could I forget the smell? Epic, wasn’t it?” He turned back to the window, leaving the weight of his words—and maybe the lingering camel stench—between us.

I looked out too, though the fields and hills were just a backdrop to the reel of memories unspooling in my head. Three months ago, we’d started in Ulaanbaatar, a dusty frontier city pulsing

with life, and ended in Istanbul's grand sprawl. In between stretched a blur of border crossings, new languages, questionable bathrooms, and extraordinary people.

I thought of Doug diving into the icy depths of Lake Baikal, laughter echoing off the frozen shore. The Russian trains, where strangers became storytellers over meals and vodka that seared the throat and the soul. The Svetlanas—formidable, aproned women of the rails—who ruled the train cars with an iron ladle and surprising warmth.

There were endless buses with cracked vinyl seats and drivers who smoked, swore, and somehow knew every pothole by name. We danced jigs in dimly lit Russian restaurants and discovered that, when in doubt, just point at something on the menu and hope it's not tongue.

Then came Azerbaijan—Yuri and his van, rattling down roads that weren't entirely sure they wanted to be roads. A night in a cottage by the Caspian, then Sheki, a little town tucked against the Caucasus, where we boarded buses to who-knows-where and drank tea under leafy trees, surrounded by curious locals and mildly confused cats.

In Georgia, we drank wine that tasted like it had been filtered through history itself. Doug glided over a valley like a joyful, slightly uncoordinated bird. We walked through streets carved with stories, and ate food that made us consider just staying

forever. Khinkali and khachapuri may not be life-altering, but they came close.

And Türkiye—windswept ruins in Ani, long train rides, and chaotic bazaars where bargaining was performance art. We lingered in villages where 800-year-old mosques and homes whispered quietly of centuries past. Every stop brought new faces, new challenges, and the occasional surprise involving goats.

For months, we'd lived in a world where English was a rarity, meals were mysteries, and transport held together by willpower and duct tape somehow kept going. Through it all, one truth emerged: it wasn't the destinations that mattered most—it was the people. The strangers who shared food, stories, awkward silences, and directions that were sometimes wildly inaccurate but always well-meaning.

That, I realized, is the heart of travel—not just the places, but the people who make them unforgettable. The laughter shared over miscommunication, the kindness offered freely, the way someone you've just met can feel like an old friend by the end of a single train ride.

As the train hummed on toward the next border, I let the weight of those moments settle, knowing they'd linger long after the journey ended—and maybe even longer than the smell of camel.

