Nothing Tender About It

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by Nesher

Summary

There is very little left between them except hatred, memory, and the fact that Reich is freezing to death. Soviet has every reason to leave him in the snow and one very personal reason not to. What follows is less a reunion than a collision between everything they used to be and everything the war has made of them. Some things survive betrayal more stubbornly than they should.

Notes

Originally posted on AO3. These fics were written some time ago, so I didn't write them all today! I'm reposting them here because of the great AO3 shutdown of 2026. We'll get through this together <3

Kinktober 2026, Day 13.

See the end of the work for more notes

The snow had stopped falling an hour ago, or maybe three. Time did strange things when the white swallowed everything, when the horizon and the ground became the same pale nothing and a body could walk straight into the sky without knowing it. Third Reich kept walking because walking was the only verb left. His left leg dragged. Something was wrong with his knee, had been wrong since the shelling two days back, a grinding sensation beneath the kneecap like someone had packed gravel into the joint. He refused to limp. Limping was an admission, and he did not admit things.

The wind cut through the wool of his coat where shrapnel had opened a seam along the ribs, a clean horizontal tear that let the Eastern Front reach in and press its fingers against his skin. His SS uniform was built for intimidation, for the sharp silhouette of authority in occupied streets, for making lesser nations flinch when he entered a room. It was not built for this. Nothing was built for this. The snow seemed to rise to meet him with every step. He felt the cold in his bones, in the way the frost crept up from his boots like mold through bread.

He'd lost the rifle. Stupid. Genuinely, catastrophically stupid, and if Wehrmacht were here he would have dressed Reich down for it, that clipped efficient disapproval, but Wehrmacht wasn't here. Nobody was here. The retreat had scattered them like seeds thrown on concrete, nothing taking root, everyone rolling in separate directions. Reich had ended up alone somewhere east of a river whose name he couldn't remember in a forest that had thinned into open steppe, and the steppe had become this. White. Flat. Endless. A world with all the furniture removed.

He still had the knife. The knife in his right boot, pressing against his calf with every step, a small bright point of purpose. He held onto that knowledge the way a man underwater holds onto the direction of the surface.

His hands were the worst of it. He couldn't feel three fingers on his left hand and the remaining two on the right were clumsy, slow, as though the cold had gotten into the wiring and was pulling connections apart one by one. He shoved them deeper into his pockets and thought about fire. Fire was easy to think about. The way it moved. The way it ate. He'd always liked fire, had always understood its logic, the clean simplicity of consuming what it touched.

Something flickered at the edge of that thought. Gold skin. Black hair. A sound like screaming that he had stood and listened to with his hands at his sides.

Bruder.

He killed the thought. Strangled it the way he strangled everything that tried to surface from the place where he kept those particular memories. It wasn't difficult. He'd had years of practice. You simply pressed down, hard, and held, and eventually the thing stopped moving.

His knee buckled on the next step. He caught himself, staggered, kept going. The snow was deeper here, past his ankles, and each step required a deliberate wrenching motion that sent pain radiating up through his thigh into his hip. He was breathing through his teeth, short sharp hisses that froze in the air in front of his face. His lips were cracked. There was dried

blood in the corner of his mouth from where he'd bitten through his own cheek during the last artillery barrage, and the cold kept reopening it, a tiny persistent sting that annoyed him more than the knee.

He thought about the nations he hated and used them as fuel. There was plenty to burn. Poland. France. Britain and that sanctimonious island composure. America with his loud voice and his late arrival and his absolute galling confidence. Reich cycled through them like logs thrown on a furnace, pulling heat from contempt, from the specific and nourishing pleasure of despising something thoroughly. It worked. It had always worked. His ideology was a furnace and his hatred was the coal and he had built himself around that simple mechanism years ago, before the war, before everything, back when he was small and sharp and had just learned what rage could do if you gave it structure.

His knee gave out completely on the fourteenth step. Or the fortieth. He went down hard, face-first into the snow, and the cold hit him like a wall of water. It flooded his collar, packed into the gap in his coat, filled his mouth with a taste like iron and nothing. He lay there for a moment that stretched and stretched. The snow was almost warm if you stopped fighting it. That was the trick, he knew. That was how it killed you. It pretended to be kind.

He was going to get up. He was going to get up because he was Third Reich and he did not lie down and die in the snow like some beaten dog. He was going to get up because he had crawled out of worse than this. He pressed his palms into the ground and pushed. His arms shook. The snow compressed beneath his weight but gave him nothing back, no purchase, no resistance, just that soft yielding blankness.

He heard the footsteps before he placed them. A rhythmic crunch, steady, unhurried. Someone walking the way you walked when you owned the ground beneath you. Reich's stomach dropped and his hand moved instinctively toward his boot, toward the knife, but his fingers were so numb he couldn't find the handle, couldn't close his grip around anything, and then the footsteps stopped and a shadow fell across the snow in front of him.

He looked up.

The Soviet Union stood there like something the winter had assembled from its own materials. Tall, too tall, that angular frame wrapped in a heavy military coat that hung off shoulders which should have been broader but weren't. He was thin. Even through the bulk of the coat, even through the layers, Reich could see it. The war had eaten him too. The ushanka sat low on his head, throwing a band of dark across his upper face so that the hammer and sickle over his left eye caught what grey light remained like a small gold flame. His eyes beneath it were yellow and steady and looking at Reich the way you look at something you've been expecting to find.

The rifle was slung over his shoulder. He didn't reach for it.

Reich bared his teeth. It was the closest thing to a smile he could manage with his face half-frozen, and it probably looked unhinged, which was fine. He'd built an entire diplomatic career on looking unhinged at the right moments. "Sowjetchen," he said, and his voice came out raw, scraped, smaller than he wanted it to be. He compensated by making the word

sharper. The diminutive suffix turned blade, twisted into something condescending. "Bist du gekommen, um zuzusehen?"

Soviet's jaw shifted. A small movement, barely visible beneath the shadow of the ushanka, but Reich caught it because he had spent months learning the geography of that face, back when learning it had been something other than intelligence gathering.

"Get up," Soviet said. His voice was low, accented, rough in the way that Russian always sounded rough to Reich's ears, consonants shouldering into each other like commuters in a crowded train. "Get up so I can look at you properly."

"Make me."

Soviet closed the distance in two strides. His hand found the front of Reich's coat and hauled him upright like he weighed nothing, which was almost true at this point. Reich's boots scraped against the snow and then he was standing, barely, held in place by Soviet's grip and by his own refusal to fall again. They were close. Close enough that Reich could see the hollows beneath Soviet's cheekbones, the way the red of his skin had gone dull and wind-chapped, the small scar along his jaw that hadn't been there before the war. Close enough to smell him. Smoke and wool and something underneath that was just skin, just the specific animal warmth of another body, and Reich hated how his own body leaned toward it.

"You look terrible," Soviet said, and there was something in his tone that wasn't mockery. It was worse than mockery. It was observation.

"You look thin," Reich shot back. "Communism not feeding you, Sowjetchen? All that shared wealth and nobody thought to share a meal?"

Soviet's grip tightened. His eyes were doing something complicated, something that kept shifting between registers Reich didn't want to read. "Was any of it real?"

Reich felt the question hit and reached for contempt before Soviet could see it. "Any of what?" he said, and smiled, and the smile was a door slamming shut.

Soviet's face went hard. The yellow eyes stopped shifting and became fixed, and the shadow of the ushanka made them look like something burning at the bottom of a well. "Ublyudok," he said softly, and shoved Reich backward.

Reich went with the momentum and then reversed it, throwing his weight forward into Soviet's chest, which was like throwing himself against a wall that happened to be slightly concave. Soviet stumbled, caught himself, and then they were fighting. It was ugly, graceless, two starving animals in the snow. Reich couldn't feel his hands well enough to make a fist, so he clawed, grabbed, used his elbows and his teeth and his forehead. He got his hand to the knife in his boot and pulled it free and swung and Soviet caught his wrist, twisted, and the knife spun away into the white and vanished.

They went down together. Soviet landed on top of him, pinning him with the advantage of those extra inches, that reach, and Reich thrashed beneath him, spitting German profanities that came out in clouds of frozen breath. "Scheiße, get off, get off me, ich bring dich um..."

But his body was failing. The cold had taken too much. His muscles shook and stuttered and refused the commands he was sending, and gradually, by degrees, the fighting slowed.

Soviet's hands were on his shoulders, pressing him into the snow, and Reich's hands were on Soviet's chest, still pushing but with less and less force, and they were breathing hard, visible breath tangling together in the air between their faces. Close. Too close. The same distance as before but horizontal now, with the full length of Soviet's body along the full length of his, and the weight of him was warm. The weight of him was so warm that Reich's body registered it as pain, as the agonizing reversal of numbness, nerve endings coming back online like lights flickering in a bombed building.

Neither of them moved for a long count. Five heartbeats. Six. The steppe was empty in every direction. No one. No armies, no scouts, no flags, nothing. Just two countries in the snow, pressed together in a way that could be read as violence from a distance but wasn't, not anymore, not exactly.

Reich kissed him first. He would deny it for the rest of his life, but he kissed him first, surging upward and catching Soviet's mouth with his own. There was nothing tender in it. His teeth found Soviet's lower lip and bit down and tasted blood, copper-bright and hot, and Soviet made a sound that was almost a word and then kissed back, one hand leaving Reich's shoulder to grip the back of his head, fingers digging into the short red hair beneath the Wehrmacht helmet. The helmet came loose, rolled away. Neither of them cared.

Soviet kissed the way he did everything. Thoroughly, with too much force, with a kind of grim commitment that left no room for ambiguity. His mouth was hot and tasted like black bread and tobacco and something mineral, and Reich hated him, hated him with every frozen cell, and pulled him closer.

A hand, Reich's. He didn't remember deciding to move it. Shoving between their bodies, working at Soviet's belt with fingers that were too clumsy, too cold, too desperate. Soviet understood and helped, or fought, it was hard to tell the difference. Belts loosened, trousers and shorts tugged down just enough, no more than necessary, everything else left buttoned and layered against the killing air. Then Soviet settled back down over him and there was heat where there had been none, a startling, obscene heat, and Reich gasped, a sound punched out of him that he would have killed to take back. "Nnh, Scheiße..."

Soviet's hips moved. Slowly at first, a deliberate grind, and then with more purpose, and Reich understood with sudden humiliating clarity what this was, what they were doing, rutting against each other in the snow like animals, like soldiers in a trench with no better options. His body understood faster than his pride did. His hips snapped up to meet the rhythm before his mind had finished objecting, and the friction of it, the hard dragging pressure of another body working against his own, drew a sound out of him that was barely human. "Aahh... nn, verdammt..."

Soviet pressed his forehead against Reich's, and their breath was the same breath, sharing the same small space of heated air between their coats. His thrusts found a pace that was less like sex and more like survival, like a man stamping life back into frozen limbs, each roll of his hips stoking something in Reich's core that the winter had nearly put out. Reich's body temperature was climbing. He could feel it, the terrible tingling return of warmth to his

stomach, his thighs, the places where they ground together hardest. His hands dug into Soviet's back through the coat, gripping fabric, gripping the body beneath it, gripping something that felt like the last solid thing in a world going white.

Reich remembered, and he did not want to remember, a night before the war. Before the betrayal. A room in Moscow, warm, lamplight, Soviet's hand in his. The size of it. How his own hand had disappeared inside it. How he had felt, for the first and only time in his miserable existence, something dangerously close to safe. He had held that hand and thought, with a sincerity that terrified him even in memory, that perhaps this was enough. That perhaps the furnace did not need to burn everything.

He had invaded six months later because the ideology demanded it. Because the furnace had no setting below "everything." Because he was what he was, and what he was had never included room for the thing Soviet's hand had made him feel.

"Pochemu," Soviet murmured against his mouth, still moving, the word barely formed between one thrust and the next. Why. As if he'd heard the memory.

Reich didn't answer. He pressed his face into the side of Soviet's neck and matched the rhythm and made sounds he would never make in front of anyone else, sounds that belonged to the version of him that had existed during the treaty, the version he had killed as thoroughly as he'd killed everything else he'd ever loved. The pace turned ragged. Soviet's breathing went shallow and fast against his ear, and Reich felt the pressure coiling in his own body, winding tighter with every grind, humiliating and undeniable and good, good in a way that made him want to bite something.

When he came, it was silent. His whole body locked and his mouth opened against Soviet's throat and nothing came out. Soviet followed seconds later, hips stuttering hard against him, a single exhaled "nn..." and the involuntary tightening of every muscle pressed along Reich's frame.

They lay there. The cold began its patient return, seeping back toward the places where sweat was cooling. Reich's breathing slowed. His heartbeat slowed. Something in him slowed, some mechanism that had been running at full speed for years, and in the quiet aftermath, with Soviet's weight still on him and the snow still holding them both, he felt his eyes close. His hand was still tangled in Soviet's coat. His body was warm for the first time in days. The steppe was silent in every direction, a silence so total it was almost gentle, and for a few seconds, Third Reich was not performing anything. He was just lying in the snow with the only person who had ever understood the specific texture of his wretchedness, and he almost said something, his lips parting, breath forming the shape of a word he hadn't earned the right to speak.

The butt of the rifle connected with his temple. The sound was dull, definitive, a single thick crack that scattered the silence like glass. His vision whited out, then went red, then folded inward. The last thing he registered was cold air where Soviet's body had been. The shadow of the ushanka against the grey sky. Yellow eyes looking down at him from very far away, or very close, he couldn't tell anymore.

Soviet watched the small body go limp beneath him. He stayed there a moment, breathing, his rifle loose in one hand, and then he exhaled slowly through his nose and set about his work. He pulled Reich's trousers back up, buckled the belt with rough efficiency, buttoned the black coat over the stained uniform beneath. Not tenderness. Logistics. A dead prisoner was worth nothing, and a frozen one was worth less.

He slung his rifle back over his shoulder and hauled Reich up with him, draping that slight frame across his shoulders like a sack of grain. Lighter than a sack of grain. Reich's head hung against his back, red hair stirring in the wind, boots dangling limp against Soviet's chest.

"Durak," Soviet muttered, to himself, to the unconscious weight on his shoulders, to the steppe at large. Fool. He wasn't sure which of them he meant.

Then he turned east and began to walk, and the snow started falling again, small and steady, filling in his footprints behind him one by one, erasing the path back toward the German lines with every step, until there was only the white and the figure moving through it, carrying something small and red and breathing into the heart of a country that had every reason to want it dead.

End Notes

Translations

- **Bruder**: German for "brother."
- **Sowjetchen**: Roughly "little Soviet." -chen is a German diminutive suffix; here it was once affectionate and is now used mockingly.
- **Bist du gekommen, um zuzusehen?**: German for "Did you come to watch?"
- **Ublyudok (Ублюдок)**: Russian insult meaning roughly "bastard."
- **Scheiße**: German for "shit"; used here as a curse.
- **Ich bring dich um**: German for "I'll kill you."
- **Verdammt**: German for "damn" / "dammit."
- **Pochemu (Почему)**: Russian for "why."
- **Durak (Дурак)**: Russian for "fool" / "idiot."

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