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The Berlin Assignment

by
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“The war is over.”

“Is it?” I ask, eyeing the rifle in his hands. It’s polished clean, but worn, discolored by hard weather and harder use.

An almost imperceptible smile flickers across his thin lips before he says, “He’s not going to appreciate your sense of humor.”

“He never does,” I say, reaching for the small of my back.

His fingers tighten on the wooden stock of his gun. Even after all this time, even after surviving Stalingrad and taking Berlin, he doesn’t trust me. The old doctrines are strong.

I set my weapon on the dented, steel table between us, a worn combat knife, its naked blade chipped near the base.

“I want it back,” I say.

“No one wants your stupid finka knife,” he says, looking at the weapon, but not touching it. With a jerk of his head he ushers me past the check point.

As I pass him, his face twists into a scream, blood flows from under his helmet, the flash from an explosion behind us lights his face, deepens its shadows. I can see his skull.

I avert my eyes and take a breath, letting the memory dissipate, unclenching my fists. The blood on my palms slowly fades.

The war is over.

Still, the city has preserved its keepsakes. I reach out, brushing my fingertips over the divots in the plaster of the walls, bullet holes and shrapnel scars. We all carry a few.

I pass the broken window. It’s boarded up, but the silvery grey light from the street streams through in particle ridden beams. Midday. I push open the door to his office.

The KomDiv isn’t alone. It takes him a moment to recognize me, another to take his hand from the revolver on his belt. He sighs. “It is general courtesy to knock before entering.”

“Apologies, KomDiv. I was told you wanted to see me immediately,” I say, glancing at the other man in the room. “An urgent matter.”

“Right. Come in.” The KomDiv adjusts the fur and leather cap on his head. It’s an ugly ushanka, but I’ve never seen him without it. “And shut the damn door, you’re letting the cold in.”

I take another look at the stranger as I close the door and recognize him immediately. Not who he is, that’s irrelevant. But, what he is.

The man meets my gaze and discreetly shakes his head.

“Your trip was uneventful?” the KomDiv asks, drawing my attention.

“Uneventful,” I say.

That little Nazi resistance won't trouble you again, commander. You're welcome.

"You were gone longer than expected," he says, picking up a missive from his desk and reading it over as he waits for my response.

"A necessary delay," I say. "I continued on to Krakow to make sure the message was received."

Those S.S. bastards had been surprisingly good at covering their tracks across the Polish countryside. But, in the end, they had gotten what they deserved.

The KomDiv grunts. He's accepted what I have and have not told him. This is as much of a debrief as I will get. He doesn't want to know the details.

"This is the specialist I was speaking of," the KomDiv says to the stranger, watching as I move toward the side table he uses as a bar cart.

"She is small for a shifter," the man says in French.

His voice holds just the right amount of disgust and the softest whisper of fear. I almost applaud. As if he does not reek of his own kind.

"Oui," I say, sipping the substantial drink I've poured myself. "Je suis le petit *shifter*."

The KomDiv's mouth turns up in the ghost of a smile though he is not truly amused. He is an old man and this war is his last. The blockade tries his patience. The sneaking, and spying, and slitting of throats in the dark is not to his taste. It turns shadows into assassins, and the whisper of the wind into the promises of the dead. There is a loaded mauser and a bottle of whisky in the bottom drawer of his desk.

"What do the French want?" I ask, speaking again in Russian.

"Many things we will not give them," the KomDiv says. "But, Jean is not their envoy."

I regard the man, looking for more than was obvious as first. He is tall and slim, dark, and in possession of the fine high nose that afflicts those of Western European descent. He looks French to me.

"I don't understand," I say.

Jean smirks.

"The blockade is compromised," he says. "Supplies are still being flown in at Tempelhof and Gatow. And the new airfield they've constructed at Tegel is equally efficient. All told, there's a landing roughly every three minutes."

"And what can we do?" I ask, looking toward my commander.

"If we can destroy the supply lines, and hold the airfields long enough for winter to set in, it's possible the Americans will leave Berlin," the KomDiv says. "Once they abandon the city, the British and the French will not remain."

"Destroy supply lines?" I shake my head. "Demolition is not my area of expertise."

"No," the KomDiv says. "But, it is Jean's. Now that you are here, you can take care of the GCA operators so that he can focus on the landing strips."

"GCA?" I ask, frowning.

"Ground-control approach," Jean explains. "It's a radar system."

"For guiding in planes?" I ask. "That's rather clever. It helps them through this fog?"

"Mostly, yes," Jean says. "They've had some luck."

“Jean will see you through the barricades and put you in touch with the team that manages the Tempelhof system,” the KomDiv says. “They’re the best at what they do. If they are removed there will be no one to replace them immediately.”

“When do we leave?” I ask, setting down my empty glass.

“Now,” Jean says. He picks up his coat from the back of a chair and an envelope from the KomDiv’s desk. He tucks the missive into an inner pocket.

He has a hand on the heavy door when the KomDiv calls to us.

“You’ve got two days,” the KomDiv says. “You won’t want to be in that sector come Christmas.”

I salute the KomDiv and turn to find Jean watching me. He has deep brown eyes and long, lovely eyelashes.

“Comrade,” he says, tilting his head and stepping aside to allow me through the door.

###

Outside, the detritus of the city crunches under my thick boots. The streets have been swept, but there have not yet been any efforts to clear the massive piles of rubble or mend the missile sized holes that riddle the metropolis.

Jean leads me west, toward the barricades. I catch sight of the concrete blocks and barbed wire before he turns down an alleyway little wider than his shoulders. He ducks under fallen boards and through a hole blasted in the back wall of a deserted building. I pause, looking back toward the street and when it seems no one has noticed us, I follow.

Halfway up the inside stair the building shakes. The explosion is deafening. The structure sways and gives way. Chunks of mortar rain from the upper stories. Someone screams and a severed limb lands on the step in front of me.

“Are you coming?” Jean asks, steady on the second floor landing.

I nod, not daring to speak. He watches me for a moment, and then disappears through a doorway. I put a hand on the wall, forcing myself to take slow, deep breaths. The blood is gone. The war is over.

He’s waiting for me in a small, intact room. Two empty wooden crates are set near a window, a blackened metal bucket between them. The floor is covered in dust, and the scattered remains of a newspaper, the print faded. Jean bends down, picking up a few of these scraps and several pieces of wood from what appears to have been a third crate. He tosses these into the bucket.

The single, unclean window in the room faces west. Pressing my forehead to the cold glass, I can just make out the blurry forms at the end of the street.

“They have a tank,” I say.

Jean is crouched over the bucket, striking a match. He shrugs.

“Then we will not go that way,” he says.

When the fire is lit, he disappears for a moment, returning with a dented kettle. Using a rusted, metal spoon, he hangs it in the pitiful flames. After a few moments, I catch the faint scent of coffee.

He hands me a steaming mug and steps over to the window. He moves with confidence and grace, and for a moment I see him, the real him. The proud creature inside the human form. He senses my attention and turns, regarding me with piercing understanding.

“I’d thought you’d all gone into hiding,” he says. “What brought you into this war?”

I hear the whistle of mortars, and pain, like a bullet, rips through my chest. I look into the depths of my coffee cup, unable to breathe. My vision darkens. My hands begin to shake and coffee spills over my fingers. It’s hot, like blood.

“I followed someone,” I finally say. Despite the steadiness of my voice, the depth of the wound is evident.

“I am sorry for your loss,” he says, dropping his eyes.

“We’ve all lost,” I say, setting my cup on the ground. “What of you? How does a French stag find his way to the ranks of the Red Army?”

“A long, sad story,” Jean says and drinks from his mug. “In the end, our friends found me.”

Our friends. Though we are not familiar, Jean and I are brethren, children born of the violent recruitment strategies the KGB reserved for serviceable shifters. Those who resisted were butchered and dumped in shared, unmarked graves. Those who submitted, reemerged, loyal and lethal, Stalin’s most secret soldiers.

“How long has it been since you were yourself?” I ask, considering the size of a mature buck. He would never go unnoticed in Berlin.

“Too long,” Jean says. “As you observed, the KomDiv is meant to be kept unaware of my...”

He waves his hand in the air, searching for the word, before saying, “... esprit.”

So, Jean has been set to watch the old man. Perhaps to ensure the putsch into West Berlin is successful. There is a twinge of pity in my breast, but it winks out upon recognition.

The silence condenses between us as the room fades into deeper shades of grey. It is not an uncomfortable quiet.

Finally, Jean says, “It’s time.”

We head south, keeping the blockade and its guards on our right until Jean bolts for the wreckage of a subway entrance and disappears.

He’s standing a few steps down when I catch up to him. My eyes adjust faster than his, so I move forward until I see a sign on the wall. I can’t quite read it in the dark.

I hear Jean come up behind me and a faint metal click produces a small, flickering light.

“The North-South tunnel?” I ask, turning around. “It’s flooded.”

“Not all of it,” Jean says, letting the lighter die and putting it back in his pocket. We don’t need it. Using our inner beast to see through the blackest night is standard training. My eyes adjust again and we move on.

###

“She will train with you for two weeks. Then report back at Tegel,” Jean says. His shoulders are squared, his beret tucked under his arm. Holding out a brown envelope, he is every inch the French sergeant that the patch on his stolen uniform suggests.

We are standing in the entryway of a subterranean room, a gathering place for the American radar teams when off-duty. A cold draft whistles through the cracks in the wooden door behind us. The space has a strange, but not disagreeable, muskiness.

“We’ve heard nothing about it,” the man standing in front of us says. He has spiky red hair and is so large he blocks my view of the room. His arms, the size of tree trunks, are crossed over his wine-barrel chest. Scowling, he takes the envelope, and I quietly hope he is not part of my assignment.

“I can’t read this.” The American shoves the paperwork at Jean’s chest. “We need it in English.”

“This is what I have,” Jean says, setting the beret back on his head. “It’s been arranged. Au revoir.”

“Oh, no. You’re not leaving,” the big man says, reaching out to grab Jean’s shoulder before he reaches the door.

Jean jerks out of the man’s grasp and turns, fists raised as he flows into a boxer’s stance.

The man smiles and pushes the sleeves of his shirt up to his elbow. He’s in civilian clothes, but built like a warrior. His breath smells of beer and garlic.

I take a few steps backward, until I can feel the wall. If this is going to be a fair fight, Jean won’t have a chance.

“Woah. Easy, Harris,” a woman says as she steps around the brute. She puts a hand on his arm and holds the other up toward Jean. “War’s over. No need to start another one.”

Sofia. My knees weaken. I grasp at the wall to keep from falling.

There is a roaring in my head, the metallic grinding of a tank rolling over bodies, masking the sound of bones being crushed. *Sofia. How are you here?*

Beautiful, undead Sofia, takes the crushed envelope from Harris. She glances at the orders she cannot read and then hands them back, motioning with her head for Harris to stand back.

Now, I see it in the way she moves. This is not Sofia. This one’s hair isn’t as bright. Her eyes the blue of a frozen lake, not the grey of twilight. Her angles are sharper. Her nose bigger, once broken. This one is harder, muscles and discipline. Sofia had been smiles and soft, warm arms.

“Are you alright?” the woman who is not Sofia asks me. “You look a little pale.”

When I do not answer, she looks at Jean and asks, “Is she alright?”

“Je vais bien,” I say quickly, recalling that I am meant to be a French soldier. “I am fine.”

“This is Lieutenant Brooks,” Jean says. There is an odd intensity in his eyes. He wants me to recognize something, but I am at a loss. What have I missed? “You will report to her while you are here.”

“Good to have you aboard,” Lieutenant Brooks says, holding out her hand. I am slow to take it, hesitant to touch her.

When I do, it becomes clear what Jean was trying to get me to notice. She is one of us. She is a shifter.

I see the creature inside of her, and it is familiar and yet strange. She is feline, but larger than any I’ve ever met.

On her part, Lieutenant Brooks gives no sign that she recognizes us. Her hand shake is firm and professional.

“We’ve got it from here, Sergeant,” she says.

Jean salutes and departs without so much as a glance my way.

###

“We have twenty-four hours until our shift,” Lieutenant Brooks says as she takes a stool at a long bar against the back wall. She motions for me to take the other. “Then it’s a brutal ninety-six on, which we work in paired rotation, until we’re relieved.”

“So relieved,” the big man, Harris, says as he reaches between us and takes six bottles of beer off the counter, three in each hand. He winks at me and returns to his table. The rest of the team sits there. Two of them have women on their laps.

“How’s the new strip at Tegel?” Lieutenant Brooks asks as she takes two more bottles from a wooden crate on the bar. “Have the new landing patterns been worked out?”

I try to speak, but have to clear my throat. I’ve been staring. I can’t shake Sofia. The memory of our last kiss presses itself to my lips. Her crooked smile surfaces in my mind. Her warm body twists under my hands. The blast that split her into less than these pieces is deafening.

The beer is cold and bitter and clears my mind. Lieutenant Brooks is no longer my lost love.

Just as I begin to answer her question, the door to the basement opens, allowing a fierce gust of wintry wind into the space.

“Shut the door!” someone says.

The woman who’s come in is wearing a dress coat, low heels and bright red lipstick. A thick scarf is wrapped around her curled hair. She puts her hand on an empty chair as if she needs it to steady herself.

With a broad, white smile, she says, “They’re here.”

Someone groans. Chairs are pushed back, away from tables. Lieutenant Brooks smiles and claps me on the back.

“You’re in for a treat,” she says. She drinks the rest of her beer in a long pull.

“What’s going on?” I ask as we join Harris and the others, pulling on coats, scarves and thick caps.

Specialist Brooks burps lightly into her hand as Harris hands me a pair of heavy work gloves.

“Special assignment,” he says.

“These aren’t mine,” I say, trying to hand them back.

The big man shakes his head. “You’ll want them.”

“Let’s shake a leg,” Lieutenant Brooks says, pulling open the door. “Don’t want to be late.”

I pull on the gloves as we move outside. It smells like snow. It’d be the first of this winter.

The team seems to be in a good mood. They joke with each other, and call out greetings to the few people we pass. I let myself trail behind them. I haven’t forgotten why I am here.

There’s five of them. Too many to take at once. Harris is the largest by far, but even Lieutenant Brooks is larger than I am. And though they all move with the confidence of fighters, she’s the one that concerns me.

As if my thoughts called to her, she turns and looks at me for a moment.

After a few more blocks, I can hear the noise of a crowd and see a bright light, though it’s source is hidden around a corner. More people are on the street now, all moving in the same direction.

We come to an intersection that opens up in one quarter to a large plaza. Bonfires burn around the perimeter and in the center, next to the bottom half of a broken bell tower are several open back military trucks. Soldiers surround the vehicles, but their demeanor is casual. They are smoking, and laughing.

As we approach, two men hop up into the bed of one of the trucks and lift what appears to be a bound evergreen tree. They hand it down to those who have arrived.

The radar team is greeted by the men and women moving the trees and we are absorbed into the task. Harris takes one of the smaller trees on his shoulder and points to one of the waiting people.

“You,” he says. “Show me the way.”

The man he’s pointed to grins and with a wave of his hand, guides Harris away from the trucks, down a side street.

Two more of the radar team share a tree between them, and then it’s my turn. The pointed end of one of the trees is passed down to me from a truck. I find Lieutenant Brooks on the other end.

We follow a woman as she leads us several blocks from the plaza. The neighborhood becomes dark and quiet. She keeps turning around and motioning for us to follow though we are only a few steps behind her. She enters an apartment complex without a front door, heading toward the back of the building. There, she opens the door on a small, warmly lit set of rooms.

Two small children run forward. “Mama!”

A third, smaller than her siblings totters toward us until an older woman scoops her up. They both smile at us toothlessly.

The woman we’ve followed points to a corner of room and in German says, “Please, over there.”

We help her set the trunk into an old tree stand as the children rotate around us in unpredictable orbits. When we’ve untied it’s branches and step back, they swarm in, armed with colored paper folded into little flowers and figures made of bits of cloth and twine. The older woman helps them reach the higher branches.

As we begin to take our leave, cups of watery, hot coffee are pressed into our hands. A man, using a thick cane, hops in from the other room. He is in his thirties, missing his left leg above the knee. Quietly, he watches his children around the tree. When we hand our cups back to the woman, he moves forward, taking Lieutenant Brooks hand first and then my own.

“Dankeshon,” he says. “Merry Christmas.”

“Frohe Weihnachten,” I say.

Outside, as we walk back toward the plaza, Lieutenant Brooks asks, “So, you speak German?”

“Not a lot,” I say, lying. “Just please and thank you. And merry Christmas.”

She grunts. It could be a sound of acknowledgement or amusement.

“Where do the trees come from?” I ask.

“The Russians,” she says with a chuckle. “They brought them into to try to keep the West Berliners happy. I think most of them have found their way east.”

“Germans do love Christmas,” I say. I can see the light from the plaza fires ahead. A quick look reveals we are alone on the dark street. Sliding off one of the thick gloves, I slip my hand under the back of my coat, touching the knife concealed there.

“And their families,” she says. “The barricade has split the city, but not her people.”

“Lieutenant!”

Two of the men from the radar team join us, trotting up from one of the shadowy side streets.

“We’re done,” one of them says.

“So fast?” Lieutenant Brooks asks. “Last time it took a few hours.”

“More volunteers tonight,” he says. “Everyone’s in the Christmas mood.”

In the plaza, we find Harris standing next to a jeep, speaking with one of the soldiers. The trucks are gone, as are most of the people from earlier. There remains a smaller group, however, both in numbers and stature.

The man in uniform hands something to Harris and the big man slides it behind his back as he approaches the gathering of solemn faced children.

“Oh! What’s this?” He says. “Why are you lot standing about?”

The children shift, glancing at each other. One of them giggles nervously.

“Have I got something on my face?” Harris asks, crossing his eyes and touching his nose.

A wave of smiles breaks across the group. The giggles this time are true.

“Or…” Harris pulls the bag from behind his back and holds it high. “Is there something here that you want?”

The children have gone dreadfully quiet with expectation. One of them steps forward, a boy, his light hair cut short. The others divide their attention between him and the bag swinging from Harris’s hand.

“Merry Christmas, sir,” the boy says in halting English.

There is a moment of silence. And then Harris grins.

“That it is, little ones!” He reaches into the bag and draws forth a handful of candies wrapped in shiny paper. “Wiggly Wings isn’t the only one handing out candy tonight!”

The children surge forward, babbling in German and broken English. Their small hands held toward the treats that Harris deals out as if he were some giant, red headed Santa Claus.

When the bag is empty, the children retreat, holding their sweets like gold in their gloved hands.

###

“It’s going to be busy?” I ask, sipping the whiskey we’ve been drinking.

Upon our return to the break room, a fresh box of beer and spirits had been discovered, set on the table in the middle of the room. Lieutenant Brooks had set most of it aside for the other teams, but the bottles kept out had served their purpose.

“Well, of course it is,” She says. She speaks low and slow, like a drunken cowboy. Every vowel is drawn out in her heavily nasal accent. It’s intoxicating in a way the alcohol can’t match. I want her to keep talking.

“Rations and fuel might be a bit light this year,” she says, her voice rising as she continues.

“But, we’re going to make sure that no one goes without this Christmas. Right boys?!”

There’s a chorus of agreement from the team. They sit, playing cards near the wood stove. Candles burn in clusters around the space. It’s warm and merry in this little den.

“I’d like to ask you a question, Lieutenant Brooks,” I say.

“You don’t have to call me that,” she says.

“Excuse me?”

“My real name is Barbara,” she says. “But no one calls me that. The guys will only call me Lieutenant, but you can call me Bobby.”

“Bobby,” I say and she smiles at me.

It suits her. The name, and the smile.

“You’re staring,” she says.

I clear my throat, dropping my gaze to the table.

“They, ah. They know... what you are?” I ask.

She blinks. I’ve startled her.

“I’ve heard the French are forward, but you’re something else.” She laughs. It is a good laugh, and it gentles her, softens her sharpness.

“I didn’t mean to be rude,” I say, looking down again into my glass. There’s just a bit of the amber liquor in the bottom. It catches the light and sparkles.

“Before this assignment, Harris and I were in Belgium,” Bobby says. She picks up the bottle and freshens my glass. “There was a bit of a sticky situation in the Ardennes. We were foxholed. They kept charging up the hill. I’d run out of ammunition...”

She shrugs. “I did what I had to do. After that, I was reassigned. Captain wouldn’t even look at me.”

She takes a drink directly from the bottle. Then, she turns around, setting her elbows on the bar and watching her team playing cards.

“When it was all over, and most were getting shipped home, those four petitioned to stay,” she says. “Found me in Monmouth training on radar. Turns out, they’ve got a knack for it.”

There is a warm, nostalgic smile on her face. The whiskey has colored her cheeks and brightened her eyes. She’s almost pretty in the half light of the wood stove.

“What are you?” I ask, almost in a whisper.

She isn’t surprised this time. She turns her head, regarding me. All of me. Her eyes drip over my shoulders and down the lines of my body. She angles her chin and stares into my eyes.

“I’m like you,” she says.

And suddenly, I know. I can see it all in her eyes. The blue of skies over bare rock mountains, stalking swift prey under always green pines. The scent of the wind with no trace of man. The deep comfort of a den, made warm by your mate.

I drop my eyes. I know my cheeks are flushed, but there is nothing I can do. She’s twisted the insides of me with the direct intensity of intimate desire.

She seems to remember herself, and she too, averts her gaze.

“I’m cougar clan,” she says.

When I don’t respond, she looks up and says, “Mountain lions.”

“Merry Christmas Eve!” Harris says as he joins us, interrupting whatever Bobby was about to say. He throws an arm over her shoulder and pours from his bottle into my already full cup.

“Drink it while you got it. For tomorrow, we land some planes.”

“Tonight,” Bobby corrects him.

Harris groans and says, “Right. Right. We’ll be ready. Let the Reds try it!”

Someone starts singing a slurred Christmas song and Harris’s face lights up. He turns away, joining in at a bellow.

“Try it?” I ask.

“There’s been a rumor that the Russians are going to make a push east,” Bobby says. “It’s an old report, though. First, the attack was meant to be in late summer, then it was in the fall. Now, it’s Christmas.”

“No credit to it?” I ask, thinking of the KomDiv and his master plan. And, the part I’d been tasked to play.

“Not yet,” Bobby says.

Harris returns then, still singing and grabs us both by the arm, pulling us toward the off-key choir and spilling drinks.

###

The others are talking quietly and smoking by the wood stove, nursing the last of the whiskey. Harris lays across a table, snoring and grunting in his sleep. The candles have burned themselves to cold stubs.

Bobby and I sit in a darker corner, our backs against the wall, empty glasses on a table between us. She takes a long drag of her cigarette and then passes it to me. I close my eyes, more relaxed than I have been in a long time. More than I have any right to be in this moment.

Frowning, I find myself staring at the bright ember of the cigarette. There hasn’t been any bombs or blood in my head in hours. Not since I first mistook Bobby for Sofia.

I look over at the lieutenant and find she is watching me.

I hand the cigarette back to her as she asks, “How long has it been?”

“Not so long,” I say, thinking of my previous assignment, my claws slicing through evil men.

The expression on her face reminds me of who I am meant to be. I cough, trying to cover the slip with a farce of embarrassment.

“I mean, I know I’m not supposed to, but…”

“I do it sometimes, too.” Bobby closes her eyes and smokes. As she exhales, she says, “Sometimes, I climb up onto the roof at night and just sit there, feeling the wind in my fur.”

The room settles into silence. The fire dies down to glowing red coals. The men around it, slump in their chairs, breathing heavily. Bobby sits so still, I think she, too, is sleeping.

I look at her pale, exposed neck. This is the time.

I lean forward, careful not to allow my chair to creak, and reach back, under my jacket. I close my fingers around the hilt of my knife and then I pause.

There is a sudden warning in me, a certain knowledge. That if I were to kill them, the sleeping radar team, I would never be finished. Theirs would be the first of many undeserved deaths.

I lean forward, dropping my head into my hands.

She stirs as I stand, reaching for my coat.

“Where are you going?” she asks.

“I need some air.” I head for the door, but she moves quickly, catching my hand.

When I don’t pull away, she slips her fingers between mine. Her cautious smile is kittenish, shy and inviting.

“Come with me,” she says.

She pulls me toward the back of the room, through a door and up a set of crooked stairs. She glances back at me as we walk through the shadowy grey rooms of a forsaken home. The fragments of abandoned lives still hanging from the walls, sitting on the tables. Another staircase and through the doorway at the end of the hall.

This last set of stairs is more of a ladder, but opens up to a great, wide room, the length and breadth of the house. There are piles of boxes, things covered with sheets, but it's brighter in here than an attic should be.

Behind me there is a great, round window. It's as tall and wide as my arms spread apart, and looks out over a canal and the roofs of the apartments on the other side. The city is black. The blanket of clouds less so, glowing with the unfettered celestial light above.

"The team doesn't like it when I go out at night," Bobby says, moving to the edge of the window and running her hand along its curve. "So, this was the compromise."

Something clicks, and the great glass window swings inward.

The night air washes over me in a freezing wave. It's harsh and purifying. I take a deep breath in through my nose. Berlin sleeps.

I can hear the distant thrum of aircraft heading for the Templehof fields. Without the constant effort of the allied powers, this half of the city would soon be hungry and grow cold. They'd welcome the KomDiv, all the officers of the East, as long as they came bearing food and fuel.

After some time, I hear the rasp of a match against sandpaper and smell a faint wisp of sulfur.

I turn to find her standing naked in the candle light. Her body is ripe in maturity, full and gentle in the flickering glow. She's half-shifted. I can see the outline of her small, erect ears. The shadow of her long, thick tail moving slowly behind her, held just above the floor. Her eyes are golden, bright even in the darkness.

My breath stop in my chest. All I can manage is a soft, "Oh."

A smile tugs at the corner of her mouth.

"I hope I have not misjudged the situation," she says, crouching to set the candle on the open floor. Then, like liquid, she moves forward, lifting my chin and pressing her lips to mine. There is a roaring in my head that is not artillery.

###

I turn my ears toward the window before I open my eyes.

It's very quiet and very cold. It is not yet dawn, though the hour is not far.

I reach for her. I want to tell her about my dream, about two wild cats running across the forest steppe. They were free creatures, unhindered by duty or sorrow.

Her skin is like ice.

Her eyes, open, see nothing.

There is movement, a metallic glint and the wire is around my neck before I realize what is happening. Strong hands keep the garrote firm as I claw at my own neck.

"You are a fool," Jean says. "Did you think the KomDiv did not notice your... episodes?"

I kick out, trying to reposition my weight, but he is well grounded. My thrashing only serves to hasten my death.

My heartbeat is pounding in my head. There is a pressure building that blocks out other sounds. My vision darkens and my arms become unusually heavy. Quite suddenly, I feel calm.

I can see Bobby clearly as she turns her pale face toward me. She blinks, very slowly. The wound across her neck is precise, the blood, dark.

“Shift,” she says and her voice is not of the living. It scrapes against my bones and burns like a star in my belly.

“Shift,” the corpse demands, her golden eyes flashing with hellfire. Far away a large cat growls and there is rage in the sound.

“Shift,” she says, her voice fading. “Or die.”

With the last of her anger, I plant my bare feet on the wooden floor and push my weight backward, throwing myself against Jean. He is overbalanced and we hit the ground. His hold on my neck tightens.

I toss my head back, catching him, not in the nose as I’d hoped, but against his cheekbone. Something snaps and it is enough.

I scabble across the floor, gasping. Air like razors slices into my throat and chest. There is blood in my mouth.

Jean is pushing himself to his feet. His cheek is already purple, his eye closed. He touches the bruise and winces. He sighs deeply.

“If it is not me today,” he says. “It will be another tomorrow. You know this is the way.”

He is right, of course. I should have suspected something when we were assigned a joint mission. Shifters always work alone. Identities and operations kept secret to protect us. Or, to protect our masters. The radar team has been a final test. And I have failed.

“Come now,” he says, leaning down to pull a knife from his boot. He opens his hand and motions for me to approach. “Let’s have this done.”

I shake my head and step backward. If I can make it to the stair, I might have time to shift before he catches me.

He advances. He is unable to shift in this small space, but with focus, he lends fierceness to this form. He is ready to kill me.

I stumble on Bobby’s shoes, landing hard on my backside amidst our discarded clothing.

Panting, I glare up at him, feeling the rumble of anger in my chest. The growl sets fire to my throat. I grasp my neck, doubling forward and hiding the thing in my hands. The thing I’ve found under my coat. My whining sounds like wheezing.

He lunges forward, driving his knife down, allowing me no time to retreat.

But, I don’t need it.

I twist away from him as I bring my own knife up into his chest. He grunts, and then his arms drop to his sides. His knife lands quietly on top of our clothes. He slowly falls forward, into my hands.

I do my best to lower him to the ground next to me. There he lays still, trying to draw breath, making strangled, wet noises. His eyes are wide, aware of his death. He can only watch as I kneel next to him. He slowly shakes his head as I grasp the knife. I pull the blade from his chest anyway.

As his body cools, I cover Bobby with my coat. I close her eyes and touch her cheek. May her spirit find the eternal forest steppe.

I dress, and slip out of the window. On the roof, I turn east. I feel the sunrise and, as I make my way across the rooftops, the cold kisses of the first flakes of snow.

Soon, the KomDiv will wake. He will break his fast and he will walk to his office. It is there, I will wait for him. There, I will remind him. The war is over.