

# MEET MIRO

A SCENE FROM FIRST LIGHT OF DAWN

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## MIRO'S APARTMENT

### BELGRADE, SERBIA

A SET of 4K monitors spanned Miro's desk. Miro sat in front of them, looking bewildered as Maksim shared an abbreviated version of what happened at Village Ksorba. He *didn't* explain why anyone had gone there, nor did he mention Kat. Mostly, he stuck to the basics, sharing only enough to express the direness of his situation—and not so much that he seemed primed for a mental wellness check.

Miro ate while he listened. By the end of the story—the basics of which were crazy enough—Miro's eyes had gone wide, and his mouth had tumbled open. All he managed was a mumbly “Bro” through his last bite of *ćevapi*.

In addition to being a hacker, Miro was a serious gamer with many of his virtual friends living in the West. He had a knack for accents and colloquialisms, and Maksim could always tell when he'd been spending time with Brits versus Aussies versus Americans. Presently, his Serbian friend sounded like a SoCal surfer with a Slavic accent.

“It's unbelievable. I know.” Maksim navigated candy wrap-

pers, chip bags, and takeout sacks that littered Miro's floor. He used his boot to nudge a soggy lump of something. Whatever it was had been there a while. "But I'm telling you the truth." He traversed the lump. "I've not exaggerated any of the details."

"No one would believe me if I told them... but there has been a lot of speculation online." Miro tossed the foil wrap and studied one of his screens, reading through a chat he'd pulled up. "People are talking about what happened. What they *think* happened—the fate of the Răzvan clan, who's going to fill the power vacuum. Look at this." He switched to the center screen and launched a darknet message board. "They're placing bets on who will take over the Răzvan territory."

Maksim leaned in. "What are they saying?"

"Many think Arben's clan, but some are speculating that Émilien will rise up." Miro focused on Maksim. "You said Émilien is in jail?"

"For the moment. If and when he gets out, he'll become Vladimir's right hand."

"So then he *won't* be taking over the operation." Miro smirked, fingers flying over the keyboard, and joined the chat.

4NOPE\_STR0\_DAMUS1:

1 bitcoin says emilien is not your guy. any takers?

The responses poured in...

JEDIMINDTRIKK:

ill take that bet.

SILLY\_SHADOW\_W@LKER:

me. source says your wrong.

HOLLA@YA\_BOI:

ohhhh shit just got real!!

INCOGNITOMODE:

i'm in. you better pay up.

One response in particular snagged Maksim's attention.

IV\_3.1415CRLME:

what ya kno, ?

"Ivy," Maksim whispered, noting the moniker; though, even if the user had been anonymous, he could have guessed who it was based on the Cockney-style rhyme. Technically she hadn't finished the rhyme, but that was what made it Cockney.

Historically, this type of rhyming slang had been codespeak for the traders in London's East End. When the bobbies—cops—started to catch on, the Cockney had been shortened, eliminating words and at times whole phrases. Those fluent in the slang understood what the missing pieces were based on the first part of the rhyme.

In the case of Ivy's comment, "kno" rhymed with "Miro." But instead of calling him out, she'd left that part blank, making his name implied. Only Miro would realize she was talking to him.

Miro had worked with Ivy, so he knew all of this. He grinned and typed a response.

4NOPE\_STR0\_DAMUS1:

whoa whoa whoa wouldnt you like to kno...  
bro!

He chuckled, proud of his cleverness, and moved his pinky to the Return key.

Maksim caught his hand. "Don't."

"But—"

"You cannot say anything that will give me away." Maksim straightened. "You've already said too much."

Miro sat back. “I have said nothing.”

“People can read between the lines, Miro.” He gestured toward Ivy’s comment. “You think she didn’t perceive that you have inside information? She will want to know who it’s from.”

A bright *ping* pealed through the speaker. Miro glanced at the direct message. “Ohhh.” He grabbed his head and sent a wide-eyed look to Maksim. “It’s her.”

Maksim brought himself eye level with Miro. “I came here at great risk to myself because you’re one of the few people I trust.” He grabbed hold of Miro’s shoulders, and the gaming chair swiveled. “Vladimir could be waiting for someone to slip up, to give some indication they’ve seen me, heard from me, spoken with me—”

“You think Vladimir is watching?” Miro’s eyes widened. “Does he know my handle?”

“Ivy knew it.” Maksim straightened. “You have to respond to her.”

“What? No!”

“You must.”

“And what do I say?” Miro grimaced. “I... I don’t know, Maksim.”

“Not answering would be suspicious.” Maksim turned the chair back around, squaring Miro with his monitors. “Act casual. When she inquires further, say you saw someone talking about Émilien on a message board. She’ll want more details, so you’ll need to be coy. Tease her about taking the bet.”

Miro exhaled a sigh that expanded his cheeks. “I’ll try.” He opened the message.

IV3.1415CRLME:

hru

(translation: How are you?)

“What do I say?” Miro asked.

“Whatever you normally say.”

His expression turned thoughtful. “I can’t remember. Maybe no one ever asks.”

Maksim rolled his eyes. “Do you have any other messages you could check?”

Miro opened another window and pulled up his DMs. He scrolled through one thread and then another, searching for how he’d responded to other people.

Another message pinged.

IV3.1415CRLME:

hru

?

She’d added the question mark and nothing else.

Miro swore. “I know someone just asked me that. What did I— Oh! I remember.” He returned to the thread with Ivy and typed his answer.

4NOPE\_STR0\_DAMUS1:

stfu

He paused, then added another line.

... punk!

Maksim rubbed his forehead. *Shut the F up* wasn’t exactly what he had in mind, but at least it was genuine.

IV\_3.1415CRLME:

funny, mate. i see what ya did there.

now, wuz this about emilien?

Miro fleshed out a response and then waited for Maksim to give his approval.

4NOPE\_STR0\_DAMUS1:

saw someone talking about him on a message board. seems he's \*ahem\* indisposed.

Maksim's eyebrows converged. "That doesn't mean what you think it means."

"What? Indisposed?"

"Use 'incapacitated'."

Miro made the change and hit Return. Ivy replied with another question mark.

"I don't think *that* means what you think it means," Miro muttered, typing his next response.

4NOPE\_STR0\_DAMUS1:

u kno my engleski is rubbish. whats the word for 'in jail'?

IV3.1415CRLME:

wtf! u serious, mate?

4NOPE\_STR0\_DAMUS1:

thats what i heard. guy deleted his comment after. i figured he was wrong... or he was right and knew he shouldnt have said that. catch my whiff?

IV3.1415CRLME:

it's 'drift' you twat

whereabouts u see this?



4NOPE\_STR0\_DAMUS1:

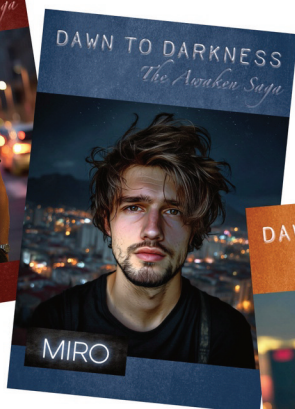
like im goin to tell u ; ) whats the matter, i.v?  
scared to put your € where your big beautiful  
dirty british mouth is?

Miro paused. “Too much?”

“I don’t even know anymore.” Maksim straightened. “Just send it.”



TIRANË, ALBANIA



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