

THE WITCH WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD

SEASON ONE
EPISODE 01



A Long Cold Winter
MAX GLADSTONE & LINDSAY SMITH

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BY

MAX GLADSTONE & LINDSAY SMITH



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The Witch Who Came in From the Cold

The Cold War rages in the back rooms and dark alleys of 1970s Prague as spies and sorcerers cross murky lines to do battle for home and country. The fate of the East and the West hangs in the balance right along the Iron Curtain—and crackling beneath the surface of it all is a vein of magic, raw and waiting to be tapped.

Who's Who on Witch

Tatiana Mikhailovna Morozova, “Tanya” – KGB agent and Ice operative

Nadia – Tanya’s partner with both the KGB and Ice

Gabe Pritchard – CIA agent

Jordan Rhemes – Mysterious owner of Bar Vodnář

Andula Zlata – Czech student

Karel Hašek – Flame operative

Vladimir – Flame operative

Franklin Drummond, “Frank” – CIA chief in Prague

Aleksander Komyetski, “Sasha” – KGB chief in Prague

Alester Winthrop – Ice sorcerer

Drahomir Milovic, assistant undersecretary for the Czech Ministry of Economics

The Witch Who Came in from the Cold

Episode One

A Long, Cold Winter

by Max Gladstone and Lindsay Smith

1.

Prague, Czechoslovak Socialist Republic

January, 1970

Tatiana Mikhailovna Morozova lay on her belly on the slate roof tiles, trying not to let the cold harden her muscles. She needed to stay limber for whatever came next—if it ever came next. The past few nights had proven fruitless, but she couldn't let down her guard. She listened to Prague's nightlife settle around her, from the distant mutter of drunks to the crunch of thin boot soles against snow to the heavy chill crackling in her numb ears, and tried to sift through them for any signs of her target.

But none of the street sounds were out of the ordinary; not a single person was out of place. Her entire operation, so carefully crafted, had been for nothing.

Tanya grabbed the binoculars from the rooftop ledge—KOMZ, dense metal and enviable optics, standard KGB issue—and surveyed Staré Město Square once more. A lone man crossed the square, kicking up a swirl of fog in his wake, but his frowning face was not that of their target. She swiveled her gaze across the night-stained square toward the streetlamp at the northwestern entrance, where a woman leaned against the post. Tanya couldn't hear the repetitive click of the lighter flicking open and snapping shut, but she could imagine it; she knew the sound too well. Nadezhda was just as bored as she was—knowing Nadia, probably more. If their target didn't show soon, it'd be another empty night. Another battle lost.

With a growing sense of desperation, Tanya checked each exit of the square once more. Their sources had hinted that their adversary was working on a new, advanced scouting method, and this was just the sort of night for them to turn it loose. All their analysis indicated tonight was ideal—weather conditions, star alignment, magnetic pull, all those fiddly little calibration elements that operators like her rarely had to take into consideration. That's what the bureaucrats were for. But if Tanya let another target slip past, too many people would pay the price.

Several of their assets had already vanished, and they couldn't afford to lose even one more. She had a better chance out here, on the edge of the Iron Curtain, but then, so did the other side. It was difficult to get information when she was back in Moscow, spending her days in the dank basement of the Lubyanka headquarters, pretending she couldn't hear the screams from the interrogation cells. And her family was better connected than most, better skilled at greasing the ancient gossip machinery that far predated the East-West divide.

The messages they did manage to pass on were always brief, vague, smuggled in via

coded newspaper advertisements or a short radio broadcast on a signal strong enough to pierce the censors' static. *We have located one in Burma*, the message might read, or *One lost to them in Marrakesh*. Tanya didn't know which side was ahead, but suspected it was a little too even for anyone's comfort.

Something rattled on the roof ledge beside her.

Tanya dropped the binoculars and glanced toward the array of devices lined up on the ledge. They weren't so much devices, really—the largest of them was scarcely wider than a ruble—as charms. Talismans. One was twitching like an electric wire starting to fray; another hummed with a barely visible glow. Some kind of detector slowly coming to life.

Tanya held her breath like a fist squeezing shut. There it was, just on the edge of her hearing: a shuffle and scrape, dry and rhythmic. So rhythmic it sounded mechanical. Close enough, anyway. Tanya raised the binoculars again, and sure enough, Nadia had finally flicked the lighter to life. Their target had arrived.

Nadia lit the cigarette, but held it aloft, uncertain. *Come on, Nadia. Give me a direction. Give me something to work with.* The bright cherry bobbed as Nadia scanned the square.

Finally, she jabbed it in the direction of a frothily ornate building tiered like a wedding cake of stone.

Tanya swiveled toward the old town hall. There it was, a dark figure, a blur behind the veils of fog. *Crunch. Crunch.* Each step in slushy snow a labored act. Was the target injured? Weak? Undercharged? They could only be so lucky.

She set the binoculars aside and bounded for the fire escape.

• • •

Drahomir was drunk. That was, after all, the plan.

He leaned over the table, clutching his beer with both hands. "And then I could see your friend Joshua to be holding the two pairs—I knew he had them, from his eyes, which are soft as pools. I am an excellent judge of character."

"You sure are, Drahomir." Gabe Pritchard raised his glass. "Here's to your success."

Smoke and jukebox jazz owned Bar Vodnář after dark. Candles flickered on tabletops. The lamps burned low, and conversation rumbled behind the music, Czech cut with jags of German and French. When the door opened, it drew eyes like filings to a magnet, but never held them long.

"I stayed in, to show him I was not afraid. I could turn the jack or the six, and his pairs would be as nothing against my straight. Through the, what is it—"

"The turn."

Drahomir grinned like a horse about to bite an apple. "The turn! But you turned no jack, and no six." He slapped the table once to emphasize each loss. "And he, what is it, re-raised. So all of my money, I push it into the center of the table. I will scare him away. And then, to find on the final card the jack, my friend!" He laughed, and slapped Gabe hard on his bad shoulder. Gabe kept his own smile beaming, and laughed along, though less harshly. "Gabriel! Poker is full of such strange words. Is there a word for this miracle?"

"It's called being a river rat, Drahomir."

“Rats,” Drahomir observed, “are fantastic animals. They are hardy, and they live well in the most inhospitable corners of our earth. Wherever you find man, look beneath him and you will find a rat.”

Gabe himself was neither a rat nor drunk, but he faked the latter well. Throughout the game at Josh’s place, he’d steadily poured himself shots of iced tea from a whiskey bottle; after dragging the victorious Drahomir to drinks at the Vodnář, he’d switched to “gin and tonic.” Jordan, who ran the bar, owed Gabe, and he owed her. She knew that when he ordered a gin and tonic with a twist, he meant hold the gin.

Plain tonic was the perfect drink for this kind of work: Gabe had never acquired the taste for quinine, and damn if the stuff didn’t make him squirm just as well as if it were fully leaded.

But that wasn’t the only reason he wanted to squirm, now.

This talk of rats and reading men might mean Drahomir had jumped a step or two ahead of Gabe’s agenda. Gabe liked agendas: He liked conversations to move where and when he wanted under conditions he controlled. The plan had been to get Drahomir drunk and excitable—which Josh’s sacrifice back at the poker table, and his sleight of hand, achieved neatly—but, flush with triumph, the man might be too drunk, too excitable, for the gentle work to come.

Gabe felt a sharp pain in the middle of his forehead, and hoped it was only nerves. He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “I’m glad you enjoyed the game, Drahomir.”

Drahomir mimicked him. “Enjoyed? I found it wonderful. Such talking, it feels like playing against *men*. I have, you know, played mostly chess—there we keep silent, we watch, we are like machines. I never liked much gambling, but this!”

“It’s a game about friendship, really,” Gabe offered. “It teaches you to know people. When you can trust them. When you can’t.”

“Will we play again?”

“Soon,” Gabe said. The pain intensified. He grimaced.

“Are you well?”

“I’m fine, Drahomir. A headache.”

“Ha. A few too many drinks, my friend?”

“No, nothing like that.” He focused on Drahomir’s dark eyes, willing the pain away. “Look, Drahomir, we’ve known each other for a while now. I’m glad my job at the embassy lets me work so closely with you at the Ministry of Economics. It’s been a good partnership.” Another wash of pain split his head in half between *good* and *partnership*, but he kept his voice level. Drahomir looked concerned, but was it concern for Gabe, or concern at the subject of their talk? Jordan, at the bar, stared at him—at them. Had he made a sound without noticing?

Don’t overthink it. Make the touch, make the call. You’ve strung this guy along, now show him the bait, and the hook. Gabe and Josh had figured Drahomir for an idealist and a patriot—a smart one, he’d have to be, the man had survived more purges than a cholera victim, but an idealist and a patriot still. Gabe had gone thirteen rounds with Headquarters over the proper pitch. Don’t offer money, that would make us seem venal and corrupt. Play into Russian narratives. Let him know money’s around if he needs it, but don’t think you can buy him.

Don't offer asylum. If he wanted to run he'd have run already.

Give Drahomir Milovic, assistant undersecretary of the Czech Ministry of Economics, a chance to be a hero. And let him take it.

Headquarters was doubtful.

"I especially value your friendship given everything your country's been through in the last few years," Gabe continued. Meaning, though he wouldn't say it out loud: the Prague Spring, Soviet tanks in the Staré Město, the end of their government's short-lived normalization. This was when Gabe needed the soft eyes, the earnest stare, the Marlboro Man jaw and the aw-shucks John Wayne calm: *You can trust me, sir, I'm Amurican, ah just want whut's right.* And he could have done it, had done it in a hundred gin joints all over the world, except for this damn *pounding* in his *head* like some furious dwarf burrowing inside his brain, mining for gold. It was all he could do to keep from wincing. *Pull it together, dammit. Make the pitch.* "We agree on a lot of things. You like freedom. You like being able to trust the people you sit next to. You like making your own choices, for your own reasons."

The dwarf hit a fresh vein of ore. Gabe raised a hand to his temple and tried not to scream.

"My friend," Drahomir said, not listening, worried—worried about Gabe because of this beautiful connection they shared that Gabe had spent the last six months building, block by painstaking block, "you seem unwell. We should find you perhaps a doctor."

I know people, Gabe could not say, because the words could not escape the ring of the dwarf's hammer, who would give their lives to know what you know. To sit at the Minister's ear and hear the poison the Soviets whisper there. To watch the little traces that matter: sudden shifts in spending patterns, interest in new industries in third-world nations, transfers of raw capital backed by Red guarantees. And when Drahomir said, Ah, but I have this knowledge, and I can do nothing to help my country, to help my people, he, Gabe, would reply, You can. Knowledge, Drahomir, is power. Like at the table, when you knew my buddy held two pair. And if you help us—and I'm not talking anything major here, just little details, schedules, the answer to a question or two once in a while, so long as you feel safe—you can sleep at night, and know you've done your part to slide a knife between the ribs of those smiling bastards who step so tenderly onto your country's throat and bear down.

That's what he would have said, but with kinder and more measured words, with the soft Iowa assurance he'd deployed so readily with assets in Cairo and Madrid and Bangkok and Milan, so that Drahomir, like all the men and women before, would listen, and look into his heart, and find that in that secret place he had forged, unwilling, unsuspecting, a tool to Gabe's own specs: a hammer, maybe, or wrench, or screwdriver, or pry bar, or knife. A tool with a handle, waiting to be used.

That's what he would have said, but the dwarf hit cerebellum paydirt and what he said, instead, was sharp and four-lettered and of no use to anyone at all.

• • •

Tanya and Nadia crossed paths one block west of the square, ahead of their target. The street was a patchwork of shadow and light, everything reduced to hazy blobs that either

melted into the darkness or blotted the lamplight. Having to rely on their own imperfect eyesight, the women were at a disadvantage.

Better to focus on what they could turn in their favor; better to minimize their shortcomings and leverage their strengths. Just as their forebears had stolen the secrets of the atom bomb rather than wasting money uncovering it for themselves. She and Nadia had three advantages over their target: One, they could be certain their target would take the most direct path available to its destination. Two, that it would move at a steady pace. Three, and perhaps the most crucial: It had no idea they were looking for it.

In truth, Tanya much preferred stalking this kind of prey over the usual drunken, paranoid diplomats the *rezidentura* chief frequently sent her to follow. Those men were always ready to throw a punch, looking for spies everywhere, a confusing mix of alcohol and counterintelligence training sending them looping halfway around Staré Město trying to shake tails real and imagined. But that's where the advantage ended. Diplomats, agriculture secretaries, cultural attachés, and the like—they rarely showed a fraction of the raw determination that tonight's prey surely would.

“Couldn't get a good look,” Nadia said, voice pitched low so it wouldn't echo off the stone around them. “Still not sure who they're after.”

“We're close to Bar Vodnář.” Tanya pointed along the narrow, curving street ahead, through the hazy shapes of balconies and cherub statues jutting from the dark. “Everyone likes to make trouble there.”

“Well, let's try to stop it before it gets too close. Last thing we need is to pick a fight with some supercharged construct.” Nadia pitched her cigarette into a snow bank. “You have enough dampeners?”

Tanya's jaw stiffened. Between her grandfather's constant second-guessing and Nadia's chiding, it was hard not to feel like a child, fumbling along. Hadn't she proven herself enough? But she nodded, huffing out a white cloud of breath before her. “I'm ready.”

“Great.” Nadia rolled her shoulders and her neck—the fighter in her limbering up for a brawl. “Since we don't know exactly what we're dealing with, let's keep it standard. You take the lead, find out who our target's after. See if you can't get that person to safety in a hurry. Use the Vodnář safe room if you have to, though try not to get that nosy bartender involved if you can avoid it. I'll circle back and try to delay or disable our target.”

Tanya refrained from pointing out that this was exactly how *she'd* set up their operation last time, only with their roles reversed. That operation belonged to another world—a whole other set of problems. Their mundane daytime world of geopolitical struggle, scrabbling for scraps of information that could change the fate of governments, entire continents. How tiny it all seemed, comparatively.

No, Tanya thought, as she glimpsed their target up ahead. Its limbs—definitely something stony, bound with metal and a host of other elements—shimmered in the dim streetlights a block away. A construct, a being assembled by powerful sorcerers and breathed to life with elemental energy. A creature fueled by a single purpose: to hunt down an elemental Host.

This world was something else entirely.

Gabe's dwarf wormed spineward. He grimaced, and clutched the table's edge.

"My friend," Drahomir said. "You are not well. A doctor must be found."

"It's fine, Drahomir." Gabe ground the words between his teeth. "I have to ask you something." Hammers struck his temples. *Meet Drahomir's eyes. Be John Wayne.* "You probably know I don't." He tightened his jaw through a spasm. Jordan set down her towel, watching him openly. He was attracting too much attention, dammit. "You won't be surprised to learn I don't work—" But he cut off for a rapidly indrawn breath as wires of pain shot up and down his spine.

Fine officers stroked out on assignment. People had heart attacks. But this didn't feel like a heart attack. Poison? He'd not left his drink unattended—that was a rookie mistake. Could Drahomir have—no. They'd watched the man. They knew him. He wasn't a killer.

Drahomir took his wrist. "Gabriel, let me take you to the hospital. Or at least your embassy. You are in pain. They will surely want to care for you."

And let Drahomir go down with him in public documents, let him be seen entering the American Embassy—how much use would the man be then? Gabe tried to shake his head.

A shadow blocked out the light. "I'll take care of him. I've seen this before."

Jordan Rhemes set her hands against the booth tabletop and loomed over them. Silver strands in her dark hair caught the light.

Drahomir looked at her, astonished. So did the rest of the bar.

Too much, Gabe wanted to say to her. *You're attracting attention.* Not that Gabe himself wasn't, here and now.

"He is my friend," Drahomir repeated. "I will take him to hospital."

"You," Jordan replied, "should leave, now. It's past your bedtime, Assistant Undersecretary. Your wife is no doubt anxious. I'll make sure he's safe."

"I cannot." He held onto Gabe—why? Maybe Drahomir knew what Gabe wanted to say, maybe he wanted to agree, if Gabe could just get the damn words out.

"You can," she said, and looked at him. The turning of her head left a trail of music, like soft bells, and her eyes were large. Drahomir paled. He tried to speak, but found no voice. "Go."

Drahomir scooted from the booth, and stood. He backed toward the door, eyes fixed on Gabe, and in his gaze Gabe saw the wreckage of months of planning. Groping behind himself, Drahomir found the door, opened it, and staggered out into twists of fog and snow.

Jordan nodded once when he was gone, as if she had settled everything, or anything. "I was worried he might follow through with that hospital idea. That wouldn't be good for any of us."

"Do you have any idea how long it took me to get him here?" he whispered in Coptic.

"Won't matter one damn bit if you drop dead in my bar."

"You had no right—" But before he could finish his sentence, the world thinned and sped up at once, and the table rushed to meet his face.

...

Tanya sprinted back from the lead, just far enough that Nadia could see her, and met the other woman's eyes. *Confluence*, she mouthed. The intersection of two ley lines, those globe-spanning sources of energy, several of which cut through Prague. They could be used to power everything from the tiniest charm to a massive ritual conducted by hundreds of sorcerers.

The particular confluence they were approaching happened to lie beneath Bar Vodnář, to the consternation of pretty much every sorcerer in central Eastern Europe. The bar's owner, Jordan Rhemes, wasn't exactly friendly to institutionalized witchcraft, no matter which institution it was. And for reasons Tanya found it best not to question, she was especially unfriendly to witches who happened to also be intelligence officers for the KGB.

Nadia held Tanya's gaze just long enough: Message received. They could use the energy from the ley lines to power some of their rituals—hopefully enough to stop the construct. Easy. Then all they had to do was corner a creature formed of elemental magic for a single-minded purpose—the pursuit and capture of a Host. A task it would continue for eternity until it either acquired its target or had been completely smashed into its base components. Yes, Tanya twisted her mouth into a scowl, *it's as simple as that*.

Nadia reached into her satchel and pulled out a small charm. Tanya couldn't see it from this distance, but she had a pretty good idea which one Nadia had chosen—two stones sandwiching a dried paste of dirt, bound with a thin copper wire in an elaborate design. Nadia puffed out a sharp breath onto the charm to supply the final component, then lobbed it over the construct's shoulder as hard as she could.

The charm plinked against the cobblestone street, several feet ahead of the creature. For a moment, nothing happened. Tanya used the delay to dart forward one block, evening her path with the construct's once more. Then the creature's foot landed just short of the charm.

A dagger of rock and hard-packed earth shot up from between the cobblestones, sending the monster flying as it pierced two stories upward into the air. The crack of shifting earth ricocheted across the ornate facades that lined the street. Tanya cringed at the noise—but the time for subterfuge had passed. They could not allow this abomination to reach the Host. The construct crashed onto its back in the middle of the street, limbs whirring frantically, its mechanical drone shifting into a dizzying screech.

“Poshli!” Nadia shouted at Tanya as the stone dagger submerged itself back into the street. Go. *“Find the Host!”*

Tanya sprinted forward into the fog. Only a block to Bar Vodnář. If the Host was nearby, he or she might feel drawn toward the ley lines, whether they understood why or not. And depending what type of elemental they hosted . . .

Well, Tanya didn't want to think about what might happen to an unsuspecting Host if he or she tripped a ley line without proper training. Especially with a construct homing in—who knew what they might unknowingly unleash while trying to protect themselves? The power of two ley lines coursing through someone who didn't know enough to channel

them properly—it'd make the cover-up for their last intelligence op look like a stroll in Gorky Park.

With the construct down, Tanya now had to rely on the charms in her trench coat pockets to track down the Host. Not that they were much more reliable, this close to the ley lines, than any of her other field equipment—the static-snarled bug detectors, wonky signals scans, improperly ciphered codes that passed as standard issue. One charm vibrated the closer it got to anything powered by elemental magic, but unfortunately, that description applied to a surprising portion of Prague. Two things this city was lousy with: spies and witches. And more than a few, like Tanya and Nadia, who qualified as both.

The humming in her pocket grew fainter, then stronger as she crossed from one side of the street to the other. The confluence was only a few blocks away now, so accounting for its pull . . . Tanya took a deep breath and plunged around the corner of the next building. Right into a young woman.

“Oh! *Omluvte mě!*” the girl cried, reeling back. Her blonde hair, only a little lighter than Tanya's own, was tucked into a knitted cap, and she wore a thick, boiled wool coat over flared trousers. A university student, if Tanya had to guess. Working class, probably a good little junior Communist who supported the Party and attended all the right rallies and didn't associate with those Prague-Spring, Alexander-Dubček types who only ever made trouble.

But the charm was vibrating madly, threatening to drill a hole in Tanya's thigh. This had to be the Host.

“Come with me. Quietly, please.” Tanya's Czech was filed off at the edges, prickly with her Moscow accent. “Do not make a sound.” She looped her arm through the girl's and ushered her toward the next block—the back alleyway and service entrance for Bar Vodnář.

Tanya knew she looked terrifying right now, her face flushed with exertion, blonde wisps of hair snaking free of her braid, her lips pulled back in a painfully false grin. But sometimes fear was a necessity. Fear got people to comply.

The girl resisted for only a second before her limbs softened in resignation. “Who—who are you?” she whispered, as they approached the alley's mouth. “No. Let me guess. *Státní bezpečnost?*” The Czech secret police. “KGB, with that accent.”

“Quiet. I need you quiet for one minute.” The darkened alley enveloped them, but now they were only yards from the confluence: Whether the Host girl could feel it or not, Tanya could sense every charm and talisman jammed in her pockets coming to life. “I can explain everything.”

• • •

The touch of cold metal cleared Gabe's head and righted the spinning bar, almost. The room still danced behind him and around him, but less forcefully, and the ache in his head dulled. Jordan's hand was on his hand, her long, dark fingers pressing a charm into his palm—a closed eye in iron, with a narrow white feather wound through the metal.

“Does this help?”

“You,” he said, finding words came more easily now, “had no business chasing him away.”

“Don’t give me too much credit. You did more than enough.” He’d heard doctors sound that way before, when operating on patients they judged terminal. “I just helped the process along. Follow me.”

“No,” he said, but she was already leaving. He hated this feeling: drowning in foreign waters. It reminded him of Cairo, of smoke-filled basements and impossible visions, of 1968 and the year he’d first met Jordan Rhemes. Back then he’d thought the only secret world was the one where he lived and worked. He slid out of the booth and pursued her, shakily, one hand always touching something solid: the side of a booth, a table, the wall, a bare water pipe. Jordan’s skirt swayed ahead of him, but her shoulders were fixed and steady as a battleship prow. “It’s only a headache.”

“Even you do not believe that,” she said. “I did not save your life back in Egypt to watch you decay now.”

“I can handle this on my own,” he said.

She laughed.

• • •

Tanya steered the girl toward a stack of wooden pallets. “Climb. Get up high.” They climbed up to the low roofline of Bar Vodnář and settled on the edge of slate tiles; Tanya kicked away the pieces of lumber closest to them so no one—or rather, no thing—would find an easy path up. “All right. Can I trust you to stay put long enough for me to explain?”

The girl nodded. Her face was still soft around the edges, but her eyes sparkled with youthful determination. Tanya remembered that feeling from her own days as a student back at Moscow State. Back before she was assigned here, at the frontlines of the stalemate.

“My name is Tatiana Mikhailovna, but please, call me Tanya, if you like. I’m a cultural secretary at the Soviet Embassy”—the lies flowed easily as water these days—“but that isn’t why I’m here tonight. There are people hunting for you. I want to protect you from them, but I need your cooperation.”

The student hunched her shoulders forward, drawing back from Tanya. “Hunting for me? People from your . . . embassy?” She said the word plainly enough—not dipped in the venom Tanya would expect from one of the Dubček sorts, but the distrust was clear.

“No. No, nothing like that.” Tanya shook her head. “Let me ask you . . . uh, Comrade . . .”

The girl hesitated, then shoved her hands into her pockets. “Andula.”

Tanya gave her a sheepish smile—a well-worn tool in her kit for softening up a potential asset. “Andula. *Děkuji.* Thank you. “Have you experienced anything strange lately, perhaps when you cross through Staré Město?” She gestured toward the winding street beyond their alleyway. “It might be more intense during periods of low tide, or when there is a full moon, or—or perhaps when Venus is visible in the—”

Andula’s stare was inching wider and wider, the sort of expression usually reserved

for dealing with ranting lunatics.

Tanya cleared her throat. “What I mean to say is, have you noticed any strange sensations in this part of town? A headache, perhaps, or a tug of some sort, deep in your gut.”

“I haven’t a clue what you’re talking about. I . . .” But then Andula’s eyebrows drew downward. “Wait. No, now that you mention it, I did feel ill the other day, when I was collecting my stipend at the university offices not far from here. And then tonight, it was like this—I don’t know, this . . . pressure, just in the back of my skull.” Her eyes narrowed. “Your friends at the ‘embassy’ haven’t done something to me, have they?”

“No, I assure you, it isn’t that at all.” Tanya laced her fingers together, the leather of her gloves squeaking. Where the hell was Nadia? She should have dismantled the construct by now and joined them. Somehow, for all her brusqueness, her partner was always better at explaining these things. The best Tanya could hope for was to spin an intriguing enough tale that the girl’s curiosity or confusion would keep her from running. “There is no easy way to explain this, Andula. You are what is known as a Host. A vessel for one of the thirty-six elementals that power the world’s sources of magic. Because of what you are, you are in danger from those who would use you to—”

Andula scrambled to her feet, tiles crashing to the alley floor beneath them. “All right. I think I’ve heard enough.”

“Please. Just let me finish.” Tanya pinched the bridge of her nose. “It’s very important that you hear me out—”

“*Get back!*” Nadia roared in Russian as she tumbled into the alley’s mouth. She wasn’t alone—she was coiled around the main body of the construct, ungloved hands clawing desperately at the copper components that traced strange shapes all around its trunk. The construct lurched, menacing, toward the roofline, and leapt at them. For one moment, the phosphorescent eyes and gash of a mouth carved into its rocky face seemed to fix right on Tanya and the girl before Nadia was able to throw enough weight to send it crashing back to the alley floor.

“Wait right here,” Tanya said to Andula—no more softness, no apologetic tone. No more time. She clenched her teeth and jumped down from the roof.

Tanya dug a charm out of her pocket and snapped the twigs on it in half to activate it. As she tossed it against the construct, the twigs turned into vines, flourishing over the construct’s trunk, tangling around its limbs. Nadia bounced to her feet, nimble as ever. “Are we close enough?” she asked in Russian.

“It’ll have to do.” Tanya pulled out the components bag and dumped it open on the construct’s twitching form. Flashing metal filings, herbs, flint, more twigs. She added a gob of saliva to the mix, then stepped over the construct to join hands with Nadia.

A bluish-gold glow seeped out of the spell components. It swirled into the air and wrapped itself around the two women, gilding the construct, the pile of discarded crates, the edge of the roof as they began to chant. Old Slavic words tangled into Latin; Aramaic put in an appearance. The longer they chanted, words droning as the intensity swelled, the more the glow illuminated, until it was pouring out of their mouths with each phrase and slicing through the cold night air.

The construct rattled beneath them, trying despite the vines to continue its grim march. *Just a few seconds more*, Tanya prayed, as she let her chant punch through the night. Then the vine snapped, and the construct lurched forward.

2.

Following Jordan through the bar's back rooms, Gabe clutched the charm and told himself that the metal's temperature made the difference. Gave him something to focus on. Or perhaps it was the pain of the amulet's edges digging into his palm that clarified his mind. The symbol did not matter, nor did the feather. He would be mad to think so.

Maybe he was.

She led him through a door, lit a candle, and continued down a sloped passage lined with shelves piled high with stock. Most of the Vodnář's customers would have been surprised to see what stock, precisely. The hall's first turning held the usual: beer bottles and cleaner, pallet boxes of chips, a vat of nuts, liquor. After the second turn bar supplies gave way to drying herbs and fruits, and what he hoped were roots—the light down here wasn't good, and some roots did look like mummified hands.

After its third turn, the hall might have been a museum stockroom. Wrought metal charms filled one shelf; along another rested a line of ancient nails sorted painstakingly by size and type of head, each tip stained with what Gabe hoped was rust. Large stylized masks in the shape of birds' and lions' heads, or in shapes he did not recognize at all, rested on the top shelves, staring down like angels in judgment. Beneath them lay drums and flutes made of beechwood, God, that had to be beech, though the grain looked more like bone. One shelf sported only gleaming knives. He could almost hear the candlelight against their edges.

At the hall's end stood another door, which opened into an office: leather chair, fine old desk, packed with so many herbs and unguents the smells clashed and overlapped and all he could think was *jungle*. Jordan fit the candle she carried into an iron holder.

"Close the door. Sit."

"What," he said, "no skull? I thought the candle's supposed to, you know, sit on the skull."

"Perhaps I will have yours out for the purpose. Sit."

He sat. The throbbing headache returned. He pressed the talisman to his forehead. She grabbed a bronze bowl off one shelf, tossed it on the desk, lit a small gas flame under a black kettle, and circled around the room, gathering herbs and screwed-shut jars.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to keep you in one piece. This is the worst the headaches have been, yes? The worst since Cairo?"

He crossed his arms. "That's none of your business."

She slathered a scoop of what looked like black tar into the bowl, added three handfuls of three different herbs, and mixed them into a paste with a flat blade. "It is all of my business, and very little of yours. By rights you should never have been drawn in to this world. You have tried to ignore it. You have tried to *cowboy* through, and perhaps now you may see that this is not helpful? Ignoring your difficulty hurts you, and your mission."

"I know this talk," he said. "You're buttering me up for a pitch."

"I am trying to help you."

"I won't betray my people."

The kettle whistled. Jordan poured water into the bowl, mixed the paste as if she were making cocoa, then added more water. “No fresh goat’s milk, sadly, but this will have to do. Drink, quickly. It will help the pain.”

He set down the charm, and raised the bowl. The bronze warmed his hands. “This is steaming.”

“It will not hurt you. I promise. Try not to breathe the fumes.”

He met her eyes, and drank. Oily liquid, gritty with powder, ash, and herbs, slithered down his throat. The pain receded. His vision cleared.

“I am not pitching you,” she said. “And I do not wish you to betray anyone. There are people who have dealt with problems like yours since long before you were born—and long before your country was born, as well. They will help you, and then you will be able to do your job again. Will you listen to what I have to say, at least?”

Gabe finished the bowl, set it down, and slid it back to Jordan. The pain felt like a radio on in another room—easily ignored. “Fine,” he said. “Tell me.”

Jordan squeezed his shoulder, and smiled. “You stumbled into a new world in Cairo, a world on whose edges I’ve lived all my life. There are two factions: Call them the Ice and the Flame. Their leaders have been fighting a secret war for a very long time, with people like me caught in the middle.” Her smile turned sad. “Sound familiar?”

He nodded.

“Good. When you need to vomit, use the bucket beside you.”

• • •

Tanya and Nadia chanted, bathing the alleyway in shades of blue and gold, even as the construct lurched out of its bindings. The glow wormed into its articulated stone joints; the “eyes” in the hollows on its head burned a hot white. It leapt once more for the roofline, where Andula, the terrified student, crouched. But they didn’t relent, letting the ancient languages twist and flow.

Then everything happened at once: Andula’s scream, the sparks showering from the construct’s joints, the flash of light that hit Tanya in the chest like a fist. Her hand ripped out of Nadia’s, and she tumbled backward into the heap of broken wooden pallets. Flecks of wiring and crystals sprayed across her lap—the creature’s elemental components.

They’d done it. They’d overloaded the construct with energy direct from the ley lines, more than it could possibly contain. It had been reduced to its base parts, all of the power its creators had stored within it unleashed in a single burst.

As for the matter of just who’d created it . . . well, she and Nadia would have to deal with that soon enough.

“*Blyad*,” Nadia swore, heaving a chunk of rock off her arm. She was sprawled across the alley floor, her dark hair pooled beneath her. Tanya had to blink a few times to clear the afterflash in her eyes to make sure it wasn’t blood.

“What the devil was that thing?” Andula screeched.

Tanya and Nadia exchanged a look. “I need to gather components,” Nadia said. “So we can track down the creators.”

Tanya sighed and climbed back up to the roofline with Andula. “As I was saying . . . You are a Host. You were born attuned to a particular elemental, and, through some means, have been activated. Your elemental has come home to roost, you could say.” Tanya smiled darkly. “Witches like me are able to use these elements for good, but there are witches who would use them for more sinister purposes, too. And they would very much like to harvest this elemental from you.”

“Harvest? *Harvest?*” Andula crawled back on the roof, away from Tanya. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Tanya chose to ignore her question for the moment. “These witches—the Acolytes of Flame—someone from their organization created that device. An elemental construct. Its sole purpose was track you down for them. Fortunately for you, members of the Flame aren’t the only people capable of wielding elemental magic.”

The girl’s eyes were wild. “And what would it have done if it caught me?”

Nadia trilled with laughter. “Oh, *milaya devushka*. Trust me, you don’t want the answer to that.”

The crisp night air crackled in the heavy silence for a few moments. “It was tracking me,” Andula finally said. She watched as Nadia wrenched apart two chunks of crystal that had been fused together. “Like—like a radar, or something.”

“Yes, much like that. The Acolytes of Flame are attempting to collect all of the Hosts like you,” Tanya said. “They want the elementals for themselves.”

“So there’s something inside of me? Right now?” Andula pointed to herself. “What is an elemental, and what does it want with me?”

“It wants *you*. You were born to be together, you were meant to be the Host for the kind of elemental power it represents—like water, or electricity, or earth, so you can use its power to its fullest potential. Think, Andula—have you always had an affinity for water, perhaps, or a particular type of flower? But it wasn’t until you were activated by a strong burst of energy that your elemental could find you.” Tanya’s expression softened. “Don’t worry, it can’t harm you. This is what you were made for.”

Andula laughed, a dry and bitter rasp. “I’ve never known you *KaGeBezniks* to be big on matters of fate.”

Nadia and Tanya flinched as one. They exchanged a glance, a long, wordless debate, then Tanya closed her eyes with a faint nod. “We’re not here as *KaGeBezniks*,” Nadia said at last.

“No? Then who are you? What do you really want with me?” Andula folded her arms across her chest. “How can I trust you? How do I know that this ‘Flame’ is the group that means me harm, and not you?”

“We’re with the Consortium of Ice,” Tanya said, resting one hand on Andula’s knee. She was careful to keep her palm curved down, concealing the tiny charm nestled in her hand there. “And we’re here to help.”

. . .

Gabe thought that by the third heave, surely there couldn’t be anything left. He was wrong.

Jordan rocked back and forth in her chair and kept talking, as if his guts weren't lying in a bucket between them. "The Ice like the world more or less the way it is. They are . . . prigs, for the most part, but less vicious than the Flame. I have contacts among them. If anyone knows how to deal with your pain, they will." She passed him a tissue.

"I don't need their help" would have sounded much more authoritative if his stomach hadn't chosen that instant to double him over, dry-heaving.

"That should be the last." She passed him a glass of clean water once he finished. "Rinse your mouth well. You don't want any of the stuff you drank lingering between your teeth."

He rinsed, spit, and wiped his mouth, then tossed the tissue in the bucket. "Is there a place I can dump this?"

She nodded to a door he hadn't noticed before. "Washroom."

By the time he returned she'd wiped the bowl clean, and burnt a handful of herbs within.

Gabe took his seat. "I can handle myself."

She laughed. "Like you handled Drahomir?" Jordan did not let the silence linger long enough to compel his answer. "How long can you keep this from your comrades at the embassy? Or from their bosses back at Langley? The Ice can teach you to deal with your problem."

"Can't you?"

She shook her head. "I can treat the symptoms. The problem beneath, I cannot touch. And if you let that problem go untended, the symptoms will grow beyond my ability to calm."

"That doesn't sound good."

"No," she said. "You must speak with Alestair Winthrop. He is a . . ." she searched the air above his head for the right word, and settled on ". . . cultural attaché at the British Embassy. One of your people."

Gabe crossed his legs and leaned back. She hadn't said *operative*. She hadn't said *spy*. "A cultural attaché?"

"MI6," she said. "So, really your kind of people. It's not like I'm sending you to the KGB."

"Was that an option?"

Jordan's smile was very white, but in other respects nothing like a shark's. "Your service and his are friendly. If your comrades, or Langley, discover the relationship, they might even be pleased: Interagency cooperation is so difficult to achieve, especially in the field."

"And he's a . . . whatever."

Her face screwed up. "*Sorcerer* is the term they prefer. But yes. From as old a family as they come. The Ice cares about things like that: bloodlines, titles, families. Prigs, like I said."

"And he's MI6. Of course."

"I don't care for the Ice at all, Gabriel. But Alestair is a good man. He will help you."

Yes was the word on the tip of his tongue. It tasted smooth, round, soothing, cough-drop fresh. But with the pain gone, training caught him like a trap. An officer massaged an

asset through the stages of the recruitment cycle like a priest led parishioners through the stations of the Cross: Find a potential source, trace the outlines of his needs or hers, build relationship through trust or fear or common cause, and then recruit. Coax the player into the game.

I'm not trying to pitch you, Jordan had said. But that was the cycle's core, the double blind, the story told and sold: This isn't a process, these steps aren't mechanical. You're special. We care.

The magic was real. Cairo streets twisted through his nightmares. Jackals laughed and metal feet clattered down cobblestones in memory. Knives gleamed in shadows, their edges blood-wet. He saw those dark dream visions waking, sometimes, before the headaches came.

Jordan wanted to help. Or wanted him to feel that's what she wanted.

He swallowed the *yes*, said "No," and stood. The room did not tilt or sway as he approached the door.

"Gabriel—"

"No," he repeated, finding it easier the second time.

She rounded the desk toward him, reached for his arm but did not touch him. "You cannot ignore Cairo forever. Sooner or later you will have to face the wounds you took. Sooner or later you will have to trust me."

He couldn't bear to say *no* a third time, so he walked through the door and shut it behind himself.

• • •

Karel Hašek watched with one perfectly crinkled eyebrow as Vladimir spread the contents of his satchel on his desk, early morning light painting them with a softness that, having failed, they didn't deserve. Molten tangle of copper wiring. Crystal fragments. A bundle of herbs or flowers, singed beyond recognition. A chunk of quartz. Vladimir snapped the satchel closed, then crossed his hands before him, waiting for his boss to speak.

"What?" Karel asked. "That's it?"

"That's all we recovered from the alley where we located it, sir." Vladimir's thick fingers clenched around the satchel straps. "I suspect that whoever dismantled it most likely took the rest with them."

"Whoever. *Whoever*." Karel raked a hand through his dark curls. "And who, pray tell, do you think is capable of dismantling such a construct?"

Vladimir's throat bobbed; he looked around the study, half-afraid the rest of their coven might pour out of the shadows at any moment. "The—the Ice, sir?"

"Yes. Yes, the Ice. But what are they doing in Prague?" Karel shoved away from the desk and began to prowl, pacing in long strides. "When was the last time they bothered to track down the Hosts on their own?"

"All they seem to care about is interrupting *our* work," Vladimir said.

"Always we must stay two steps ahead, Vladimir. Never be the one to pursue. What good is it doing the Soviets to chase after the Americans, after all? Kennedy said he wanted

a man on the moon, the Soviets poured all their funds into trying to beat them there. No. Too late. They tried to squash our spirit here, in Prague, but by tamping out one fire, they ignited a dozen others. So it will be for the Ice.”

Vladimir studied the map pinned up behind Karel’s desk. Hand-drawn, centuries-old, the political boundaries embarrassingly outdated. But the stark diagonal lines formed an uneven grid that never budged. Whatever they accomplished with the ritual, with all of the Hosts bound together as one, that grid would remain, ready to serve them. An endless power source for their endless reign.

“But they have our Host,” Karel continued.

Vladimir cleared his throat. “We cannot be certain of that. If we can identify the Host through what remains of the construct, we might be able to locate him or her through more . . . conventional means.”

“Mm. Perhaps.” Karel plucked up one of the crystals, turning it over in his fingers. A splinter of darkness lingered at the center. Vladimir couldn’t remember if it had been there before their ritual or not. “Or at the very least, we might locate these Ice interlopers. That could be far more valuable, in the long run.”

Vladimir blinked a few times, then forced himself to nod, even as he was trembling inside. “Naturally, sir. But—but in the meantime. What shall I . . . tell the others?”

“Tell them we’ll need to conduct a new ritual sooner than we anticipated. I’ll check the charts, the almanac, but I think there are several auspicious times ahead.” Karel grimaced. “It would be better if we could gain access to the confluence beneath Bar Vodnář.”

“The one the Rhemes woman owns?” Vladimir asked. His shoulders rolled back as he stood up straighter. “I think we might have a solution to that.”

Karel seized his coat from the rack and swung it on. Heavy tweed, a fine English cut—something from before the tanks rolled in. “Then see to it.” He pulled on his cap. “I have a lecture to give.”

3.

CIA Prague Station was born out of an architect's mistake.

The embassy building that housed the station was a sharp Georgian beauty curled around a tree-strewn courtyard, and its large third-floor chambers might, in a distant aristocratic past, have been drawing rooms, or libraries, or studies—not that Gabe knew the difference between the three.

Those rooms, the few times Gabe had been inside them, demonstrated that the architect knew how to produce a decent space. Light filled the chambers from their plush carpeted floors to their high ceilings, and pale blue plaster walls created a flawless illusion of openness. Which, of course, rendered them utterly unsuited for intelligence work.

But between and behind those chambers—now repurposed as filing rooms or meeting halls or public offices—tangled a warren of coffin-sized rooms where two grown men would have to exhale to pass abreast, improbable cul-de-sacs, doors built for hunchbacks, S-curve crawl spaces with ceilings that belonged on a submarine, opening onto oddly-cornered cubbyholes twice as tall as any room in the rest of the house. All windowless, of course, even the one room large enough to stash four officers' desks side by side. They'd been servants' quarters once, or storage, meant for heavy use by people the building's proper residents preferred to ignore.

Which, come to think, remained an apt description.

They'd carved a window for Frank's office during renovations, a smoked-glass slit broader on the inside, like an arrow loop. That had been their one concession to design or comfort, a status symbol and a generous allowance for the Chief of Station. When Gabe first arrived in Prague, he had imagined they made the window narrow for security reasons, but today he thought there might have been a different sort of foresight involved. Granted, he'd put on weight since his college days, but even in football trim he wouldn't have been able to throw himself out of that gap.

Franklin Drummond had killed seven men with a shovel in a foxhole in Korea. Gabe knew this, as did everyone in Prague Station, even though Frank never told the story and no one else did either. Secrets of many kinds moved around and through Prague Station, and some you learned just by breathing in.

Today, that story Gabe had never heard was impossible to forget.

"Sit," Frank said when the door closed. "And take me through it one more time."

"I'd rather stand, sir, if it's all the same to you."

"It is not all the same," Frank said, his voice tightening and tensing as he circled the desk. "It is not all the same because one of us has a leg missing, and that one of us just happens to be your commanding officer, who is confused, and frustrated, and angry at what looks to be a first-degree failure of basic intel work last night. So sit down, Pritchard, and walk me through this mess again."

Gabe sat. Frank sat.

"Well?"

"I screwed up," Gabe said.

Frank lifted his clipboard with a typed report. "Officer Toms praises your work on the hand-off. The potential asset enjoyed the game, won big, for which I'm sure Accounting

will thank you, and then the pair of you skipped off to a nice smoky bar for the final pitch.” He turned the page. “At which point, Toms continues, the, let’s just say ‘high-value,’ target, whom we have spent, and you have spent, six months and significant departmental resources developing, emerged from the bar ‘spooked’ and ‘shaking,’ which are not, in my professional opinion, words I would use to describe a successfully recruited asset. Would you agree?”

“Sir, I—”

“Would you agree, Pritchard?”

“Yes, sir, I would agree. Those are not words I would use to describe a successfully recruited asset. Nor would I describe what I did last night as successfully recruiting Drahomir Milovic.”

“What would you describe it as?”

“I screwed up, sir. It’s in the report.”

Frank turned the page. “The report indicates that you suffered, and I quote, an ‘intense headache’ during the pitch. That you took suddenly ill, and asked the asset to leave rather than placing yourself in a situation where the two of you might appear on hospital records together.”

“That’s the shape of it, yes, sir.”

“You’re looking well today, Pritchard.”

“It was a twenty-four hour bug, sir. I thought I could keep it together for the op.”

“You went into a delicate recruitment op, which we’ve been planning and prepping for months, sick.”

“I was feeling off yesterday morning. I didn’t want to cancel at the last minute. It could have made us look bad.”

Frank threw the clipboard on the desk, folded his hands, and leaned across toward Gabe. “Friends cancel on friends all the time, because they’re sick. We could have changed the schedule. This week, next week, makes no difference. But you got to the pitch, and you blew it. Best case scenario, Milovic’s just worried about you. Worst case, which is likely, he knows you were trying to set him up for something, and he’s worried about *us*.”

“With respect, sir, I know this is bad. I’ll make it right.”

“Over a few months, during which we could have used you on other targets.”

“I know,” Gabe said. “I’m sorry. I’ve had a lot on my plate recently—”

“A lot on your plate.” Frank’s eyebrows rose, as if he’d never heard those words in that precise combination before. “A lot on your plate. Boy, you’ve been dropping more balls than a drunk juggler. My girls have a Labrador, you know, those big dogs with the floppy ears?”

“I’m familiar with the breed, sir.”

“Now, I’ve known smart dogs in my time, and this is not one of those. When I throw a stick, she’ll run in the opposite damn direction. But my girls love their dumb dog, and because I love them, I love her too. I don’t mind that the dog can’t do what the damn thing’s bred for, because I don’t need it to. But I don’t have room for two pets in my life. Whatever unscrewed your head at Cairo Station, you’d best get it screwed back fast. I took you on because Killarney said you needed a change of venue, that you were a good officer,

and I've seen some shades of that. But you better show me more than shades soon. There are boys dying for the chance to prove themselves here. We're on the front lines of the Cold War. We are in the no-man's-land." His eyes met Gabe's. "And the no-man's-land is no place for someone whose head is not in the game."

"I understand, sir." Gabe's heart beat fast, but his voice, at least, he kept level. "I'll get it under control. I'll do whatever it takes to land the asset."

"Damn right you will. One more screwup, and there's no way in hell I'm letting you touch ANCHISES next month."

"Leave it to me, Chief."

Frank pulled the report from the clipboard's jaws, opened a desk drawer, and dropped the papers in a file. "Show me what you can do, Pritchard. Get this done." Without looking, he slammed the drawer shut.

• • •

Tanya rushed through the Soviet Embassy's hallways, sleep-crusted eyes squinted against the harsh morning sunlight. The worst sort of January day—inexcusably cold and unforgivably bright. Last night's encounter with the Host and the construct still rattled around her thoughts. It had been a perfect pitch. She'd laid out precisely why the Flame posed a danger, and why the girl needed the Ice to keep her safe. But it had been too much to swallow, Tanya feared. The girl needed time to regain her footing.

And then there'd been all the paperwork for the Ice afterward, prepping the report, picking through the construct's pieces for clues . . . And, of course, strategizing how they'd explain to their superiors that they hadn't persuaded the Host (*Andula, her name is Andula*) to turn herself over to Ice protection.

But the girl would come in from the cold, Tanya told herself. They always did, once they saw just how determined the Flame was. Just how cruel their methods.

None of it mattered, though, the moment she walked through these corridors. Here, she was the *KaGeBeznik* Andula had accused her of being; when she was here, there was no room in her mind for anything else to matter. Her grandfather had pulled countless puppet strings to land her this prestigious assignment in Prague, the sort of post every ambitious officer's school graduate would happily claw her eyes out for, and she couldn't show one ounce of weakness.

We need you in Prague, he'd said. It's vital to our success.

She'd just laughed. For the Ice? Or for the Party?

He hadn't answered her for a long time; the tightness around his eyes had begun to frighten her. He'd always been that rarest of breeds—the unserious Soviet. The carefree true believer. *Both, if you can, he'd said, finally. But in this, you must put the Ice first.*

She hadn't believed him then. Still didn't want to now.

Tanya shoved open the door to the concrete *rezidentura* vault, buried like a tainted piece of evidence in the embassy's basement.

Heads snapped up at her entrance, eighteen minutes late—including, she noticed with a scowl, Nadia's. Hadn't Nadia said something about heading to the bar, even after

they'd finished up well past one? Tanya ducked her head and made her way down the swaying, clanking metal staircase, feeling the heat of every single one of her colleagues' stares.

No encrypted cable messages from Moscow awaited her—no updates on her grandfather, no word from KGB headquarters, or from anyone else. She spun the dial to unlock her file safe and started to dig through the folders inside, but already knew what they'd all contain. A couple of surveillance shots of suspected CIA and MI6 officers, none particularly damning. Some of the people she was developing for recruitment—mostly university students who might someday, eventually, inform on their capitalist-leaning peers; a few handsy businessmen; and the dossiers on a couple of maids who might, if their third cousins were to be believed, *might* clean the American ambassador's home . . .

They were Nadia's potential agents, really; as her supervising officer, Tanya had encouraged her to pursue contacts at the university for some easy recruitments to get her initial numbers up. Their encounter with the Host the night before played through Tanya's mind again. A university student herself. *Andula Zlata*. Tanya scribbled the name into a new information request form. She'd check KGB records first—then, if she couldn't find anything there, she'd run it by the Czech secret police service, the StB. Andula had agreed to meet with them in two days' time, after she'd had enough time to mull over Tanya's pitch, but if the Flame was already on her trail, it never hurt to be prepared—

"Morozova." *Rezydentura* Chief Aleksander Komyetski loomed in his private office's doorway. "A word, please."

Tanya dropped the form on her desk and shuffled toward his office. Nadia met her eyes as Tanya passed her; Tanya gave her the faintest shake of her head.

Chief Komyetski—Sasha, as he insisted even the most junior officers call him, in the spirit of socialist equality—was already seated at his desk when Tanya entered. A brutally sheared bonsai tree occupied one third of his desk, while a variety of chessboards covered shelf space, a few side tables, and two chairs. Sasha acknowledged her with a nod, but didn't motion to the sole unoccupied seat as he rolled his own chair toward one of the chessboards farther afield. He clenched a scrap of cable traffic in his fist; Tanya's heart leapt at the sight of it. Word from Moscow? An update on her grandfather's condition, perhaps.

Sasha squinted at the paper, rubbing his free hand against his jowls. After a moment's consideration, he changed to squinting at the chessboard instead. "Ah!" His whole face glowed as he slid his knight into position, and struck out the unseen opponent's bishop with a *click*.

Tanya's shoulders drooped. Of course. One of his countless games of correspondence chess with his chums back at Lubyanka, and the *rezydenturas* across the globe. She shifted her weight and waited.

"Officer Morozova." Sasha turned his wire-thin smile on her. "I thought it was time that we discussed . . . your goals in Prague Station. Specifically, that you are not meeting them."

Tanya felt her throat harden like ice, holding back all the objections she wanted to make. "I—I recruited over a dozen agents in my two years in Madrid," she finally managed.

“One of them was a British Royal Air Force attaché. He gave us—gave us vital information on NATO discussions.”

“So you did.” Sasha wheeled past her, making his way toward another board.

“It’s not even been two years since the Soviet tanks rolled into Prague to crush the rebellion,” Tanya said, panic raising her tone. “The people are deeply distrustful of us—we have few friends amongst the Czechs.”

“All issues my other officers face,” Sasha said with a wave of his hand.

Tanya clenched a fist at her side. “I graduated top of my class at the academy. Top marks at Moscow State’s graduate program.”

“Yes, yes. And we all know your family’s credentials, as well.” Sasha settled another chess piece into place. “But what are you doing for me here in Prague?”

Tanya’s teeth clicked together. “It . . .” She swallowed hard, trying to vanquish the desert in her mouth. “It takes some time, sir, to familiarize myself with the new environment. We face far more hostility from the Western services here than we did in Madrid. But I’m building—building relationships. I have several developmentals in progress.” She glanced down. “I understand that the CIA station chief is aggressively thwarting our pitches, and I don’t want to get overeager without taking the necessary precautions . . . but you are correct, Comrade. I will do better.”

The click of another piece falling. “Everyone knows what a Morozov is capable of accomplishing. I know you will live up to your name.” The smile that shoved at Sasha’s chubby cheeks sent a chill down Tanya’s spine. He wheeled back behind his desk and gestured to a board on the far corner. All the pieces were lined up in starting position. “Come, Morozova. Sit. Would you like to play?”

Tanya hesitated, fingers curling around the top of the empty chair. She was fairly sure she had one too many games running at the same time as it was.

Two sharp knocks rang on Sasha’s office door, then the door swung open. “*Izvinitye*, Comrade Komyetski, I was looking for—ah. For Comrade Morozova.” Nadia cracked a wide grin. “I have the information you requested on the university student you’re developing. You know. The one you think is ready to be persuaded . . . ?”

Tanya took her hand off the back of the chair she’d been about to sit in. The university students were Nadia’s to recruit. But the tension in her partner’s smile was growing by the second. “Oh! Oh, yes, of course. Thank you, Comrade.” She hurried toward the door. “Come, I’ll show you how to study a developmental’s dossier, if you like. A good opportunity to prepare you to manage your own cases.”

“That’d be most helpful. As long as Chief Komyetski is finished,” Nadia added, with a shy glance toward Sasha.

His lips rolled into a smirk. “Go on, my dear, we were only having a little chat.”

As soon as they were out of Sasha’s hearing range, Tanya rounded on Nadia. “Please, this is your developmental—I can’t just take it from you.”

“You need to boost your recruitment numbers to get Sasha off your back. Besides, you’re the boss—you have priority. Around here, anyway.” Nadia cracked her gum with a grin. “After we’re done with the dossiers, I think we should both spend some more time at the university library. Check up on our new friend.”

Tanya scooped up the information request she'd filled out earlier. *Andula Zlata*. "My thoughts precisely." She reached into her pocket and closed her hand around the bit of crystal she'd scavenged from the construct. "And then I'd like to do some research of our own."

• • •

Jordan picked up her phone on the seventh ring, and didn't miss a beat when Gabe said, "Introduce me."

Nor did she look up from the bar when he entered the Vodnář that night, snow melting on his overcoat. Smoke burned his eyes. He peeled off his gloves and folded them in his coat pocket as he descended into the dark.

In the corner, behind a pillar—the table to which he'd guided Drahomir last night. Gabe draped his coat over his arm.

A man sat in the booth, reading: blond and long and pretty, a fencer or a gymnast gone soft with age. He wore a tweed jacket and a silk tie, either of which Gabe would have bet cost more than his own present wardrobe in its entirety. When the Brit saw Gabe he closed the book—*The Stars My Destination*, Gabe had never heard of it, maybe poetry or something—and smiled with the furthest corners of his lips, not baring teeth. A spark in the man's blue eyes suggested merriment or larceny. "Good evening, dear chap. Please." He extended one hand palm up across the table.

Gabe sat. A drink appeared at his elbow. "Jordan says you're the man to see."

"Very right." The Brit didn't look much older than Gabe himself—a handful of years at most—but his voice suggested otherwise. A put-on, Gabe thought, but maybe not, considering. This was a world inside the one he imagined he knew, with secrets of its own. "I am certainly a man, and I've had scads of people eager to see me, from time to time."

"I'm Gabe Pritchard."

"Alestair Winthrop." The man's handshake felt firm, not strong, like he was made from math rather than from muscle. "The fourth. Cultural attaché of her Majesty's government. And I understand you're an analyst with the American Department of . . . Agriculture, was it?"

"Commerce," Gabe said.

"Oh, Commerce, indeed." Winthrop folded his hands on the table. "We do love our masks. Miss Rhemes did me the favor of arranging this meeting, but she left the details of your story imprecise, their relation up to your own discretion. I understand that your main interest tonight thrusts neither toward, shall we say, commerce, nor culture, mine or anyone else's. Beyond that I'm afraid you must be forthright, if I'm to aid you in any way save offering the considerable pleasure of my after-dinner conversation."

Gabe felt the cold glass in his hands, and pondered walking out. He remembered Frank. He remembered Cairo.

He stared into the light in Winthrop's eyes.

"Something went wrong in my head in Egypt," he said. "And Jordan thinks the Ice can help."

“Well, now.” Winthrop unfolded his hands, laid them palm down on the table, and leaned in. “Perhaps we can, at that.”



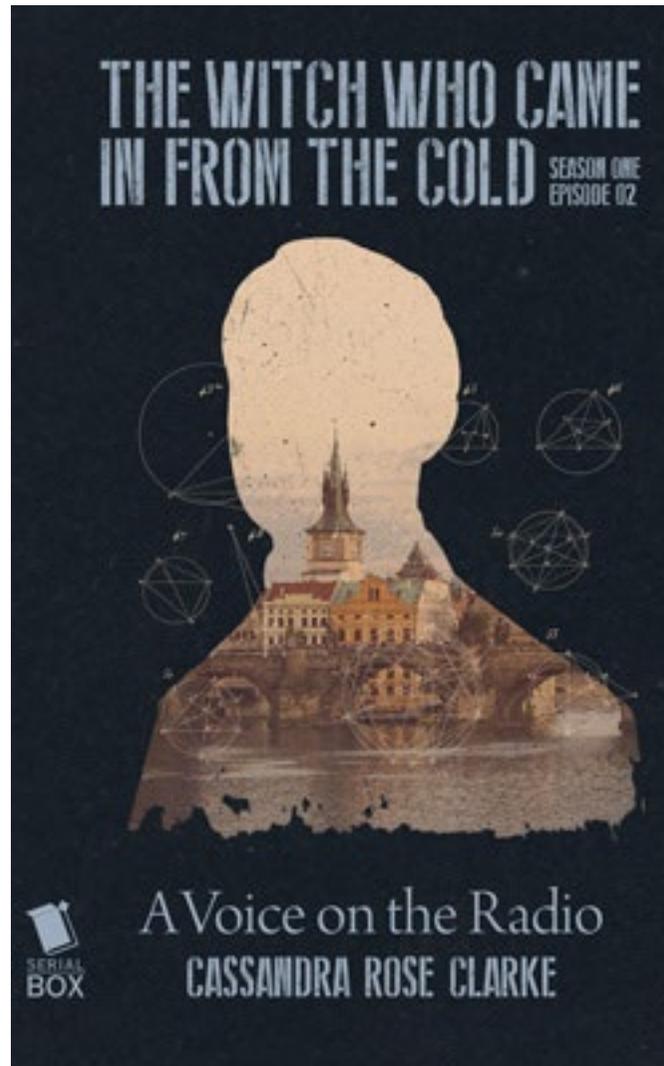
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