

1. Customs **October 1928**

I'll admit it. I never expected to get out of Russia alive. And that was *before* I was targeted as the man who murdered Stalin. At half past four, the sun's already below the tree line, and I know I'll be lucky if I live to see it rise another morning.

The afternoon shadows lengthen around me, stretching languorously toward the stone-gray building that squats between me and the Russian border. Impossibly tall fences prickling with barbed wire march away on either side, disappearing into the woods. I have to squint my eyes to make out the birches and pines outside the pool cast by the floodlights above. Details run together in a grainy haze. There is no movement, no sound. The countryside surrounding the customs office is as dead as a pigeon in Moscow.

Standing, I press my hands against my cheeks, trying to squeeze some warmth back into them. Even through my gloves, I can feel the roughness of the stubble on my face; with any luck, it will alter my appearance. It's the only disguise I have. A new layer of powder crunches under my Belleville combat boots as I approach the steel-plated door of the customs office. After almost a full day of steady snowfall, the sky has finally cleared. The cold clings to me, a second skin underneath my woolen clothing. I can't feel the doorknob beneath my palm. This is a problem. Unless I can get my hands warmed again, and fast, my chances of living through this are even worse. Just one more reason I've come to hate this country.

It's just as ugly and colorless inside as it was out. The walls are stark concrete, unadorned, flat. No windows relieve their austerity or offer escape. A small woodstove huddles in the corner. Judging by the loud crackling behind the iron door, it's burning larch. The room is substantially warmer than the outdoors; it's a small blessing, but a good one. I flex my fingers within my wool-lined gloves as I cast a

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wary eye over the office. A young couple stands at the single open booth, speaking in low voices with the inspector, a thin bespectacled man in his forties. I hear him ask how they paid for their train tickets, but don't know if he's referring to tickets inside or outside the country.

I don't waste too much time on the ragged commoners. It's the guards I'm worried about. Right off the bat, I can see three: one is visible just behind the inspector, and two more stand at the other end of the room, talking softly. There are probably at least twice that many in the building, possibly more. Each one has a Dragoon rifle slung over his shoulder with a canvas strap. They're wearing long olive-green coats made of a felt-like material that's inferior in quality to wool, but markedly cheaper to make. Their boots are ill-fitting constructs of battered leather. Their hats are thin rabbit fur.

I relax slightly. The cheap uniforms are a good sign. These are simple border guards, not soldiers sent from Moscow. They may not have orders yet to be watching for a black-haired, blue-eyed killer trying to flee the country. *Unlikely. But I'm not here because this is my first choice. I'm here because it's my only choice.*

The couple is finally allowed to cross. They hurry out the other door without a glance in my direction, probably grateful to be leaving the land of ice and starvation. By now, my hands have regained enough feeling for me to remove my gloves and slip them into my jacket pocket. I want my hands free. The guard I'd seen earlier comes out through a door to my left and leans against the wall, lighting a cigarette. The smell fills the room quickly, mingling with the scent from the woodstove.

He watches me as he smokes. His casual pose reminds me of Jez; the way the cig dangles from his lips like he's forgotten it's there. His dark eyes are narrowed slightly. The whole left side of my body prickles without the familiar weight of my Colt 1911. I feel naked and vulnerable without it. I pointedly ignore the man, but I can see from the corner of my eye that he never looks away.

"Identifikatsiya!" the inspector barks.

I step up, slapping my papers down on the counter along with my fake passport. I wish I had a few rubles to slip over with them, but I don't even have that to fall back on. My heart's thumping steadily now, and the room seems almost too hot. *Where is everyone anyway?*

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This place was in total chaos when Jez and I crossed four months ago.

The only warning I get is a whiff of sweat and tobacco half a second before the guard from the corner slams my head onto the counter. He yanks my black hat from my head and twists my face to see it better. His body is shoved up against mine, blocking any chance of retreat. “You’re that American spy, aren’t you?” he growls in Russian. “Echo Maebius? Kustova said you’d be coming this way.”

“What?” I manage to gasp out. “There must be some mistake, I’m not a spy—”

“Assassin, then? You like that word better?” Without waiting for an answer, he snaps across the room. “Belinsky, Ivkin! Backup! Now!”

I jerk my elbow back as hard as I can, driving it straight into his face. Before he can recover, I spin and snap my fist into his nose. He stumbles back a step, and I take the opportunity to grab for the rifle hanging at his side. But I don’t have time to get it free before the room is swarmed by men wearing long double-breasted wool coats and ushanka hats. My face goes cold. I am in serious trouble.

The first gunshot takes me in the left shoulder, spinning me around and throwing me back. It feels like getting hit by a train. The pain is so extreme that the sheer volume of the shot barely registers as a faint numbness in my ears. I manage to keep from going down completely only by grabbing at the waist-high counter behind me. My fingers slide along the rough wood, gouging in for grip, my shoulder screaming in agony the entire time.

Another shot echoes explosively through the room, and a new pain erupts in the back of my thigh. Somehow, it hurts even worse than the one in my shoulder, though I wouldn’t have thought it possible two seconds ago. My fingers slip farther, but I am grabbed roughly from behind before I have the chance to fall. A gun barrel is shoved against my ribs hard enough to crack them. *What was I thinking, trying to come through here? I must have been insane.* The scent of gunpowder fills the air. It seems appropriate that it’s the last thing I’ll ever smell.

“*Nyet!*” The shout is sharp and urgent. “Don’t kill him! He’s the last one who saw Gospodin Stalin alive.”

The pain radiating through my body is so acute that it takes a moment before I realize what he’s saying. They don’t want me dead. I

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should have expected this. For some reason, it doesn't bring relief, but dread. It's hard to put up any resistance as one of the soldiers wraps his arm around my throat and drags me away from the counter.

Whatever happens, I think, don't let Jez come through here in the next few hours. It's the one good thing to come from our argument three nights ago; at least he's not with me now. Maybe they'll even let him through without trouble if they think they've caught the killer. I wonder if he'll ever know what happened to me. Or if he did, whether he'd even care.

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By the time we reach the tiny room tucked deep in the back of the customs building, I've got a pretty steady shaking going on, made up of adrenaline, blood loss, pain and fear. For one desperate second, I'd managed to get my hand on one of the officer's small Nagant revolvers. I didn't have time to pull the trigger, though, before the soldier in front of me slammed the butt of his rifle against my forehead so hard I lost my vision for a second. After that, the pain was so severe it was all I could do to keep from passing out.

It's cold back here in the bowels of the building, practically freezing. The little room I'm forced into is lit only by a single bare light bulb overhead. Its weak beam illuminates a dusty concrete floor and gray walls. It's a prison cell without bars. The only item within is a scarred wooden chair. Discolored ropes hang stiffly over its arms. The floor underneath is stained the color of bricks. The air smells metallic, and leaves an unpleasant taste in my mouth.

Two soldiers yank me to the chair, and I can't quite swallow a scream when one of them wrenches my wounded shoulder brutally in the process. They wrap the ropes tightly around my arms and legs. The narrow cords apply intense, almost painful, pressure through my thick layers. Everything has happened so fast up until now that I'm having trouble wrapping my head around it. This has never happened to me before. I'm too careful. I know better. *This is the very reason I don't normally go after big political names. Why didn't he listen to me?*

Any remote chance I still had of trying to play innocent disappears with the arrival of the *komandarm*. He ranks the rough equivalent of a general in the army back home. Although I'm sure

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Stalin's lapdog, Zarya Kustova, gave the guards at the customs office notice ahead of time, Semyon Naumenko is probably the reason there was an actual platoon of soldiers waiting here for me. When he enters the room, he dismisses the other soldiers. All of them. A queasy feeling worms its way through my gut.

Semyon is older than me by about a decade, putting him in his mid-thirties. He's got dark cropped hair and a short beard, and his normally placid gray eyes are alight with fury. I've never seen him in formal uniform before. I'm so used to his simple training grays that the long coat and fur hat embossed with a golden hammer and sickle seem out of place on him.

"Echo Maebius!" he snarls. "Do you have any idea how many times I defended you to soldiers who wanted you dead?"

I grit my teeth and glare at him from beneath matted bangs. "That's exactly why you're still alive. I could have killed you just as easily as I did the others."

My answer gets me backhanded across the face; my cheekbone splits and warm blood runs down my cheek and onto my coat. "You're not in a good position to make threats, you little *mudak*. You're going to regret every one of those kills. Those were my friends, my comrades. Just like I thought you were." He backs away again, pulling his Nagant. I feel the trembling starting in my arms again, and force myself not to stare at the weapon. I'm pretty sure my expression remains steady, but my breathing is far too shallow to fool anyone.

"You had an accomplice," Semyon says. "Zarya reported a red-haired man in the room with you that night. Where is he now?"

I shake my head. "No. I was alone."

"*Fignya!* Vozhd is missing, presumed dead. There's no way you got him out of that room by yourself. You have *at least* one accomplice, and probably more. Give me their names."

"I was *alone!*" I insist. "And you have no proof Stalin was killed. Ask your comrade Zarya. By the time I got to his room, he was already gone."

"What do you mean, *gone?*"

"What do you think I mean? Gone. Vanished. Disappeared into thin air. One minute there, the next—"

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I choke on my words as Semyon shoves his Nagant between my teeth. “Shut your stupid mouth, you ignorant *pizda*. You think this is funny?”

I try to shake my head, but I can’t even move it. All I can think about is the click of my teeth against the barrel, the taste of oil and metal mixed with blood scraped from the roof of my mouth. I can’t for the life of me remember what I was saying. Semyon’s voice reaches me from far away, low and hateful.

“Listen closely, Maebius. When I pull this out, the next words out of your mouth better be either the location of your friend or the place you hid Stalin’s body. Preferably both. Do you understand me?”

He pulls the gun out, leaving me coughing and spitting the taste from my mouth. My jaw aches in remembrance of the barrel’s shape, and I have to clamp my lips shut to hide the way my teeth chatter against each other. For just a moment, I imagine saying the words: *My companion is Jez Ryder. I walked away from him three days ago.* Why should I care? He threw away our friendship. I’m as good as dead to him already. And as for Stalin...I’ve already told him the simple truth. I have no idea where he is. Someone beat me there, half a second before I would have reached him myself. And then...gone. My mind shies away from the memory, even now.

I look up, steeling myself. I force the words out before I can change my mind.

“I’m not telling you a thing.”

Before I’ve even finished talking, he fires. In the tiny room, the bang of the revolver is painfully, unbelievably loud. It’s my right hand that explodes in agony this time, my shooting hand. I cry out, jerking against the bonds. A red hot shard of fire shoots up my entire arm. My yell dies a ragged death, leaving behind something uncomfortably close to a sob. For a few seconds, all I can hear is the buzzing in my ears from the gunshot. The blood pumps from my hand in a steady rhythm, matching my rapid heartbeat. I breathe hard, fighting to keep from losing my connection with reality. The pain from my wounds has congealed into something greater than I’ve ever fought before, and I’m aware that I’m losing, and losing badly.

A loud pounding on the door drags me back. Semyon darts a look over his shoulder without loosening his grip around the gun. “What?” he snaps out.

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"I have a message from Zarya Kustova," yells someone from the other side.

"Oh, hell," I say under my breath. My voice comes out weak and uneven. "As if this could get any worse."

The messenger pushes open the door. It's the man who recognized me initially and took me by surprise. His nose is bent into an awkward angle, and still has blood stains under it. He holds a paper out to Semyon. "Sorry to interrupt," he says, "but I have a soldier here who was sent by Kustova to interrogate the prisoner. In private, he says."

"Give me that!" His mouth curls into a sneer as he snatches the piece of paper from the man's hand. He skims it, then crumples it in his fist when he's done. "What is the meaning of this?" he says. "I know Echo personally. How *dare* she undermine me by sending her own interrogator!"

He's really enjoying himself, I realize with a surge of nausea. His head snaps back to me, and the hand still holding the revolver twitches. For several seconds, he stands staring at me, fighting an inward battle between his desire and his duty. Finally, he brings the gun down with a snarl and storms from the room.

The door thuds shut behind him, leaving the room as silent as a crypt. Now that the ringing in my ears has faded, I can actually hear the droplets of my blood hitting the pool that's formed on the concrete floor. The pain is excruciating, like I'm plunging a straight razor repeatedly through the center of my palm.

I risk a look at the wound, and suck in my breath sharply. Shattered bones coated in crimson protrude from the back of my hand. The entry wound of the bullet is obscured by all the blood, but I can tell it's a sizable one. I don't think I could turn my hand over to look at the exit wound even if I wanted to. But I already know that's something I really don't need to see. This side is bad enough; that side will be worse. If I live through this, I'll never shoot with that hand again. I'll be lucky if I can use it for anything at all. It seems like such a distant worry, though, that I don't dwell on it for long.

The door in front of me opens again and my head comes up. *That was quick*. Looks like Semyon lost his argument, because I am left alone with an entirely new man. He's not dressed in a Red Army uniform like the others were; instead, he's wearing the long black coat of the Cheka. My stomach turns over. This is the uniform of Stalin's

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secret police—the uniform I myself would have been wearing in another few months if I'd remained loyal. If I know one thing about the Cheka, it's that they are better than anyone at getting information out of those they call enemies. This is bad. I wasn't expecting this, at least not yet.

There is something familiar about his tall wiry build, and the way he slinks like a thief into the room, shutting the door quietly. He keeps his back to me while he latches the heavy bolt. His black boots are impeccably polished, his belt cinched securely to hold the leather coat tight around his body, his black cap glossy and clean. He's holding his gun in his left hand, away from me. I watch him wordlessly as he turns to face me.

A black scarf is wrapped around the lower half of his face, obscuring his features. Except for his eyes. They're a vivid blue, piercing and cold, partially hidden behind stringy black bangs. *Those are the cruelest eyes I've ever seen.* A second later, my whole body turns to ice. *They're mine. They're my eyes.*

He unwraps the scarf slowly, and I can only stare in frozen horror. His eyes are not the only similarity. Everything else about him is identical, too—his pale white skin, his unshaven chin, his serious mouth locked into a scowl.

"I bet you're wondering," he says in a low voice I've heard every single day as long as I can remember, "how I managed to get in here."

"Um," I choke, "not exactly."

He purses his lips. "Well, I would tell you that you're lucky I got here when I did, but...you're not, Echo. You're not lucky at all."

2. The Russian All-Military Union **March 1928 (Seven Months Earlier)**

There are certain things that have stayed with me as long as I can remember. The first time I fired a gun, for example; the way it kicked in my hand, wild and uninhibited, like it had a spirit trapped inside fighting to be free. The warmth of it burning in my palm. The harsh report it left echoing in my ears. The slightly acrid scent of singed gunpowder drifting from the barrel.

It's moments like these that come to define us, though we rarely see them coming. The first time I held a 1911, I didn't know that in less than a decade, that weapon would become my closest and only friend, thousands of miles from home. In the same way, when I decided to join Pyotr Wrangel's Russian All-Military Union—one of the last anti-revolutionary factions to fight against the reds—I had no idea that it would be the catalyst leading to my personal crusade against Iosif Stalin himself.

I'd never been to Russia before. I'd spent the last four years in different parts of Europe, working alone, finding a niche for myself in a profession that didn't come with laws. When I heard General Wrangel was hiring men to flesh out his army for a march on Moscow, I had mixed feelings. Part of the reason I'd left West Point in the first place was because I didn't want to be part of a collective. But the limited amount of news that managed to squeeze past the Russian border intrigued me, and I saw Wrangel's army as a chance to learn more.

We marched in from the southwest corner of Russia, heading north across miles upon miles of snow-covered grassland, interspersed with occasional hills or groves of spruce. In the midst of an army, the utter solitude of a land like this is lost; but here, in the biggest, most foreboding country in the world, that sense of isolation is never far. If I walked just ten minutes in the opposite direction, the

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world opened up around me—the sweep of pale gray sky stretching to the horizon; the geese flying so high overhead they seemed frozen in mid-flight; the cold sunshine straining to reach down from a weakly burning sun that was more afterthought than giver of life. At times, I felt like I was looking at the physical embodiment of my own soul.

In the evening, after the sun went down, I would find a place beyond the lights of the campfires and the harsh words of the loyalist soldiers, and I would practice. I found my greatest peace of mind with my Bowie knife. I didn't practice forms or execute stabs or thrusts at these times; instead, I held the knife gripped in my right hand and concentrated on moving like water, like the wind itself. I'd found that by clearing my mind of every distraction, I could keep my body moving fluidly, reacting without thought and striking by instinct. It wasn't really knife-training at all, but mind-training. *The mind is a man's sharpest tool*, my father used to tell me, *but it's also the hardest to control*.

“Hey! *Nayemnik!*”

The voice was scornful, turning the word *mercenary* into the lowest form of insult. I lowered my knife and turned. In the light from the newly rising moon, I could see the soldier's pale greatcoat and pure white hat, with the earflaps tied snugly beneath his chin.

“What do you want, Perov?”

“General's asking for you.” He stood with his arms crossed, watching me. A cold wind blew down the steppe, giving off a lonely keening. I glanced back toward the fires in the camp behind him.

“For me,” I finally said. “You sure about that?”

“Your name's Maebius, right?”

After another moment, I slipped my knife into my belt and tugged my dark coat tight around my body. It was much shorter than his, barely clearing my hips. My own untied earflaps lifted from my head with the next gust of wind, sending an icy chill through me. “Tell him I'll be there after I've grabbed a bite,” I said.

Perov didn't move. “Your dinner can wait.”

“It won't take me ten minutes, Perov—”

“Those are my orders, *nayemnik*. Straight to his tent.”

I was glad the darkness hid the sudden flush of anger that flamed across my cheeks. *This is why I never wanted to join an army*. “Well,” I said, “maybe he'll just have to share his dinner with me, then.”

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Perov eyed me, perhaps unsure if my comment was sarcastic or if it was just my questionable Russian making it sound that way. When I didn't give him a hint either way, he turned and crunched across the snow back toward camp. I followed, tugging my hat down tighter over my forehead.

As we walked north through the camp, the voices of the soldiers and other mercenaries took distinction around us. The general's army was comprised of some ten thousand loyalist soldiers and less than a thousand mercs. The non-soldiers were easy to identify by their mismatched clothing, usually much darker than that of the soldiers around them. They also tended to cluster together apart from the disdainful loyalists. Most of them were Eastern European, particularly from the less-developed countries to the south of the Russian border. I hadn't seen many Americans. Then again, I hadn't looked.

The crackle of late-night fires surrounded us, sending the aromatic and slightly bitter scent of spruce into the air. It was mingled with the heady scents of roasting grouse and quail. The farther we walked into camp, the harder it was to ignore. *Honestly, what would he do to me if I were a few minutes late?* I scowled, pushing the thought away. *I should be worrying about Wrangel. What does he want with me?*

It took ten minutes alone just to cover the distance to Wrangel's tent. Perov put out his arm to stop me right before I walked inside. His hand fell at my left side, over the bulge where my 1911 sat in its shoulder holster under my coat. Our eyes met.

"Can't let you bring that in to see the general, *nayemnik*. The knife either."

For crying out loud... "He thinks I'm trying to assassinate him?"

"Someone tried to poison him just last week. These rules aren't for nothing."

For several moments, I stared at the flap of the tent, my jaw clenched tightly. "Let me get this straight," I said in a low voice. "He forbids me from eating dinner before speaking to him, and *now* he's making me leave my weapons outside?"

Perov narrowed his eyes. "Your kind don't fool him. He knows you're only loyal to the highest bidder. He's not scared of you. But he does have to watch his back. You, of all people, should understand."

I grated my teeth. Then I undid the top button of my coat, yanked my gun from its holster, and slapped it into his waiting palm. My

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Bowie clanked down alongside it. “You better be here when I get out,” I growled, then turned and stalked into the tent.

I was hit by a medley of smells; it seemed that Wrangel was eating his dinner at the same time I would have been enjoying my own. I identified several different kinds of cooked meat, including some antelope that had been shot the week before. A goose, covered in some sort of berry sauce. Biscuits and fruit. Wine. All laid out on a table off to the side, untouched. My gaze slid away from the display. General Pyotr Wrangel was alone, standing and watching me as if he hadn’t moved a muscle since he’d sent the messenger. A single chair sat against the tent wall, and a thick caribou hide covered the snow under our feet. A small brazier crackled to my left, making the tent warm and cozy.

Wrangel stood an inch or three above my own six foot height, and gazed down at me from a face as flawless and cold as marble. His mustache was groomed immaculately under an aquiline nose. Unlike most of his soldiers, he wore black; a long Cossack coat that hung all the way to his ankles, and a black fur hat in the Papakha style, without the familiar earflaps worn by most everyone else I’d seen. His coat was covered in badges and insignia from his days with the White Army during the Russian Civil War. His light blue eyes were as cold as the air outside.

I met his gaze evenly, making no move to take off my hat or gloves. “Gospodin,” I greeted him. “I am Echo Maebius. I believe you asked to see me.”

“Yes.” He studied me clinically as he spoke. “I apologize for being so abrupt, but your name came up recently during one of our discussions. When I heard it, I realized that—and correct me if I’m wrong—you must be the son of Robert Maebius. Is that true?”

All thoughts of hunger and cold fled as I stared at him in shock. I didn’t answer. The brazier snapped merrily at my back. Other than that, there was no sound; even the murmurs of the men outside had faded from our hearing.

“You’re wondering where I’ve heard that name.” Wrangel took a step forward, his eyes locked on mine. “I met your father during the Great War. We had the opportunity to speak at great length before I had to head back to Russia. He was a brilliant tactician.”

“That’s what I’ve heard,” I said. My voice was as stiff as my posture.

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A flicker of a smile crossed Wrangel's wintry face, and was gone. "Well, surely his son must have some of that same talent. I'm sure you've spoken with him—"

"We don't speak anymore," I interrupted.

"Echo." His voice was soft and gentle, so different from the piercing intensity of his eyes. "I'm sure you've noticed that...we could use more men. More forces. I remember your father being a rich man, not to mention in a position of influence. Excelled at West Point, a general in the National Guard, handpicked to help with the war...in fact, from what he told me, he was on track to a promotion, some sort of military service chief position right under the president. Isn't that right? What I'm trying to say, Echo, is that if we could get the support of the United States—"

"They don't want to get involved," I said sharply. "I could tell you that without any connections. Is this really why you called me in here?"

He took a step closer, holding a hand out. "You can't tell me he wouldn't want to help his own son—"

"I can," I said. "I do. Would you like me to tell you just how supportive he was when I deserted West Point to become a mercenary? Think he boasts about that to his National Guard friends, or the president?" I raised my chin, hardening my voice. "I am dead to him. He has told me as much. So don't waste your time trying to get to him through me. It won't work."

Wrangel's brow furrowed. Abruptly, the friendliness was gone from his tone. "Listen, *malchik*, I can change all of that for you. I'm offering you a chance to become more than a mercenary—"

I cut him off with a swipe of my hand. "I never asked for more. I *chose* this." I caught a glimpse of distaste flicker across his face, and a spike of anger shot through me. "I know neither you nor your men think much of us mercenaries, but I have no shame for what I am. If you don't like it, you shouldn't have hired me. Don't expect me to give you more than what I signed on for." I cast a deliberate glance at the food set out for him. "I'd better let you get back to your dinner, General. I hope you're able to enjoy it, knowing there are men out there starving and freezing to get you to Moscow."

Wrangel's palm slapped down on the table. "Careful, Maebius," he growled. "You're starting to sound like a Bolshevik."

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I stepped back, my heart hammering. *Calm down*, I told myself. *He's not actually accusing you of anything. Yet.*

"If you'll excuse me, Gospodin," I said, "I believe I've made myself clear." I turned without waiting for a proper dismissal and pushed through the tent flap.

"Now wait just a moment, Maebius—"

I quickened my step. Perov stood several steps from the tent, wide-eyed. *How much of that could he hear, I wonder?* Without pausing, I snatched my weapons from his arms and marched away through the trampled snow. I shoved my gun back into its holster, but hadn't sheathed my knife yet when Wrangel's tent exploded behind me.

I was far enough away by then that the force of the blast wasn't as deadly as it might have been. I threw myself to the ground, covering my head in a move so instinctual I didn't even think about it. Bits of metal showered down around me, burrowing into the snow. Some of them hit my back; I could feel the stings of their teeth biting through my layers. The smell of gunpowder hung heavy in the air. The camp had gone completely silent around me. All I could hear was a steady ringing.

I glanced over my shoulder, and saw chaos. Soldiers were running, holding guns, looking for threats, their mouths open in quiet yells of rage. Horses were rearing and pulling at their reins, desperate and maddened. As for Wrangel's tent, it had been completely obliterated. I could barely make out the shape of a broken table beneath the burning canvas. I was too far away to tell if there was a body.

That could have been me. If I had stayed in there one minute longer... I scrambled to my feet, scooping my knife from the snow where it had fallen. I turned in a circle, looking up at the inky sky, wondering where the attack had come from. *Perov said someone tried to kill Wrangel last week*, I remembered. *Whoever did this is here in the camp.*

Something broke through the muffled ringing in my ears. A soft shout, sounding miles away. I looked back toward Wrangel's tent and saw Perov on the ground, pointing in my direction. *What does he want?* Another soldier was crouched down next to him, and he pointed at the tent and then at me. *Wait. Do they think...?*

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I didn't stick around to find out. With that maddening ringing still dominating most of my hearing, I turned and battled my way through the chaos around me. It felt surreal, to move through such hysteria and hardly hear a thing. I held my hands up protectively in front of my face, brushing aside the bodies that bumped and stumbled against me. When I realized I still held my knife, I put it away, not wanting to look more guilty than I probably already did. As I got farther from the scene of the blast, the stench of gunpowder faded, and campfire smoke, soldiers' sweat, and burning food once again filled the air.

When I felt a yank on my arm, my first instinct was to fight. I turned to face my attacker, but it wasn't one of Wrangel's loyalist soldiers. It was another mercenary. He was young, barely into his twenties, with a drab green coat two sizes too big hanging to mid-way down his thighs. His hands were wrapped in ratty gloves cut so his fingertips showed through. Unruly red hair poked out from beneath the brim of a canvas cap, and shoved over that was a sheepskin hat with braided ties dangling down on either side of his face. A canvas haversack hung at his back. I realized with a start that my own pack was clear at the other end of the camp.

He shouted something at me, but I shook my head, gesturing to my ears. I could hear his voice, but only barely; I couldn't make out any of the words. He nodded in understanding and pulled at my arm again, leading me toward the northern edge of the camp. I glanced back as we walked. As far as I could tell, no one showed us the slightest interest.

In the general confusion, we left the camp altogether. As soon as we cleared the lights from the fires, it was easy to disappear into the darkness without being noticed. I strained my ears with every step, relieved when I started to hear the crunch of snow beneath my boots. My back burned where I'd been hit, but the wounds weren't major enough to slow me. I'd be able to hike for days, weeks, without worrying about tending to them. And with my gun, food wouldn't be a problem.

Why am I thinking that way? I don't have to run. I didn't do anything wrong.

"How are you doing? Can you hear me yet?"

To my surprise, I could. "Who are you?" I said. "Where are we going?"

THE RUSSIAN ALL-MILITARY UNION

He stopped, turning around. His face lit up in a grin, and his dark eyes were wide with excitement. It made him look even younger, like a kid with a new puppy.

“I knew it!” he said. “American! I can hear it in your accent.”

“What? What does that have to do with—”

“I had to get you out,” he explained hurriedly. “You know they’ll be going after the mercs now, right? After what happened? And I knew there was another American, so I figured I could use the company...Stalingrad ain’t that close, after all, and I hear you’re a good fella to have around in a fight.”

It wasn’t until he threw in the slang that I realized he’d switched to speaking English. I blinked in surprise, and did the same. “Stalingrad? Why would we be going to Stalingrad? I don’t even know you.”

He stuck out his hand, and his sleeve slid down to cover most of his glove. “Jesse Ryder. Jez. And you are?”

“Uh, Echo. Echo Maebius. But you still haven’t told me—”

“Why we’re going to Stalingrad?” Jez finished. “So I can get paid, of course. I’ll even give you a cut, for distracting his guard.” He laughed, shaking his head. “I don’t know how business is for you, Echo, but I just don’t make enough to go around blowing up generals for free.”

3. The Real Enemy

October 1928

The concrete walls are closing in around me. The weak light from the bare bulb overhead heightens the effect, barely scouring the edges or corners. My clothes are stiff and damp with blood. The trickling from my hand has slowed to a drip; each one echoes hollowly in the confines of the tightening room. The hard chair pushes up against the wound on the back of my thigh, and at my shoulder blades. My body begs me to stand up, to stretch. It's so cold I've begun to shiver again. After all the blood I've lost, it's not terribly surprising that my body's shutting down.

"What *are* you?" My voice is so high-pitched that the imposter sounds more like me than I do. I can't stop staring, taking in every detail. *That scar on his temple...I don't have that. The one under his right eye...yes. But his face is thinner than mine. His skin is paler...*

I'm grasping at straws. He's me. Even an identical twin couldn't look as similar to me as this man does—and I don't have a twin. I don't even have a brother.

"We don't have time," my doppelganger says. He's in front of me, so close I can smell the leather of his coat. When he bends down to look me in the eye, I can see the individual hairs peppering his chin. His voice is quiet and urgent. "So just answer my questions. Jez Ryder. Where is he?"

"What? Jez? Why are you—" I stop, shaking my head in violent negation. The motion leaves me dizzy. "No, I'm not telling you anything. Not until you tell me who you are."

"Do you think I'm giving you a choice?" he snaps. With a deft flick of his wrist, he swats his gun—it's not my Colt, but another Nagant revolver—against the wound on my hand. I jerk at the sudden pain, but he presses his gloved palm tight against my mouth before I can cry out. My head hits the back of the chair with a sharp crack.

THE REAL ENEMY

“We’re keeping this quiet,” he hisses. “Answer my questions, nice and easy, and I’ll get you out of here. I’ll even explain everything. *If you cooperate.*” I manage a nod and he removes his hand. “Where’s Jez?” he asks again.

“He’s...on his way to the border.”

My doppelganger glances behind him, then returns his gaze to me. He bites his lip. “He’s alive?” he says. “As far as you know?”

“What?” The word explodes out of me. “I—yes, why wouldn’t he—unless he’s been caught...are you saying he’s been caught?”

“No.” He heaves a deep sigh, and walks to the door and back. He runs a hand through his hair, skewing his Soviet-issue cap. *I never look that nervous, I think. Even when I am, I know how to hide it.* He glances at me, dropping his hand. His black hair sticks to his forehead under the brim. “I...I was afraid he was dead. That I might’ve... you know...”

“*You?*” I lean forward as much as I’m able, staring incredulously. “*You* what? Kill him? Is that what you’re trying to say?”

He glares at me from under his lashes. The only sound in the room is his leather glove tightening around the gun’s grip. *Is that how I look right before I kill someone?* I shiver. It really is getting colder. “Are you...me?” I force myself to ask. I don’t care how incredible it sounds. I need to know. “A me that might have killed Jez?”

This time, he doesn’t evade the question. “Yes,” he says. He paces to the door again and leans his back against it. His arms are folded, the gun nestled in the crook of his elbow. “I come from another universe, Echo. Do you know what that means? Another universe?”

My gaze flickers uncertainly around the cold gray room. My heart hammers in my chest; my shoulder and hand throb incessantly; the wound pressed against the wood beneath my leg burns like a brand. I can’t begin to make sense of what he’s saying.

“No,” I answer.

He turns his head for a second to listen to something on the other side of the door, and then he faces me again. “I’m another version of you. I come from a world where...I took a different path.”

“A different path. You mean one where you...you killed Jez?”

He watches me closely, his face guarded. “There. Not here.”

The room rocks around me. I close my eyes abruptly, trying to

THE REAL ENEMY

keep my bearings. *My god, I think, feeling sick. He must mean our*

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argument. He's talking about Ada. "You killed him over that?" I whisper.

"You thought about it." His voice is hollow in the cold room. It's lower pitched than I usually sound. Angrier. "I'm proof that you thought about it. These different paths...they don't come out of nowhere. Don't tell me you didn't think about killing him."

My eyes fly open. "Okay. Yes!" I burst out. "His girlfriend is pregnant! And he accused *me* of being the one who—"

"I'm not talking about that!" the other Echo interrupts. "If there's one thing I don't want to talk about right now, it's her. You're coming back from a mission to kill Stalin, for crying out loud. Doesn't the whole thing seem just a little—"

"A little what?" I bite out. "Insignificant? Not to me. Jez all but told me he's not going to take responsibility for it, that he's going to leave her after what he did...no. That's not insignificant to me."

"That's because you didn't kill him," my other self breaks in. "Trust me. It's insignificant. Ada is the least of your problems."

"Is she?" I retort. "Looks like you've done pretty well for yourself in your own...life. A soldier of the Cheka? Does that mean you gave up on Jez and Ada? Are you a socialist in your world?" I blink against another wave of dizziness; my ire is costing me energy I don't have. *I need to stay focused. I can't afford to pass out now.*

Before he has a chance to respond, there's a hammering at the door. I freeze, abruptly unable to remember what we were talking about.

"*Ey!* What's going on in there?" Semyon, of course. My doppelganger and I stare at one another; I've never imagined my own eyes could look so terrified. Whatever else he knows, he's familiar with Semyon Naumenko. "Why's this door locked?" Semyon shouts. He renews his pounding against the wood, causing it to shudder behind the other Echo's back. "Open this now, you stupid *shalava*. I never said you could interrogate the prisoner!"

"What now?" I hiss. "You said you could get me out. Can you?"

He lowers his hands from his chest, pressing them against the shuddering door. The gun is still clutched tightly in his fist. "Yes," he says. "I'll take care of these soldiers." With his free hand, he reaches beneath his coat and pulls out another gun. This one's not a model I recognize. Despite everything, I can't help thinking how strange that is.

THE REAL ENEMY

What if Semyon puts a bullet through my head while he's distracted? "Wait!" I call out in desperation. "Can you untie me first? I don't want to be completely helpless while—"

"You won't be here," he grinds out.

"Won't be here? What—what do you mean?"

"I said I'd get you out of here. And I will. But I'm staying here, in this world. With Jez. I'm sending you back to my world."

"Wait. *What?* You mean the world where you *murdered* him? You're sending me back there?"

He pins me with his dark blue eyes, and I can actually see the pain deep within them; a pain deeper than anything I've ever experienced before. In that moment, he doesn't look anything like me. My heart beats faster in my chest.

"No," I say. "You can't. You *can't!*" For a second, I actually forget I'm tied down, and every injury screams in protest as I yank against my bonds. I let out of a yell of frustration and panic.

"Save your strength," he says. His gaze roams over my broken body. "For all the good it'll do you."

"I could *die* over there!" I shout.

"Yes," he says. "Just as easily as you could here. You should thank me. At least you won't be tortured to death there." A loud crack drowns out the last word, and the wooden door trembles violently in its frame. He nods to himself, his eyes far away. I know that look. He's planning his moves, going through the upcoming fight in his head. *Step away from the door, spin, shoot the foremost target, shove one shoulder against the door, use the first target's body as a shield for the next...*

He steps away from the door. He aims his gun at me—the one I don't recognize. Behind him, the door splinters and bursts open. He fires the gun. It's explosively loud, like the grenade that once stole my hearing. I smell the sulfur stink of a match being struck, but so potent it chokes me and burns my eyes. I try to lunge forward again, and something snaps.

The world lurches, ceiling and floor and walls spinning sickeningly. I seem to be falling, though I can't imagine how. Droplets of scarlet spatter across my face and into my eyes. Wind hits my cheeks; raw, harsh, outdoor wind, whipping through this tiny enclosed room in the middle of customs.

THE REAL ENEMY

I don't know what happens next. Something slams against my head, so hard that every other pain dims in comparison. My vision flashes bright searing red. I hear screaming, distant and frantic. An ocean of darkness slams against me and swallows me whole.

4. Stalingrad

March 1928 (Six and a Half Months Earlier)

Our first several days together, Jez and I hiked so hard we barely had time to talk. We were hit by a snowstorm our very first day on the lam, which may have actually helped us. Hopefully, the storm would cover our tracks and hide which direction we went. We bent our heads against the gales to read Jez's compass, kept our feet pointed due north, and didn't stop. Jez tried to talk to me a couple times, but I didn't respond, and eventually he gave up. It wasn't until well after dark, with the wind howling around us and ripping through our clothes like they didn't exist, that we collapsed in the bole of a larch tree and snatched a few hours of rest.

The next day, we were plowing through drifts up to our thighs, and every step was a triumph. Again, we didn't rest, didn't speak, spending all our energy on our struggle through the wilderness. As we plunged deeper into the woods and away from the sparse grasslands of the south, birches and firs began to spring up among the groves of spruce. We trod over the skeletons of cranberry and raspberry bushes, spindly and wiry during the winter. The virgin snow huddled on the barren branches like powdered sugar. The sun went down at an ungodly hour, plunging the woods into cold so absolute I could feel it not just in my limbs and skin, but in my fingernails, my teeth, and down every vertebra of my spine.

On the third day, we caught our first wild game: a couple of grouse and a ptarmigan. We managed to coax up a fire so pathetic it barely singed the fowl, and then scarfed it down as if it were the finest delicacy. The land seemed to warm up after our bellies were full, and we were energetic enough to hike on until the silver moon was swallowed by a cloud, robbing us of the chance to safely continue on until morning.

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I let Jez pass the night undisturbed, rolled inside his scratchy blanket with his canvas haversack under his head. I stayed up for several hours more, straining my eyes to the south. At times, I caught the barest flicker of orange, no more than a pinprick against the infinite blackness. I didn't say anything, but I woke him early and pushed us harder.

It wasn't until evening of the fourth day that Jez confronted me again. The clouds had piled up in the west, casting us into an early twilight. It painted the snow a pastel orange. I flexed my fingers continuously while we were stopped, trying to increase the blood flow. *I would kill for a warmer pair of gloves. Or even just a shot of brandy.*

Jez leaned up against the trunk of a birch. He pulled a packet of cigarettes from his oversized coat's pocket, shaking one free and lighting it in the brisk air. He'd given up offering me one after the second night. He smoked it with his whole hand curled loosely around it and studied me with a fascinated curiosity. When the smell of tobacco drifted toward me, I glared and moved to his other side.

"Anyone ever told you how surly you are?" he asked after a moment.

"I have a lot on my mind," I said shortly.

"Like what?"

I looked up at a trio of geese flying overhead. *How nice it must be to travel so quickly and easily in this godforsaken land.* "For one," I said, "I'm slowly freezing to death, one body part at a time. I have no blanket roll, so half of every night is spent getting up and moving around so I don't die. I've lost the job I was counting on. I'm stuck in the middle of Russia with a fugitive communist. And I have no money to leave the country."

Jez raised his eyebrows. "Why didn't you say something before? Let's get a fire going."

"No, it's too early to stop—" I began, but he waved me to silence and started gathering wood around him. "Jez," I said sharply. "We're being followed. We can't stop yet."

He froze. The cigarette fell from his hand to lie hissing in the snow. "We are?" he said.

"Yes. So finish your break and get a move on. If we're lucky, we can get another hour out of this light."

STALINGRAD

He looked past me to the south, as if our pursuers would be waving at him over my shoulder. “How long have you known?”

“Only for sure since last night. Suspected it the night before that.”

He glanced down briefly, saw his cigarette, and bent down to snatch it up. “Again...why didn’t you *say* something?”

“We can’t be more than two days away from Stalingrad by now. They’re white soldiers; I don’t think they’ll risk following us into the city. I didn’t suggest facing them because I don’t know how many there are. Our best bet is to keep moving.”

Jez grabbed his haversack from the ground and slung it over his shoulder. The cigarette was back in his mouth, none the worse for its fall. He spoke around it. “I ain’t a communist.”

“No?” I wrapped my arms around myself as we started walking again. “Forgive me for assuming, after seeing you blow up Russia’s last chance for redemption.”

“Thought you were a merc,” he said. “Not a loyalist.”

“Who hired you?”

“Stalin did. Offered me a pretty penny to do the job. Doesn’t mean I love the man. Or his politics.”

The orange was fading from the snow, and the sky was turning navy blue. I shivered again, and increased my pace. “Why’d you decide to take me with you?”

“Like I said, I was looking out for you. Especially if they discovered I was missing, can’t imagine it’d go too well on the other American. From what I hear, you don’t want to be given the third by a Russian.” He glanced over at me, pulling the cigarette from his lips. The smell of the smoke hung in the air between us. “You didn’t think I waited ‘til you were out of his tent by accident, did you?” he said. “I kept an eye on you. What was he talkin’ to you about?”

“Family business.” I shrugged uncomfortably. “Then he accused me of being a Bolshevik. Wasn’t exactly worse than anything I’d heard from the other soldiers, but...it was different hearing it from him. Might be you planned your attack at a good time.” I nodded to his canvas sack. “Where’d you get the grenade? Pack it in?”

He grinned. “Check this out.” He stopped, slinging the pack down and opening it up to show me.

“What is that? Condensed milk?”

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“Condensed milk *cans*. Fill ‘em half full of dynamite, throw on some bits of iron, and boom. Well, there’s a little more. But that’s the gist. I can make these things anywhere I go, if I know where to get the materials.”

I reached inside hesitantly; there were shafts of pine attached to the cans. For throwing? “That’s...that’s impressive,” I admitted. “But where’d you get the dynamite?”

“For these? Supply truck in Georgia, before we crossed the border. Any place with a mining camp around, you can find what you need. And if you know how to take apart a bullet...that doesn’t hurt, either.”

I looked behind me, toward the south. Jez buckled his pack back up, flicking his spent cigarette butt off to the side. He noticed where I was looking and frowned.

“Let’s not,” he said. “I like your original plan. We’ll be safer in Stalingrad.”

That wasn’t a promise... But I nodded grudgingly. Jez started to shoulder his pack again.

“Oh. Before I forget.” He reached back in and tossed something to me. “Spare gloves, and a pair of socks. And you’re getting the blanket tonight. Won’t do any good to pull you from camp if you never make it out of the country alive, will it?”

I caught the bundle of clothing instinctively. “Are you sure? For someone you just met?”

He smiled. “Bet you’d do the same for me. Don’t worry about it.”

Where on earth did he get that idea? I accepted the offer, and wisely kept my mouth shut.

*

We walked into Stalingrad late the next day, crossing the Volga River from the southeast. After so long in the wilderness, it felt good to be surrounded by buildings again. People passed us by, busy in their private worlds, studiously ignoring us. I saw a couple soldiers amongst the other civilians, and idly wondered if these were the men we might have ended up fighting if things had gone differently with Wrangel’s army. It hardly mattered now. Soon Russia would be a distant memory, and I could forget all about the hardships we’d faced

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here. Jez disappeared straightaway to call his employer, and I walked a ways down Penzenskaya Street, looking around.

Stalingrad was an industrial metropolis in the midst of modernizing. New electric lights came to life as the cold afternoon deepened toward dusk, lighting up the snow-dusted brick streets. A train pulled into the huge railway station nearby, a shrill whistle announcing its arrival. Coal-black smoke gusted from the engine in a dirty parody of the steam from my breath, dispersing across the whole area and disappearing as it blended in with the gray of the twilight. I distractedly watched workers in coveralls and fur hats swing open the doors and start tossing out crates.

While I waited, I wandered toward the passenger end of the train. I found the conductor, a short skinny man in an expensive but worn overcoat. "Where's this headed?" I asked in Russian.

"Kharkiv," he said. "Ukraine." He ran his squinty eyes over my clothes. His mouth twitched.

"When does it leave?"

"Two hours. Passports required." He spat and walked away.

"Isn't Ukraine part of the Soviet Union?" I called after him. He gave no sign that he had even heard the question. I scowled and touched the hard edge of my passport beneath my coat, to make sure I still had it. I did. *Now I just need a few rubles for a train ticket. Wonder if Jez was serious about sharing that reward with me.*

I turned away from the train and caught two men in long black coats staring at me. One of them touched his hand to the brim of his hat when he saw me looking. It wasn't a greeting. It was a conscious gesture to make sure I noticed his uniform. "Can I help you out with something?" he called.

I shook my head. "No, my questions were answered. *Spasibo.*"

He came closer, and his companion followed. "We'll be taking this train, too," he said casually. "On business for Vozhd, as a matter of fact. Maybe you could join us."

Vozhd? Oh yes, Wrangel mentioned that's what Stalin's soldiers call him.

"That won't be necessary," I said. "I haven't even decided..."

"Not another train headed west for two weeks," the man said. His light gray eyes studied me intently, and his narrow lips curved up. "Probably best if you caught this one, *vam ne kazhetsya?*"

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My stomach fluttered uneasily. I stepped away so I could walk around them. "I...I have to go."

"Hey, *rebenok*," the other man said as I went by. His coat stank of stale tobacco, and his voice was even deeper than my father's. "You've got absolutely the worst accent I have ever heard."

I stared at him. How was I supposed to respond to that? His comrade laughed at the look on my face. I flushed. For a couple moments, the only sound was the thumps of boxes as the men worked behind me. Then I acknowledged the comment with a nod and turned away.

"Aren't you going to excuse yourself?" the first man said. There was an edge in his voice; he wasn't used to people just walking away from him.

"*Izvinite*," I muttered. I heard them laughing again behind me, even though I left as quickly as possible. My hands clenched into fists. *If I end up catching this train, I might have to do something about those men...*

Jeز was enclosed in a telephone booth across the street and down a block. I dodged between two carriages, hurrying to put distance between me and the Soviet soldiers. The buildings on the other side were industrial gray structures with dark windows that stared forebodingly out on the pedestrians below. There wasn't a hint of color on them. The clouds overhead let loose a couple errant snowflakes, not sure if they were ready to dump all they had. Russians wrapped in ill-fitting layers huddled in doorways, clutching hand-rolled cigarettes in bony fingers. An automobile idled across the street. The smoke it spewed smelled so foul I almost wished I was back across the Volga.

As I passed an alley between two of the constructs, a voice spoke from within. "Newspaper, Gospodin?"

"I haven't any money," I answered without looking.

"I'm sure we can work something out, *nayemnik*." I was grabbed around the neck and yanked into the alley before I had time to respond.

I didn't wait to regain my footing. My Colt was out of its holster and in my hand before I ever saw my assailant. I twisted sharply, bringing the weapon up. Then I remembered the soldiers across the street.

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My moment of hesitation cost me the element of surprise. My wrist wrenched painfully as someone grabbed for my gun. It wasn't the same man who'd assaulted me. I smashed the gun against his fingers, and went for my Bowie instead.

As it cleared the sheath, I drove the blade straight back. I met resistance, and felt the muscles in my left forearm tense as I forced past layers of clothing and muscle. My antagonist cried out behind me. Moisture drenched my glove. I tore the knife free and swung it to my other side, toward the other attacker. In almost the same motion, he kicked out and sent my gun spinning away down the alley.

"You and that other *Amerikanyets* thought you were safe, didn't you?" he growled.

"I still do," I answered. I slashed out with the blade, my arm moving faster than my mind could follow. Reacting without thought; striking by instinct. My body flowed into the motion as naturally as breathing.

Perov was fast, too, though. His hand shot up, and he caught the blade against his palm instead of his throat. He stepped forward, completely ignoring the slash, and drove a fist toward my face. I ducked, catching the blow at my hairline. It was like being hit by a rock, but I didn't let it slow me down. I ripped the knife across his hand and thrust it up into his chin. He grabbed for my hands and wrapped his fingers around one of my wrists. But he couldn't stop the momentum of what was already coming.

The weight of my body drove us against the wall of the building behind him. His head smashed against it and my knife plunged even farther up toward his brain. I couldn't avoid the gush of blood that poured out over my hands and arm. The stench filled the alleyway; a metallic smell like hot pennies. I pulled my blade free, and Perov's body slumped to the cobblestones. He didn't move.

I looked back at the other assailant. He was bleeding from a wound in his stomach. He'd put a hand over it in an attempt to close it, but judging by the size of the pool beneath him, he'd completely failed. From where I stood, I couldn't see any telltale rise and fall in his chest.

Neither one was wearing a military uniform. If I hadn't identified Perov by sight, I would never have known why they attacked me. Also conspicuously absent were their Dragoon rifles. Smart things to leave outside the city if they'd wanted to avoid the attention of the

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Soviets. But deadly to be without against an armed man. Either they'd thought I was unarmed as well, or they'd assumed they could subdue me before I had the chance to draw. *I'd better get back to Jez. These might not have been the only two.*

I retrieved my Colt, stuck it in its holster, and wiped my Bowie off as best I could on Perov's body. I started to button my coat back up over it, then stopped, grimacing at the bloodstains. Ditch it? I'd freeze to death. *I'm not out of Russia yet.* But those Soviets were already suspicious... *And I won't have time to buy another one.*

There was nothing to be done for it. At least it was black. I started to walk away, then went back to search their pockets. The first man had barely anything, but Perov had more than I expected. I tucked the small cache of rubles and kopecks into my coat pocket and hurried from the alleyway to find Jez.

He was waiting for me outside the telephone booth. I don't know how long he'd been finished, but he'd had time to buy a newspaper. He leaned against the booth reading it, a cigarette stuck between his lips. When he saw me coming, he blanched and stood up straighter. "What happened to you?"

I winced. *Is it that obvious?* "Couple of Wrangel's men. I took care of them. What happened with Stalin?"

Jez looked up and down the street, noting the complete lack of concern by passers-by. "Did you shoot 'em?"

"No. Knife. Jez, we need to hurry. Did you talk to him?"

"Yes, he..." He ground his teeth and let out an exhalation of smoke. The smell of it was almost welcome after the stench of blood on my clothes. "He says he has the money, but that he can't spare anyone to meet me just now. And he doesn't want me to come to Moscow because someone might find out he hired a paid gun."

"What if they do?" I said. "He can't use that as a reason not to pay you."

Jez dropped his cigarette butt and stomped it beneath his heel. "What am I supposed to do, Echo? I don't think he'll grant me an audience if I show up at the gates of the Kremlin."

Good point. A businessman dressed in coat and tails hurried by. His eyes stayed on me a moment too long. I stuck my hands in my pockets, turning away. "How much do you think he pays his men?" I asked.

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Jez's light brown eyes narrowed. He folded the newspaper and crossed his arms over it. "Why?" he said.

"There's a couple of them over there," I said, nodding toward the train station across Penzenskaya. "They were—"

He was already shaking his head. "Bad idea. Whatever they have, it isn't worth it. Not compared to what Stalin promised me."

I sighed, looking behind me. The businessman was halfway down the block. He looked back at me in the same instant I looked at him. At least he hadn't hunted down anyone to investigate yet. I turned back to Jez. "Maybe," I said, "they don't have any money *now*. But the soldier I spoke to said they were headed west to do something for Stalin."

"How does that help us?" Jez said, exasperated.

Because," I said, "they're on a personal mission for *Stalin*. If he sent them to do something for him personally, it must be pretty important."

He snorted. "I doubt they're leaving Russia to pick up a pile of jack."

"No. Listen. We follow them, we find out what they're doing, and then we sabotage the mission by capturing his men. Then, when we call and tell him, he'll pay just to keep us quiet and make sure we don't ruin his plan."

Jez stared at me. "He may still pay me. He didn't say he wasn't going to."

"Jez! He's not going to!"

He shoved the newspaper into the pocket of his coat. "This sounds dangerous, Echo. Really dangerous. Capturing Stalin's soldiers, threatening him, sabotaging his mission?" He leaned his head against the booth and glanced toward the train station. "I love it," he said.

"You do? You'll do it?"

"Yes. But your clothes...how are you going to explain that?"

I looked down at my coat. "I'm afraid I won't be riding with the passengers anyway, Jez. These soldiers have already marked me as someone to keep an eye on."

He raised his eyebrows. "Are you serious?" he said, "In the short time you were gone, you managed to get in a knife fight *and* offend two of Stalin's personal soldiers?" He gave a short laugh. "You're not exactly the safest companion, are you? Promise you won't get me

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killed?”

I started across the street. “If you’re that worried, find another way to get your money. I don’t make promises like that.”