For Now I Am Winter

Chapter 1

Mathias Krüger stared out of the car window, his gaze tracing the shapes of heavy rain clouds gathering over the port town of Klaipėda. The city began waking up to face the misery of yet another day. As he met the eyes of his ghostly reflection overlapping the view, he saw his own bitterness and the weight of existence painted all over his face.

He was sitting in the back of an unmarked burgundy car passing by the rows of grey concrete blocks of flats. They climbed from four to twenty stories up and appeared so crude that even the few scattered rays of early morning sun failed to enliven them. Mathias had seen similar suburbia in Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus. In all those places, the buildings protruded from the ground like remnant bones from the decomposed corpse of Eastern Bloc, casting long shadows over the streets below. Their facades stained by acid rains, like long streaks of dark tears, made them look mournful, darkening his thoughts further.

The car stopped at the traffic lights, letting a throng of Lithuanian men and women march across the pedestrian crossing. Many faces were bleak and contorted in a grimace of discomfort. It remained to be seen whether it was the suburbia warping its dwellers, or their attitude distorting their urban landscape.

It began to rain. Mathias's gaze followed one of the droplets of water hitting the car's window until it merged with another. The rain picked up, and he could see partially melted snow join the fall. The people outside pulled their hoods up and marched on, seemingly unimpeded, though he expected they shared his lack of

enthusiasm for trudging in wet snow. What he loved about the winter was the crunch under his boots, and the refreshingly cold dry air. The local weather decided to spoil him with none of that. He sighed and looked away from the sorrows of other people and back at the folder spread on his lap.

Most of the photos were unsatisfactory, either out of focus or taken at the wrong angle. *Amateurs,* he thought to himself. *At least, none of them stuck a finger over the lens.* He held up a photograph showing only a half profile of the deceased NATO soldier and threw it on the discard pile growing next to him. The Preliminary Report of Death, another sloppy work, listed manner of death as a suicide. Hanging was indicated, yet no information about the ligature material was included. Mathias looked through the folder with a patience bestowed upon him by the long years of dealing with laziness and mediocrity, alas, he arrived at the exact same conclusion. In addition, he was provided with neither Certificate of Death nor autopsy, not to mention lack of witness statements.

‘Private Zajac,’ Mathias addressed his driver.

If the reflection in the rear mirror did not betray him, the young man driving the car might have gotten away with the grimace he made before their eyes met.

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Something wrong, private?’

‘Yes, sir. It’s Zając, sir.’

‘*Natürlich*. It’s Polish, isn’t it?’

The private nodded, and relaxed.

‘Thank you, sir. Appreciate, sir.’

Mathias waved his hand dismissively. It was important to get the names right and that was that. He pointed to the folder on his lap.

‘Was this everything you were supposed to give to me?’

Private Zając glanced over his shoulder before he looked back at the road. The young soldier shifted in his seat, and Mathias watched his well pronounced Adam’s apple move up and down as he swallowed hard.

‘That’s correct, sir. I guarded it like I would my own eye in the head.’

Oh, dear. Mathias smiled faintly. *Poles' exaggerated literalness.*

‘Then, it's a good sign you still have both.’

‘That’s correct, sir. Safe and sound,’ Zając tittered, turned red on the realisation of doing so, and quickly put on a serious face.

‘At ease, private Zając. I do not bite.’

Not yet, in any case. Mathias gave the private a friendly smile.

‘Will you get me to the base before noon, private Zając?’

‘Yes, sir. We’re on the shortest route—’

‘My sat nav would beg to disagree, though.’

For a moment, only the hum of the electric car filled the silence inside the vehicle.

‘Apologies, sir. Let me adjust the route right now.’

Mathias shifted his attention back to the few photographs, which survived his rigorous selection process. He picked the one depicting the NATO soldier’s face with the collar of purplish bruises around his neck. His eyes had an empty look, a shroud of fog pulled over them. *Homer’s achlys,* he thought, remembering the way the Ancient Greek poet used to refer to it. Indeed, there was much sorrow in those dead eyes staring back at him from the photograph. *How difficult was it? Were you scared? Did you hesitate? Was it your first time or did you try over and over? Did you hate looking into the mirror only to realise you continue your pointless existence?*

Mathias felt bile on his tongue, but no amount of swallowing would get rid of it. He retrieved a glass water bottle from the compartment and gulped down about half of it. It felt refreshing, reminding him of drinking from a mountain spring. A memory began to resurface, trying to push through the walls he erected around it. He shivered, and desperately pushed it to the peripheries of his mind.

He focused back on the photograph and moved his phone over it, zooming in on details. The deceased's lower lip was broken and swollen. Faint bruising and laceration around his chin and lower jaw area suggested blunt trauma, potentially with two points of impact if he was not mistaken. *So did you hit yourself on the face before or after you hanged yourself, corporal…* Mathias looked back to the preliminary report searching for the name.

'Hmm… Sergeant. Sergeant Mauricio Bolsarno.'

'Could you repeat, sir? I couldn't hear,' said private Zając.

Mathias forgot about the presence of the young driver. He began to gather all of the photos back to the folder.

'I tend to talk to myself when I think. Ignore me, please, when that happens.'

'Yes, sir. My father used to do that too. It was after he separated from his wife. He said he had to talk to someone, so ended up talking to himself.'

'I suppose it's natural if she moved out…'

'Oh no, she still lives with him, but treats him like air. They don't have enough money to buy another flat—they're grumpy pensioners. You know how parents get at a certain age,' private Zając said and stole a glance at him in a rear mirror. 'Sir,' he added, remembering to whom he talked.

Mathias raised a polite smile. He could not stop himself from picking on a small detail. He had to ask to get it out of his mind, otherwise it would bother him needlessly.

‘Any particular reason why you didn’t say “my mother”, private Zając?’

The driver looked off into the distance before responding without making eye contact.

‘No, not really, sir. Just a poor choice of words. I often think faster than I can speak in English.’

It was a relatable sentiment and Mathias was about to share it with private Zając before he rained himself back in.

Youngster, and a Pole. Of course, he’ll trick me into a conversation every single occasion he gets, and before I know it, I’ll even begin to like him. God forbid, Mathias smirked and looked out the window at the grey buildings passing by. The sight offered him no shelter, but he had once known someone who would have marvelled at the sheer brutality of local architecture. *You’d love it here, Gertrude. It has the air of fin de siècle. I’d suspect every winter here of conceiving at least one Nietzsche.*

‘Permission to speak, Opel-fert-veber Krüger?’

The question pulled Mathias’s mind from wandering where it should not.

‘It’s *Oberfeldwebel* Krüger, but 'Officer' will do.’

‘What a relief. I was wondering how to say it the whole way. Sir.’

‘Go ahead, private Zając.’

‘I just wanted to say that I was asked by the Command to show you around the city, thus I took a longer route, sir.’

‘*Natürlich*. I’ll personally thank the command for that gesture.’

Private Zając sent Mathias a proud smile.

‘It won’t be long now.’

‘Fantastic. Could I have a moment of privacy, please?’

‘Sure. I mean, yes, of course, sir.’

As the darkened glass rose to separate them, Mathias reached into his pocket. He retrieved two white pills from a plastic box before adding the third. He took them all and emptied the water bottle. He could taste the water from that mountain spring again yet, this time, memories of Gertrude did not return. He slumped in his seat and closed his eyes, letting the peace embrace him.